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Securing the Future for International Education

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Introduction

Thank you for giving me this opportunity to address this very important conference and to present my compliments to you all on the incredible work you are doing for Australia and for the education of people all over the world. I add my welcome to our overseas visitors and hope you get the opportunity to see Sydney as well as Melbourne. We are good guys up there too.

It is the function of all of us to try to ensure that ours is, in the words of Voltaire's Professor Pangloss, "the best of all possible worlds". But like Voltaire, when we look around, both above and below the surface, we realise that there are more than a few blemishes. There are cracks that the paint cannot hide.

Education is one area which we must try to protect at all costs. In Australia and many other places at the dawn of the 21st century, this is becoming more and more problematic. Yet education, and the ability of everyone to access it, is crucial to justice. For education is an essential underpinning to a progressive decent fair society. Neither freedom nor justice can be permanently maintained without education, and equal access to education. It is also a democratic entitlement, and most often a step to advancing both the student and the nation.

Just over 150 years ago, less than half the children in Australia attended school, and those that did averaged only two years of education. For most families, the choice of educational institution was between cheap private schools whose teachers had frequently entered the profession only after they had failed at everything else, or denominational schools which received meagre funding and little supervision from the government. Many schools had such appallingly low standards that the buildings were described as "wretched hovels"¹, about three-quarters of them had insufficient furniture, and only half had sufficient books. There was understandably an enormous groundswell of support for a comprehensive system of government-funded schools.

¹ William Wilkins, following a tour of schools in NSW circa 1850, quoted in Austin, A.G. Australian Education 1788 – 1900, Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons V1961 Melbourne at p58.

By 1848 many in government had accepted that a basic education was beneficial for more reasons than to instil religious and moral beliefs in the working masses. The diffusion of knowledge through a basic comprehensive education was something from which everyone in society should benefit and in turn society as a whole would profit immeasurably from an educated populace. And so was born a system of public education in Australia.

At that very time, the philosopher Horace Mann wrote that education is a great equaliser in society. At least it has the potential to be so. Education is not a mere transmission of knowledge, but a total development of the person. The primary object of education is not to impart knowledge of facts, but to develop in the student the ability to formulate and ask questions, and to find the answers. It is part of the quest for knowledge on any number of issues and of the search for their solutions. It also allows people to explore their dreams and ambitions, essential ingredients for an innovative progressive society.

Education is also crucial to a society which understands the central role of human dignity for all its citizens. Infusing decency and tolerance of difference into our students' classrooms has helped and will continue to maximise the potential that Mann recognised.

As all of us here today recognise, educational institutions provide an excellent environment for children to experience and enjoy the multicultural miracle of Australian society and to learn why it is so wrong to discriminate against people because they are of a different race, religion or culture. We are unfortunately not there yet but the cultures of Indigenous Australians, and those of the multitude of ethnicities who have migrated to Australia in the last 215 years, should all have found expression in our educational structures. It is there that our students – young and older alike – should learn that our multicultural society has its origins in the cultural and linguistic diversity of the many Aboriginal nations that inhabited this country prior to the arrival of white man. The students – and for that matter, their families too – must also learn that we are a nation of many peoples sharing essentially common goals whose diverse cultures are one of our great assets that differences between people take nothing away from anyone. They add to what we share. They make our country abundantly wealthy in its most important resource – its people. And if I may be permitted to say so, precisely the same observations apply to many of the countries where IDP operates and from where many of you overseas visitors come.

Given the negative messages on immigration, religion, Indigenous people and similar major social and social justice issues that parts of society are sending to youth everywhere today, there is a need for an assertive approach towards teaching everyone about human dignity and the equal worth of all people. I hope that this conference and the momentum of sentiment it builds will play a stimulating part in ensuring that the students you generate receive these educational opportunities as well as their mainstream academic training. But in order to put your massive international endeavours in education into some perspective, let me go back in history a little.

55 years ago this coming December, a war ravaged and war-weary world ushered in a new international order with what was called the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. It was a bold and brilliant document full of words, phrases and concepts that everyone wanted to hear. It spoke of recognising the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family as the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. It observed that disregard and contempt for human rights had resulted in barbarous acts which had outraged the conscience of mankind. It called for the advent of a world in which human beings shall enjoy freedom of speech and belief, and freedom from fear and want, as the highest aspiration of the common people. It declared as essential that human rights should be protected by the rule of law.

As a consequence, a common standard of achievement was declared for all people and all nations. Every individual and every organ of every society was required to strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms, and to work to secure their universal recognition and effective observance.

