

AUSTRALIAN LEFT REVIEW

JANUARY 1988



THE BICENTENARY - MY FEELINGS

Australian Left Review

January 1988

THE BICENTENARY - MY FEELINGS

The Honourable Justice Michael Kirby*

The easy thing to do with a challenge is to put it into the too hard basket or ignore it or react aggressively to it. More difficult is to turn a challenge into an opportunity.

The Australian Bicentenary offends some sensitive Australians, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. They regard it as an event to mourn, not celebrate. On the other hand, most people reading this Review would not be here but for the events which the Bicentenary marks. Accepting that reality, we should turn the Bicentenary into a reflection on our history: both our successes and failures.

Our most glaring failure as a nation, relevant to the Bicentenary, has been the relationship established between the newcomers and the indigenous people of the continent. The Bicentenary should therefore be the impetus for a new era of economic, cultural, linguistic, legal and political rights for Aboriginal Australians.

When they open the new Parliament House in Canberra - with or without prayers - it would be my hope that in the presence of the Queen of Australia, all the Senators and all the Members of the House of Representatives, the proceedings should start with an affirmation of the unanimous resolve of the Australian people to do much better on this issue in the century ahead. Let there be parties and celebrations. Most Australians like such things. But let the Bicentenary also be an event for sombre and constructive self criticism and for resolve about action in the future.

* President, Court of Appeal, Supreme Court of New South Wales. Commissioner, International Commission of Jurists. Former Chairman of the Australian Law Reform Commission. The views stated are personal views only.