

## **Second Annual Address on Immigration and Citizenship**

Speech by

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at the

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### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

- The Honourable Chris Bowen MP, Minister for Immigration and Citizenship
- Mr Andrew Metcalfe, Secretary, Department of Immigration and Citizenship
- Professor Ian Young, Vice Chancellor of Australian National University
- Ms Jenny Anderson
- Dr Marry Elizabeth Calwell
- Mr Derrick Hammon
- Distinguished guests
- Ladies and Gentlemen

### **SPEECH**

It is a great honour to be here and to present this year's address. I sincerely thank Andrew Metcalfe, DIAC and the ANU for the privilege. I also thank Andrew for his very generous introduction and warm welcome.

Ladies and gentlemen.

Our culture, our history, locates us.

It is essential – gathering as we do here tonight to discuss the power and value of cultural interaction – that we acknowledge the traditional owners of this land we are meeting on and pay our respects to their elders, past and present.

It's impossible to stand in this place and not feel a sense of history.

The echoes of past voices in this chamber whisper in our imaginations.

Here, decisions were made that have shaped us as a nation.

Remarkable men and women have stood here debating and sharing their differences.

In the process, they have forged wisdom in the tangling and tussle of ideas and philosophies and visions of this country and our futures.

This has been a place where ideas have gathered.

There is a dynamic and power when people gather, when cultures come together and connect, when passion and ideas rub shoulders.

It leads us to the fertile ground of empathy and understanding.

The horizons that locate us expanded – we are enlightened!

I am someone whose circumstance has gathered to this land – one to whom a great generosity of spirit has been given, to whom a new and rich identity has been accorded.

I feel myself to be an embodiment of the immigrant experience – the beneficiary of the imagination of this nation.

It was an imagination for gathering that just over 65 years ago created an arm of government that would say and act on the belief that elsewhere there are ideas, skills, knowledge, wisdom and application that can come, that can make us better, that can enrich us.

When we see again the black-and-white footage that flickered in the dark of a nation's imagination in 1927 – recording the occasion when the Duke of York, in the midst of his struggle to find his voice, declared this building open – we are moved.

There was a strange rustic charm about this white building, surrounded by open paddocks and gums, where the crowd had gathered.

It was somehow incongruous, somehow entirely appropriate.

Somehow it is the power, the spirit of the landscape that infuses those images.

It is something we call the spirit of place.

It is a landscape that carries the dreaming of 40,000 years of history, of our gathering.

If we allow our dreaming to take us, we can see here the confident, aloof gaze of Stanley Melbourne Bruce.

We see the worried eyes of James Scullin, taking office at the time of the Wall Street Crash.

There's the genial Irish smile of Joe Lyons.

And we hear the whipping wit of Menzies, the steel of John Curtin, the honest grittiness of Chifley.

We can feel the towering physical presence of Gough and Malcolm – fierce foes who became friends.

We stand in this place; gather all that has gone before, custodians of invisible suitcases – suitcases containing our ideas, our ideals, culture, the land, the spirit of place.

There is always a spirit of place if we seek it out.

We stand on the shoulders of the giants of our history, of our cultures.

When we see those black-and-white images of the past, of the first day of this house, we might think of the words of LP Hartley, who started his novel, *The Go Between*, with the words: “The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there.”

This is true for all of us – we who were born in a century that saw the greatest and most rapid changes in human history.

The nationality of my childhood was war and dispossession and chaos.

The nationality of my childhood was Vietnamese.

My homeland is a culture that goes back 5,000 years to the Hung Dynasty, and I carry it in an invisible suitcase of all that made my childhood.

Today, my homeland is also a spirit that goes back 40,000 years, and I see that in the landscape where I now live.

My homeland is in the voice of reason and inclusivity kept in articles of good faith – in things called the Magna Carta and Common Law, in an abstraction called “The Enlightenment”.

It's evident in my home State of South Australia being described as a “paradise of dissent” – a notion enshrined, before virtually anywhere else in the world, in the right of all, male or female, to vote by secret ballot, to represent, to govern.

The nationality of my adulthood is tolerance – a laconic and ferocious attachment to fairness and generosity.

I am a citizen of respect for due process, of the pleasures of diversity, of liberal social democracy.

The nation of my adulthood is Australia.

We are all from another country and those smells of childhood – those lost scents of the past – are not lost in memory.

They are the scents that make sense of our present.

From the past we cherish, we look to the future – the silver glow on the horizon.

I remember, 34 years ago, being on the deck of a small, flimsy fishing boat anchored off the southern tip of Timor, listening to the radio for the weather forecast and waiting.

We had been warned about the Timor Sea.  
The crossing would take us four or five days.

We waited for good weather, then we took to the sea again, the lonely sea and the sky in a fragile boat and little more than a compass and star to steer her by.

