

**“EYES WIDE OPEN – GRASPING
THE OPPORTUNITIES OF
CITIZENSHIP”**

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**ADDRESS TO THE 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF
AUSTRALIAN CITIZENSHIP CONFERENCE**

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Thank you.

In opening, I'd like to acknowledge the presence of the minister for immigration and multicultural affairs, Mr Phillip Ruddock.

We are here to commemorate the 50th anniversary of citizenship.

In my short address I want to reflect on what citizenship has meant for our nation, what it means for us today, and what it can mean for our future.

Post-war and the citizenship act

In 1948, Prime Minister Ben Chifley legislated a brave response to the economic challenges facing our nation.

Post-war reconstruction demanded that we increase immigration to grow our population and our economy.

In building our population and our economy, immigration proved a resounding success.

But as we look back on fifty years of citizenship, we come to realise that immigration has given us much more than we bargained for. More than a labour force and a bigger population.

New arrivals to our country, whether Greek, Italian, Vietnamese, Macedonian or Chinese, have helped to define our nation - they have opened up our minds and hearts to new ways of thinking and living.

The history of Australian citizenship, in a broader sense, is a mixed one.

There have been great triumphs, and there have been great injustices.

There have been matters for which we, as a nation, should feel great pride, and others for which we should feel genuine shame.

To be able to express that pride and shame, honestly and openly, should be accepted. It is part of a tolerant society.

We currently have a Prime Minister that faces a number of serious challenges – relating to our past, present and future.

In relation to our past, he needs to recognise the injustices that have been part of our history, and apologise to our indigenous people.

In relation to the present, he needs to acknowledge what we as a nation are, and cannot be afraid of the word ‘multiculturalism’.

In relation to our future, he needs to move us forward by fully engaging Australians in the republican debate.

By failing to grasp the opportunity that we have to define citizenship - past, present and future - our current leader is not only passing up a wonderful political opportunity – he is subjecting our country to national and international indignation.

He is in some way holding our nation back from fulfilling its full potential as a forward-looking, tolerant society.

If we refuse to acknowledge the past, understand it, and learn from it, then we will struggle to see things in an even light. There is a saying that what you see depends on the lens through which you gaze.

The task for John Howard is to simply open his eyes.

Citizenship today

When I walk down Logon street or Victoria street in Melbourne, when I talk to people in my local community - from over 50 ethnic backgrounds - I see the embodiment of a multicultural society. I am reminded of how truly wealthy we are as a nation.

Citizenship to me means more than cultural diversity - it is as much about our fundamental equality, what we have in common, as it is about our respect for diversity.

We all want better education, better health and aged care, job opportunities for ourselves and our children. And most of us believe that the words 'a fair go' can mean more than they currently do.

Our goals and values are rarely as different as they are sometimes portrayed.

Newly arrived migrants

Migrants offer us a range of experiences, values and traditions.

Their history is not something we should ask them to leave behind, for they cannot – it is part of their lives and souls – it is part of their identity.

It is something that enriches their lives - and the life of their new country.

Hopefully, by learning a little from each other, we can better understand each other.

As we better understand each other, we are that little bit closer to giving primacy to what we have in common rather than our differences.

In the past, and still in some countries today, rights to citizenship have been restricted on the basis of wealth, status, gender, race and religion.

Fortunately, this does not describe Australia in 1999.

We do relatively well in recognising and celebrating citizenship - both what we have in common and our diversity.

Personally, I would struggle to think of a time or place that I would prefer to be.

In so many important respects, we are indeed the lucky country.

That said, it has not always been so for all Australians – and it is still not so for all Australians.

While we are an inclusive society, citizenship is an evolving concept. It would be a grave mistake to believe that we do not play a hand in how we shape that concept.

The literature we give to new arrivals to our shores is scattered with the phrase 'a fair go'.

I believe in a fair go, I think most people in this room believe in a fair go, and I think most Australians believe in a fair go.

But I'm not so sure that the less fortunate in our society - the unemployed, the homeless, the frail, the disabled - I'm not at all convinced that they believe in a fair go.

Sometimes you need to see it to believe it - and some Australians are neither seeing nor believing.

A truly 'fair go' recognises the *social* dimension to our understanding of equality and citizenship. And while the evidence still suggests that the life chances of our children are so heavily influenced by what their parents do, by where they live, and by the opportunities afforded them, a fair go has not yet been achieved.

Challenges facing Australian citizenship

I see two great challenges facing Australian citizenship. The first is the rise of individualism that is stemming from economic, social and technological change. A decline in shared experience, and the insecurity this has implied for some, is a real threat. Australians are increasingly being asked to choose whether we are prepared to give a little for our mates – to recognise that equality of opportunity is not something that comes free.

Providing the education, the health and aged care, and the jobs that people want takes a substantial investment, which in turn takes a contribution from all.

I am optimistic that we will meet this challenge – I don't think it is a certainty, but I am optimistic.

Although much has been said about the decline of shared experience, this is not the whole story.

What we receive from shared experience is knowledge and understanding.

The global era of telecommunications offers us unprecedented opportunities to learn more about each other rather than less.

Knowledge can be a powerful counter force to the decline of shared experience. It is not a substitute, but it is something that can be made to work for us.

The second great challenge to citizenship is the opportunity we have to move forward together. It is the opportunity to boldly state what we mean when we use the word citizenship – a statement I hope reflects substantive equality, our commonality, as much as our difference.

It is by no means certain that we will meet this challenge. I believe we can better define 'a fair go' – so that it can be meaningful to indigenous Australians, to the less fortunate in society, and to all of us. It is not going to happen in the course of the next few years – for it requires a substantial shift in sentiment. I am talking about the sort of change that requires a major commitment – from national leaders, from people in positions like yours and mine, and from ordinary Australians.

A necessary feature of Australian citizenship in the new millennium must be the recognition of the treatment of our indigenous people, past and present.

When we characterise injustice as mere misfortune, we perpetuate the injustice. Our silence serves only to deepen the problem. An apology is just a start, but it is a start.

We must ask ourselves whether we do in fact believe in 'a fair go', and if we do, we must ask ourselves what that means. The fact that a nation of such wealth can have so many of its people finding life so tough - this must be a matter of grave concern.

Looking ahead

Looking ahead, I hope that we enter the new millennium as a nation that takes an active interest in what others do, and that we dream of what we might be able to do ourselves.

This requires both knowledge and imagination, and it gives us the capacity to assess how well the rights of citizenship are secured and the responsibilities discharged. It gives us a reference point from which we can expand our horizons.

As nations go, we are lucky – we could live, as others have and do, in a time and place less fortunate. But when we use our imagination, we also wonder whether our children might live in a time and place even better still.

The responsibilities of citizenship do not end at the ceremony with a certificate. Our responsibility needs to go further, as a nation that respects the values of others and as a nation whose communities are all-inclusive.

The way forward

As a nation, we face important choices about how we define citizenship.

If we fail to take the opportunity to commit ourselves to greater understanding of others, and to answering the difficult public issues that have plagued us for so long, then we should not doubt that fear, habit, rhetoric or the passage of time will define Australian citizenship for us.

My hope is that we take this critical period in our nation's history to define citizenship in a way that makes life better for ordinary Australians, but especially those that do not yet feel the sense of belonging that comes with true citizenship.

I hope that all Australians are prepared to take a stand – to play their part in defining what it means to be Australian.

We live in exciting times, with exciting prospects – but we must make the effort to grasp every opportunity – and we must do it with our eyes wide open.

Thank you.