It was too late for the 20 million Russians who had died in the freezing winters of 1942 and 1943. It was too late for the 15 million civilians in other parts of Europe who had died as the innocent victims of the power-hungry half crazed lunatics of the Third Reich and their millions of German, French, Polish, Ukrainian, Croatian, Italian and other sympathisers.

It was too late to save the 17 million allied soldiers who had died in defence of the gravely imperilled frontiers of freedom, and their German, Italian, Japanese and other counterparts who hardly had a stake in the cause which sent them to their inglorious deaths. And it was

too late for the 6 million Jews and the hundreds of thousands of gypsies, communists, social democrats, Catholics, non-Aryans, homosexuals and humanitarian sympathisers – including 1½ million children – who were subjected to the rifles, the preposterous death camps and the Zyklon B Gas of the SS and Einsatzgruppen.

The atrocities of the Nazi era and the horrors and devastation of the Second World War compelled the international community to unite in a vow to create a world free of war, persecution and injustice, and never again to allow such horrors to darken the lives of humankind. And on 10 December 1948, the General Assembly of the newly created United Nations, under the chairmanship of an Australian, proclaimed this extraordinary declaration of humanitarian principles.

The pen was almost still writing the Universal Declaration when the Iron Curtain descended on Europe. Behind this almost impenetrable barrier for another 40 years, the so-called workers' revolution against the evils of capitalist materialism held sway. Under the guise of establishing an egalitarian proletariat, Soviet and Eastern European communism constructed a secret society of repression, fear, inhumanity, and nuclear might.

They built the monstrous Berlin Wall, attempted to blockade and perhaps obliterate the United States by carpeting Cuba with nuclear missiles, and armed ruthless regimes oppressing their own peoples, from North Korea to Angola, from the Middle East to South America. They paralysed the United Nations with their infamous veto, and built an environmental legacy from which to this very day hundreds, perhaps thousands, die every year just by breathing the air and drinking the water.

In response, the western world built armies, armaments and armadas of ships, planes, bombs and rockets. Amongst other places, we fought in Korea, Indo China and the Persian Gulf, as it turned out, for very elusive results. We ignored and not infrequently funded ruthless dictators even when they butchered their own people, because they were seen as "friends" of the West or at least anti-communist. Yet when first the Polish Solidarity Movement and then Mikhail Gorbachev brought the communist house of cards crashing down, and then the tragic followers of the evil Saddam Hussein gave up their unequal struggle in the first Gulf War 12 years ago, we cried out victory.

The new international order

40 years after the first one was virtually stillborn, the second new world order of our era was born – this one was alive, or so the politicians told us. There was no Universal Declaration Mark 2. We had done such a good job ignoring the first version, and it was so well expressed, there was no point in trying another exercise in grandiloquence.

The world had come a long way in that 40 years – colour television, people on the moon, space research and travel, the Salk and Sabin vaccines and other phenomenal medical advances prolonging life and alleviating suffering, the end of colonialism, the US Civil Rights Act, progress for Aborigines, a human rights charter for Canada, and subsequently for the UK and New Zealand leaving only Australia of the western industrialised world without one, mobile and car phones which can telephone Moscow as easily as Melbourne, and so on.

But while all this was happening, people were getting swamped by the tyranny of bureaucracy, the politics of the unprincipled or negligent – even of the dishonest – and the effects of massive national debt brought about in part simply by bad government. And millions became beset by famine, poverty and persecution by new warlords.

The allies spent \$US150 billion in the first Gulf War to oust Saddam Hussein from Kuwait – without removing Saddam himself or achieving even a skerrick of democracy in Kuwait where women can still not have a driver's licence let alone a vote. And then we permitted him to murder, starve and freeze to death thousands of his Kurdish and Shiite citizens.

Indeed we actually allowed him to remain in power until 5 months ago so that he could go on oppressing his own people and doing murderous mischief and mayhem – just as we have allowed the Turks to persecute the Kurds from the other side of the border while we in Australia gave an AC – our highest civilian honour – to a visiting former President of Turkey.

The international community failed dismally in Somalia. We ignored the warnings about Rwanda, and then withdrew UN personnel allowing thousands more to die. We set up safe havens in Bosnia and, as I saw for myself, then stood by while the people we were

supposedly protecting were forcibly uprooted and mercilessly shot. I actually stood in a football field where hundreds of men had been shot dead at point blank range, and then dug into the ground in front of the eyes of their parents, wives and children hiding in the trees. This was civilised central Europe at the end of the 20th Century.

We have largely ignored massācres in Algeria and elsewhere, done little to assuage or reverse the suppression of the Burmese and the Tibetans, and for four decades we Australians virtually made love to the ruthless autocrat Soeharto and his voracious family in priority to helping the Indonesian poor and seeking justice for the East Timorese.

