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**WALTER MURDOCH LECTURE  
LIVING WITH DIFFERENCE:  
DOES MULTICULTURALISM HAVE A FUTURE?**

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MURDOCH UNIVERSITY  
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- Professor John Yovich, Vice Chancellor, Murdoch University
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- Murdoch family members; Mr Walter King, Mrs Elizabeth Millett and Mr Simon King
- Members of the Anti-Racism Steering Committee
- Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you very much for inviting me to deliver this lecture in honour of Sir Walter Murdoch.

I certainly won't take the opportunity tonight to inform you of Murdoch's views of politicians.

He had, what John La Nauze described as a "deep-rooted scepticism of politicians' intentions and abilities."

He was a "stirrer" or, to use his own words, a "growler" for whom the intellect was the King. His weapons were words and he had a distaste for the "scheming, plotting, shuffling, intriguing, blundering" which he associated with politics.

Importantly, though, Murdoch did have strong opinions on political, social and economic matters and was fearless in expressing them.

I don't know what he might have said about our multicultural society of today but I suspect he would have approved of its dynamism and diversity.

For Murdoch, "the suburban spirit" was "the everlasting enemy". It was not just that the lawn-mowing proclivities in the suburbs seemed to undermine a sense of real purpose, it was the conformism and imitativeness of Australian suburban development that bothered him.

He bemoaned the lack of controversy in radio programs, the aridity of the Australian theatre, and the lack of a first-class satirist to teach us to laugh at ourselves.

Murdoch described himself as a "sceptic" or an "inquirer", one who looks carefully, examines and considers. He said:

*“The scepticism I praise and try to practise, is of another pattern. It is the sworn foe to that intellectual sluggishness which closes the mind to new ideas, it makes war on spiritual stagnation, on the common habit of taking the easy way and running along in a rut that others have made.”<sup>1</sup>*

This takes me to our multicultural society.

It needs inquiry, examination and consideration.

Indeed, it is a topic which can't be avoided in today's world.

It's a world where we see ethnic strife as well as racial and religious conflict.

In some locations it has meant complete community breakdown and much death and misery.

As Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis put it in their book *Productive Diversity*:

*“Diversity is now the most pressing global issue. It is clearly too late to retreat into some imaginary sheltered village of identically shared values.”<sup>2</sup>*

For much of the twentieth century scholars and activists assumed that conflicts associated with race, ethnicity and religion would slowly fade away as the grand struggle between capitalism and communism worked its way to resolution. For both capitalist and communist, scientific rationality ruled the roost and would determine the future.

How ancient that struggle appears today and how inappropriate its metaphors and theories when tackling today's problems, particularly those thrown up by the reality of diversity.

In an important sense, of course, Australia has always been a multicultural society. When the British settled they confronted Aboriginal Australia but it has only been in more recent times that this relationship has been identified in terms of 'reconciliation' rather than 'conquest' or 'assimilation.'

And when Australia became a nation it was to be "White Australia."

One of the first acts passed by the new Commonwealth Government at Federation was the Immigration Restriction Act of 1901.

Edmund Barton, Australia's first Prime Minister, defended the legislation by arguing that the doctrine of equality was never intended to apply across the

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<sup>1</sup> J.La Nauze, *Walter Murdoch: A Biographical Memoir* (MUP, 1977), pp.113-15, ("politicians") 122-23 ("suburban spirit"), and 148-49 ("scepticism").

<sup>2</sup> Bill Cope and Mary Kalantzis, *Productive Diversity: A New Australian Model for Work and Management* (Pluto Press, 1997), p.22.

racial boundaries. He stated that “*nothing we can do by cultivation, by refinement, or by anything else will make some races equal to others.*”<sup>3</sup>

The strict adherence to the White Australia policy changed in the 1930s when the implementation of the policy was adapted to accommodate the assumption that with time and the right environment, people who are not of the Anglo-Celtic background could assimilate. As a result, non-British European settlers from war torn Europe were accepted for migration to Australia.

It wasn't until the early 1970s that the Whitlam Government set about to rescind the White Australia policy and introduce a non-discriminatory policy of immigration and adopt a policy of ethnic pluralism in relation to settlement.

