

**Opening Keynote to Inaugural Asian-Australian Leadership Summit  
13 September 2019, Melbourne**

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Exactly twenty years ago Australia was debating the question of the republic. Among the leading voices on the republican side was Jason Yat-Sen Li, a twenty-something Australian born lawyer of Chinese heritage. He was an eloquent and compelling voice for his cause, certainly a standpoint at the Constitutional Convention of 1998, at which he was an elected delegate.

As Li put it at the 1998 Constitutional Convention, 'I believe that all Australians should be given equal opportunity to attain the honour of being Australia's head of state – all Australians regardless of their ethnic descent.' Establishing a republic, he continued, was about 'the forging of a national identity within which all Australians can feel a sense of belonging, a sense of fitting in and a sense that this land is their home.'

As we all know, the republic referendum failed. But the aspirations spoken of 20 years ago – giving all Australians an equal opportunity to lead, regardless of ethnic descent; the forging of a national identity that includes all of us – remain as relevant as ever.

If anything, they've become more urgent. Twenty years ago, many of us – and this would include my own 16-year-old self back in 1999 – thought we saw in that republic debate a glimpse of what we thought Australia twenty years on might look like. A confident, multicultural nation – with institutions that reflected that character.

Yet in the Australia of 2019, serious questions linger. Can we seriously claim to be the most successful multicultural society in the world, as our leaders frequently like to boast? What does it say when our the leadership of our institutions do not bear the imprint of our

multiculturalism? What does this say about the prospects that Australian citizens of Asian and other non-European backgrounds enjoy within our society? And what does this say about Australia and our cherished ideals of the fair go and egalitarianism?

In his recent book, the distinguished historian David Walker speaks of us as a 'Stranded Nation', as 'White Australia in an Asian region'. In citing Walker, I am guilty of some mischief. For Walker's analysis was historical: his focus is on Australia from the late 1930s to the 1970s. There seems, nonetheless, something disturbingly contemporary about the description. I ask: How many among you would have thought I was describing a book about Australia today, as opposed to Australia of decades ago?

This Asian-Australian leadership summit is a timely opportunity for us to put cultural diversity and multiculturalism back on the agenda. In particular, to ask why it is that Australia does so poorly in having ethnic and racial diversity within the leadership of its institutions. To Gareth Evans, Penny Burt, Andrew Parker and all those at the ANU, Asialink, PwC and the University of Melbourne who have driven this initiative, we all owe you a big debt of thanks.

As the press coverage this week has shown, you have succeeded in putting this issue back on the agenda. But whether change comes – well, that depends in large part on you, and on us. That depends on the will, the energy, the creativity, the grit, and the fight of Asian-Australian leaders, and their allies.

### **The evidence**

Let me turn briefly to the evidence on all this.

When I was Race Discrimination Commissioner, the AHRC produced two reports on cultural diversity in leadership – our Leading for Change reports of 2016 and 2018. We did this work because Australia, atypically among liberal democracies, does not collect comprehensive data about the ethnic or racial composition of its population. As a result, there is little official data about the representation of cultural diversity within the leadership of Australian institutions.

Many of you will be familiar with the report's findings, but let me recap them.

In the 2018 study, we examined the cultural backgrounds of chief executive officers of ASX 200 companies, federal ministers, heads of federal and state government departments, and vice-chancellors of universities. We also examined the cultural backgrounds of senior management at the level directly below chief executives and equivalent – namely, group executives of ASX 200 companies, elected members of the Commonwealth Parliament, deputy heads of government departments and deputy vice-chancellors of universities.

Using statistical modelling based on the 2016 Census, we estimated that 58 per cent of the population have an Anglo-Celtic background. An estimated 18 per cent of the population have a European background, 21 per cent of the population have a non-European background, and 3 per cent of the population have an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander (Indigenous) background. We estimated there is well above 10 per cent of the Australia, if not close to 15 percent of the population, that has an Asian background.

What we found, all of us already knew and know: our cultural diversity is significantly under-represented among senior leaders in Australian organisations and institutions. Of those who occupy 2490 of the most senior posts in Australia, 75.9 per cent have an Anglo-Celtic background, 19.0 per cent have a European background, 4.7 per cent have a non-European background and 0.4 per cent have an Indigenous background. Of this total, just 3.1 per cent have an Asian background.

Described another way, about 95 per cent of senior leaders in Australia have an Anglo-Celtic or European background. Although those who have non-European and Indigenous backgrounds make up an estimated 24 per cent of the Australian population, such backgrounds account for only 5 per cent of senior leaders.