While a global economic order now outstrips the Bible and the Koran as the guiding faith of today's world, sadly the remoteness of global **humanitarian** reform is truly great. There is simply no sign at all that at last, economic equity and social equanimity are about to supplant the essentially selfish and aggressive pursuits of most nations. There is not even a whisper of a world united in its commitment, as opposed to its rhetoric, to redirecting its abundant skills and resources towards taking up the challenges of the real problems of humankind.

These challenges include alleviating hunger and disease; confronting, exposing and overcoming exploitation and corruption; removing torture and cruelty; attacking prejudice and discrimination; and addressing constructively the human imbalances and inequities which abound everywhere.

The present international crisis

The world has been traumatised by the wicked destruction of human life and property in New York and Washington on 11 September 2001, and by the tragic loss of 91 Australian and 111 other lives in Bali just one year ago. As it still reels from the economic havoc caused or generated by those events, we face the realisation that humanity is threatened, not so much by superpower rivalry or nuclear confrontation – as we have been brainwashed for so long – as by the much more sinister threats posed by suicide bombers and chemical and biological attacks on such things as our water resources, power generation capacity, oil supplies, transportation and communication facilities and other fundamentals to our way of

life. The breakdown of power in New York just two months ago, though thankfully due to nothing more sinister than the antiquated inadequacy of the electricity grid system, is a stark alert to what we could be facing in the years ahead.

If the so-called war on terrorism could not protect the people in a major American hotel just two months ago in Jakarta, one of the most unstable and vulnerable cities in the world, nor the UN Headquarters and other heavily guarded major buildings in Baghdad, it seems that there is a long way to go before this war can even be on target, let alone succeed. I profoundly disagree with those who say that if we capture a few masterminds, and convict and sentence to death some smaller fry murderers, all terrorism will end. If we do not address the causes of the mania to become martyrs which is so difficult for most of us to comprehend, I am afraid that our legacy to our kids will be a long and very painful struggle. The real possibility of a 100-year war of different cultures looms starkly.

Yet to maintain our continuing existence and enjoyment of life, we are asked to trust in our leaders to choose wisely and execute efficiently, when we generally do not trust them to do much simpler things almost every day. We in Australia for example have been told that we must, as it has been put, “brace” for a terrorist assault, though how you “brace” for any such thing has not yet been explained. Nor have we been told why anyone would choose a few hundred people walking in Collins Street Melbourne, or a street in one of our other cities, when 250,000 people are in Trafalgar Square Tube Station in central London every hour of every working day.

Moreover, we have just had the SAS in Iraq as a couple of hundred troops in a force numbering almost half a million military personnel. Yet these are our very best soldiers who would be needed to defend us if we are seriously under threat. One of our prime responses – injected into our psyches by advertising campaigns at vast public expense – has been to invite people to be alert for (but apparently not alarmed at) bombs in parked cars, school bags, and the clothes of Muslim women – but not the flowing robes of other women or men or of working doctors, nurses, judges, barristers, members of the clergy or university lecturers. Perhaps our most highbrow defence against terrorism has been the supply by government without charge of frig magnets to display in our kitchens. Nothing could tell us more about this crude political scaremongering than any words ever could. Why is all this

money not being spent on healthcare and education, on building tolerance and cultural understanding between peoples, and in addressing poverty here and overseas to provide more justice and incentive for those who are desperate, even mad, because they feel powerless to change their situation and place in the world?

No one even takes a breath at the hypocrisies that would forget that America, the UK and many other countries are brimming with weapons of mass destruction to deploy or use as each unilaterally decides. It is conveniently overlooked that American and other western money financed terrorism by the IRA against British and Irish civilians for decades and longer in a cause they were unwilling to negotiate, and by violent groups all over Latin America and beyond so long as they were fighting in countries other than ours. For that matter, the West armed and funded Saddam Hussein in his nine-year war against Iran in which 10-year-old boys fought and died in the front line. We even funded al Qaeda to fight the Soviet Union in Afghanistan, showing that we will act how, when and when it suits us regardless of morality and consistency.

Led by a witless media and calculating politicians, we have recently witnessed not a little triumphalism from events in Iraq, yet what has been won? There was never a doubt that US armed force would eventually overwhelm whatever Iraq had to offer. But what was the plan then? What is it now when predictable chaos has descended on the country? Where was the rearguard of experienced US and British police forces or civilian controllers to protect life and property including priceless antiquities? For that matter, the Australian Army and Federal Police have considerable skills and experience in such matters as they have demonstrated in many places in recent years.

