

Closing Address Welcoming Cities Symposium 2021

MORE IN COMMON? IDENTITY & BELONGING IN AUSTRALIA

Thursday 22 April 2021,

Australian National Maritime Museum

Paul McCarthy, *Senior Executive, Strategy & External Relations,*

Australian National Maritime Museum

In this century museums are about story telling. And we are so blessed in Australia to have two great stories – the stories of our first peoples and the stories of those that came later – Australia’s migrants.

I am delighted to wholeheartedly acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, Traditional Custodians of the bamal and badu, the unceded lands and unceded waters, on which this museum is located and pay respects to their Elders and all Indigenous peoples present today. I personally look forward to a future when the structural changes proposed in the Uluru Statement from the Heart are realised.

My job is to remind you of what has been discussed at this symposium and to invite you to reflect on your own next steps.

Firstly, I congratulate all the speakers for their contribution to this symposium.

I have personally had a roller-coaster of emotions throughout the day, from a sobering start to this most wonderful finale – demonstrating the power of the arts to uplift us all.

It is impossible to do justice to everyone’s ideas in just a few minutes at the end of a very stimulating day but the theme of ‘more in common’ has been illustrated in ways as diverse as we all are.

After almost 40 years, multiculturalism is entrenched in our national identity. It is unexceptional. But it does not mean that all people feel that they belong or that racism has been eliminated or that Australian advocacy for human rights around the world is universally supported. That requires more effort by individuals and institutions.

There is obviously a lot of goodwill towards a future in which we are wholeheartedly welcoming, reconciled with our Indigenous sisters and brothers on their terms and with a more expansive sense of what we have in common.

Today’s presentations highlight that partnerships with local government and community are really powerful. Starting with what we have in common, and the trust developed through meaningful partnerships, we have a strong platform for progress.

Turning now to the speeches:

Minister Hawke officially opened the Symposium last night thanking the sector for its work throughout the pandemic. He noted that Australia is doing better than other places in the world and is more cohesive. He observed that many groups have remarked to him about the serious difficulties experienced in their countries of origin because of the pandemic. The Minister also shared the story of Kathleen Quan Mane – posted on www.australian-values.gov.au - to illustrate the experience of

‘a fair go’ and what he described as the essence of what we should strive to retain as Australians. The Minister said he was pleased to acknowledge record levels of support for the migration program and multiculturalism in the latest Social Cohesion survey. He noted a substantial fall in negative attitudes towards Muslims which he attributed to less negative media. He also acknowledged, with concern, the experiences of Chinese and other people of Asian descent during the pandemic – again due to media. The Minister advised that social cohesion is front and centre in the Government’s thinking as it seeks to build on the cohesion demonstrated over the last 18 months. He spoke optimistically about the upcoming Federal Budget, noting the current \$1B investment in uncapped hours for English language training for migrants and refugees and that conversations are occurring about other issues that are priorities for the sector.

Alison Larkins, Australia’s Coordinator-General for Migrant Services, gave the Opening Address. She was a most compelling speaker, conveying the impression that this important role is in great hands.

Alison explained that her role was created to provide a ‘centre of gravity for settlement, employment and integration programs across all levels of government and throughout the community’. She has been focused on how to improve settlement efforts in collaboration with local government and communities. Some areas of work over the last year included:

- A review of the Community Support Program in consultation with a broad range of stakeholders. Alison said she was overwhelmed by the level of enthusiasm from Australians who want to play a greater role in supporting new arrivals and want to help our country make a meaningful contribution to refugee resettlement. As many feel there are limited avenues for Australians to assist refugees and migrants, the goal is to ease the way for greater volunteer engagement.
- The rapid shift to online learning with the AMEP over the last year was welcomed by migrants juggling work and family responsibilities with learning English – demonstrating the importance of the perspective of the learner in service design.
- International benchmarking and review of evidence has demonstrated the enormous benefit of community engagement and social connections, especially in Canada where secondary migration (shifting locations) of new arrivals has declined. Alison also called out the success of a program in Ireland to welcome Syrian refugees.
- There are great examples of leading practice in Australia and Alison acknowledged some local examples of community leadership, namely the work of Rosemary Kariuki, Tambo Teddies in Toowoomba and Community Refugee Sponsorship Initiative.

In concluding, Alison noted that the pandemic, floods and bushfires have shown the community pulling together in the most fabulous ways, bringing to light our nation’s spirit and unwavering resolve to help one another, our generosity and collaborative character.

And this morning **Joseph La Posta** gave the opening address, speaking about 65,000 years of Indigenous multicultural leadership, the diversity of the State of NSW and the role of Multicultural NSW including:

- working with local councils to sure everyone feels they belong and can take part in our social, cultural and civic life
- addressing regional skills shortages
- planning for long-term sustainability; and
- ensuring a robust State policy framework for local government, including supporting local councils in planning and implementation of regional settlement.

Joseph acknowledged the “sewer of hate” that was prominent online last year during the pandemic. He affirmed the importance of reaching out to connect and build tomorrow’s social capital, the

necessity of developing respect and understanding for other cultures, along with supporting multicultural communities to connect and grow. He challenged us to have different conversations and to be unique leaders.

