



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR  
VICTORIA

## VICTORIAN PARLIAMENT IFTAR DINNER 2016

**Monday 20 June 2016**

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

**The Honourable Robin Scott MLA**, Minister for Multicultural Affairs and Minister for Finance

**The Honourable John Eren MLA**, Minister for Tourism and Major Events, Minister for Sport, and Minister for Veterans Affairs

**The Honourable Luke Donellan MLA**, Minister for Roads and Road Safety, and Minister for Ports

**The Honourable Bruce Atkinson MLC**, President of the Legislative Council of Victoria

**Professor David de Kretser AC**, Former Governor of Victoria and **Mrs Jan de Kretser**

**State and Federal Members of Parliament**

**Members of the Consular Corps**

**Mrs Helen Kapalos**, Victorian Multicultural Commissioner

**Board Members of the Australian Intercultural Society**

**Mr Ahmet Keskin**, Executive Director of the Australian Intercultural Society

**Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen**

### **INTRODUCTION**

First, I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathering and pay my respects to their elders, past and present, and to any elders with us this evening.

Tony and I are delighted and honoured to attend this Victorian Parliament Iftar Dinner. It is important. It pertains to themes dear to my heart: themes of diversity, social inclusion and unity.

Why do I feel so strongly about them? Well, there are several reasons that I can readily point to.

First, you don't need to be a psychologist to know that so much of what we think and feel is encoded in our early childhood years.

From as early as I can remember, my father imparted very particular learnings to me and my older siblings:

- First, as he had suffered as the victim of racial and religious abuse, he insisted that we all had to do whatever we could to diminish racial and religious prejudice and hatred, in favour of respect and harmony.
- Secondly, he never faltered in saying how lucky he was to have found a life in this wonderful country of Australia, and
- Thirdly, he spoke of and modelled how we must give back to the community and look after other people.

He didn't like to talk of his childhood in Poland. He found it too distressing to recall, and to talk of the prejudices that he, as a Jewish boy at school, had endured. As we grew older though, he did tell us a little more.

There was one story in particular that never left me. It was about a little coat that his parents had bought him in the midst of winter. It had a special collar made of some sort of fur. His parents had worked hard to buy it, and he was very proud of it. On the first day that he wore it to school, a group of boys beset him and, taunting him with cries of "Dirty Jew", they cut off the collar. His little coat was ruined.

Now I know that this story doesn't rate against the atrocities suffered by so many millions of other people in Europe just a short time after that, or the atrocities and indignities suffered by millions in very many places since then.

But it was my dad. And the poignancy of that story moved me.

When such vignettes were told, they were always a prelude to a spontaneous pronouncement by him about our lucky country. For the almost 83 years that he lived here, he loudly counted his blessings to us: the blessings of a country where all were welcome, where we were safe, where people from different races and religions co-existed peacefully and, most importantly, where he could educate his children and build a good life for us all.

Then, as night would follow day, he would talk against prejudice and racial and religious hatred, and he would tell us to look after those who needed help. He always told us, for example, to pay our taxes....they were needed by those who did not have as much!

I have no doubt that my moral DNA comes from my parents, my mother always endorsing my father's views on these important topics. And, I have no doubt, that it is why I feel so strongly about welcoming diversity and embracing difference.

My professional life then taught me more. With the unusual privilege of 28 years in the judiciary, (yes, I was VERY young when first appointed), in the Children's Court, Coroners' Court, Magistrates' Court (in civil and in criminal cases) and for the last 18 years of my judicial career, in the Family Court of Australia, I learned a great deal from listening to experts about what young people need to survive and thrive in an increasingly complex world.

The recurring message was of their need for resilience and a sense of belonging.

I heard psychologists with great experience and expertise describing that resilience ensures a better capacity to cope, to avoid various tempting pitfalls, and to achieve an harmonious life. And, repeatedly, I heard them say that the best way to ensure resilience in young people was to give them a sense of belonging in a group, a sense of welcome, a sense of being valued.

And that's why I feel strongly about social inclusion.

Then there was football. AFL football makes all sorts of claims as to where it sits in our community. As a former AFL Commissioner, may I say with (I assure you, tongue in cheek) humility, that amongst all the achievements of that code, I think we even made a start towards world peace!

As some of you might know, AFL footy was used as the vehicle to bring together a squad of young Israeli and Palestinian men. They learned our game together, a neutral game, a game in which neither had an advantage, a game that allowed all body types, and a game that depended not only on acquiring new skills together, but also on maximum collaboration to swiftly move that pesky oval ball around the ground.

I can tell you funny stories about it – of standing on the ground while Dipper addressed the team at half-time – listening to him being translated simultaneously not only into Hebrew and Arabic, but first from “footy” into English!

More pertinently, I can tell you the serious stories of that team. Of the friendships and understandings that grew between the men. Of the suspicion and misunderstanding that, inevitably, still raised its head between them, from time to time.

Of the hard work, the negotiations and the discussions that would bring them back from the brink: that is, the hard work of them all, digging into reserves of the goodwill of their common purpose.

And that’s why I care so much about unity.

And so to Victoria – our multi-cultural State - to whose peace and prosperity I know that everyone in this room is committed.

We know of course that one quarter of all Victorians were born overseas, and that over 45% of us have at least one parent who was born overseas. We know that we speak around 260 different languages and dialects, and that over 20% of us speak a language other than English when we are at home.

And we know that Victorians practise more than 100 different religions, with the largest group comprising only a quarter of our population – significantly below the average for the predominant religion within most countries. And, of course, even within religions, there is a huge amount of difference and variety.

One third of Muslim Australians live in Victoria. They come from around 183 different countries, and thus have a diverse range of language, cultures and practice.

But a common observance is the Iftar dinner during the holy month of Ramadan.

How lucky are we that, tonight, through our Muslim community, we can be exposed to the custom of sharing this special evening meal to break the daily fast.

Ramadan is a time when Muslims reflect on the importance of their faith, and the virtues that bring meaning and value to their lives, as well as remembering those less fortunate.

This evening gives us all a privileged insight into those Muslim virtues and values. It also gives us the chance to reflect – as we must continue to do - on unity, on overcoming ignorance and prejudice, on the strength and harmony of being together – together, tolerant, and above all, respectful of each other's differences. Truly one, but also many.

It is a time to ponder our Victorian State motto and wish each other “Peace and Prosperity”, and to say to Muslim Victorians “Ramadan Kareem”.