The genius who dreamt up the idea that a retired American general could rule, even for a day, 30 million Iraqis, or administer their affairs has walnuts for brains. Was there some unbelievably arrogant assumption that Iraqis were some type of pre-historic savages when in fact they are a highly educated people with a long and distinguished culture? What will we have "won" if the next or a following Iraqi Government is dominated by religious fanatics seeking a pan-national theocracy? Iraqis and the rest of us may be well rid of the sons of Saddam but deliberately executing people whoever they are is rarely the solution to anything.

Communication

The nature of societies dictates that there will always be differences of views and interests. Yet the only sensible and intelligent way of resolving these conflicts, whether between individuals or nations, is through communication and cooperation. As everyone experiences in domestic life, all conflicts, even verbal, end. All wars stop at some time.

The longer they take to do so, the greater are the losses and the harder it is to repair the damage suffered. The promotion of a culture of understanding and non-confrontation is surely crucial for the future of humankind. It is not enough for governments and their citizens to endorse, even revere, the principle of peaceful co-existence without any appropriate action to promote and protect it.

There will always be obstacles in the pursuit of our goals. But if we remain passive and make no effort to bridge the gaps between us, conflicts will arise and injustice will grow. Transforming these obstacles into opportunities for positive growth is a challenge to our human ingenuity. That is why the work you all do is so important. But to achieve the results for which you strive requires patience, compassion and commonsense, an element of the human psyche which is unfortunately today remarkably uncommon. The vision must be to ensure that all the vivacious colours of society survive and flourish as far across the spectrum of society as we can achieve, not only for our benefit but also for our kids and theirs.

The historic legacy

The last 60 years have witnessed many amazing technological developments and some remarkable co-operative humanitarian efforts by the international community but they have also seen nuclear confrontation threatening the very existence of the world, the Cold and several hot wars, massive poverty, hunger and disease, and far too many other threats to the peace and tranquillity promised to humankind in the wake of the Nazi and later the Soviet threats to a decent world.

Our generation has produced some great benefits and opportunities but also a swag of major problems for the next generation to solve. We must today contemplate these stark and quite alarming new challenges which will test our and our children's capacity and commitment to meet and overcome.

So as you meet to discuss the many difficult and troublesome challenges facing your industry, be assured that you are in distinguished company. There is not a lot of structured leadership, still less statesmanship, with which we can be happy and contented anywhere at this time. And although geographically remote and politically unimportant, Australia and we Australians are going to feel the pain, pay the cost, and endure the risks that so many others are facing at this time. If nothing else, it should make us take stock and look to what we can and should do to address our own weaknesses and faults.

Australian human rights

For most of these last 55 years since the Universal Declaration, Australia has been one of the leaders in implementing the humanitarian standards it identifies. As a middle power with a respected human rights record, Australia has been looked to and listened to by the international community on human rights issues. This proud tradition of support for human rights and dignity casts upon us a great responsibility. As the largest developed democracy in our region, indeed the sixth oldest democracy in the world, Australia not only has an obligation to speak out and act against persecution running rampant in other countries; we have an obligation to prevent and remedy human rights abuses on our own soil. And the

standards we must observe are those we set for ourselves, not alien credos which we loudly, and rightly, reject.

Some people label these human rights principles as foreign ideas imposed upon us by unattractive regimes or ideologies from elsewhere. But none of the tenets of the Universal Declaration and the raft of international laws which has followed have in fact been forced on Australia by anyone. For one thing, when they were passed, the UN was firmly under western control. But much more significantly, none of their principles are foreign to us or to decent people anywhere. All of them are recognised and accepted as part of our and many others' cultural and legal framework in any event.

The driving force for their enthusiastic adoption in Australian terms is the evolution of our nation into a society where laws, employment and human relations reflect decency and honour; where legitimate controversy is fought and resolved with a passion devoid of stereotypes, and of minority, group or racial defamation; where a fair sharing of our country's resources and benefits is open to every sector of the community; and above all, where decisions of all kinds stem from considerations of merit and true deserts, free from preconceptions, prejudices and prejudgments.

However, in my perception, we Australians, together with the peoples of many others of the so-called developed countries, are today in serious danger of forgetting these goals. Continuing to recall and nominally respect the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and all the other human rights treaties is one thing. It is quite another to ensure that our governments and people actually honour these rights. And as of late our commitment is looking decidedly hollow and the world is taking notice.

At present, our society represents a mixed bag of the good, the bad and the ugly. And as your truly remarkable organisation goes out to sell Australia, I think rightly, as an education centre of true excellence, it is important that we not exaggerate our other characteristics. People are not looking for perfection. They are seeking quality, safety and truth. Whilst we rightly receive international acclaim for amongst other things, our scientific, technical, manufacturing and sporting triumphs, we also receive criticism for our insidious treatment of our Indigenous people and of asylum seekers, and for policies either designed to discriminate between our own citizens or having the effect of doing so. If we accept the

praises, balance and truth require us also to examine and prise open our consciences as we question both the substance and direction of our nation and people today.