Megan Davies delivered the Indigenous keynote about the role of local government in supporting the Uluru Statement from the Heart – an invitation to the Australian people to achieve changes which have been sought by First Nations representatives since the mid-1800s.

Megan argued that for First Nations peoples, a welcoming country, city or local area needs to effectively grapple with the complex and dark past and advocate for a better future. She believes that the answer lies in law reform and Commonwealth action. She argued that without Constitutional reform – where the High Court is the arbiter – there will be no guarantee of an Indigenous voice at the table when decisions are made about Indigenous Australians.

Megan described local government as the heavy lifters of social cohesion, acknowledging this difficult work often goes unrecognised. She spoke about the importance of local government services in her own early life. She acknowledged that local governments have been at the forefront of reconciliation - engaging with community long before RAPs - and leading the response to issues important to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples such as 26 January and National Sorry Day.

Megan's key point was that local government can lead on the implementation of the Statement.

Megan told us that truth telling was added to the Statement following consultation with those in the community who are not usually heard. The community's expectation is that truth-telling will happen at the pace and in the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people determine. Truth-telling is deliberately sequenced last to avoid the practice of using it to kick the can of difficult issues down the road – such as that which occurred with the unrealised election promises of the Hawke Government and the implementation of the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal deaths.

Megan emphasised that “voice” is the duty to consult and involve Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on matters that affect them.

Megan argued that “Reconciliation” presumes relationship is pre-existing, however consultation with community exposed the view that “we haven't met each other yet” and Australia has not yet made an official statement or recognition of dispossession. This concept is fundamental to understanding the Statement.

Megan highlighted a high degree of public support for and submissions in favour of the Statement from across the political spectrum:

- 8000 submissions, the vast majority from non-Indigenous Australians, and 90% or so of whom want a referendum.
- About 70% sentiment in favour of voice, treaty, truth. It is the intuitive nature of the reform that attracts support.
- 94% of support in latest poll.

She acknowledged the positive impact of local council endorsements of the Statement from the Heart campaign, with several great examples.

- The City of Bayswater, making a submission to the Joint Committee, setting up a webpage on the issue and writing to the State's Local Government Association.

- City of Vincent sent a letter to the PM stating “we are not just about roads, rates and rubbish... we are elected representatives... when people feel there is shortfall they turn to local government.”
- Noosa Council and Cherbourg Shire Council co-endorsed a motion to QLGA conference showing the intention to walk together for better future (the motion succeeded 159 votes to 38).

Megan made a compelling argument that as the Australian Constitution will require amendments in respect to at least 4 different issues, the Australian people and the political class need to become more comfortable with referendums – some of which will fail. She emphasised that local government is in a very powerful position to give the political class confidence that the public will support Constitutional recognition in a form derived from the Statement from the Heart. And this advocacy is needed now.

It is a no brainer that you get better laws and policies by having Aboriginal people at the table about matters that affect them and Megan left us with several suggestions:

- Read the statement on the official website
- Learn about First Nations voice being enshrined in the Constitution
- Make a motion expressing support
- Write to the Prime Minister and Minister for Indigenous Australians – explaining the ways in which you already turn to community on issues of policy
- Make submission to the current inquiry
- Advocate to your national and state local government associations
- Promote the cause in your communities, like posting the logo on bus stops
- Review and reform structures to that Aboriginal staff involved in decision making
- Sponsor events to broaden awareness of the Statement from the Heart

Megan concluded her speech by observing that we are in the midst of a movement of the Australian people which speaks to people across the political spectrum. Those closest to those on the ground – local governments - have a crucial role in ensuring the will of the common people is realised.

National keynote speaker **George Megalogenis** told us the single biggest issue facing Australia in the next 10 years – demographic change - will be impacted by what we do when the borders open to migrants and where we want them to live.

He provided an overview of the “problem” with migration using census data and migration history, noting:

- Our overseas born population is at its highest since Federation (10% in 1947 to 30% in 2019)
- The proportion and number of the Asian born migrant population – particularly Chinese and Indians - has dramatically increased since WW2 (0.3% in 1947, 1.2% in 1976, 5.5% in 2001; 12.7% in 2019)
- In 1976 we fell behind in the replacement rate (with migration becoming the more significant factor in the population mix than births)
- The impact of migration from overseas and interstate impacts very differently around the country, with most ‘action’ in Melbourne and Sydney. 4 of the 8 capital cities don’t look like the country at large in terms of diversity – they have received the majority of the Asian migrants, principally in Sydney and Melbourne in last 20 years. Cities like Adelaide rely on migration to balance emigration and negative population growth (particularly rapid ageing). Loss of overseas migrants is propped up in Queensland by interstate migration. A lot of variability in WA based on economy.

George's aspiration is for the entire country to benefit from migration but the strongest message – the most ominous message – is that the differences around the country, in terms of population mix and ageing, have the potential to be very divisive given the way in which Federal Election results are ultimately decided by votes in a few seats in Queensland and WA.

