

DEDICATION OF THE GAY & LESBIAN MEMORIAL

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Green Park

Cnr Darlinghurst Road & Burton Street
Darlinghurst, Sydney

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Introduction

I am honoured to have been invited to dedicate the Gay and Lesbian Memorial, here in Green Park today. I have always argued that human rights can be achieved, not by legislation but only by attitudinal change brought about by education and information. This memorial is a positive weapon in that task at an important time in Australian history.

The dedication of memorials to gay and lesbian people who have been murdered or tortured because of their sexuality, whether in the Holocaust or otherwise, is a relatively new concept – the first such memorial having been dedicated in New York City on 6 May 1999 – but it is a concept worthy of the support of all. Memorials such as the one we are dedicating today offer comfort to all people who have lost family, friends and loved ones through the scourge of discrimination and persecution; they confront naïve and small-minded people with memories and images of the horrors of mindless hatred; and they encourage our youth to think about and adopt basic social values such as tolerance, mutual respect, human rights and democracy in today's varied and multicultural world.

For us here in Australia this memorial offers hope for the reduction in the number of hate crimes perpetrated in our society today. Recent statistics reported in the SBS documentary "Outing Gay Hate" stated that gays and lesbians are five times more likely to be targeted in violent attacks than heterosexuals. It also has particular relevance for people suffering discrimination in today's Australia – often the case for young gay and lesbian people who are coming out to their family and friends for the first time – who can see in it physical proof that others before them have trodden darker paths and suffered more hardships than any of us deserve; and that long after they are gone, their memory is recalled and cherished. The physical presence of this memorial will also hopefully lead to the shedding of the culture of silence that currently envelops the victims of sexuality-based attacks, with the statistics in "Outing Gay Hate" stating that only 18% of gay and lesbian people attacked report the violence to police.

This memorial's proximity to the Sydney Jewish Museum on the other corner there, with which I have had many years of affiliation, is also a matter of some importance. A memorial to the gay and lesbian people lost in the Holocaust does not, as some blinkered people might say, detract from the memory of the incomparable murder of fully one third of the world's Jews during that horrific period in human civilisation. The losses of the gay and lesbian community during the Holocaust, like the losses of communists, social democrats, socialists, trade unionists, ethnic

Roma (gypsies), Slavs and others, belong in their own category. The fact that the extent of the persecution inflicted on each group and community differed, in the case of Jews to significant orders of magnitude, does not make the sufferings of each one of the thousands of gay and lesbian people killed during the Holocaust any less tragic or horrific than the sufferings of each of the 6 million Jews who lost their lives in the same tragic period. Moreover, each community feels and commemorates its losses in its own way, and has historically received differing levels of support and recognition from governments and their citizens.

To my mind, the juxtaposition of two of these commemorative symbols today, one a Jewish record of the Holocaust and its impact, and the other a Gay and Lesbian memorial, in my mind actually reinforces the horror as it serves to highlight the sorrows of each community. Only through complete awareness and full recognition of the truly evil policies and practices of the Third Reich can we hope to avoid the occurrence of such events again. And the avoidance of the recurrence of such events must be our goal. To focus exclusively on but one aspect of these past horrors – albeit the most horrific aspect of all – would not do justice to the striving for this goal.

Unfortunately, even with memorials in place, some have not learned from the past and continue to bring the nightmare of gross inhumanity into the world. The difference is that now the nightmare is complete with live images on our television screens every night. If the excuse was available during the Nazi Holocaust in Europe, our generation can certainly not claim that we are unaware of persecution occurring around the world. This memorial is thus not only, or even mainly, about the past. It is certainly a call to all of us as individuals to show our respect for those who have suffered and died in the past. But it is also a clarion call for those who are still suffering at the hands of persecutors. Most of all, it is a declaration to our families, our nation, our world, indeed our souls, that by educating ourselves, and by learning and spreading tolerance and understanding, we will all be enabled to contribute to ensuring that these horrors do not happen again.

