



GOVERNMENT HOUSE  
SYDNEY

**Speaking Points - FINAL**

# **2nd National Advancing Community Cohesion Conference**

**21st November 2017**

**Western Sydney University**

## FULL SPEECH

Thank you for the invitation to speak at this 2nd Annual Advancing Community Cohesion Conference which is being held on the land of the Darug people, to whom I pay my respects, and I respectfully acknowledge all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of this State and nation.

In Sydney's Mitchell Library sits a cloth-bound book, its cover worn smooth by the years. It is called *An Historical and Statistical Account of the Colony of New South Wales*. Published in 1834 - in two volumes - this oldest of English historical accounts of the origins of the Colony of New South Wales was written by John Dunmore Lang, the Colony's first Presbyterian Minister, and a historian, who arrived in New South Wales in 1823.

When considering this presentation on the topic '*Bringing New South Wales Together*' I want to go back to the minds of those early colonists.

How did they view this strange new world - New South Wales? What thoughts did they have about this extraordinary land that, to their European eyes, was so different in size and scale and strangeness of animals and plants, and so different compared to life in Britain in providing the opportunity to create a better life?

Of course, in 1834, the colony of New South Wales included the parts of Australia we now know as Queensland, Victoria, Northern Territory and South Australia - until proclaimed in 1836 - as well as New Zealand - proclaimed in 1841.<sup>1</sup>

As a Presbyterian Minister, it is not surprising that Lang's history is prefaced with a verse from the Bible, the book of Judges xviii 9: "*We have seen the land and behold, it is very good*". And, may I add, in the context of this conference, being 'very good', it deserves our best efforts in all nation-building endeavours.

Lang's history with its fragile foldout, hand-drawn maps and curious personal commentary tells us much about our early colonial history.

In the late 1820s and early 1830s, Lang devised and implemented the 'Stirling Castle' scheme, which was the first privately funded immigration scheme to the colony. Lang specifically selected and shipped to Sydney a number of religious leaders, educators and artisans to build his Australian College and, more broadly, to improve the quality of society in New South Wales. In referring to his immigration scheme and his intention to use immigration "*as a means of effecting a great moral reformation in the Australian colonies*"

Lang wrote:

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<sup>1</sup> While British sovereignty over all of New Zealand was proclaimed in 1840 – the North Island on the basis of cession through the Treaty of Waitangi, and South and Stewart Islands by right of discovery, New Zealand was a dependency of New South Wales until May 1841, when it became a separate British colony with Hobson as its Governor.

*“It will doubtless be supposed by the reader that in working out the transcendantly important experiment that was thus in progress, I would receive all the countenance and assistance that was requisite to enable me to comply with the conditions imposed by Lord Goderich, from the Colonial Government as well as from the colonial public. He (the reader) would be very ignorant, however, of human nature, and more especially of the nature and character of colonial Government, previous to the advent of free institutions for the colonies, who should seriously think so.”*<sup>2</sup>

Lang’s criticism of the Colonial Government is interesting in itself but it was the phrase ‘transcendantly important experiment’ which leapt off the page to me.

While New South Wales may have begun as a place to dump the unwanted convicts of Britain’s overflowing prisons, within a very short period of time the characteristics of immigration and the development and betterment of society came to be seen by those who were actively engaged in the leadership of the colony as a form of ‘social experiment’.

Has this experiment concluded or is this experiment still continuing?

This is a question we may ask ourselves as we consider *‘Bringing New South Wales Together’*.

This topic implies that there is still work to do.

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<sup>2</sup> JD Lang - *Historical and Statistical Account of the Colony of New South Wales*, page 231

I consider that at the heart of this topic, indeed this conference, is the contention that this social experiment in Australia is still underway. The social and political tensions of the early colony – between Aboriginal inhabitants and British settlement, between convicts and administrators, between freed convicts and free emigrants, and between people of many faiths and backgrounds – still echo today, and have been complicated by a diverse range of new challenges that form the subject matter of many of the presentations you will receive and consider today and tomorrow.

Australia is widely acknowledged for, and rightly celebrates, the fact that it is successful example of multiculturalism. According to the 2016 Census, in New South Wales we follow 146 religions, speak 215 languages, and come from 229 birthplaces and 307 ancestries. Given this mix, that we function successfully as a liberal democracy points to one measure of social cohesion about which we can be justifiably proud. Assuming that multiculturalism is still the intended approach to developing Australian society, there are, however, threats to social cohesion and resistance to multiculturalism that are creating tensions in our society.

