

DON DUNSTAN HUMAN RIGHTS ORATION:

INAUGURAL YOUTH ORATION

Mr Josef Rafalowicz

23 August 2005

In 1996 John Howard announced his vision for Australia, 'I would like to see an Australian nation that feels comfortable and relaxed' he said, and with few exceptions that's exactly what we are today. Comfortable. Complacent. Cocky.

And it is this attitude of complacency and arrogance that is allowing us to deny the human rights abuses that occur daily around the world. When it comes to defending the human rights of other people, what's required is empathy, acknowledgment and concrete actions to affect change – in essence it requires discomfort; it requires us to feel the pain of those that weren't born into fortunate situations. And that requires courage and commitment and compassion.

The enemy of human rights is prejudice and discrimination, saying these humans deserve these rights, but those other people don't. The universality of human rights is being eroded in this way. If you are a white male living in a developed nation, then the likelihood of your rights being met are far greater than most, and we have only to look at the situation in Darfur, or the continued persecution of Political activists in China, or any conflict zone in the developing world to see this. However, we can look much closer to home to see our complacency leading to human rights abuses:

Australia has been condemned numerous times by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights for our policy regarding Asylum seekers. In fact, Australia was even taken before the High Commission for Human Rights in 1997, when a detainee challenged Australia, arguing that the mandatory detention policy and facilities were a violation of human rights: a decision upheld by the United Nations. And since then, our policy has remained largely unchanged, with another condemnation being issued in March of this year, by the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

But our disregard for the rights of others goes much further than people simply wanting to live in Australia, no the original occupants of this country experience conditions that would cause a scandal if they were not an indigenous people.

Australians in general enjoy the second highest life-expectancy among OECD Nations, however the average life-expectancy of an Indigenous Australian is 20 years less than a non-Indigenous Australian. This gap increased between 1997 and 2001. Indigenous mortality rates are 2.5 times higher than for other Australian infants. In terms of deaths from preventable conditions, an Indigenous Australian is 3 times more likely to die from circulatory conditions, 4 times more likely to die from respiratory conditions and 8 times more likely to die from diabetes.

Our complacency can even be witnessed as we hear, or rather don't hear, about the continued detention of David Hicks in Guantanamo Bay, where he was held without charge or trial for years, and where there are ongoing questions about the legitimacy of the proceedings against him. At one stage the attorney general of America even issued a memo stating that the Geneva convention and other human rights standards are not relevant to the prisoners held at Guantanamo. How can supposedly universal human rights be not relevant!

I for one find this in particular a very scary development – I mean David did everything right! He was from the suburbs of Adelaide, he was of European descent, probably played footy for his school, I mean where along the line did his human rights suddenly disappear? And I wonder who is there to defend these rights that supposedly we have? Perhaps they are too busy being 'relaxed and comfortable'?

I look around and I see leaders who as they have grown into the comfort of their positions begin to relax, be content, and start to erase the knowledge of injustice from their minds. And when I talk to other people my own age, they have this amazing and perceptive knowledge of what is unjust, yet it is the leaders in power who fail to act on this. So when I hear that tired cliché 'young people today are apathetic' it really makes me angry – how dare they accuse us of apathy when we care so much, yet are dismissed out of hand by politicians and decision makers as being "immature" or "unable to understand". This very attitude, and the structures of power that surrounds it, denies us the ability to speak out, and to create change, and yet we are accused of being apathetic!

Now you may think I'm being altruistic here, thinking 'oh isn't that nice, a young person that wants to end poverty, how quaint and idealistic' but I'll let you in on a secret. I'm being entirely self-serving! Do you think I want to grow up in a world where climate change has wreaked havoc on our cities? Where my own children wear surgical masks to school? Or where half the world lives in abject poverty, eyeing our own wealth with angry eyes?

By trying to get policy makers to think about the future, I'm actually imagining the kind of world I that want to live in. (I'm behaving as the 'rational human' economists insist on describing us as, I'm thinking of my own self interest).