What Nazi Germany did to human decency, including to gay and lesbian people, is indescribable in polite words – yet it must be described over and over again so that people do not forget. It should therefore not be surprising that there is deep concern at recent developments in Austria – a country that, unlike Germany, has not been prepared to face and stare down its past at all. Austria's election a few years ago of Kurt Waldheim as President in the face of worldwide condemnation and ostracism, and the inclusion of the professed racially extremist Freedom Party

in the new Government there are just two examples of the continuing reason why reconciliation is so difficult with Austria. Some Austrians and Austrian publications have been so busy trying to portray Hitler as a German and Beethoven as an Austrian that they seem unable to come to terms with their humanitarian obligations at all.

By contrast it must be openly acknowledged that Germany has done and is doing much to show that it is genuinely in search of reconciliation and inner peace. Last November, the German Federal Parliament carried a motion offering apologies to the gay community in relation to the murder of gays and lesbians in the Holocaust. By any standards, it has also been generous with compensation and reparations to Israel and the Jewish people. It has at last turned around its education system so that young people can face and learn about their nation's past. At last the Holocaust is not quite the invisible happening it once was. The intention to build a Holocaust memorial in Berlin, now re-established as Germany's capital, is also to be applauded. I hope that it will recognise all who died because of persecution by the Nazi monster.

Just a few years ago, then President of Germany Richard von Weisacker together with the then Chancellor and Opposition Leader led a protest march of millions against racism and racist outbreaks in Germany. Other than Israel, the leaders of no other nation have to my knowledge done so although some might easily have helped the cause of humanity if they had. Although many leading Australians marched for reconciliation last year, official Australia still cannot bring itself to apologise for the racism and genocide our country has inflicted on its Indigenous people. And the Irish antagonists are still battling to embrace peaceful and non-military means of resolving nearly 500 years of armed and cultural conflict, and continue to march for the entirely opposite purpose of perpetuating their separate ununited identities.

Ironically enough, in many ways these cleansing acts by Germany have made the Nazi era all the more bewildering. For one of the most extraordinary aspects of the Final Solution was that it was carried out as if such things were entirely normal. All the apparatus of a technologically advanced nation was part of the scheme – the station master, train driver and conductor, the electrician, the plumber and the engineer, the town councillor, the local newspaper editor, the corner shopkeeper, indeed virtually every man and woman in the street were all part of it. Where did all these people think their former clients, customers, neighbours, constituents all suddenly went when they disappeared for good? Who succeeded to their houses or took over their leases? Who acquired their household goods, their refrigerators and their furniture?

Booty from the extermination camps included gold yanked from dentures and teeth, plus gold watches, earrings, bracelets, rings, necklaces and even spectacle frames – for everyone was encouraged to bring all their valuables with them for the promised ‘resettlement’. There were also diamonds and silverware. And there were great wads of banknotes. All this windfall of valuable goods were deposited in accounts in the Reichsbank under the cover name of ‘Max Heiliger’. In fact by 1942, the Reichsbank was overwhelmed by these ‘Max Heiliger’ deposits. With its vaults filled to overflowing, the bank’s profit-minded directors turned the holdings into cold cash by disposing of them through the municipal pawnshops.

At the Nuremberg trials, the appalling Oswald Pohl, Chief of the Economic Office of the SS, who handled the transactions for this wicked organisation, emphasised that the officials and employees of the Reichsbank knew very well the origins of the goods they were trying to pawn. Was the pawn market, when it suddenly became overwhelmed by all this booty, suddenly struck dumb? Did the pawnbrokers and their employees, families and customers ask no questions or make no comment about the completely unexpected influx of ordinary people’s wedding rings, watches, spectacles, brooches, pins, gold and other valuables? And, perhaps even more relevantly to us, who is wearing all that gold, diamonds, jewellery today?