Surely our generation has a responsibility to ensure that our nation is, and continues to be known as, a champion of honourable and humanitarian conduct. Yet because we appear as a nation **not** to be questioning our societal constructs today, we are at best wandering aimlessly, permitting our development to be steered in many directions, not all of them desirable.

Our public education and health systems are in considerable disarray. Government schools are suffering and being closed down for lack of students and money, and the continued expansion of the HECS system is both dissuading young people from undertaking a university education and seriously impacting upon their ability to marry, start families and breed in sufficient numbers to sustain our population. And this is a country which needs population, and every brain to be developed to its maximum potential!

Contrary to what some of our leaders claim from time to time, breaches of human rights and decency occur every day in Australia and all of the so-called developed societies. We fall far short of our obligations to children, women especially those in poor circumstances, people with disabilities, refugees, new migrants, senior citizens and others. Recent year cutbacks in public funding in this country for social justice, allegedly due to economic imperatives sometimes rather ironically called economic rationalism, might have produced budget surpluses but they have resulted in major reductions in our provision of childcare, in job creation, education and social welfare programs, and in efforts to care for children, especially refugee and new migrant children, and to assist Aborigines and Islanders to improve their situation – so that again the poor are being hit to help the rich and the gap between the two widens even further.

I have never been a believer in the so-called “trickle down effect” supposed to flow to the poor from helping the rich become richer. In my experience that creek simply never flows at all, or stops well before it reaches its end. If you don't mind my saying so, we need a little less economic rationalism and a little more rational economics.

People are even being urged to put any spare money into stocks and shares, thereby allowing the rich and the greedy to further exploit the poor or poorer to their own advantage. That odd politician, Mark Latham, seems to think that the shares should even be paid for with public money. On the other side of politics, some argue that we should sell off the rest of Telstra. Whatever the commercial merits of doing so, I cannot for the life of me understand how its ordinary people can be asked to buy more Telstra shares when those they have already bought have won them the prize of a handsome loss for which of course no one apologises.

And judging by our reactions to recent year arrivals of people escaping torture and persecution, we are even losing our compassion and tolerance for others different to ourselves. I am a proud, patriotic Australian – but I have been ashamed at some of what we have been up to of late.

Children

Although it saddens me to say it, developed nation status does not guarantee respect for the human rights of children. 15 years ago when I was its President, our Human Rights Commission reported that there were 100,000 homeless kids living in a country of affluence and prosperity. They are still there, some not very far from here, living on the streets of our cities and towns, injecting their arms and selling their bodies just to stay alive. Not long ago the Salvation Army reported that 400 children sleep on the streets of Sydney every single night. The figures are proportionately similar in our other major cities. We have the 4th highest youth suicide rate in the world. There were 30,000 reported cases of child abuse neglect in New South Wales alone in each of the last 3 years. We can only imagine how many more were not reported. Far too many of these disasters are Aboriginal children. They all impact on educational outcomes and success.

Indigenous Australians

Indeed, there can be no doubt that the continuing sufferings of Indigenous Australians are undoubtedly our greatest and most long-standing shame – and the deprivations endured by the children are the very worst aspect of that shame.

Many people in this country, including many leaders and moulders of public opinion, speak of everyone having or being given equal rights in our society. This is a glib, albeit seductively expressed, point of view. If two people commence life far apart in assets, whether personal or material, and they thereafter receive proportionately equal benefits, the gap between them actually increases. In other words, equal treatment of people on unequal levels at the outset of the equalisation process merely perpetuates the inequality.

Hence the superficially attractive appeal of “everyone should be treated equally” as from now is in fact a recipe for retaining differences, imbalances and discrepancies because of the commencing inequality. When used in relation to our Indigenous peoples, it is also surreptitious and insidious discrimination if not racism. For whether conscious or unconscious, the consequences for the victims are exactly the same.

The truth is that Australia’s Indigenous peoples still face gross inequality deeply rooted in history and the prejudiced, intolerant or stubborn attitudes of the white community. Whichever social indicator is looked at, whether it is health, education, justice, employment or housing, Indigenous Australians are identified as the most disadvantaged group in the country. This situation represents a manifest and fundamental breach of Australian and international law. What it says about the morality of our nation I leave you to categorise.

