



**Asian-Australian Leadership Summit -- Keynote Address - Adam Liaw 12 September 2019**

I cannot impress on you how proud I am to have been asked to give the keynote address here tonight. I am standing in front of a room that to my mind represents a large part of the future of Australia. A room of Asian-Australians excelling in their fields, as well as – if today’s news reports are any indication – quite possibly also a handful of Chinese Communist Party spies.

When I was growing up this was a room that I didn’t think existed. And I didn’t think it existed because it didn’t exist. When I grew up there wasn’t really a concept of being Asian-Australian. And the concept of Asian-Australian excellence? You can forget about it.

I know Asian-Australians existed. Asians have been coming to Australia even before Europeans have, but when I was growing up “Asian” and “Australian” were two separate things. You could hardly be both at the same time. Total assimilation was the only game in town.

If you played footy and didn’t have an accent you were “just like an Aussie”. If your family had been here for 3 generations you were “basically Australian”. And the language here matters, because to be “like an Aussie” or “basically Australian” meant, of course, that you weren’t.

In order to be more Australian, you had to be less Asian. But of course, no matter how much beer you could drink, or how little of your parents’ language you could speak, you could never change the way people looked at you.

As a kid, the question of identity was a difficult one for me. I’m of mixed race, born in Malaysia to parents of mainly English and Chinese ancestry. As a kid I bought into the idea of exclusivity. I thought that to be more Australian, I had to be less Asian.

As an adult, I know that the more I embrace my heritage, the more Australian I feel. Because that’s who I am. That’s who we are.

Of course, I’ve experienced racism and discrimination. I’ll bet nearly everybody in this room has a story to tell. It’d be a sure bet too, as that is precisely what the concept papers for this Summit bear out.

I empathise with stories of racial vilification and discrimination, but for the purposes of what we are all in this room trying to achieve, they are not particularly relevant. The drunken yobs hurling broken beer bottles and racial slurs at me when I was 13 years old, sculling down the River Torrens at school rowing training never turned me down for a job. They never stood in the way of my success.



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We need to get past the idea of racism as just people calling other people names on the bus. We need to get past the idea that just fixing “racists” is going to fix the systemic problems with race our country has.

There’s no bad guy manning the barricades to our participation. The bamboo ceiling isn’t something we have to convince someone to take away. Both it and other areas of systemic inequality are part of a system we are all a part of, regardless of race. And we must address them together, for the good of us all.

These inequalities are part of a system built largely on fear.

As a nation, our fear of Asian-Australia diversity has hurt us before. It’s nearly crippled us before.

At the turn of the previous century the country had an abundance of Asian workers. From telegraphs to railways to goldfields, they were engaged in the literal process of building our nation.

Public fear of “Asians taking our jobs” became a political movement, and we brought into effect a series of measures that became known as the White Australia Policy.

A half century later the post-war global economy experienced what has been called the Golden Age of Capitalism. Other multicultural Allied nations grew and prospered at an unprecedented rate as a result of a burgeoning middle class and enormous consumer demand, but we were left behind.

So far behind that we had to beg people to come, to “Populate or Perish”. The Assisted Passage Scheme gave us the “ten pound poms”. Come one, come all. We’ll even pay for your trip. As long as you’re white.

It would take 30 more years to unwind the last vestiges of the White Australia Policy, and ironically for a country terrified of people coming by boat, we largely missed ours.

Where would we be today if it weren’t for the historical myopia of the White Australia Policy? Where would our economy be? How differently would we be looking at The Asian Century?

We’re nearly a fifth of the way into it already, and it’s frustrating to see that in many quarters we’re still discussing whether there even is a bamboo ceiling or an ethnic wage gap, despite ample statistical evidence of both.

We’re running out of time to capitalise on our assets, our talent and our opportunities and this Summit could not be more necessary, or more timely.



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But more than missed opportunities in the past, are we going to allow our fear to get the better of us again? The fear of “Asians taking our jobs” is still here.

As someone who 10 years ago won a reality TV cooking competition by taking a job away from an extremely adorable young country lad, I know this all too well. At the time, one commentator noted that me winning MasterChef would be bad for our economy, because I would simply take the prize money and send it all to China.