Cultural diversity is particularly low within the senior leadership of Australian government departments and Australian universities.

Of the 372 chief executives and equivalents identified in this study, we find that 76.9 per cent of chief executives have an Anglo-Celtic background, 20.1 per cent have a European background, and 2.7 per cent have a non-European background. There are six chief executives who have an Asian background (1.6 per cent).

As I've said it before, these are dismal statistics for a society that prides itself on its multiculturalism. If we are not careful, we are at risk of creating a new class in Australian society: a class of professional Asian-Australian coolies in the twenty-first century. A class of well-educated, ostensibly over-achieving Asian-Australians, who may nonetheless be permanently locked out from the ranks of their society's leadership.

### **The barriers**

It is often said that time can solve this under-representation. However, time alone may not resolve a lack of cultural representation. It has already been about half a century since the White Australia policy started being dismantled, and about four decades since non-European background immigrants began arriving in Australia in significant numbers.

For some time now, the children of immigrants on average outperform the children of Australian-born parents when it comes to educational and employment outcomes. In what is by international standards a relatively mobile society, we should by now be seeing greater representation of cultural diversity in senior leadership.

One set of problems: bias and discrimination. These are undoubtedly factors. Research indicates that those from non-European backgrounds encounter significant barriers in work.

For example, one study conducted by economists at the ANU found that having a Chinese name or Middle-Eastern name can mean a job seeker may need to apply 68 or 64 per cent more times, respectively, compared to someone with an Anglo name before being invited for interview. A more recent study, conducted by my colleagues at The University of Sydney, has found that those with a 'white' name are three times more likely to be invited for interview, compared to candidates with a Chinese name (the study also found that those with Chinese names who had an Anglicised first name doubled their chances of receiving a job interview).

Then there are the biases in the assumptions people may make about leadership. For Asian-Australians, there are popular assumptions that they aren't necessarily suited to

assuming leadership positions in our society – that they are better suited performing roles in finance or IT behind the scenes, rather than roles out the front.

The problems of bias and discrimination can also be reinforced through minority self-selection. As it's frequently said, 'You can't be what you can't see.' Identity matters.

The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, one of the influential theorists of multiculturalism, said that our identities are shaped by recognition and misrecognition. Who we are, depends in part on what others see – which can in turn shape how we see ourselves. When it concerns leadership, if some groups do not recognise themselves in their institutions at the highest echelons, they may never seriously entertain ambitions to lead such institutions. They may come to understandable conclusions that the Australian leadership 'club' may not be as conducive to diversity as it should be.

We see this playing out in a certain way for Asian-Australians. Many talented Asian-Australian professionals walk away from corporate Australia or from large organisations – choosing instead to go into business for themselves. It is striking that the numerous Asian Australian stories of success in business, for example, have tended to involve founder-CEOs rather than CEOs who have worked their way from within to steer listed ASX companies. This has been the pattern for people such as Bing Lee, LJ Hooker, David and Vicky Teoh. Private entrepreneurship, rather than large institutions, has been the vehicle for leadership.

There's nothing wrong with this. But there can be a cumulative or systemic effect that we don't often account for.

And then there is an added barrier right now. The recent and ongoing debates about foreign influence in our public institutions may be having a chilling effect on Asian-Australians, particularly those of Chinese backgrounds. Our society must not end up in a situation where Chinese-Australians need to work twice or thrice as hard as Australians of other backgrounds in order to demonstrate their loyalty to this country. If anything, Australian citizens of Chinese backgrounds are entitled to enjoy a presumption of loyalty, if the equal status of citizenship is to have any real meaning.

## **What must we do?**

### *Leadership*

There must be leadership on diversity and inclusion. This involves chief executives and other senior leaders taking opportunities to speak about cultural diversity. Doing so helps to signal to others a commitment to the issue.

There is also strength in senior leaders coming together in numbers. In late 2016, a number of chief executives in business, government and higher education formed the Leadership Council on Cultural Diversity – with the intention, among other things, of amplifying the member leaders' individual voices on cultural diversity. There must also be efforts dedicated to emerging leaders. This is why the 40 Under 40 Most Influential Asian-Australian Awards, launched last night, is such an important initiative.

One challenge is getting authentic leadership. Those who are prepared to advocate for cultural diversity often do so because of their own personal conviction or experience. The task of leadership cannot be delegated, however, just to those from non- European or Asian backgrounds. At the same time, leaders who have Anglo-Celtic backgrounds may be reluctant to speak out, especially if they are conscious their own professional life has not included any lived experience of adversity based on race or culture.