After nearly a month in the open sea, this was the last leg of our arduous journey searching for a safe place to live in peace and freedom.

On the third day of the crossing, there was some sudden excitement on the deck.

Someone had seen birds – someone said they were seagulls.

These beautiful white seagulls were like angels leading the way to a promised land.

I grabbed the binoculars and stared to the horizon, and there they focused on a most brilliant line of silver.

I can't describe the moment, the feeling.

This silver sliver of hope took form as we crept closer through the dawn light.

It became an early morning mist across Darwin Harbour.

We approached nervously and hopefully.

After many horrific experiences with coastguards in Southeast Asia, we were apprehensive as to what kind of reception we would now receive.

We chugged clumsily into the harbour, then heard the approaching buzz of an outboard motor.

It's the coastguard again, we thought, and we braced ourselves, while some even said a little prayer.

Gradually, emerging out of the morning mist, we saw a "tinnie", with two blokes with shorts and singlets in it, sun hats on, white zinc cream on their noses, fishing rods primed and sticking up in the air, and the first beers of the day were in their hands.

They were looked like "extras" from the old Barry McKenzie film!

They waved at us and steered their boat very close to ours, and one of them raised his stubby as if proposing a toast.

"G'day, mate," he shouted "welcome to Australia!"

Then he revved up the motor and sped off to get on with the fishing trip they set out to do.

We have never seen them again.

We were stunned by the warmth and good nature of this laconic welcome.

And that one moment in time has left a lifelong impression on me.

My personal navigation to Australia had been a combination of dark circumstance, accident, fear, despair, but most of all, of hope.

Like most other migrants and refugees, I arrived on this silver shore with nothing but my invisible suitcase of cultural heritage and dreams.

At another time, another place, a traveller such as me might have been greeted with fear or hostility.

But at that time, in this place, I was given the unfettered wish and opportunity to show gratitude.

What greeted me was a remarkable generosity of spirit.

In the past 34 years, I've learned something about this new culture – about the language – that deep down “G’day mate” means something about a society that fundamentally believes in helping, in shared responsibility, and that if we’re not actually all in the same boat, then we’re all in the same harbour.

If we stand on the shoulders of giants, we must do all we can to raise up others.

I was born in the year the Vietnamese defeated French colonial rule in Vietnam – It was also the beginning of the bloodiest conflict in our history.

For me, the war was part of my life and a painful memory of my childhood.

I lost many close relatives and friends in the war.

Ironically, when the war eventually ended in 1975, the drastic change of the political regime that followed caused me to escape from my motherland in search of freedom and the opportunity to rebuild my future.

In the dead of night – a violently stormy night as I remember well – and with much secrecy and drama, we boarded a fishing boat with 50 others and sailed south.

Through much further adventure, a dreadful time in a refugee camp in Southeast Asia, and the torments and fears of the sea journey, we arrived that morning in Darwin Harbor.

There is an odd line in our national anthem – “Our land is girt by sea” – as if we need to inform ourselves and the world that our country is surrounded by water.

It’s a rather prosaic observation.

But then, perhaps we should make such an observation, because it reminds us that we are the most defined nation state on earth.

We are the only country to occupy an entire continent – a unique continent long separated from the other land masses, with its own fauna and flora.

It’s a land so ancient and unchanged it has been called the “timeless land”.

Ours is a land so separate, so distinguishable, it needs no separation.

Rather, it is a place of coming together, where threads of lives have come over the seas to stitch together here.

The ocean, the blue strip on the horizon, is our connection to the world.

When we arrived in Darwin on that leaky boat, we came with our pieces, our threads of culture, and we were stitched back together again – stitched into the rich fabric of this country such that we became part of it and it became us.

My wife and I, and 39 other Vietnamese boat people, spent a week in an abandoned quarantine centre in Darwin.

We then went through an intensive interviewing process for assessment of our claimed refugee status.

We received medical check-ups and immunisations in preparation for our transition into Australian society.

One night at the centre we heard the sound of a bus arriving, followed by a knock on the door.

We were told to get on a bus, and we were taken to an airport in darkness.

At dawn we arrived in Adelaide.

Not long after we settled into the Pennington Migrant Hostel, north of Adelaide, we saw “Asians Out” racist graffiti on the walls of our new neighbourhood.

At that time there were people in the surrounding community who were unsettled by our presence, complaining loudly to the government that these new Vietnamese arrivals were not welcome.

They claimed that we took their jobs and that our children should not be accepted into their schools.

The record of debate in State and Federal Parliament, in the late 1970s, gives us a hint of the unease felt by some towards Indo-Chinese refugees.

In the Senate, a Minister was forced to reject claims by some unionists that some refugees were “former pimps, brothel keepers and other undesirable people”.