Then Minister of Immigration Al Grassby coined the term ‘family of the nation’ whose meaning he explained in the following way:

*In a family you have the short and the fat, the tall and the thin, and the blonde and the brunette, and everything you can think of. They are in one family...We were going to talk about the family of the nation with many ethnicities.*<sup>4</sup>

Changes in immigration policies were reflected in Australia's population composition. In 1947, 97 per cent of Australia's population was of Anglo-Celtic origin. In 1986 the corresponding figure was 86 per cent.

At 2001 census Australia's and Western Australia's diversity was as follows:

- 22 per cent of the population in Australia and 27 per cent of the population in Western Australia were born overseas. Western Australia has the highest proportion of people born overseas of any State or Territory.
- Western Australia's population practise approximately 100 different religious faiths.
- While Christianity has been the predominant religion over the past decade, there has been a rapid growth in the populations of non-Christian religions – particularly Buddhism and Islam.

Indeed, figures issued by the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Development last week show that Buddhism is the fastest growing religion in Australia, with a 79 per cent increase between 1996 and 2001.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> E.Barton quoted in Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates, 26<sup>th</sup> September 1901,p.5233.

<sup>4</sup> A. Grassby quoted in Mark Lopez, *The Origins of Multiculturalism in Australian Politics 1945-1975*,(Melbourne University Press, 2000), p.202.

<sup>5</sup> The People of Western Australia, Statistics from the 2001 Census, Australian Government, Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs and Government of Western Australia, Office of Multicultural Interests, 2003.

- Approximately 2.9 million Australians speak a language other than English at home.

These are the realities of modern Australia and modern Western Australia.

For some Australians these changes are unsettling. For them our nation is losing its sense of identity and common purpose as an Anglo-Celtic culture.

I can't agree.

Multiculturalism has shaped us as a dynamic, colourful and vibrant society. Cultural diversity is one of our most valuable assets. It enriches our social fabric and brings with it a variety of cultural and economic benefits, generating innovation and enhancing flexibility.

It would be an austere person who is not thankful that we are a nation no longer restricted to meat and three veg for tea. We now boast a culinary abundance of world class sophistication. Many of us remember when the humble garlic was exotic and curry powder a virtual mystery.

Research shows a strong work ethic amongst newer Australians coupled with a strong ambition and drive to achieve. People who come from a situation where their freedom was curtailed don't take the opportunities of living in a free, democratic society for granted. Second generation Australians don't take the sacrifices their parents made for them for granted and many recognise that education is a key factor in their future success in life.

From an economic perspective our prosperity depends on our capacity to compete in the global market. More creative and innovative approaches are made possible through diversity. A diverse workforce has a range of language skills, variety of communication styles and of thinking, varying tastes, global networks, in-depth knowledge of other countries' cultures, tastes, traditions and a variety of life experiences.

I think we can be also proud that we live in a relatively peaceful, tolerant multicultural community. Race related violence is rare. Such criminal behaviour is not tolerated under the law or by the vast majority of the community. In our democratic society people are free to be who they are, and who they want to be, within the confines of the law, without fear, harassment or degradation. In our culturally plural society ethnic minorities have the right to celebrate their own culture and practice their own religion.

Why then, you might ask, is a discussion about multiculturalism necessary?

Firstly, we need to note that multiculturalism is still a contested idea. We cannot assume that it will survive and prosper on its own logic. It needs to be advocated and its policies need to be defended.

Secondly, we can't be complacent. Racism hasn't been abolished and often rises to the surface in times of stress or in reaction to national or international events.

Instances of vilification experienced by Muslim and Sikh Australians have increased greatly in the aftermath of September 11. Both Mosque and Synagogue have been the subject of targeted vandalism and Muslim women who wear the Chador have been harassed.

Thirdly, we need to be honest about the realities of our society and what they mean for individual aspiration and achievement.

Second and third generation Australians are finding barriers still exist which prevent their equal participation in the political, social and economic spheres of Australian life.

