

**After-dinner speech  
Churchill Trust dinner**

**Commonwealth Club**

**26 June 2007**

Thank you for the invitation to speak tonight. It occurs in part because I gave a speech last year which Paul Tys was interested in, and he asked me to give it again. A year has passed since then, and what I want to say tonight differs in part from what I said then. It had been suggested to me that I might like to talk on the theme 'What it means to be an Australian', partly because it was topical, and partly because I had written a book which had this question as one of its themes.

If that is the theme, then it centres on that much used word 'values', and it is topical because in a diverse society like our own we can often differ on what it is that holds us together, about from simple residence. As far as residence itself is concerned, I should point out at once that there are nearly a million people living and working in Australia who are not citizens, and may or may not think of themselves as Australians. It is only fair to point out as well that there are nearly a million Australians who live and work overseas, and they have not chosen to become citizens of the countries in which they work. Residence, I think you will agree, is not enough. What makes us 'Australian' is not simply our passport or our citizenship, though these are important. It is that, on top of residence and passport and citizenship we also share certain values, a certain outlook on life, and a certain set of attitudes about one another.

As you will know from what has happened in the last year or so — episodes like the Cronulla riots, what has been said in rape trials, what a celebrated Muslim cleric said in what may have been an unguarded moment, and what Ministers and other leaders have set out in their speeches — there is room for considerable disagreement about what these values are. I am going to propose five central values to you, and then I want to draw some historical comparisons, because a basic point here is the issue of how universal these values are, across time and across our world. In short, how 'Australian' are these values? And how permanent are they?

My five candidate 'Australian values' are equality, fairness, tolerance, aspiration and respect. I would like to argue that the five together

constitute an Australian outlook on life, and enable us to live in harmony with one another. Although I will emphasise that it is the set taken together that is really important in considering values, let's consider each one in turn.

Equality comes first. In Australia we use it in a special way. You could call it an 'equality of manners'. It is an early Australian value, developed during the convict days. At its core is the notion that each of us is a valid human being, deserving of equal respect from anyone else. We men have learned over the last century to add women, migrants and latterly indigenous people into the notion that each of us is a valid human being, whatever we look like. Australia is not about aristocracies, castes or classes.

Let me move to the second value: fairness. Like all human beings, we grow up with an acute sense of fairness and unfairness. 'That's unfair!' and 'Fair go!' register our belief that each of us deserves just treatment, especially by those bigger and stronger than us, including our government and big companies. A strong sense that unfairness is wrong runs through our history. It is the underlying sentiment of protest, and in our case you can see it in the development of trade unionism and the Labor Party — indeed, in the development of all political parties — in the women's movement, in the land rights movement for indigenous people, in suburban protests when corner stores are taken over by supermarket chains, and when abattoir workers are sacked so that they can be employed at a lower wage. All of us have our own sense of unfairness and injustice, and you can provide different examples from your own experience.

Fairness is a blood brother to equality, especially in our country. It is increasingly clear that every human being is born with the same attributes of high intelligence and creative potential. All of us can become competent at almost anything, given sufficient encouragement, preparation and motivation. I think that human beings have intuitively recognised this since they began to live in societies, and it is that recognition that fuels so much of our politics, and political sentiment everywhere. What happens to us after birth is out of our control, at least while we are infants and children, and that often leads to a feeling that the world has been unfair.

You can see that I could spend the rest of the evening on just this one value, but some of you will want to go home earlier rather than later. So I move to my third value, that of toleration. There has been considerable

debate about this one too. Were we tolerant or intolerant to the first few waves of postwar refugees and emigrants half a century and more ago? It depends on what you are comparing us to. Given that a society of just 7.5 million people in 1947 had welcomed another six million people by 2002, without civil unrest of any notable kind and with much inter-marriage, we can surely consider ourselves and our forbears reasonably tolerant.

Tolerance is the younger brother of equality and fairness. To recognise that others are as valid human beings as ourselves both reduces the likelihood that we will behave unfairly to them and makes us more relaxed about their differences, as we see them. We tolerate our fellow citizens' peculiarities, recognising that we need to be tolerated sometimes ourselves. As an old saying goes, most of us are peculiar save for thee and me, and I sometimes wonder about thee.

Those first three values — equality, fairness and tolerance — allow us to aspire to try to achieve whatever personal dreams we have. We are not a society where activities of one kind or another are automatically ruled out for some people though not for others. 'Go for it!' is our contemporary slogan. Aspiration is about hope and endeavour. Life is a great gift, and a good society will encourage all of us to develop that gift, both in our own interest and in the interest of the society itself. Australia is a good place in part because aspiration has not been blocked.

