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HEARING THE VOICES - REACHING THE LIGHT

Sydney Gay & Lesbian Choir
20th Anniversary Celebration

Sydney Town Hall
4 June 2011

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

SYDNEY GAY AND LESBIAN CHOIR

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SATURDAY 4 JUNE 2011

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THE POWER OF MUSIC

As we listen to the choir singing *Sunset* from the three Australian bush songs by Iain Grandage, followed by the Aboriginal themed presentation of *Bacchanalia* from the work *Mythologia* by Carl Vine, we felt the power of music. This mysterious power which, in human beings, is probably genetic. The impact of rhythm with harmony, disharmony, familiarity and then surprise.

Listening to the Australian bush songs, we, the audience, entered my own kind of Dreamtime. It conveyed the nobility and beauty of our continental land. It made us think of the chance we have, but have so often squandered, to make our human contributions here noble. The music helped us to dream of an Australia where all people would be truly equal:

- * The Aboriginal and indigenous peoples together with the settlers and their descendants;

* Patron of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Choir. Commissioner of the UNDP Global Commission on HIV and the Law (2010-11). Member of the Australian delegation to the High Level Meeting of the General Assembly on HIV/AIDS (2011).

- * The young and the old Australians;
- * The people of Anglo ethnicity and those from Asia, the Pacific, Africa and beyond; and
- * The heterosexual majority and the homosexuals, bisexuals and other sexual minorities.

As we listened to the power of these noble themes in music, our hearts yearned for an Australia which would be a true example to the world. An example of a multicultural country that honoured all of its citizens. An inspiration to the world and a constant encouragement to ourselves.

How we yearn for leadership. For leadership from our politicians. A land without the trivia of political games, where the name-calling of one using the word “meow” responded to the use by another of the words “mincing poodle”. We have had enough of that. More than enough. We want leadership, taking this red land into the future, where all of us will share in the light. A great example to humanity. Not a land that has fallen behind so many others in achieving true equality for its minorities: Aboriginals, refugees, the unemployed, prisoners, the gays and lesbians. Once we were a country that gave inspiration and examples to others. Now, through timidity and indecision, we are prisoners to talk-back radio, red-neck opinions and sheer ignorance. All this must change. We are here to say that we believe it can be changed.

THE CHOIR THAT SINGS

We honour the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Choir. I speak directly to the choir members past and present. You have accompanied us on our journey these past twenty years. You have sung out loud in times of joy

and times of pain. You have expressed our thoughts over two decades. So we are here to honour and thank you.

- * When you won that prize, so soon after your formation in Wagga Wagga in 1992, we knew immediately that you were on to a good thing. That you could reach out to rural and regional Australia, places often said to be unfriendly to gays and lesbians. That by your professionalism, you could beat all comers and confront the demons and stereotypes in so many minds. It was a triumph at the time. It has been a challenge and encouragement ever since.
- * You accompanied us in the grim candlelight processions in the dark years when the AIDS epidemic struck the gay community so cruelly. You sang out our thoughts. You expressed our tears. We have been reminded of those times in the filmed images of the processions of the 1980s and 90s, with candles held with courage. Like the choir, we were galvanised by that cruel encounter with death. We were tested in the furnace. We were not found wanting. It hardened our steel. It made us determined to stand up for ourselves and for others who suffered from irrational hate and discrimination. We have never been the same since those years. You sung us on to be strong and brave. There can be no going back.
- * At the turn of the century, you were in good voice. You beckoned in the millennium with prize-winning themes. You interpreted our hope and renewed optimism. On your 10th anniversary, in this great understated hall of the citizens of Sydney, you sang to the new Governor, Professor Marie Bashir. What a fine representative of the Crown and the people she has been. Always there for our occasions. In earlier days, the Governors signed the orders for the

imprisonment of many gays. Now they are there with us, beckoning all people to real equality.

- * On one such occasion (it might have been the 10th jubilee) you performed in bright colours with pink and rainbow themes. But then, as I was about to deliver an address, you turned up all dressed in black. For me, it was like a nightmare. Suddenly, I found myself on the stage with a hundred High Court judges in their sombre robes. And yet I felt that, with you, there would be complete harmony and no dissent. And then I looked around and saw that the black robes were nothing more than garbage bags, soon to be torn to allow your colourful secrets to be displayed once again, in all their glory. You have been a constant source of surprises.
- * At the Sydney Gay Games in 2001, you sang out to the world as we welcomed visitors from every continent in an exuberant celebration of diversity. We thought that we were then on a high road to full equality. It was not to be so. But you sang on and kept our spirits up.
- * In 2010, as we have seen on film, you performed a duet with the band of the Royal Australian Navy. Whoever, in days gone by, would have thought of such a combination. Yet, how harmonious and natural was the interplay. Once again, you lifted our spirits and gave us encouragement that anything was possible.

To all members of the choir, to the successive musical directors, Stephen Schaefer, Jonathon Welch AM, and Sarah Penicka-Smith, to the sensitive accompanist Gareth Chan, and to all of you we say thanks. My partner Johan and I and hundreds of others will be back for many more jubilees.