The Stolen Children

Many wrongs have been committed against our Indigenous people and their ancestors during nearly 216 years of European civilisation in Australia. They did not deserve what they received. And it cannot all be laid at the door of the past. Certainly past generations acted quite appallingly and in a most violent and discriminatory way. The Stolen Children experience – which involved Indigenous children being removed from their parents and communities and placed in government-funded homes or in the households of white Australians – was not, as it has been described by some people who should and do know better, “well-meaning if misguided”. To my mind, this is just a mischievous Australian cover-up. In any country and every language, kidnapping is a criminal offence. So are rape and assault. Stopping youngsters from ever seeing their parents again, in many cases not even

allowing them to go home to attend their parents' funerals, may and ought to be criminal. It is certainly gross immorality.

Slave labour was outlawed by Abraham Lincoln a little over 150 years ago. The Australian convict settlement ended about the same time. Yet for decades up to as late as 1970, many Aboriginal children were taken from their families – supposedly because it was regarded as beneficial to them – and effectively enslaved to white farmers, and became the victims of all those other crimes. It does not strike me as “well meaning” to require a 6, 8, 10 or 12 year old to work 14 hours a day or more, 7 days a week, and to pay them \$1 or \$5 a week for doing so.

Yet this is what often occurred. Many of these Aborigines are well and truly alive today. Many of the white people involved are also still with us. An apology is the least we owe for that wickedness.

The present generation

But our generation has a pretty solid case to answer as well. On this very day, against a national figure of around 7%, the Aboriginal adult unemployment rate, including Indigenous persons who forgo their rights to unemployment benefits to participate in community development employment projects, is 41%, and is expected to rise to 60% or more by 2010; unemployment among Indigenous youths is 18 times worse than their white counterparts; the average income for Indigenous adults is some 30% lower than the overall Australian average; and the deaths of Aborigines in official custody are still happening, even increasing, despite a \$30 million Royal Commission and a considerable expenditure of effort and money.

We have just not spent enough time or effort on Aboriginal health. It is well known – and heartbreaking to have to acknowledge even now – that the mortality rates among Indigenous people continue to greatly exceed the rest of the population at all ages in both genders, particularly among infants. But it is not as well acknowledged that Indigenous Australians are more likely than the rest of us to be sick from almost every type of disease or condition for which information is available. Most of them, such as heart disease,

respiratory infections, middle ear infections, intestinal infections, and the eye diseases, which plague Indigenous communities throughout Australia, are symptomatic of the poor living environment in which most Aborigines live. Contaminated water, inadequate hygiene, overcrowding, poor basic utilities such as the lack of toilets, running water and electricity, and a scarcity of preventative and curative medical and dental care all contribute to this deplorable situation. The Aborigines concerned have no power themselves to improve those matters.

Unequal justice

Imprisonment of blacks continues to be far greater than whites everywhere in this country, with the Australian Bureau of Statistics reporting last year that the rate of Aboriginal imprisonment was 15 times greater than for the total population.

Statistics extracted by the Institute of Criminology last year showed that in New South Wales where Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders represent less than 2% of the population, they account for a third of the juveniles in detention, a fifth of adult female prisoners including one in four of all females in full time custody, and one in seven of all the adults in prison. The Institute has also reported that a New South Wales Aboriginal youth is twice as likely to receive a jail term or community service order as a non-Aboriginal youth of the same age, with the same criminal history, committing the same offence.

Which disposes of the argument that their high incarceration rates are due to a greater Aboriginal propensity to commit crimes. It is simply that the white community has not been and is not prepared to deal with the causes of the problems because it will cost money which in too much of the country it prefers to spend on incarceration. Where alternative methods have been tried – and there are a number of such examples – they have been strikingly successful in reducing the crime rate.

I recently visited the Dubbo Juvenile Correctional Centre in the New South Wales Central West. There were 25 inmates, I think they call them "clients". The majority were Aborigines. 23 of the 25 had been there before. When I asked what happened to these youngsters when they finish their term, I was informed that they are driven 8 kms into the

city of Dubbo and left there – no job, no money, no food, no home, no one to love or care for them. Is it any wonder why they come back to the place that actually provides all those things? Our generation has its own quite new Stolen Children saga to confront.

A fair go for all

In short, we continue to deny Indigenous people the very equal opportunity to a fair chance in life which we Australians like to call a 'fair go' for all. Which is not to say that Australia is not a wonderful country – I would say the best in the world – and that we are not generally a kind and generous people. It is just that we are not as good as we say or think we are. Indeed, while this situation persists, we are engaged in an empty untruthful boast about our allegedly superior standards.

