

SPEECH by
MR HIEU VAN LE
LIEUTENANT GOVERNOR OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA
CHAIR, SOUTH AUSTRALIAN MULTICULTURAL & ETHNIC AFFAIRS COMMISSION
TO THE LANGUAGES MATTER CONFERENCE RECEPTION
FRIDAY 13 JUNE 2008
AT THE ITALIAN CENTRE, ADELAIDE

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

- Dottore Tommaso Coniglio (*Tom-AS-so Con-ILL-lyo*) Consul General of Italy
- Professor Michael Clyne, of the University of Melbourne
- Dr Howard Nicholas, Director for Regional Education, LA Trobe University
- Professor Joseph Camilleri, Director, La Trobe University Centre for Dialogue
- Associate Professor Dr Anton Lucas, Director, Flinders Asia Centre, Flinders University of South Australia
- Associate Professor Dr Lester-Irabinna Rigney, Director, Yunggoendi First Nations Centre for Higher Education and Research
- Ms Helen Wildash, Executive Director Curriculum Services, Dept. of Education and Children's Services
- Mr Allan Dooley, Director, Catholic Education South Australia
- Mr John Kiosoglous, Chairman of the Ethnic Schools Board
- Mr Vince Buckskin, Ambassador for the Kaurna People
- Educators
- Representatives of Schools and school parents associations
- Distinguished guests all
- Ladies and gentlemen

SPEECH

I acknowledge that this land we meet on today is the traditional land of the Kaurna people and that we respect their spiritual relationship with their country.

I also extend my respects and thanks to Mr Vince Buckskin for his welcome to country.

It's a great pleasure to be here tonight to welcome you all to this reception and to usher in the *Language Matters* Conference.

This Conference brings together, for the first time, Government, Catholic and Independent schools, and language teachers throughout those three sectors, along with the Modern Language Teachers Association of South Australia.

And, symbolically, it is being held in the United Nations International Year of Languages.

We are living through an interesting new era ladies and gentlemen, an era that hints at great potential promise for the learning of modern languages in Australia, and we can play a major, vital and historic role in it.

This new era has been shaped by two things – one an old, historic process that has shaped Australia, the other a fresh and well-informed view of Australia's place in the new, globalised world, and especially in our own region.

The old, historic process to which I refer, is the shaping of the Australian people.

We are a community, a population, of three distinct strands; the Indigenous Australians, who have been here for more than forty thousand years, the colonists and early migrants who arrived between 1788 and 1900, and the migrants and refugees who arrived between 1947 and today.

That process has created a dynamic, multicultural and multilingual nation, where English is the common language and is valued for that quality.

The unifying role of English as a common language across all of Australia's people and cultures does not negate the importance of the multitude of other languages – indigenous, European, Asian and African – spoken by the Australian people.

On the contrary, the languages that the Australian people have brought with them into the 21st century are undeniably an invaluable energy source for the continued cultural, economic, community and social functioning of our nation.

Howard Nicholas, a distinguished academic at La Trobe University, who is here with us tonight, said that:

“Languages are not just technical tools for transmitting information... languages actively shape the thinking and relationships of the people who use them.

“In engaging with languages and cultures we have to deal with ways of understanding people, how people engage with one another, and how they conceptualise themselves and others.”

In other words, ladies and gentlemen, languages play an important role in how successfully and productively Australians deal with each other and with the rest of the world.

And that brings me to the second of the two things that are shaping the new era in which we find ourselves — the new view of Australia and her place in the world.

During the past quarter century there have been government leaders who have made much of their view of Australia’s regional future; her prosperity, security, and positioning as a power that can, and should, influence the region.

Prime Minister Kevin Rudd is making a strong case for Australia’s regional position and future.

With his fluent knowledge of Mandarin Chinese, he has brought to his high office a diplomat’s appreciation and experience of the importance of a modern language – in this case, the language of our biggest trading partner, the most rapidly expanding regional and world economy, an ascendant global power, and certainly the most important new power in our region, with radical strategic implications.

All this comes at a time when Asia, historically a continent that had been powerful and had been dotted by great empires and flourishing cultures long before European imperial expansion, is once again heaving and surging, reclaiming that history with foundations built upon increasing wealth and power, and on Asian cultural terms.

In his address at the opening of the 2020 Forum, Professor Michael Wesley said:

“For the past 220 years Australia has lived in a world dominated by societies that spoke our language, shared our sense of right and wrong, had similar institutions and outlooks. That world is passing. The English-speaking powers and their close allies must now negotiate with Asia’s giants to manage the big issues. The rules governing how we act and what we can achieve in the world will be less familiar to us.”

Ladies and gentlemen, Asian nations are proving that it is no longer necessary to “westernise” – as some had done in the 19th century – to be successful.

We have to deal with them on different, but mutually beneficial, terms, and that will include learning their languages and affording them an equal place in our culture and our education system, as well as in our foreign and trade policies.

I cite Asian examples only because I am more familiar with their cultures and outlooks, but what I have said applies equally to other nations and regions.

For example, the “old Europe” is new again, with rapid expansion of both the European Union and the European arm of the Transatlantic NATO alliance.

European nations, too, are now asserting their languages over the ubiquity of English; indeed, a linguistic renaissance is sweeping across the world.

But what of Australia; what is to be done here?

I spoke earlier about the make-up of the Australian people, and how our modern nation has been shaped by Indigenous and migrant peoples over many years.

More than 43 percent of Australians have either been born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas.

Indigenous and migrant Australians each have a linguistic heritage too, and a very long one at that, so English alone is not enough to express the cultures that exist here, nor to draw the best contribution possible from each Indigenous and migrant Australian.

The reality is that Australia has benefited socially, culturally and economically, from the wide variety of languages that her people speak.

And there is the human rights imperative, too, to safeguard this process; the United Nations Declaration of Linguistic Rights, Article 7, states clearly that:

“all languages are the expression of a collective identity and of a distinct way of perceiving and describing reality, and must therefore be able to enjoy the conditions required for their development.”

To know the Australian people, our region and the world, we need to know their languages — the keys to their cultures, their world view, and their view of us.

That way, we can engage with each other and across distances, we can learn to respect difference and diversity in the knowledge that variety creates strength, and we can connect with people in ways that create harmony, peace and prosperity.

You, the language teachers, the curriculum planners and the school administrators, are the people who are best qualified and best positioned to make this a reality.

I and my fellow members of the South Australian Multicultural and Ethnic Affairs Commission look forward to learning of your progress at the conclusion of this conference.

Welcome again to all of you, and I wish you well in your deliberations.

Thank you.