Some of these barriers have been erected by passive tolerance or difference blindness perhaps better known in colloquial terms as a "you'll be right Jack" attitude.

Some of these barriers have been erected by systemic racism. This type of racism is more insidious than direct racial attacks because it is embedded in the processes, attitudes and behaviour of the dominant culture. Prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping can injure or disadvantage an individual.

In saying all of this I am also very conscious of the distinction between 'old' and 'new' racism which has been articulated so clearly by Professor Laksiri Jayasuriya. He has observed the shift from biology to culture in defining difference.

The 'new racism' which has emerged is couched in the language of discourse about culture and nationality and emphasises the need to reconcile differences arising from race or culture with ideas of national unity and social cohesion.

What emerges is a concept of the rights of the majority with the presence of minorities seen as a threat to the cultural integrity of the nation.<sup>6</sup>

If we look at our political structures, we are struck by the exclusion of visible minorities from their ranks. Although there is greater representation of Australians of European backgrounds, even here there is greater capacity for more inclusion.

For example in the Western Australian public sector, Indigenous Australians and Australians of culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are under-represented. We need to look at our recruitment and selection processes and

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<sup>6</sup> See Laksiri Jayasuriya, *Racism, Immigration and the Law: The Australian Experience*, (University of Western Australia Press, 1999).

practices to understand why this is the case. In Western Australia, we will be initiating a pilot project in the public sector designed to analyse factors that may be contributing to systemic racism so that strategies for addressing them can be appropriately targeted.

The policy implications of these three points need to be followed up by any Government serious about its commitment to multiculturalism.

We need leadership at the top, anti-racism strategies within the community, and programs that encourage the full participation of minorities in our society.

In a recently published essay on this agenda Stephen Castles has contrasted the models of citizenship being developed in Australia with those in Europe. He notes that the European debate on citizenship for immigrants has been one-sided, focussing mainly on the issue of formal citizenship rather than on substantial citizenship, that is, the rights and obligations of being connected with being a member of a State.

In Australia, New Zealand and Canada, on the other hand, the debate has been broader and the results better. He writes:

*What emerges clearly from an international comparison is that the countries with inclusionary pluralist models of citizenship have escaped much of the racism and conflict experienced by countries with either exclusionary or assimilationist models.<sup>7</sup>*

Now this reference to “citizenship” takes us to the heart of another tension in a multicultural society.

Citizenship links the discussion to democracy and democracy links the discussion to two questions that have long puzzled political theorists.

How do we protect minority rights in a majoritarian democracy?

How do we link self interest with the common good?

Just as we now ask of individuals that they look beyond their narrow interests when participating in public debate, so too we ask this of the range of groups that make up our multicultural society.

Isn't this a form of assimilation or integration, you might ask, of the sort that I have been critical in earlier parts of this lecture?

The answer to this question is provided by Jurgen Habermas in an essay dealing with immigration to Germany. He writes that a democratic state should demand political acculturation and acceptance of the basic constitutional principles. He defines that in this way:

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<sup>7</sup> Stephen Castles, “Democracy and Multicultural Citizenship. Australians Debates and their relevance for Western Europe”, in R.Bainbock (ed) *From Aliens to Citizens: Redefining the Status of Immigrants in Europe*, (Avebury, 1994), p.24.

*. . . assimilation to the way in which the autonomy of the citizen is conceived, and to the way in which the “public use” of reason (Rawls) is practised in the receiving society.*<sup>8</sup>

He distinguishes assimilation of this sort with “ethical and cultural integration” which would be unacceptable.

What we are talking about here is not just political education formally conceived but political education through the practice of democracy. This is how we use democratic dialogue to make “self” and “society” compatible.

Political theorist Veit Bader puts it this way:

*. . . we should focus on civilized and decent ways of living with disagreement: liberal-democratic culture, attitudes or habits, virtues and traditions of good judgement, and good practice are crucial.*<sup>9</sup>

In another sense this is a version of the rights and responsibilities mix that underpins a functioning democracy. After all to claim a right to freedom is to accept a responsibility to defend the society that guarantees that right.