These things should not be happening. The things in the past should not have happened. Together they are human wrongs, not for blame in the crude sense, but for the deepest regret and for a commitment to put them right as a matter of the utmost urgency. If they represent what some have called a black armband view of history, I for one wear it as a mark of sorrow, and as a commitment to reconciliation. Rather a black armband than a white blindfold to shut out the truth.

It can never be right to be wrong – or to continue a wrong. We certainly do not need to convict ourselves of a past which we did not influence and over which we have absolutely no control. But future generations will undoubtedly judge us harshly if we do not respond now. This is not a question of anyone's attitudes to people racially, culturally or ethnically different to themselves. It is about justice and fairness to all our people, not just some.

Asylum seekers

Much has also been written and said about our recent and current treatment of people seeking asylum, refuge and rescue in our country. Last year I was honoured to preside over a unique coalition of healthcare organisations, including all or most of the specialist colleges, in a major submission to the Human Rights Commission's Inquiry into Children in Immigration Detention. For anyone interested, as the Commission's Inquiry is still

continuing, the Submission may be found on the website of the Royal Australasian College of Physicians.

On the issue itself, I say only this for today. No one has ever suggested that anyone and everyone who wants to come here should be allowed to do so. Of course countries have to regulate their population and migration numbers. No one has ever suggested that anyone but we Australians should determine who should be allowed to join what is, I believe, one of the great multicultural societies of the world.

Until recently we had a policy of border controls and refugee protection. For some reason I do not understand, we have now changed to border protection and refugee controls. Border protection is in fact a propaganda catchphrase, not a national problem. Our borders are not under assault, least of all from the Captain of the Tampa who should have been recognised as a hero, as he was back home in Norway and in New Zealand, for risking the lives of his crew in rescuing helpless people in danger of drowning in the sea. Instead, he was lambasted here by politicians and some media for, as they put it, "invading Australia's sovereignty", as if the King of Norway had somehow "lost his marbles" by declaring war on Australia with an oil tanker or container ship.

I am shocked that we kind generous Australians, living in almost unparalleled comfort and tranquillity, have been prepared to allow our hard-won reputation for compassion to be demolished at a stroke. That so many Australians, including far too many who should and do know better, have been willing to inject into our everyday language of kindness a term like illegal migrants, when asylum seekers are neither illegal nor migrants. When we have been prepared to accuse people seeking rescue from torture and terror, or allow them to be labelled, as queue jumpers when the very concept of queues of people escaping with their own and their terrified children's lives only has to be thought about for a minute to be revealed as a canard of gross order. When we are punishing the innocent helpless **victims** of people smuggling for the sins of its avaricious and unscrupulous **perpetrators**. When a manicured term like mandatory detention has been substituted for what it really is – compulsory permanent or long term jailing of children, women and elderly people in remote harsh places in appalling conditions of cruelty and inhumanity without crime, charge, bail or trial.

But above all, and whatever else we do, there is nothing more urgent and more fundamental to our own consciences and peace of mind than to deliberately and consciously deflect the racial overtones flowing from the asylum seeker debate, now reinvigorated by the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the death and suffering of their victims, away from vengeance and violence to a search for the ways to solve or at least salve as many of the causes of such outrages as we can.

It is a tough ask to try to deal with fanatical martyr-driven hatred which intentionally seeks to kill children and innocent civilians generally. Amongst other problems is the ignorance of each civilisation of the other. There is not even a common language of communication readily available. How many non-Muslims have ever read one line of the Koran? What do we know of Muslim poetry and literature, of its music and art, of its culture and philosophies? What efforts are we making to access the personal interests and aspirations of a billion people as a means of building understanding and tolerance?

Yet there is in truth no sane alternative to a search for peaceful solutions. We simply must find ways to get Muslims in our own community and everywhere to share with us the rich and beautiful elements of their beliefs and practices, rather than the ugly and insane manifestations of the few amongst them who do not wish to live in peace with the rest of us, with all our faults and inadequacies.

It is not and cannot be beyond us. I have been in over 20 Muslim countries in recent years and have met and talked to hundreds and hundreds of their peoples. I have met none who want anyone to be killed, still less to kill anyone themselves. All they want is what we want – the opportunity to live peaceful lives with their families, to work for fair reward, and to give their children opportunities for happier, safer and more prosperous lives than they themselves have had.

I have held in my own arms Muslim children and babies dying of simply cured diseases like measles and diarrhoea if only we could have got them the fresh water we throw away every day just cleaning our teeth. I have looked in the eyes of their parents as the lives of their children ebbed away and cried with them when I could not answer their pleas for help to save their kids. I could detect absolutely no different level or sense of love and loss than

would be the case with any and every one of us. If we can do nothing else, can we just tone down the arrogance a fraction?