One of the reasons for this, I believe, is that we do not have an agreed view on the model of multiculturalism that we wish to create. The Macquarie Dictionary defines ‘cohesion’ as:

*‘The act or state of cohering, uniting or sticking together.’*

Are we cohesive, in that sense?

I am not a social scientist nor do I wish to enter a discussion on categories of nomenclature.

There are at least three models of Australian society in play in the discussions of multiculturalism that I have observed:

- Assimilation into the 'Aussie' monoculture, primarily British influenced (the antithesis of multiculturalism);
- Harmonious co-existence, facilitating the existence of many cultures alongside each other who participate in the life of this nation in as far as that participation benefits the cultural group;
- Integration, in which cultural groups maintain a cultural identity, yet see the greater benefit in contributing to Australia as a whole, as opposed to seeking the greater benefit for the particular cultural group.

Whichever model is pursued, movement towards that model requires cultural change in Australia. In pursuing this change, Australia faces the same challenge that many businesses face - determining and implementing a cultural change program. Unity of purpose is essential to all cultural change endeavours. Can we continue to make progress in bringing our society together when our model and, therefore, outcome is not agreed?

Whatever one's view on that question, I have observed a number of threats to social cohesion and multiculturalism during my three years as Governor. My list will not surprise you:

- Reconciling and closing the gap with Indigenous Australians. The first statement of the *Close The Gap: Progress and Priorities Report 2017* states that 'After 10 years, and despite closing the gap being a national bipartisan priority, it is clear that Australian governments at all levels are, in key respects, failing Australia's First Peoples. ' We cannot expect social cohesion and harmony while our oldest culture feels that it stands outside our society
- The 'Sandstone Curtain' or the rural, regional and urban divide. Up until 1813, the Blue Mountains were an insurmountable barrier to the development of New South Wales. While we have conquered the physical barrier, we are in danger of creating another barrier - one based on changes to our agricultural production models and poorer access to employment, health services, youth programs and opportunities for those living west of the 'sandstone curtain'. In the midst of our Sydney boom, it is critical that we consider how we might share the benefits of the growth in the economy across all areas of our State. The urban-rural economic divide remains a clear challenge.

- Cycles of generational unemployment and poverty. In cities, towns and communities across New South Wales there is an underclass of several generations of families experiencing unemployment and underemployment.

Often living in the one town or living under the one roof, and living on the edge economically, these families withdraw from society and pass disaffection on to their children and the next generation

- Religious extremism. New South Wales owes much of its acceptance of the plurality of faiths and cultures and faith-based schools to early far-sighted decisions in our history, but our 'experiment' - to be successful - needs to embrace all cultures and religions and appeal to moderate elements within them. There is hope. An Australian Muslim community leader here in Sydney has expressed to me his belief that we, as a community, can achieve something that he calls a brand of 'beautiful multiculturalism.'

In dealing with such threats, we must ensure that our strategies do not change too quickly; that our programs are not driven by short-term funding arrangements, such as grants, that create uncertainty and break down trust. Our social planning and policy, in particular, needs to be integrated into long term strategies that are measurable and, wherever possible, bi-partisan.

An example. Western Sydney is a booming and diverse region of our city and our State. Since 2006, the percentage of people born overseas has increased from 34.1% to 38.7% in 2017. However, this does not reflect our State's regional profile. A total of 11.2% of people in regional New South Wales were born overseas, and the majority of these residents came from the United Kingdom and New Zealand.

This has implications for our State as whole and, I believe, may impact on our social cohesion unless this disparity of diversity of populations is addressed. In this regard, a more representative profile of our overall population may be achieved in our regions through a reconsideration of our thinking about decentralisation in relation to the sustainment of communities, the provision of services and the creation of jobs and opportunities in regional and rural areas.

According to the 2015 *Intergenerational Report*, about 88 per cent of migrants to Australia are aged under 40, compared to the average of 54 per cent of resident Australians, meaning that migrants are mostly young and of working age.<sup>3</sup> This is a wonderful situation to be in, in many respects, as this means our economy and our communities will continue to be revitalised by new people with new ideas and energies. We have a good starting point to drive cultural change.

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<sup>3</sup> All Data from Multicultural NSW.

While providing my list of threats to social cohesion, I am pleased to say that I have seen much that is being undertaken to reduce these impacts and to create social cohesion.