In the South Australian Lower House, one MP raised the belief among farmers that the boats posed a “*catastrophic disease threat to Australia’s sheep and cattle population*”.

Foot-and-mouth disease, anthrax, and tuberculosis were all in danger of being introduced into Australia, apparently.

A recently released document shows that Federal Cabinet was warned in 1979 that the Indo-Chinese refugee problem “*threatens to precipitate a regional crisis of major dimensions*”.

That same memorandum says that “*if the refugee problem were to get out of control it would impose very serious strains on the unity and character of Australian society*”.

“*This new situation has all the ingredients for one of the most controversial and divisive issues in Australia’s history,*” the document says.

Nevertheless, the then Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs, Michael MacKellar, addressed many public forums and explained why Australia had an obligation to take its fair share of refugees.

In one speech, he told of how he had visited 10 Indo-Chinese refugee camps in Thailand and Malaysia – camps that housed a total of more than 65,000 people.

*“My impression of the refugees,”* he told the audience in Sydney *“was one of courage and determination.”*

In another speech – this time delivered in Adelaide in July 1979 – Mr MacKellar said:

*“(Refugees) can be expected at an early stage after arrival to contribute to the social and cultural life of their new community. They have to do well here because once here, there is nowhere else to go... They are honest, hard-working people who respond well to challenge. They are willing to undertake jobs not readily acceptable to others in the community. Most Indo-Chinese children are reported to be adjusting well in school ... Australia offers a great deal to refugees, but refugees also offer a great deal to Australia.”*

Malcolm Fraser wrote recently:

*“When the Vietnamese came here, if I’d asked Australians before the event if they wanted to have 70,000 refugees from Indo-China that would go into a population of around a quarter of a million, in a public poll people would have said no. But when you say this is what we must do and these are the reasons then people accept it. Melbourne is one of the largest Greek cities outside of Greece – if you’d asked Melbourne in 1948 if they wanted that they would have said no. But it happened, and everyone would be enormously proud of the contribution Greek-Australians have made to Australia in so many different ways.”*

Some months after our arrival, after the typical Australian meals we were given each day at the hostel, my wife sent me out to find the necessary ingredients for a traditional Vietnamese meal.

I vividly recollect my unsuccessful search for lemongrass.

I think I canvassed every shop and greengrocer within walking distance of home.

My drawings of lemongrass didn’t help either, for nobody had any idea of what it even looked like.

One shopkeeper, out of frustration, said to me: *“Mate, in Australia we don’t eat bloody grass!”*

And I cannot forget loading my supermarket trolley full of small bags of rice – much to the amusement of bystanders – because the large bags that are common today simply weren’t available.

In 35 years, our society has undergone dramatic change.

The rows of Asian groceries in our local supermarkets are just one manifestation of this shift that we take for granted in our daily lives.

What we see now is the integration of many cultural values into Australian society.

As refugees, we received the benefits of so many individual acts of generosity and openness that we feel a deep sense of gratitude and find our greatest pleasure in being able to contribute to the place we now call home.

In Australia we have a deep tradition of seeing immigration as an asset, as building our human capital, and as a positive addition to our economy and our society.

It has been what has made us.

In a recent interview on ABC's *Lateline*, Malcolm Turnbull put it thus:

*"We believe that one of Australia's greatest strengths is its cultural diversity. We are the most successful immigrant country in the world.... We have achieved an extraordinary degree of harmonious integration of people from every possible culture in the world. It's a great achievement. We're proud of it. We are committed to a multicultural Australia – that is a reality."*

And Minister Chris Bowen said in a recent address to the Sydney Institute:

*"We now live in a nation shaped by migration: one with broader horizons, open and tolerant. A nation that is more confident, more vibrant and more diverse. We recognise and celebrate different cultural heritages but insist that our future is common, is shared."*

For us it has been a privilege to have joined and been able to be a part of that longer heroic quest for a just, inclusive, tolerant and culturally rich Australia.

By the way, I recently caught up with a friend of mine who arrived with me on the boat and now lives in Virginia, an agricultural region in South Australia.

He owns more than 100 giant glasshouses.  
All he does, all year round, is grow lemongrass.

And business is booming!

Some people have said we live in a lucky country.

Our community harmony has nothing to do with good luck.

It is because we have provided the right conditions for diversity to exist and multiculturalism to thrive.

The history of Australia is a history of the contribution of migrants and their descendants.

We are the beneficiaries of great cultural richness.

It is my opinion that no matter what period of history we're looking at, immigration has overwhelmingly been beneficial to Australia.

It has increased our population and productive capacity, and it has helped make us a much more open and outward-looking nation.

Culturally, it has also made Australia an infinitely more interesting place to live and to visit.