This powerful conceptual and political link between multiculturalism, citizenship and democracy and its implications for the political education of those who live here also takes us into the troubled water of group rights versus individual rights.<sup>10</sup>

Multiculturalism is, and will always be, located within the broader framework of human rights and debates about what this means for the range of groups with their different traditions and practices will be inevitable and ongoing.

A lack of understanding of this framework, has at times, encouraged the practice of cultural norms and practices that clearly collide with human rights. While recognising the on-going debate on individual rights versus group rights and recognising the availability of group rights in Australia, as in the case of native title, and the State funding of non-government religious schools, the implementation of multiculturalism in this State operates within the framework of individual rights.

This framework is best illustrated by using the example of women’s and children’s rights. In Australia, and indeed Western Australia, I am aware that there are small cultural and religious groups practising female genital mutilation which is prevalent in some African and Middle Eastern cultures. These practices are not only harmful, injurious and inhuman but represent a colossal slur on human decency and respect and will never be acceptable in Australia.

<sup>8</sup> Jurgen Habermas quoted in Castles, *ibid.*, p.23.

<sup>9</sup> Veit Bader “Religious Pluralism: Secularism or Priority for Democracy?” *Political Theory*, Vol 27, no. 5, Oct 1999, p.618.

<sup>10</sup> M.Kymlicka, *Multicultural Citizenship*, (Clarendon Press, 1995), pp.34-48.

The myriad of pluralities that constitute a democracy including gender, class, race, ethnicity, location, age, sexuality, ability and every other dimension of difference need to be participants in the dialogue, able to negotiate their own positions and shifts in the positions of others. In a democracy, difference need not always be reconcilable, but we must make it possible, through dialogue, for these differences to be mutually respected.

That is after all what the democratic process is all about – and it derives from the values of the Enlightenment.

Today the Enlightenment is often viewed as a historical anomaly. The ideal that the perfect society could be built on the basis of individual freedom, common sense and tolerance all but collapsed amid the chaos of the French Revolution and the coming of Romanticism. Thereafter many religious thinkers tried to discredit it; Marxists rejected it for being bourgeois and anti-working class; and from a modern global perspective it could be said to idealise specifically European notions as universal truths.

And yet, in a general sense, the idea of Enlightenment has never been more alive. The concept of human rights that it developed has universal appeal. They form the consensus of international standards by which modern states are judged. People who are oppressed in the world today appeal to the same notion of natural law that inspired Voltaire and Jefferson, that the moral standards that govern human behaviour are, in some sense, objectively derived from our rational nature.<sup>11</sup>

Surely, then, I have now completed the discussion by outlining the policies needed to properly protect and promote multiculturalism (advocacy, anti-racism, and equal opportunity) and the political education required to ensure its ongoing connection to our democratic system and our enlightenment values.

Without doubt I need to take the discussion further by bringing religion into the analysis.

Religion is emerging as a potent force for cultural conflict in our society today.

If we are talking about multiculturalism we cannot ignore the religious underpinnings of cultures. This is because religion goes to the heart of identity and belief. It matters to people. It is linked to culture and ethics.

Just as tension between different cultures is inevitable religion throws up similar issues, and given the importance of religion to many groups and individuals the conflict may be intensified.

How should governments deal with this situation?

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<sup>11</sup> My account of The Enlightenment is based upon the excellent article by Paul Brians, 2000, Department of English, Washington State University [www.wsu.edu](http://www.wsu.edu),

The simple answer is to draw a line in the sand and say there must be separation between Church and State.

In other words, religious worship is an individual or a group's private affair and it does not inform government policy. That is to say, the State should be neutral in respect of religious belief.

This particular notion of negative neutrality is very much a historically contingent outcome of the battles within Western Europe between an emerging liberal constitutional state and a politically and economically powerful clergy.

Yet the circumstances we face in contemporary Australia are very different. We need an updated version of the separation that takes into account our modern society and the role religion plays.

Even today links remain between religion and politics in some democratic states, if only in a small and symbolic way, as with the Lord's Prayer to start the proceedings of Parliament.

Independently of these formal links there are conflicting claims about the importance of religion as a basis for political action and legislation.