We must also get the pipeline of leadership right. Namely, those from Asian-Australian backgrounds coming through into leadership positions must be of the right calibre, and must exercise the proper responsibility. Having the wrong people in positions of leadership will set back the cause.

### *Data, targets and accountability*

It remains difficult to get data on cultural diversity. Unlike on gender, where federal legislation compels all companies with 100 or more staff to collect and report on gender equality data, there is no legal obligation for organisations to collect cultural diversity data. There is an urgent need for the Australian government to collect better data on cultural diversity in Australian organisations and institutions.

There have been some recent international developments on data collection worth noting. In October 2017, British Prime Minister Theresa May released a Race Disparity Audit, which examined the treatment of people of different backgrounds across health, education, employment and the criminal justice system. According to May, the audit data may be 'uncomfortable', but will also be 'regarded as the central resource in the battle to defeat ethnic injustice'.

Data is, of course, a prerequisite for targets. It is hard to see how serious progress in improving the representation of Asian-Australians in leadership can be done unless some thought is given to the adoption of targets.

To coincide with this Summit, the ANU commissioned some survey research. Among the questions asked of respondents was this one: Do you think there should be quotas or targets for Asian-Australians in Australian workplaces? The responses from Asian-Australians was striking. While the vast majority of Asian-Australians said they experienced discrimination at workplaces, their view on targets and quotas was divided. Only 14 per cent supported quotas, and only 34 per cent supported targets. Fifty-one per cent do not think targets should be set.

Now, there is an important debate we should have about merit, targets and quotas. We should have that debate. But these findings reveal something about the mindset of Asian-Australians. To the Asian-Australian delegates here, I ask you this: Who will fight for you, if you won't fight for yourselves? Do you expect that change on this will come through benevolence or paternalism?

### *Cultural attitudes*

If change is to come, it will require some changes in attitudes. Let me enumerate some necessary changes.

First, we need to stop seeing cultural diversity as just an instrument for Australia succeeding in Asia. We must resist seeing the push for Asian-Australian leadership merely in terms of the Asian Century. The question of representation is primarily an internal or domestic

consideration. It is not fundamentally about us flourishing in Asia, though that may be a welcome by-product.

Second, we cannot just making the case economically. The case for more diverse leadership mustn't be reduced to the business case. Sure, if we get diversity right, there will be economic payoffs. But we can't forget the moral and civic reasons behind it.

Third, we can't assume that change will come purely through the application of reason and data alone. As David Hume said, reason is the slave to the passions. We must strive to win both hearts and minds.

And finally, the cause of cultural diversity must be twinned with the cause of anti-racism. The two must always go together. Otherwise, we may lapse into only pursuing a celebratory mode of diversity. The advocates for cultural diversity must be robust advocates for anti-racism, especially when nationalist populism is on the march, and when much commentary has posited a false moral equivalence between racism and anti-racism. Advocates must not acquiesce to the dilution of multiculturalism into a superficial project of cultural harmony and community relations. Rather, we must see it as implicating a question of citizenship.

### **The future of Australian multiculturalism**

Let me conclude with posing two questions: What is at stake? And in what spirit must we prosecute our cause?

At stake is nothing less than the future of Australian multiculturalism. We come to consider the question of Asian-Australian leadership at a time when our demographic character is rapidly changing.

The journalist and author George Megalogenis has described the changes this way:

*Twenty-first-century immigration has inverted the relationship between new arrival and host, as our ethnic face changes from Anglo-European to Eurasian. The new arrival is younger and better educated than the locally born, and typically lands somewhere between the middle and the very top of the income ladder. Two out of*

*every three new arrivals since 2001 have been skilled immigrants. They come primarily from India, England, China, South Africa and the Philippines, to work as doctors and nurses, human-resources and marketing professionals, business managers, IT specialists, and engineers.*

In other words, given the nature of our immigration program and demographic trends, that risk of creating a class of 21<sup>st</sup> century professional coolies will grow only more acute.

As for that second question, much of this concerns the role of Asian-Australians themselves. To those of us here who are Asian-Australian, this issue is of course about us. But it's not only about us. It's about something bigger and larger than us. It's about ensuring that Australia lives up to its promise as a nation – that it lives up to its best.

Sometimes, when people agitate for greater diversity, the response can imply that those agitating are unhappy with this country, or are bitter ingrates. Nothing can be further from the truth. If we are exercised by the status quo, it is because we believe it diminishes our nation and our premise – because we think so highly of who we must be a nation in the first place.

So let us go forth with new momentum on cultural diversity and Asian-Australian leadership. But let us not lose sight of this as a national project, as a mission of nation-building, in the best sense.

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