I didn't, of course, but I suspect that given contemporary economic concerns, it would be a source of even greater anger to that person to know that I, as an Asian person, instead put the money toward buying a house in Sydney.

We might laugh, but here we are. Asians are taking our jobs. Our baby formula. Buying our houses for millions of dollarydoos. We look at billions in Asian investment in our country as a threat instead of an opportunity.

In the 1980s, before diversity was a public consideration, the United States and other countries grappled with the idea of how best to access Japan's bubble economy. Executives were sent to language classes to bumble their way through their konnichiwas and otsukaresamas. They studied manuals of the proper pitch for bowing to executives of varying rank and took courses in how to use chopsticks.

These are efforts that to modern understanding sound almost laughable, and yet over the past two decades in private legal practice, my corporate life, and the weird TV cooking thing I do now, barely a day has gone by when I haven't been asked by some organisation or another how to crack into the inscrutable, mysterious markets of powerhouse economies like China and India, or emerging ones like Indonesia, Vietnam and the Philippines.

Here in Australia we have a ready-made talent pool for whom these markets are neither inscrutable nor mysterious. Many of them are in this very room, and yet too many organisations are going into the game with their best players on the bench.

And what about education? Are we going to look at thousands of Asian students in our universities – building lifelong ties with our country – not as a phenomenal opportunity, but instead as devaluing our institutions?

This year I've been working closely with DFAT as an ambassador for their Australia Now program, travelling throughout Southeast Asia engaging on Australian opportunity, aid, trade and culture.



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Throughout the region, the concept of “Australian Alumni” is one of the strongest commercial, social and political associations you can have, and by that term I mean people who have studied here, worked here, and who may have children who are also studying and working here. Many have family members who have become citizens and permanent residents of our country. Some of those family members are this room.

In their home countries Australian Alumni are politicians, journalists and captains of industry. They are one of our most vital resources for soft power, direct trade, and economic opportunity and yet our national discourse includes calls to scrap it all because our fear leads us to want to blame Asians for – of all things – peak hour traffic. It beggars belief.

The opportunities for Asian-Australian leadership in our country are obvious, as are the challenges.

Our nation’s security in a changing world is of paramount importance. I make no comment on the events of this week’s political sideshow (as I’m sure there is a lot more of that story to play out over coming days and weeks) save to say that I had some days ago written a joke here about how everyone in this room would now be on either an ASIO or Chinese Communist Party watchlist that now seems both wildly inappropriate and eerily prescient.

As countries like China increase their projection of both economic and political power, and as Asian-Australians grow in prominence and public profile, the scrutiny on us will increase, often unfairly. Professionally and privately will be called to account for the actions of foreign countries and people to which and whom we owe no allegiance and have no connection besides sharing an ethnic background.

I know this, because it’s happening right now. Again, this is no reference to our domestic politics of the day, but I’ve seen Asian-Australians vocally supporting the protesters in Hong Kong, while simultaneously being called agents of the Chinese government.

I’ve been called the same because my documentary series on Chinese food didn’t include an expose of the Uighur situation in Xinjiang. Perhaps most bizarrely I’ve even been called the same in regard to Malaysia because a nature documentary I narrated this year that was filmed entirely by an overhead drone, did not cover the sodomy trial of Anwar Ibrahim 20 years ago.

In the United States, the implication that Jewish-Americans somehow hold dual loyalties to Israel and United States is considered an anti-Semitic trope. People are aware of it, and they see how it erodes trust based entirely on race.



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Here we have little history with it, but we're going to have to learn very quickly.

Despite the challenges, the future of Asian-Australian leadership must be on our own terms. Nobody in this room is Oliver Twist, standing pitifully with an empty bowl asking for more. Our future is not about begging for a fair go. It's about what we have to offer. It's about our leadership.

There was once an theory that human beings used only 10% of their brains, and in considering it we were spellbound by the possibilities. We asked ourselves, "What could we achieve if we could unlock that remaining 90%?" Could we read minds? Telekinesis? Could we live forever?

Modern science has shown that theory to be false, but what do we think of a nation that chooses to engage only 10% of its talent?

These figures are rough – but working-age males over 50 of Anglo-Celtic and European heritage in Australia comprise just over 10% of the Australian population, and yet hold almost all senior executive C-suite leadership positions.

Just imagine what we could achieve, as a nation, if we used our whole brain.

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