For some the link between religious belief and practice is unbreakable.

Indeed, there are even forces in the world today calling on people to take up terrorism in the name of religion.

It is simply foolhardy to ask the State to be 'neutral' in respect of the threat posed by religious extremists who turn to terrorism.

How, then, do we work our way through this contentious issue?

I think we have to start from the presumption that in an open society, governments must adopt the view that no single group or category has *a priori* access to the truth.

Some, such as religious fundamentalists, believe their way is the only way to salvation.

Some are prepared to tolerate the existence of other religions as a passive, tacit, or even charitable acceptance of the different.

But, as with cultural diversity, I think it is now important that we move beyond this stage and engage in a more active dialogue between religions in society. Such a dialogue would, of necessity, include atheists, agnostics and those of a humanist disposition.

We need to create opportunities for dialogue and encourage mutual respect.

Dialogue fosters the capacity for negotiation, compromise, and mutual respect, a hallmark of the democratic pluralism which is essential for our liberal democracy.

This kind of dialogue demands a recognition of the epistemological complexity and uncertainty that characterises our plural society, and this in itself stands against fundamentalists of all persuasions.

As Bhikhu Parekh says, however rich or ancient it might be, no culture or religion embodies all that is valuable in human life and develops the full range of human possibilities.

Religious dialogue is also an important condition of human freedom. Unless humans are able to step out of their own religion, they remain imprisoned within it and tend to absolutize it.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, the diversity of other cultures and belief systems alerts us to the complexities and contradictions within our own.

The more we can bring people of different religions together, discussing their doctrines and co-operating in respect of matters of mutual concern, the better it will be for us all.

But there is a more pragmatic issue here, if our aim is to achieve a democratic citizenship which recognizes and respects religious and cultural difference in society.

Religious difference is a facet of our multicultural society that has often been obscured in both the theory and practice of multiculturalism. To cite one instance, Hilary Carey says that:

*“it is also becoming apparent that pluralism, in so far as it was culturally conceived in Australia, was only reluctantly extended to include freedom of religious expression for non-Christian faiths, especially Islam”.*<sup>13</sup>

And, as I pointed out earlier, the recent census figures on religion confirm the growing religious diversity in Australia. It is this aspect of ‘difference’ in our pluralistic community and its implications for political practice that we need to examine more systematically.

While acknowledging the elevated status that Christianity, in particular Anglicanism, has historically held in our system of Government, I must reiterate the importance of neutrality and secularism to our democratic society.

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<sup>12</sup> Bhikhu Parekh, *Rethinking Multiculturalism: Cultural Diversity and Political Theory*, (Macmillan Press 2001), p.167.

<sup>13</sup> Hilary Carey “Australian Religious Culture from Federation to the New Pluralism” in Jayasuriya et al (eds.), *Legacies of White Australia: Race Culture and Nation*, (University of Western Australia Press, 2003), p.88.

We need to recognize the fact that our liberal polity depends on the even-handedness of the State in relation to various religions without prejudice or bias towards partiality to any particular religion or religions.

Public policy and debate need to be based, as far as possible, on principles and 'public reason' — as the pre-eminent liberal theorist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century John Rawls argued — that do not depend on any comprehensive world view.

I say "as far as possible" because it would not be possible to debate these matters free of comprehensive doctrines and truth-claims but as Bader says we can:

*"develop the duties of civility, such as the duty to explain positions in publicly understandable language, the willingness to listen to others, fair-mindedness, and readiness to accept reasonable accommodations or alterations in one's own view"*<sup>14</sup>

In addition – and this is especially important in our pluralistic society - this must be accompanied by a clear commitment to religious freedom.

Having said this, I think the concept of neutrality needs to be clarified if we are to seriously consider the issue of religious differences in our community.

Negative neutrality assumes that the State can be passive or indifferent to religious differences.

Positive neutrality implies a set of conditions which will create mutual respect between various religions within our community at large.

In using these conceptions of positive and negative neutrality I am drawing an analogy with Isaiah Berlin's famous distinction between *negative* and *positive* freedom.