Let me mention just a few examples of the achievements and work of some outstanding organisations that often operate on a shoestring and through the dedicated service of a troop of generous volunteers and supporters:

- Maranguka Justice Reinvestment - Aboriginal justice
- Backtrack and Youth Insearch - Youth at risk
- Granville Boys High School – Multicultural education. Under the care of School Chaplain and Youth Leader, Shaykh Wesam Charkawi – this is a Western Sydney school in which 99% of students are from a non-English speaking background and the school celebrates the cultural and linguistic diversity of all its students
- Pathfinders Pumpkin Farm - Homelessness
- Cana Farm - Unemployment, Education and Justice
- Sisters of Charity Foundation – Addressing poverty and equality of educational opportunity
- Odyssey House - Drug and Alcohol Rehabilitation

- Wayside Chapel - Inner city mental health, poverty, housing
- Junaa Buwa – Juvenile rehabilitation and Mental Health
- Bus Stop Films - Disability and Training.

Linda and I have also had many opportunities to see the fine work of our larger organisations:

- Red Cross
- United Hospital Auxiliaries
- Country Women's Associations
- Agricultural Show Societies
- Surf Life Saving NSW
- NSW Police, State Emergency Services, NSW Ambulance and Volunteer Firefighters
- St John's Ambulance.

The contributions of these organisations - and the people within them - demonstrate to me one of the key actions we must take to continue to build social cohesion in Australia.

Acknowledging that there is not a 'silver bullet' answer, I consider that our citizens need to understand that in order for our democracy to work and for our society to 'stick together' we need to uphold - and support each other to uphold - the values that derive from the Westminster parliamentary system to which we adhere closely. These values include equality of opportunity, equality before the law, freedom of expression and freedom from discrimination.

It seems clear to me that a healthy, happy, dynamic, enterprising and vibrant community, what we might call a cohesive community, can only be as strong as the sum of all its parts.

I am reminded of the social model proposed in the late 19th century by Émile Durkheim, a French sociologist. According to Durkheim, society is a living organism.

The 'health' of the social organism can be thought of as a function of the harmonious interaction and working of culture, politics, and economics.

Durkheim said: *"The state of integration of a social aggregate can only reflect the intensity of the collective life circulating in it. It is more unified and powerful the more active and constant is the intercourse among its members."*

Within this living organism, the 'social man', the contributing member of society, is the 'masterpiece of existence'.<sup>4</sup>

I am often asked to speak to groups of people around the State about leadership and service to the community - and it is in this 'measurable' of voluntary service to the community that I see our healthiest and most cohesive communities.

We are social creatures, and being active and engaged citizens, contributing to the community, is what will keep us both connected and cohesive as a society.

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There are a series of brass plaques on the concrete walkway between Circular Quay and the Opera House.

You may know the ones to which I refer. It is Sydney's version of the Hollywood Walk of Fame. Each of the plaques refers to a famous writer and their works.

One refers to David Malouf - an Australian writer of award-winning novels such as *Johnno*, *An Imaginary Life*, *Fly Away Peter* and *Remembering Babylon*, and a recipient of the Australia Council Award for Lifetime Achievement in Literature.

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<sup>4</sup> Emile Durkheim: *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* 1897

In many ways, Malouf's family story epitomises the Australian story of multiculturalism - born in Brisbane to a Christian Lebanese father and an English-born mother of Portuguese Sephardi Jewish descent.

On Malouf's plaque is inscribed the following quotation written by him in 1978:

*"Australia is still revealing itself to us.*

*We oughtn't to close off possibilities by declaring too early what we have already become."*<sup>5</sup>

Australia is a nation built by migrants. According to the Department of Planning, over the next 20 years the population of NSW is expected to grow to 9.9 million people, an increase of 2.2 million. This increase will include more than 1.5 million migrants who will continue to shape the multicultural face of our nation, our State and our cities. So the challenge to manage cultural change will continue.

*'Bringing New South Wales together'* is, therefore, not an outcome but a process ... A process that should be integral to everything that we do, plan or enact in New South Wales.

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<sup>5</sup> David Malouf - *Lugarno Postscript: Notes and Furphies*

To Lang, over 180 years ago, it was a 'transcendantly important experiment'.

And, we need to heed, Malouf's allusion: We oughtn't to 'close off possibilities' ... because this experiment is still a work in progress.

**END**