

## ASIAN-AUSTRALIAN LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

Welcome and Opening Remarks by Professor the Hon Gareth Evans AC QC, Chancellor of The Australian National University and Chair of the AALS Advisory Group, to the Asian-Australian Leadership Summit Gala Dinner, State Library, Melbourne, 12 September 2019

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Excellencies, distinguished guests, colleagues and participants

Welcome everyone, on behalf of Australia's national university, to the Asian-Australian Leadership Summit and to tonight's Opening Gala Dinner.

I begin by acknowledging and celebrating the First Australians on whose traditional lands we meet, and paying respects to the elders of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation past and present.

Welcome, first, to our panelists, moderators and facilitators who will be leading our discussions. And welcome to all our other personally-invited participants – senior and emerging leaders, all of you, from across a very wide range of communities - business and corporate, government, education, legal, science and medicine, community and not for profit, arts and culture and media, who have come from all around the country to join us for this very special event.

With a number of ambassadors, corporate CEOs, university leaders (including my Melbourne University counterpart Allan Myers) and other professional, public service and community organization heads in our midst, we are acutely aware that nearly every one of you is much more used to being on the platform than in the audience on these occasions. And that's in fact how we want you to engage at this Summit – actively and vocally, being very much part of the action in every session, not just spectators, as we all wrestle with the challenge of the under-representation and under-appreciation of Asian Australians in senior Australian leadership positions.

A more specific welcome from me to our colleagues from PwC Australia and Asialink, who have joined the ANU as leading partners in devising strategies to meet that challenge. Asialink's Group CEO Penny Burt, PwC's Asia Practice Director Sung Lee, and my ANU Melbourne Executive Officer Jieh-Yung Lo have all spent huge amounts of personal time and energy over the last six months in bringing us all together for that purpose.

There has been a small army of others working behind the scenes to support that leadership team, including the very distinguished cast who were part of the Advisory Group I chaired, but we'll leave the thanks they richly deserve to the wrap up final session tomorrow.

A final very specific welcome to our generous and committed cast of sponsors and supporters: the Bank of Melbourne as our dinner partner, philanthropist Jason Yeap, and as Summit supporting organisations the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Human Rights Commission, Australian Public Service Commission, Australian Industry Group, Austrade, Asian Australian Lawyers Association, Asian Australian Foundation, Leadership Council on Cultural Diversity and the Committee for Melbourne.

And not least Matthew Gray and Nicholas Biddle of the ANU Centre for Social Research and Methods and Diane Herz of the Social Research Centre who provided tens of thousands of dollars worth of in-kind support in undertaking for the Summit a national survey looking at the exposure to, and perceptions of, discrimination, from the perspective both of Asian-Australians and the wider Australian community. Without all of you we simply would not have been able to mount this Summit and we are hugely grateful to you all.

I won't keep you too long from table conversation, but let me make just a few scene-setting remarks about the concept and organisation of the Asian-Australian Leadership Summit.

The purpose of this Summit, which I had the pleasure of formally announcing when I delivered the 2019 Asialink Sir Edward 'Weary' Dunlop Lecture in March this year, is to identify strategies and energise efforts to break through the 'bamboo ceiling'; to highlight the important contribution that Asian-Australians can play in our future engagement with Asia; and generally to elevate on the public agenda the issue of greater Asian-Australian representation in key leadership positions,

Responding to the very significant under-representation of Asian-Australians in senior leadership positions in Australian public institutions and ASX200 companies – 12 per cent now of our total population occupying only around 3 per cent of those positions – the Summit will focus on the obstacles facing Asian-Australians seeking those positions and how to overcome them. Senior sector leaders will share their experiences, and there will be ample opportunity for everyone here to participate in discussions as to how to develop and implement practical targets.

Kicking things off earlier today we had a 'NextGen' session, developed specifically to provide opportunities for Asian-Australians aged 18-40 to develop the kind of insights, skills and networks that will help them become leaders and advocates in their workplaces and communities. Over 200 participants tackled questions like the difficulty of Asian-Australians picturing themselves in senior leadership roles and positions of influence with so relatively few such positions available, what being Asian-Australian meant to them on their leadership journeys, and how to overcome the barriers they were likely to encounter. There was also a leadership workshop to examine and explore the skills needed to champion cultural diversity in the workplace.

In that context we will be announcing and presenting awards later this evening to the winners of the inaugural '40 under 40' most influential Asian-Australian Awards – the aim being to recognise and celebrate the achievements of young Asian-Australian leaders in their fields, increase their visibility and provide a stepping stone to further leadership opportunities. Congratulations to the award recipients who are here tonight and warmest thanks to members of the judging panel, and the executive recruitment firm Johnson who generously developed and supported this initiative with Asialink and PwC.

For the main Summit tomorrow, we have a series of interactive panel discussions scheduled, involving senior leaders from various fields describing their personal and professional leadership journeys, C-suite leaders (CEOs and other 'Chiefs') making the case for cultural diversity, and community leaders addressing the fundamental action agenda – what will it take to drive change and raise the priority of the cultural diversity the nation so obviously needs in its most important institutions.

It is clear that if we are to advance this agenda a great deal is going to have to be done not just at the macro but at the micro level, company by company and institution by institution. With that in mind, the last session of the day, before the threads are drawn together in a final wrap-up, will consist of a series of facilitated industry or sector-based breakouts, which will hopefully generate a number of new ideas for practical future strategies.

We are all conscious that this Summit is just the first step in what is going to be a long, continuing process. But it is crucial that we as a nation get seriously started on that journey.

We know there are multiple obstacles to overcome in making the bamboo ceiling a thing of the past, including some outright racial discrimination, rather more general stereotyping, some degree of cultural inhibition among Asian-Australians themselves, and a lack of the same level of institutional commitment to cultural diversity that we have seen for gender inclusion. I am reasonably confident that with the kind of energy and commitment this Summit is designed to mobilise we can over time effectively come to grips with all of these.

But we have been reminded in the media over just the last three days that progress is not going to be at all easy in overcoming an additional obstacle that in recent times has become very real indeed for one sub-set of our Asian-Australian community: Chinese-Australians. The current environment of hyper-anxiety in some quarters about baleful Chinese, and particularly Chinese Communist Party, influence is making it harder than it has ever been for Chinese-Australians to aspire to leadership positions, or indeed any positions at all in fields that are seen as even remotely security sensitive, not least in the public service. It is an environment of anxiety that bears no relationship to the objective evidence we have about the minimal and marginal nature of such influence as has been sought, and one which utterly misrepresents the reality of the overriding loyalty which Chinese-Australians have always had to this country and will continue to have. It's an environment of anxiety and fear that has to stop, and stop fast, or we will all be diminished by it.

Breaking the bamboo ceiling is an issue on which we have ducked and weaved and dithered for too many years. The Asian century is off and running and we have in our midst a fantastic community resource with which to take maximum advantage of all the opportunities it offers. Asian-Australians have been under-appreciated and under-utilised in our listed companies and public institutions for far too long.

It's time to move beyond rhetoric to action, and I hope and expect every one of you here tonight, who are so obviously committed to cultural diversity and inclusion, and Australia's Asia future, to be very much part of that action.

Thank you all again for joining us. Enjoy tonight's dinner, and the keynote address we'll shortly hear from by one of Australia's most talented professionals and colourful personalities, the winner of the 2010 Masterchef Australia, Adam Liaw. And please now look at the screens for a special message from another very special Asian-Australian, our very first Asian-Australian federal Cabinet Minister, Senator Penny Wong.