He argued that the global competition for labour is also a real threat in this context and that Australia is at risk of losing talent and serious labour shortages.

The question for conference delegates is how to rise above the politics and use our positions to influence decision makers?

George argued that the deep knowledge at local council level (best data – land supply, housing needs, population mix, services, what is missing in the community and too much of) needs to be shared with the States and Commonwealth.

For those of us who live in Sydney and Melbourne, we will need to increase our efforts to work with partners of goodwill in the other states. But sadly, nowhere in the country is immune from racism and this requires ongoing national attention.

There is an interesting tactical question as to whether to seek to engage with the political class about this issue. One argument is that if it is not a hot button issue, we should keep silent and hope for leadership and reform in due course. Another argument is to actively engage with the holders of the marginal seats in Queensland and WA to turn them into champions of diversity in their communities and amongst the political class. The most elevated approach is to ask the political class to use their positions of leadership and their grounded understanding of public opinion to achieve the result we are seeking.

Our International keynote **Tim Dixon** spoke about the threat of tribalism and what we can do to bridge the divides. Tim's presentation demonstrated the power of attitudinal research and gave us an interesting example from Freital in Saxony, including a great anecdote about the local community's realisation that "diversity includes everyone". His key insights included:

- Most people hold mixed views about migration – recognising both positives and negatives
- Humans are deeply tribal. In-group/out-group dynamics are at the root of social divisions, polarisation and racism
- Highlighting what we have in common, rather than focusing on the the differences that lead to "othering", helps build inclusion and opportunities for connection
- Areas of common ground include shared sources of pride (things to celebrate), shared priorities and shared aspirations for the future
- The need to build the number of actors and the field of influence in support of diversity.

Tim invited us to challenge our assumptions – perhaps particularly those of us who are "progressive activists" and out of step with the majority view – and test different approaches having regard to the evidence base. We were all asked to understand the "middle audiences" and find opportunities for people to connect across lines of division.

All of us will no doubt be reflecting on the applicability of Tim's presentation to Australia.

I take some comfort in the findings of the last Scanlon Foundation Research Institute's report on Social Cohesion (2020):

- The idea that ‘multiculturalism has been good for Australia’ received continued strong support (84% agreement in 2020, compared to 80% in 2019).
- Agreement with the proposition that ‘accepting immigrants from many different countries makes Australia stronger’ also remained steadily high (71%).

In my view, there is a risk of over-reading Tim’s presentation by those who were not in attendance. In particular, I worry that Australians’ curiosity in the world and diverse cultures, and our practice of asking each other about family backgrounds, might be categorised as “othering”. Doing so is wrong. It not only risks reactivating an awful debate about ‘political correctness’ but would also mean we all miss out on the common ground that deep sharing of cultural differences can create.

Each of the **other speakers** shared with us heart-felt, practical and evidence based ideas from a variety of angles – communicating in a crisis, responding to racism, sharing power by involving diverse populations in decision making, the power of oral history, art-making and, of course, welcoming. COVID-19 was referenced in many presentations and the theme of what people can do when coming together in a crisis reoccurred. I was particularly moved by Maha Karyem Abdo’s heart-felt presentation. The presentations about racism towards people of Asian appearance and the encouragement for us to reflect on our privilege and to have difficult conversations to become effective allies were also very powerful.

The documents launched today by **Welcoming Australia** will assist you to reflect on your own next steps.

- “10 years of welcoming” is both sobering and inspiring. There are powerful reminders of the deaths at sea by people seeking a future in Australia and the heartfelt response by people of good will. A chronology plots the extraordinary growth and achievement of Welcoming Australia but it applies to all of us – it is also an inspiring example of what leadership, compassion and hard work can achieve.
- “Stories of Welcome” is a powerful shared learning tool full of inspiring stories from LGAs that are members of Welcoming Cities. It provides insight into how Bendigo became the world’s first accredited Welcoming City and also includes case studies such as preparing a rural community for new migrants; recognising a particular Indigenous history in a bespoke RAP; and a compelling oral history project sharing stories of strength and resilience. “Putting out the welcome mat - A guide for creating welcoming cities” uses these stories (and others) to bring The Welcoming Cities Standard to life.

The Museum was delighted to host this symposium. The issues are national and we are a national social history museum focused on Australia’s relationship to the sea.

Our statutory remit includes the collection and exhibition of stories about migration to Australia and we have major ambitions in this area. As the Minister mentioned last night, we are home to Australia’s National Monument to Migration but we would love to have more impact beyond our site.

You may be interested to know that the Minister for the Arts asked us to pursue two priorities relevant to this symposium:

- To accept opportunities to promote Australian stories and identity (2019-20)
- To focus on how our activities can further encourage social cohesion and foster diversity and inclusion (2020-21).

We really value these national priorities and I note there is strong alignment with today's discussions.

We strive to use our institutional position, and our partnerships, to make the Museum a welcoming place for everyone and I will be sharing with my colleagues what I have learned today, as I am sure you will too.

Thanks again to Welcoming Australia, to all our speakers and to all of you.

Paul McCarthy. Australian National Maritime Museum
22 April 2021