Professor Graeme Hugo, from the University of Adelaide, has long researched the impact that successive groups of newcomers have had on Australia – especially refugees.

For example, he's found that such people are substantially younger than the national Australian population and those who come here under other migration categories.

Australia's ageing population, alone, makes the youthful profile of refugees a valuable asset to us.

These people are also more likely to settle in non-metropolitan areas – which address regional labour-force shortages and boosts regional development generally.

Although refugees tend to have fewer qualifications than other migrants, their children tend to attain post-school qualifications at a higher rate than people born in Australia.

Professor Hugo's other findings are:

- that refugees engage in small and medium enterprises at an above-average rate;
- that they fill many shortages in low-skill, low-status and low-pay occupations;
- that they help develop trade between Australia and their home countries; and
- that they make an enormous, but often underestimated contribution to their communities through volunteering.

One point of observation in our immigration history is that virtually every large-scale arrival of new migrants has brought short-term challenges and created doubts in the minds of some Australians.

When thousands of Europeans settled here in the 1940s and 1950s, people said that these folk would not fully integrate into society.

These “Balts” and “reffos” and “wogs” and “new Australians” were quite different from the Poms and Scots and Irish, so the story went.

*“I mean, just look at their appearance and strange food, and listen to their funny language!”*

When we Vietnamese arrived in the 1970s, some said that these “boat people” were quite different from the post-World War II crowd.

*“Yes, those Europeans turned out pretty well, I suppose, but these Indo-Chinese are something else again!”*

*“I mean, just look at their appearance and strange food, and listen to their funny language!”*

Every one of these groups has, in time, made a profound contribution and been accepted – such that their presence becomes completely unremarkable.

A Flinders University historian, Professor Eric Richards, in his recent book called *Destination Australia*, provides the following assessment of what we've achieved as a country:

*“Immigration has been the great conductor of change, tension and growth in the modern Australian experience; it has been critical to its political maturity, to its demography, its economic development, its social cohesion and its relations with the rest of the world, and also to its very self-understanding and identity ... Immigration had clearly generated no revolution, little internecine conflict, no riots in the streets of any significance, little communal turmoil and no permanent ghettos.”*

And as Minister Chris Bowen recently said in his speech, of people who have come to Australia: *“They come because of what Australia is, not to change it into what they left behind.”*

The extraordinary success of our multicultural society has come about through vision and leadership.

For the most part, this has been bipartisan – it would be the deepest of tragedies if that were not to last.

The country of my birth was torn apart by disagreement.

In this country, disagreement – civilised debate, the competition and complementing of ideas, visions built on a spectrum of perspectives – has knitted us together as a nation.

There can hardly be a better symbol of this than this building.

This has not been a place of introspection, but a place from which we've looked outwards.

Rather than narrow national interest, here there has been a looking outward – a deep sense of our citizenship of the world.

This house has nurtured people who have not shirked the mantle of leadership.

One might think of the remarkable men and women who have served as ministers for immigration in the past.

If we look around this chamber, we can see them in our mind's eye – people like Michael MacKellar, who I have mentioned, the steadiness of Ian Macphie, ..... the dramatic flamboyance of Al Grassby, who by his very personality did so much for the cause of cultural diversity.

There's also Mick Young – a political giant whose working-class origins produced a razor sharp intellect that could see through nonsense at a glance.

We shouldn't forget Harold Holt, who guided policy through the dramatic period of the '50s, Downer, the elder, Opperman, Snedden – all remarkable men in such diverse ways.

There was also Clyde Cameron – such a significant figure in the Labor party – Phillip Lynch, Jim Forbes, Gerry Hand, Chris Hurford.

And then, of course, there was Arthur Calwell, who raised the vision, who history gave the role of architect of the great post-War migration policy.

All these people spoke in this house.

Surely we can hear their voices still.

These are just some of those whose leadership has guided the success of a multicultural Australia.

It says something of the significance of this portfolio when we consider the stature of those who served in it.

And we must make words of deep gratitude to the unsung heroes – the men and women of the Immigration Department over the past 65 years who have been instrumental in implementing their policies, and who have been a major force in our nation building.

When we arrived in 1977, we thought we had come with nothing, that we had not much more than our tatty bedrolls.

But Australia taught me that we brought a great deal.

For me, the experience of the past 34 years has been that of a sharing of cultures that has been like that sunlight through a rising morning mist in Darwin Harbour.

Ladies and gentlemen.

We came with not much more than a bedroll – our Vietnamese Matildas – to this place where we could waltz them to the tune of a Vietnamese bamboo flute and the melody of a Celtic ballad.

Remember, there is a spirit which resides here, which may be heard as we pass by life's spring, which sings, you'll come a Waltzing Matilda with me.