I am suggesting that a *positive* view of neutrality is more consistent with the principles and rationale of democratic pluralism outlined earlier.

So what are the principles of positive neutrality in a democratic pluralist society that seeks to recognize religious difference? In this context there are three important principles to be borne in mind:

First, there is a need to replace, as Bader puts it, the conception of 'difference blindness' with 'difference sensitivity' in our treatment of religious difference. This means taking into account, and where possible, modifying the structural inequalities between religious groups. This might mean, for example, looking at the way different religious groups and organizations, have access to the administrative structures of the state.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Bader, *op.cit.*, p.614.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.608.

It is interesting to observe, for example, that the religious figures invited to participate in the Constitutional Convention in 1998 were all of the Christian faith. What message did that send out to those of a different faith?

Second, in dealing with religious differences we should adopt what the political philosopher Joseph Carens has called a policy of even-handedness. What even-handedness means in this context is the requirement that we balance competing claims for recognition in areas like religion and culture. As he points out, 'instead of trying to abstract from particularity, we should embrace it, but in a way that is fair to all the different particularities. The attraction of this concept of even handedness is that it makes the exercise of neutrality much more sensitive to the particular contexts - say, for example, education - in which we have to grapple with regard to religious differences.'<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, this recognition of 'particularity' in no way detracts from our universal commitment to recognize the interests of all members of the political community. I think this policy of even-handedness has much to commend if we are to accept the idea of difference citizenship that is an important element of the new Charter of Multiculturalism which I launched earlier this year and which I will be presenting to Cabinet for endorsement in October.<sup>17</sup>

Third, we need to go beyond a notion of passive tolerance to embrace a more positive tolerance which we might call a condition of mutual respect. Whereas negative neutrality demands a passive toleration, positive neutrality demands an active endorsement of mutual respect.

Mutual respect goes beyond tolerance in seeking to recognize both the integrity and validity of those who embrace a different religious worldview.

Gutman and Thompson put this well when they argue that 'mutual respect demands more than toleration. It requires:

*"...a distinctively deliberative kind of character. It is the character of individuals who are self-reflective, discerning of the difference between respectful and merely tolerable differences of opinion, and open to the possibility of changing their minds or modifying their position or view."*<sup>18</sup>

Mutual respect by discouraging moral rigidity or dogmatism, seeks to foster the deliberative character and commitment of individuals as well as the compromises that are essential to democratic pluralism.

In sum, then, mutual respect goes beyond passive tolerance in asking for styles of conduct and speech consistent with co-existing in a world of difference. And in the final analysis, participating individuals, with a growing

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Bader, *ibid*.

<sup>17</sup> WA Charter of Multiculturalism Consultation Paper, OMI.

<sup>18</sup> Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson, *Democracy and Disagreement*, (Harvard University Press, 1996), pp.79-80.

sense of their effectiveness, are the best protection against the parochialism and intolerance of some sections of society.<sup>19</sup>

In saying this all of this I freely acknowledge that I am making assumptions about the priority of democracy, openness, and liberty against all fundamentalisms, be they religious or non-religious.

I am expressing a bias towards a specific way of life which favours free choice, personal autonomy, reason and toleration.

## **Conclusion**

I believe we are left with a highly defensible doctrine of multiculturalism, one that embraces difference and what we need to do to defend it, but also recognises our common values as free citizens in a democracy.

It is as if there is a dialectic at work, between particularity and generality, between self and other, and within each person as they make sense of their own commitments under challenge and criticism.

Difference and oneness are not separate entities but one part of a whole.

A multicultural society won't work if governments are blind to difference.

Nor will it work if it descends into an unthinking cultural relativism.

It seems to me that Australia has the opportunity to show the rest of the region that it is possible to have a robust democratic and civic culture that at the same time respects and values religious and cultural pluralism.

To set this as an objective for our community, raises the bar to the highest level.

Why not?

Our nation is still young, our opportunities are many and we have the wisdom of different cultures and religions to guide us through these troubled times.

Ends.

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<sup>19</sup> Michael Walzer, *On Toleration*, (Yale University Press, 1997), p. 107.