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SWAMI VIVEKANANDA CULTURAL CENTRE
CONSULATE-GENERAL OF INDIA IN SYDNEY

REDEFINING MAHATMA FOR THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD
SYDNEY, 1 OCTOBER 2020

GANDHI'S MESSAGE TODAY

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

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MAHATMA GANDHI AND HIS MESSAGE OF JUSTICE

This morning I underwent a hospital procedure under general anesthetic. But I had given my word to the Mahatma that I would rise from my slumber to join in the celebration of his sesquicentenary. So here I am.

Gandhi set out to achieve his goals in India by a particular strategy. It was *ahimsa*-love, non-violence and pacifism. In India he is called the Father of the Nation. However, he belongs to the world, to humanity and to the larger biosphere of animal and plant life. *Ahimsa* is a call for justice for all living things. Gandhi played a vital role in achieving the political independence of India. But he did more than that. His was a special guiding spirit, struggling for more than political freedom, important though that was.**

* Justice of the High Court of Australia (1996-2009); Chair of the UN Commission of Inquiry on North Korea (2013-14).

** M.D. Kirby, *What Would Gandhi Do?*, Penguin books, London, 2011.

Animal rights

It was not enough for Gandhi to demand political rights for human beings. He insisted on animal rights. He thought of the abhorrence he felt for the slaughter of animals. For a decade I have eaten no meat and worked with Voiceless - the animal welfare organisation - to encourage less meat-eating and welfare for sentient life. If Gandhi were here, he would be trying to persuade *McDonalds*, *Kentucky Fried Chicken* and *Burger King* to substitute vegetarian products. Slip it in and tell the customers later, I say. Gandhi thought of the animals. He called for justice beyond humans. So should we.

Women's rights

Domestic violence and oppression of women is rightly on many lips today. Gandhi was always a step ahead of the great moral movements. If he were here today, he would address the enormous dangers to women; religious and caste negativity; the killing of female children; the dowry burden; and inequality in the state and in the home. He was for all people. This included equality for women.

Climate change

Gandhi's ethical principles evolved, lessons concerning the desirable limits to growth. The need for greater simplicity and self-discipline in human beings. The rejection of extreme wealth for individuals. The demand for greater simplicity in human life, protective of the beauties of the world. His voice was raised about the urgent need for ecological restraint in the place

of wasteful profligacy. We should apply these rules at the global dimension today.

Sexuality

A little known aspect of Gandhi's call to liberation concerned sexuality. He taught that "the sex urge is fine and noble thing. There is nothing to be ashamed of in it. We cannot properly control or conquer the sexual passion by turning a blind eye to it. I am therefore strongly in favour of teaching young boys and young girls the significance of the right use of their... organs." In his life he had close relations with men as well as women. He admitted that his conclusions demanded discarding the old system of ethics and morals. He saw in all humans the prospect of love. I believe that he would be proud that, in the country to which he gave birth, India, the highest court in the *Johar Case*¹ in 2018, upheld the right of all people to love and form relationships without discrimination or cruel criminal punishments. What an instance of *ahimsa* is there.

Nuclear perils

It cannot be Justice to build and maintain huge stockpiles of nuclear weapons that threaten the extinction of the world and every form of life in it. If Gandhi were alive today, I feel sure he would add this existential notion to the mandatory embrace of Justice, including for India itself. All those who love life will be hoping that the treaty to ban the possession and use of nuclear weapons will gather the last five ratifications that will bring it into force.² Justice requires, without delay, that the noise of war should no longer deafen

¹ [2020] 1 LRC 1 at 46.

² UN *Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons*.

us to risks of nuclear warfare. Thus, Gandhi was a leader for his nation and for all nations and peoples.

For Gandhi, Justice speaks broadly. To all living things. To women and minorities who have suffered from oppression. To the neglect of climate change. And to the perils of nuclear danger. It is not difficult to detect Gandhi's message today. We must all waken from our sleep, lift our voices, open our ears. And then Gandhi will speak to us.