Leadership

And finally a word on leadership. This is not a time for amateurs and armchair observers to peddle their theories and parade their prejudices. As you regularly have to do in your professional work, it is a time for our leaders of all political persuasions to actually lead us in what are now and will in the future be sophisticated and difficult undertakings.

The portents are not good. For this is the first recorded time that our leaders across the board have refused to inform and educate the people with the facts. It has become all too common for Parliament – which means, I remind you, the Members, the political spinners (different in every sense to the Shane Warne variety), and the media – to give expression to something other than the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. It should have been blindingly obvious that desperately poor people who had spent every last cent they had and could raise to get on leaky and wholly unsanitary river boats under the control of people they did not know and travel thousands of miles over rough and dangerous seas to a place they had never seen for the purpose of saving themselves and their kids from torture, persecution or starvation, would hardly be likely to then deliberately drown their own children in the sea.

Yet we fought the whole of the last federal election on the basis that they did, when it was well known that they did not. We should be utterly ashamed of ourselves that our democracy failed so dismally on such a fundamental matter as truth. And we continue to tolerate the shameful abuse of human decency, at a total cost by the way of around \$2 billion a year to keep them out of our country, of falsely labelling a few hundred victims of persecution seeking merely that we comply with our own and international law. Just think what that money could be doing in our health and education systems. I say nothing of the missing Iraqi weapons of mass destruction, or the alleged 45-minute Saddam version of Armageddon, now being proven in England as a so-called “sexed up” invention for grossly political purposes. Real sex does not deserve such a slander.

When trade unions and others objected to Chinese labourers being brought here to help find gold in the late 19th century, the leaders told the people what had to be done. When 83% of Australians told an opinion poll in 1947 that they were against allowing Jewish survivors of the Nazi Holocaust to be admitted to Australia, the leaders told the people what was right – even if they partly gave in to the pressures by limiting the numbers of Jewish passengers on each boat to 25% of the total, thereby leaving many of them to rot in Europe while they desperately looked elsewhere for somewhere to go.

When people objected to workers coming here from Yugoslavia and other parts of southern Europe in the early 50s to help build the Snowy Mountains Hydro Electric Scheme, with all that that project has meant to the prosperity of Australians, the leaders said what the national interest demanded. When more than 60% of people voted in a 1973 opinion poll to reject refugees from Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia, whose countries and lives we had helped to wreck, in our own not their interests, the leaders decided what our national duty was.

Where are the leaders today who will carry out their similar responsibilities in relation to the major crises in health and education facing our country now, instead of funding so obscenely the continuing inhuman treatment of our asylum seekers? When will the leaders of both our major political groupings decide to lead, not follow, the prejudices and ignorance of those who do not want to know the truth or are embarrassed by it? Where are the voices and votes of leaders who would refuse to contemplate paying for our soldiers to fight in Iraq unless we equally fund our humanitarian workers to help rebuild the shattered lives of the war's victims? My friends and colleagues at UNICEF, AUSTCARE and the other expert Australian relief bodies are ready and waiting. As are the people they should be in Iraq to help. Leaders speak glibly of the need to instil good governance and remove corruption in countries who desperately need both. We are told of our commitment to help people help themselves. But suddenly we are short of money!

We want, and deserve, leaders committed to one simple saintly goal – a noble country which upholds human dignity for itself and bestows human dignity on everyone in it. Surely that is not too much to ask.

Conclusion

There is no more fundamental task for honourable people than to uphold the sanctity of the human condition. We Australians are normally generous, kind and honourable people, but we have strayed from our path in these instances and a few others.

Human rights are, as their most famous declaration says, universal. They are for all of humankind. No one person is more of a human being than another. A truly humane nation treats all vulnerable people, whatever their ethnic, racial and cultural origins, with dignity, sensitivity and respect, and caters for their physical, emotional and welfare needs.

It is time for attitudinal change across the board around the world. We are no longer cherishing the principles we have so enthusiastically promised to uphold for our children and for children everywhere. In the process we are forsaking who we are and what we stand for. We must take a step back and remember why we made these promises, and what we need to do to keep them. After all, if the children are suffering and the children are the future, what hope is there for the future?²

Nelson Mandela said on his last visit to Australia just over 3 years ago :

One of the most difficult things to do is not so much to change society as to change ourselves.

This change will not just happen. It is up to us to make it happen. Our people and our leaders must be made to realise that it takes a stronger nation to admit its errors, and to learn from them, than to pretend that nothing went wrong in the first place.

This is a fight for the rediscovery of our very souls. We dare not fail. In my opinion, we have not a moment to lose.

² Adapted from Maty Phiri editor monthly newsletter for teenaged in Zambia