Looking to the future I see a great opportunity to address the injustices of the world. Kofi Annan famously said 'we have come to a fork in the road' in reference to the value we put on multilateral, democratic responses to problems in our world. An example of one such fork of this road is the Millennium Development Project, the United Nations has come together and created the Millennium development goals, a set of clear objectives that will improve the world for the majority of its population. You might be asking, why the United Nations? In short, the United Nations is the sum total of the aspirations of the world's six billion people and is the manifestation of our common humanity. As a young Australian, my generation will inherit the United Nations with its promise and its problems from the current generation of world leaders. That is why I advocate for the views of young people, we need to be heard today. As young people, the world needs our ideas, our minds, and our commitment to the framework for equality and justice contained in the Millennium development goals.

When it comes to aid for the developing world, I think the most powerful tool we have is empowerment. While there has been a lot of talk about the wonders of micro credit, and I do think that's a step in the right direction, what's really required is investment in structures that people own, not necessarily the governments - which are often plagued with problems - but the people, thing like a system of law, agricultural co-operatives, and community health initiatives. Projects that the people can feel some ownership of, as opposed to external standards that are applied to these countries, I feel its important to let them develop their own sense of worth. Having prefaced with that, a huge amount of money is also needed. But its not an impossible amount. Far from it, of the world's population of 6 billion, about 1.1 billion are estimated to live in extreme poverty, and about 1.6 billion in moderate poverty, the remarkable reality is that for the first time in history the majority of the world is not in poverty. This has huge implications for our quest to

put an end to this largest of all human rights abuses. The amount required to begin to put an end to this extreme poverty is around 200 billion per year, and this could be achieved if countries contributed the agreed 0.7% of GDP, which developed countries consistently reject, including our own. Other priorities take its place one is example is the Iraq war, which has already cost \$US300 billion, or more obviously repealing the recent tax cuts to those in the USA with incomes in excess of \$500 000. It just seems our priority is increasingly for insular comfort over the conditions of people in other parts of the world. It remains that yours and my generation are the first in which most people in the world are not poor. We can be first in which no-one lives in extreme poverty if we overcome this epidemic of complacency.

There is a mantra that I'm unable to escape. I hear it everywhere, from other students, to teachers to articles in the newspaper. 'That democracy is expanding, it is escapable and unquestionably successful' – I agree with this, it seems that never before have we had so many countries that call themselves democracies. But the essence of democracy, 'rule by the people' as the Greeks understood it, is, I think, more elusive. For example if the people really did control decisions, would they have voted for a war on Iraq? Would 'the people' have voted for the intellectual patenting of potentially life-saving drugs? Or for that matter, the manufacture of weapons of mass destruction at all?

When the self-pronounced zenith of democracy holds more weapons of mass destruction than the rest of the world put together, I begin to question how much control the people of the world really have over events.

Participation in Civil society is one of the most powerful tools by which we can influence our government, and governments around the world. It was through civil society that slavery was outlawed in the British Empire and slaves were emancipated in 1834, and it was civil society that continued this process that resulted in the Slavery Convention of 1926. It was through civil society that women gained the right to vote, with South Australia one of the first places around the world to allow women this right in 1895. It was civil society that led to the end of segregation in the United States in the 1960s, and it was civil society that brought about civil union for gay couples in Spain, Canada and the Netherlands. The right to not work in a mine for 12 hour shifts being paid a pittance is not the result of the invisible hand of the market exerting its magical influence, but the consequence of active citizens getting together and creating change. And it is collective actions which brings pressure to bear on Governments to release prisoners of conscience through organisations like Amnesty International. So to defer responsibility to the abstract

beast known as 'democracy' is a bit of a cop out – just like blaming the institutions of democracy is a cop out – what is required is your participation and involvement as a citizen, to put aside complacency and act with courage and compassion to change these situations, and to quote Ghandi, "be the change you wish to see in the world".

Moving from one great man to another, Nelson Mandela said "Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life", the ending of global injustice will not be easy, nor comfortable but it will be an act that requires tremendous courage, commitment and compassion, and one that I hope is eventually realised.

Tonight I have covered a few points from my own perspective, and you may disagree with me on some of them, but please, just don't call me apathetic.