The Nazis’ principal objections to homosexuality were that it supposedly weakened the national community by lowering the birth rate and by compromising the Aryan images that the regime encouraged. How the mass murder of homosexuals would increase the birth rate or the proportion of Aryan genes in the gene pool is not clear to me. In fact, homosexuals were probably the first people whose mass murder was publicly acknowledged by the Nazis as a policy aim, the SS newspaper first advocating the killing of homosexuals in May 1935. Before then there was a national prohibition on anal intercourse which was punishable by imprisonment and the loss of civil rights. However in 1935 the law was amended so that much lesser acts were outlawed, such as observing or indeed merely fantasising about another male in sexual relations, whether with another male or a female. Whilst it is obvious that such offences could never be proved in an unbiased courtroom, many people were tried and convicted under those laws.

When it comes to identifying exactly how many gay and lesbian people suffered this fate, there is appallingly little information. It was certainly many thousands. What we do know is that those who were interned suffered the harshest of fates. Not only were they subject to the same horrific sexual and physical abuse and extra-judicial killings as other prisoners, but the very few survivors reported that they were ostracised by the other prisoners and were forced to perform

extra hard labour duties, mostly on half or even less rations. No one in Germany or anywhere else in the world stood up in defence of the people concerned or for those who were executed without trial as many were.

No. What the Nazi Holocaust proved is that ultimately the people can only be led where they want, or are prepared, to go. And regrettably, the evils of genocide, gross racial, ethnic and religious hatred, and discrimination on the ground of sexual preference are still occurring – starkly in many countries but insidiously almost everywhere. This is why the dedication of this memorial is so significant an event for the modern era.

Now that the insular and obviously limited George W. Bush has been elected to the Presidential Office, are we likely to hear anything positive on an international human rights issue at all? Even if he can spell it. We are having enough trouble extracting responses from our own leaders these days. What is going wrong in this country at present? Why can we always find plenty of money to wage war but not enough to protect ordinary people? Who sets such values and priorities? In whose name are they set? Certainly not mine.

And, might I add, the deaths of innocent civilians in bombing accidents or miscalculations in the Balkans and the appalling loss of life in natural disasters in poor countries like India and El Salvador come about because the West is not prepared to lose soldiers on the battlefield or share its wealth with the less well off. All this means is that the life of an American or European soldier and the excessive comforts of western urban civilisation are regarded as more valuable than busloads of refugees and unarmed villagers and people trapped under tonnes of earthquake-mangled steel and concrete. I always thought that all human life was sacred. Silly me.

Multiculturalism

Because of its far wider ramifications for all of us, it must be concerning to the gay and lesbian community, as it is to many of us, that in recent times there has been renewed questioning of Australia's adherence to multiculturalism. And as the One Nation experience has shown, political elements have played on and encouraged fears and insecurities to the extent that the harmony of the Australian community is being threatened. As we recall those who died and suffered because of raw prejudice and ignorant hate, we must get out amongst the people and give them the facts, about migrants, Indigenous people, about gay and lesbian

people, and everyone else affected. We must meet falsity with truth. We must showcase the normalcy of minorities and the creative achievements of so many amongst them. We must be proud of all our people who contribute to the wider good and to our society in general, regardless of their personal beliefs and lawful practices. We must listen to and understand people's insecurities and worries but explain that irrationality and ignorance, like all one line populist solutions, are simply not available. Courageously and uncompromisingly, the lies simply must be stopped in their tracks.

Inherited or assumed intolerance is not always easy to crack and abdication of truth affects people's views on multiculturalism. But we must never give up the struggle to win understanding and consensus. The critics of multiculturalism fail to understand what it means. They think that it means throwing out older so-called well-established "Australian values" in favour of newer so-called "foreign" or "different" ones. That concept turns the truth on its head. The Australian character has many powerful qualities – tolerance, respect and trust for each other and our differences, a fair go, if not quite for all, then certainly for most. It is those elements of Australia that our migrants and minorities adopt. I know of no aspect of homosexuality which does not enthusiastically embrace all these characteristics of Australianism.