A GLOBAL CAUSE

The songs we sing tonight ring around the world. Last week I was in Belgrade in Serbia at a conference on the rights of sexual minorities in the Balkans. Alas, it was not a very happy picture. In Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, FYR Macedonia and Serbia itself, actual violence and brutal hostility are often the daily experience of gays, lesbians and others. Special hatred is visited on transgender citizens for expressing their true identity.

Many of these lands want to enter the European Union and to secure the economic advantages that come from that step. To join, they must adhere to the values proclaimed by that Union. Happily, those values include respect and equality for sexual minorities.

Many of the Balkan countries have enacted laws that proclaim equality and protection from discrimination. However, laws alone are not enough:

- * In 2009, the first Belgrade Pride Parade had to be cancelled by police because of open threats of anger and violence;
- * Public signboards, proclaiming equality and urging acceptance of diversity were defaced and smashed;
- * Groups of hooligans, sometimes even led by national football heroes, exhibited violence to sexual minorities and denounced moves to accord them civic equality; and
- * In 2010, a gay Pride Parade did take place in Belgrade. But the small group of brave marchers had to be surrounded by thousands of police, deployed to fulfil the European Union's requirements.

“How many gay parades do we have to allow to get into the EU?” was the question one government official asked before our conference. As if admission to that modern and newly tolerant group of nations could be bought by the simple expedient of a public march whose participants had to be defended in life and limb by police. Well, I declared that the *ante* had been upped. Now a gay parade was not enough. Serbia must encourage and support a gay and lesbian choir! They must all be dressed in garbage bags and perform in the Belgrade Town Hall. Moreover, they must go on a world tour and sing in Sydney with the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Choir. They must be symbols of a true change of mind and of heart.

Of course, I had no authority to impose this condition. But it is amazing how liberating it can be for a former judge to be released from office. As I listened to the choir tonight in Sydney singing *Moja Dirika*, a Croatian traditional song, I wished that it could have been beamed to Serbian national television, for the languages are similar. And the sentiments bridge the gulf of hostility and lay a footpath for love.

You can imagine how disappointed I was, when I returned to Australia, to learn that in Brisbane, like Belgrade, public signage calling for acceptance of sexual minorities and showing two fully dressed men hugging each other had been defaced and smashed. And that the advertising company had bowed to pressure from the Australian Christian Lobby to remove the sign from their public billboards. Were we in Australia no better than the Balkans? Sadly, some of the same reasons for the hostility in Brisbane could be seen in the Balkans. Religion, and astonishingly the Christian religion, is often the source of the hostility. Who is this Lobby that dares to speak with such animosity

for the religion of Jesus Christ? The Prince of Peace and of reconciliation. Well, they are at work in the Balkans too. They are at work in Australia. They must be confronted for their antipathy and for their unscientific ignorance.

Today, there was news of a small victory, in Australia at least. The signage company *Adshel* reversed their decision. They put back on their Brisbane bus shelters the sign prepared by “Queensland Healthy Communities” representing lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender citizens in Queensland. The simple realities of our lives are again revealed. As they are in evidence here tonight. When people learn of the shared features of diverse human existence, some of the anger and ignorance melts away. We Australians must be concerned not only with our own struggle but with the endeavour that is under way in every country on earth to build equality for sexual minorities based on truth and acceptance.

DO YOU HEAR THE PEOPLE SING?

On Monday, I travel to New York to be part of the Australian Delegation, led by Foreign Minister Kevin Rudd, to a High Level Meeting of the General Assembly of the United Nations on the future global response to the HIV/AIDS epidemic. HIV and AIDS are not over. The challenges for the world, and for our country, remain enormous.

One of the members of the Delegation will be Don Baxter, an outstanding Australian whose own service to the struggle has been heroic. His partner is Rob Holland spoke at the opening of this concert. They told us of how, in 1990, he had participated as the sole Australian in a great choir that sang at the Vancouver Gay Games. And on his

return to Australia, he wrote a letter to the *Sydney Star Observer* proposing the formation of a choir. The Sydney Gay and Lesbian Choir was soon created. So we are the beneficiaries of Rob Holland's idea. Every step in human progress is made in such ways.

At the end of his letter, Rob Holland quoted from the popular opera, *Les Miserables* the wonderful song, a favourite of the Choir *Can You Hear The People Sing?*. This anthem was written by Claude-Michel Schönberg and Herbert Kretzmer. It asks whether we can hear the people sing as they struggle to find the light? Well, tonight we answer back. Yes, we can hear the people sing. We have heard our choir sing. They have done so in the manner of the prisoners in Beethoven's *Fidelio*, as they rise from captivity to find the light. We are all finding the light.

So, our choir will sing on. It will demand to be heard. It will keep singing until we have all – straight or gay – found the light. The singing will go on strongly and bravely. It will encourage an end to every law, practice and attitude that denies equality to every minority in this country, including ours. We will not rest or be silent until equality is attained. And eventually, we will bring true justice for all around the world and across this fair land.
