

An extract from Legislative Council Hansard

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AUSTRALIA AS A MULTICULTURAL SOCIETY

Mr PARKINSON (Hobart) - Mr President, I move -

That this House -

- (1) reaffirms its commitment to the right of all Tasmanians to enjoy equal rights and be treated with equal respect regardless of race, colour, creed or origin;
- (2) reaffirms its commitment to maintaining an immigration policy wholly non-discriminatory on grounds of race, colour, creed or origin;
- (3) reaffirms its commitment to the process of reconciliation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island people, in the context of redressing their profound social and economic disadvantage;
- (4) reaffirms its commitment to maintaining Australia as a culturally diverse, tolerant and open society, united by an overriding commitment to our nation, and its democratic institutions and values; and
- (5) denounces racial intolerance in any form as incompatible with the kind of society we are and want to be.

Mr President, I believe that by supporting this motion this Chamber has the opportunity to stand up and be counted in the community at large. Pauline Hanson rekindled a debate in this country that really this country could well have done without. It is a debate fuelled by all of those notions in any society which divide people rather than bring people together for the common good, which pull people down rather than encourage achievement, which weaken rather than strengthen the fabric of society, which turn neighbour against neighbour, even family against family and ultimately country against country.

It is a debate filled by jealousy, by prejudice, by arrogance, by ignorance, by selfishness and even by hate. It is ironical, Mr President, that when Australians as a collective people are readying themselves to embrace the Olympic spirit in the year 2000, a section of our population is demonstrating such a total ignorance of the very meaning of the Olympic spirit, that spirit which strives to bring out the best in all of us, no matter what country of origin and no matter what colour.

Indeed, the Pauline Hansons of this country, Mr President, should contemplate whether Australia would have been granted the year 2000 Olympics if this debate had been raging at the time the Olympic movement was making its decision. I do not believe it would have been.

Historically, Tasmania has always welcomed immigrants and they have returned one hundred-fold to our community. For example, our electricity generation capacity is today what it is because of the tens of thousands of people who settled here from across the globe and with us built our dams. Others worked with us in our mines, our forests and factories; others farmed the land and helped build industries such as our fishing industry. The list goes on; it is endless, Mr President. Across the employment spectrum they contributed as teachers, doctors and engineers. In all walks of life their enterprise was and still is obvious. Our restaurants and our shops are further examples of a lasting and continuing contribution by migrant peoples to this State.

To suggest that we are taking in too many Asians is arrogant and ill-informed nonsense, Mr President. Tasmania some years ago, I recall, participated in a very successful resettlement program for Vietnamese refugees. These programs continue. More recently an entire community, the Hmong community from, as I recall, the Cambodian-Thai border region, were settled here. Numbering some 200 or more, the entire community of Hmong people's enterprise has been an outstanding example of this since their coming to this State. They are self-supporting as a community and they have improved our quality of life. Most of them farm and market vegetables for the restaurant trade and for domestic sales, and you can see these people working at our Salamanca Market every weekend.

Across our society we find the clearest evidence of our successful non-discrimination immigration policy. Notable communities within the wider community stand out for their great contributions and I cite the Greeks, the Italians, the Chinese, the Poles, the Germans, the Dutch, the Spanish, the French, the Eastern bloc countries as they used to be called - and not to forget the English, the Scottish and the Irish who, incidentally, most of us are descended from - the Indians, the Fijians. The list goes on worldwide, Mr President. They have all contributed to making this place better, improving the quality of our lives.

In fact the irony in this debate, Mr President, is that we are all either immigrants or descended from them, unless we are Aboriginal. The reality is that we are very much a multicultural society and will continue to be. Here in Tasmania we depend on the Federal Government fostering a welcoming relationship with our close Asian neighbours. We, after all, sell two-thirds of our total exports to them and the markets that we have have only just been tapped in terms of their potential. We have much to teach them and we can learn much from them. Economic and social exchange can only benefit us all. I repeat, it is arrogant nonsense to say that these people, Asians, should not settle here. Their enterprise generates and creates employment rather than the reverse.

As far as our commitment to reconciliation with Aboriginals is concerned, we must recognise and accept that the policies of our forebears are to blame for the underprivilege that exists in many of our Aboriginal communities. Recognising and accepting that blame is a prerequisite to recognising the huge resources that must be allocated to fighting that underprivilege by helping the Aboriginals to help themselves. We must accept that the process of reconciliation means that we are working for a united Australia which respects this land of ours, values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and provides justice and equity for all.

When political leaders decline to come out strongly in support of the principles that bring people together, that bring out the best in us all, they are inviting dominance by the alternative that threatens to tear society apart. It is no accident in my view, Mr President, that since Pauline Hanson began her campaign an Aboriginal boy was set alight with petrol in Queensland and we

continue to hear about that one. Fortunately he is recovering, we are told. A Chinese visitor was recently bashed in the streets of Canberra while here to visit his daughter; a young Chinese taxi-driver was murdered in Sydney on the weekend just gone. These are only the incidents that have hit the headlines.

The Chinese community in particular, Mr President, is taking the situation so seriously that they have commissioned a survey of incidents of racism against its members and already they are showing a significant increase according to a recent TV current affairs program.

Mr President, we know there is a better way and that is by maintaining the commitments embodied in this motion. This House of Tasmania's Parliament now has the opportunity to demonstrate to the people of Tasmania that we can help Tasmania move into the twenty-first century and I call on this Council to unanimously support the motion.

MOTION CARRIED UNANIMOUSLY