I say quite simply – it is an affront to decency when personal judgments are made on the basis of someone else's view of another's gender, race, religion, place of origin or sexuality, and not on their character and their adherence to the laws, customs and consensus of the country. Whatever the prejudiced want, people are going to be different. Community harmony thus depends upon an acceptance and appreciation of diversity set against the backdrop of a common loyalty towards Australia and what Australia stands for -- the Constitution, the rule of law, parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech and religion, and the rejection of discrimination on any basis.

Of course, with the right to have respected the cultures and practices of each of us comes the duty to respect and value the cultures and practices of others and what it means to be Australian. Tolerance and mutual respect are essential features of the human character. That is why multiculturalism is the recipe for a harmonious and united Australia. It is a goal we have almost achieved. And let's face it – the large majority of us agree about it. What we have to do is to get out there and tell the minority about it. Every Australian simply must be made aware that we are a nation of many peoples sharing essentially common goals whose

diverse cultures and practices are among our great assets. Our differences take nothing away from anyone. They add to what we share. They make our country abundantly wealthy in our most important resource –our people. By celebrating and commemorating human diversity, this memorial will help us in that task.

Some have justified the so-called debate on multiculturalism as an exercise in freedom of speech. I do not agree that racism, personal vilification and violence, and the promotion of division and hate has anything to do with freedom of speech at all. Some of it is actually a criminal offence. Nor can such a debate be classified as a war against political correctness. I prefer the words courtesy, politeness, respect and tolerance which we have always shown to each other. We must never allow politicians to create euphemisms to hide the truth and must never permit ourselves to forget the core characteristics of the Australian way of life. Gays and lesbians have as much right to a peaceful, discrimination-free and fully productive life as everyone else. If the people whose deaths – and whose lives – are commemorated in this memorial can have achieved that goal for this and future generations, today's event will be a true watershed for tolerance.

Reconciliation

Last year's jubilee pilgrimage of Pope John Paul II to Jerusalem, and his efforts to further the process of reconciliation between the Catholic Church and the Jewish people, should inspire all of us to realise what can be derived from facing up to the most haunting memories from the past. For millennia, Catholics have behaved abominably, sometimes even murderously, to Jews. It is undeniable that this antagonism led inexorably to the Nazi horrors against Jews, homosexuals and others, and was a significant factor in the silence of the Vatican during the Nazis' insane murderous rampage of wholesale human carnage.

Through the sincere expression of deep regret for the persecution of the Jewish people, and the performance of acts testifying to that regret, including actually praying at the Western Wall of the destroyed Jewish temple in Jerusalem, the Pope has enlivened the spirits of moderate Catholics, Jews and peoples of different communities everywhere. In doing so, he has significantly contributed to the process of reconciliation worldwide, bringing new life to the bonds that tie all peoples. The letter of regret he left at that holiest of Jewish sites bears quoting:

God of our fathers, you chose Abraham and his descendants to bring your name to the Nations.

We are deeply saddened by the behaviour of those who in the course of history have caused these children of yours to suffer.

And asking your forgiveness we wish to commit ourselves to genuine brotherhood with the people of the Covenant.

Should we make any less of a commitment to all our people?

Indigenous Australians

Let me therefore finally add an analogy between the discrimination practised against members of the homosexual community and our greatest Australian shame – the plight of Indigenous Australians.

Many people, including many leaders and moulders of public opinion here, 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 – a thesis still, I see, being propagated by Pauline Hanson and her gang -- is in fact a recipe for retaining differences, imbalances and discrepancies because of the commencing inequality. When used in relation to our Indigenous people or to other minorities, it is also surreptitious and insidious discrimination. For whether conscious or unconscious, the consequences for the victims are exactly the same.