Finally, all four values — equality, fairness, tolerance and aspiration — seem to me to embody a respect for one another and for the kind of society we have. That respect is what leads to our general belief that no one is superior to the law, or that anyone should think that he or she is. You can see that in the way in which company directors who appear to have behaved wrongly are brought before the courts, or in the investigation before Commissioner Terence Cole of the AWB's alleged payment of 'kickbacks' to the former Iraqi regime. Our basic attitude, at its best, is an application of the Golden Rule: we like to treat others as we would want them to treat us.

I would like to spend more time on each of these values, because I feel I have only skimmed over the surface. But I must move on to my two further questions: are these values in any sense reserved for Australia? And how permanent are they? Let's take the Australian-ness of these values first.

You could argue that most good societies will have these values, and I would half agree with you. I think that they are the values that any

civilised society needs in order for people to flourish. But they are very often there at the level of rhetoric only, and this true to some extent here too. Restricting access to education, as is at least the outcome of our current Government's policies, is not the application of a good value. So we move fairly quickly into an arithmetical question: how characteristic are these values within the whole society, compared to other societies?

I have lived for some time in both the USA and the UK, and visited each country many times in the last forty years. I would be prepared to say that my candidate values are more characteristic here than they are in either. In particular, our sense of equality and fairness is, I would argue, sharper and more characteristic of Australia than of either the UK or the USA. But I have also visited Canada and New Zealand many times, and as a historian and political scientist, know both countries through wide reading as well. I would have to say that both exemplify these values too, if not with quite the same intensity as we do, because neither has our particular convict and settler heritage.

All three countries — Australia, Canada and New Zealand — have some similar origins and circumstances, and that would help to explain why we have similar values. But I could not say that ours are somehow 'better' than the value sets of the other 'old Commonwealth' countries, only that in my view ours, like theirs, point to what is needed for a better society in the future. I hope we continue to develop them, and I'll say more about that at the end.

But a word now about how permanent these values are, because there is a tendency for people to suppose that we have always had these values, and always will have them. I don't think so at all. My book, *What Was It All For. The Reshaping of Australia*, compares the Australia of 1951 with that of 2001, mostly to the credit of the more recent Australia. If you knew that you were going to be born again, but you would not know your sex, your physical and mental attributes, the nature of your parents or their social and economic situation, and so on — *but*, you could choose whether you were born into the Australia of 1951 or that of 2001, on any reflection and reading you would choose the more recent Australia. It is simply a better society, more creative, more tolerant, better educated, more able to support you in whatever you wanted to do, and so on. If you don't agree, I recommend a reading of my book!

If we were to go back to 1951 — and this is the point of this comparison — and ask what the Australian values were at the time, I think that equality and fairness would have been hardly less important (although, as

I said, women, immigrants and the indigenous had yet to qualify for consideration), but tolerance would have been rather less important. Aspiration would have been much less important, because the material and social conditions that allow us now to dream of what might be, and then undertake it, were much less present than they are today. The one domain for aspiration that was powerful then, as it is powerful now, was sport. And respect was also, I think, rather more subdued.

In short, what is to count as ‘Australian values’ is likely to change in its texture and balance over time, as the values have done over the last half-century. If we look forward, what changes are we likely to see? I feel that my own generation is losing its capacity to affect the culture of our society, and that is perhaps as it should be: we had our run, and it is now up to our children and to their children, to shape the Australia of the future.

But I hope that each of my candidate set of Australian values — equality, fairness, toleration, aspiration and respect — is alive and well and further advanced in 2057 than it is now. I have that hope because, although we imperfect human beings may not be able to create perfect societies, we have it within us to create better ones, and a better one must, it seems to me, be based on these values – not just in Australia, but in any human society.

Can I offer an example of how that set might be used? In giving foreign aid, I believe we could make it quite clear that the level of aid we give is linked to the receiving country’s preparedness to take seriously our values. We could give at different levels of funding, responding to humanitarian crises as they occur, but going for the long haul and at a high level of aid with countries that, for example, accepted the equality of men and women, placed the education of all children at the top of their domestic priorities, provided contraceptives and advice about contraception to women, accepted the need for vigorous debate, opened careers to everyone, and so on. I think these values would work as well in Somalia as they do in Australia, and I would want to see such a change occur.

You will see that by saying all this I am paying my own society a tremendous compliment, and so I am. I am enormously proud of what my generation and my parents’ generations have been able to accomplish in my working lifetime. But you will also realise that I do not think we are alone in what we are trying to achieve. It is at least comforting that other human societies are with us, and that, as younger democracies in the

world, we may just be able to show other societies how to provide a good life for the great majority, not just for a privileged few.

And it is for that reason, in part, that I feel that each of us has a responsibility, as citizens and, in your case, as members of the Churchill Trust, to reflect on our own values, to exemplify them, and to speak up when we see them being transgressed. In the world of values, it seems to me, it is never someone else's responsibility: it is always our own.

I thank you for your attention and patience.