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THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY

NEW SOUTH WALES BRANCH

LUNCHEON, SYDNEY

TUESDAY 8 NOVEMBER 1983

THE ANGLOS ARE NOT THE ENEMY

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The Hon Justice M D Kirby CMG
Chairman of the Australian Law Reform Commission

AN ILL CONSIDERED ATTACK

I am a member of the Australian Institute of Multicultural Affairs. In mid October 1983, the Second Biennial Meeting of members of the Institute took place in Melbourne. On 18 October 1983 Professor Donald Horne of the University of New South Wales delivered the Institute's Annual Address. In the course of that address, he suggested that adherence by Australians to British institutions (like the monarchy) and values was in some way incompatible with cultural diversity. He was reported widely in the press, in the language actually used in his address, as saying that the 'Anglos' are the enemies of multiculturalism.

I wish to advance a thesis which is to the exact contrary. It is my view that the tolerant principle of multiculturalism actually flourishes best in a country which derives its institutions, laws and basic culture from Britain.

Like most Australians, I have affection and respect for Donald Horne. We need people like him to speculate on the future of our country. But in suggesting that the 'Anglos' are the 'principal enemies' of multiculturalism, as he did, I believe he is seriously wrong. Furthermore, if a tension is artificially whipped up between those who value the continuing British element in Australian life, and the ideal of multiculturalism, we will run the real risk of destroying the multi-partisan support which exists for multiculturalism at least at the Federal level. That would be a national tragedy. The effort to get a more tolerant society began with Mr Gorton. It was encouraged by Senator Chipp. It was continued by Mr Whitlam. And it was entrenched by Mr Fraser.

It the policy of Mr Hawke's government. But it would be mischievous and misguided to suggest, as Professor Horne does, that people from the British Isles are just another ethnic group in Australia. More than 70% of Australians trace their origins to that source. It is fatuous nonsense to ignore that reality or to suggest that we should suddenly become embarrassed or ashamed about it. To talk of Anglo 'enemies' will undermine the brilliant idea that is at the heart of multiculturalism. This is an idea of tolerance — that our society in Australia is sufficiently mature to permit people, in the one community, to be themselves and not to suppress their linguistic and cultural origins. I know of no non English-speaking country that accepts these principles. The English-speaking world, with institutions derived from Britain, is in the vanguard of the movement for tolerance. It does the cause of cultural diversity a disservice to think we advance those from other ethnic groups by denigrating, insulting or belittling the unique, indispensable and central contribution to Australian life of people from the British Isles — in which I include Ireland.

INSTITUTIONAL PARTICIPATION

From time to time I have myself raised the issue of why migrants and the children of migrants are not entering the law in numbers reflecting their growth in the community. Recently I was asked by someone in the Defence Forces : Why do we not attract people of non Anglo ethnic backgrounds? Perhaps it is the Britishness of the law and of the Forces which puts some people of ethnic background off. But the answer is for so-called 'ethnic' Australians to join and to participate. Only in this way will institutions adapt and be changed. At least our institutions can be changed. It is to the permanent credit of Britain that its people aspired to, and by long constitutional struggle achieved, political institutions of orderly change. Let it never be forgotten that after the Second World War, many people came to this country from war-ravaged Europe precisely because we could offer them the stability of British-type parliaments, the independence of British-type judges and the respect for individual rights which is the fundamental distinguishing feature of English-speaking societies.

OLD-FASHIONED VIEWS

There are, of course, some people who might regard my views about British institutions and links with the Commonwealth of Nations as old-fashioned. I declare that the views expressed by Professor Horne have a distinctly old-fashioned ring. Supporters of the Commonwealth are modernists and internationalists.

Donald Horne's views have, I am afraid, a distinctly old-fashioned ring about them. They harken back to the illbegotten days of narrow nationalism — the scourge of the early part of the 20th century. I have no time for those who think we must promote our own Australian 'nationalism' by denigrating our British links. In fact, I believe we must be very cautious about beating the drum of nationalist fervour. If the 20th century has learned anything, it should be that the narrow divisions of parochial nationalism have caused pain and grief beyond measure. In the nuclear age, nationalism of the kind Donald Horne seeks, is positively old-fashioned. We do better to establish international perspectives. Our quest for links with Pacific neighbours and regional friends is obviously desirable. But we should not throw away the links we have in the Commonwealth of Nations. Within the past few months I have participated in practical Commonwealth meetings where lawyers, doctors and others have got together to exchange experience in a common language, against a background of common institutions, common bureaucratic methods and, to a large measure, common ideals.

No doubt Donald Horne would decry all this as 'Anglo enemy nonsense'. Well, I say : I am as multicultural as the next Australian. Multiculturalism means tolerance. And it means realism. The so-called 'Anglos' remain at the core of Australian national life. We do not advance Australia by ignoring our history, overlooking our majority population and denigrating fine institutions inherited from Britain. The Anglos are not the enemy. The enemy is narrow anti-British nationalism, divisive commentary and unrealistic rejection of Australian reality. Furthermore it is wrong to suggest the 'Anglos' are always conservative enemies of reform. They have been more socially egalitarian than most societies this century. Our Labor Party derives many of its ideas from the British counterpart. The Prime Minister and other members of the Cabinet were educated at Oxford — just as Nehru, Lee and others were educated at Cambridge. England has sent out the message of reform. We belittle ourselves when we belittle the Anglos.