The truth is that in this eighth year of the United Nations-declared Decade of the World’s Indigenous Peoples, and despite the increased volume of Australian federal legislation and very significant financial allocations by governments from the seventies onward, our Indigenous people, as the Queen said so poignantly on her last visit, 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 our morality I leave you to contemplate.

Some argue that it is not necessary to say 'sorry' for this awful, and unlawful, state of affairs. I fervently disagree. Many wrongs have been committed against our Indigenous people and their ancestors during 212 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 program was at best thoughtless, at worst criminal. Kidnapping, rape and other forms of assault, and the other indecencies inflicted on the people concerned, are all crimes in any country and any language. Paying young children one, two, five or ten dollars a day for 12 or 14 hours of slave labour was a monstrosity in any era. Many of the Aborigines involved are still alive and well today. So are many of the white people who participated. These things were still happening as late as 1970 when many of us, including me, were helping ourselves to far better products of our society.

But our generation has a pretty solid case to answer as well. On this very day, against a national figure of around 6%, the Aboriginal adult unemployment rate is 41%, and is expected to rise to 48% by 2006; unemployment among Indigenous youths is 18 times worse than their white counterparts; and the deaths of Aborigines in official custody are still happening, even increasing, despite the \$30 million Royal Commission report and a considerable expenditure of effort and money.

Mandatory sentencing – which I prefer to call compulsory jailing – is a nasty insidious creation of our generation that not even the convict settlement introduced. I oppose it absolutely, and have been doing so for many years, for the reasons about which I wrote in the newspapers recently. Whatever their actual words, compulsory jailing laws clearly discriminate against Aborigines – and were intended to do so. Why else would they provide a compulsory jail term for youth, usually black, who twice steals half a pizza because he is hungry but not for an adult, usually white, who once, twice, three, four or five times fraudulently uses someone else's credit card to buy the pizzas to take to a party with friends?

I have recently taken out the details of 10 of the recent compulsory jailings in the Northern Territory. They shame Australia. There is time today to take a close look at just one of these stories – that of a young Aboriginal lad named Chris of Gunbalanya. This 18 year old copped 28 days in jail for receiving – not stealing – \$2 worth of petrol. As far as I can find out, there have been at least five other jailings of young people for stealing or receiving similar amounts of petrol. That petrol was certainly not taken to fuel their company cars. It was to feed their addictions as petrol sniffers. It is bizarre that some of our leaders only learned last week that this situation exists. In the Northern Territory we are jailing kids not because they are dangerous criminals, but because they are ill. And in the Northern Territory, magistrates hearing these cases are prevented by law from taking into account that these kids are petrol sniffers. What jurisdiction in Australia, indeed what country in the world, would jail petrol sniffers? Where in the world is there such inhumanity? We are not yet quite in a position to lecture too many other countries.

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 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.

Conclusion

There is a lesson in this for all of us. Let us not fail to learn it. I therefore conclude by paying tribute to the bravery of the people that we commemorate here today, and by expressing appreciation on behalf of all of us to South Sydney Council which has provided the land for this memorial and matched the funds, dollar for dollar, raised by the Gay and Lesbian Memorial Project. Those people within the Council who have supported this project have, in

their own ways, stood up to be counted in defence of liberty and freedom, by permitting the people of this city and its visitors to understand, to remember and to learn.

There is no more important challenge to a society than to uphold and protect the sanctity of the human condition. As I embrace with pride the honour given to me to dedicate this memorial to the homosexual people who died in the Holocaust or were persecuted because of their sexuality at other times, let us together, in the centenary year of Australian Federation, make a clear and unmistakable declaration of truth: gays and lesbians are as much part of the human family as the rest of us. They must be respected as the rest of us, have the same rights and obligations as the rest of us, and be given the same protections and opportunities as the rest of us. In the achievement of these words in practice, there is in my assessment not a moment to lose.