



COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES



HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Federation Chamber

MOTIONS

Equal Rights

SPEECH

Wednesday, 23 November 2016

BY AUTHORITY OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

SPEECH

Date	Wednesday, 23 November 2016	Source	House
Page	4271	Proof No	
Questioner		Responder	
Speaker	Perrett, Graham, MP	Question No.	

Mr PERRETT (Moreton—Opposition Whip) (12:22): I rise to speak on the motion instigated by the opposition leader and moved by the Prime Minister. It is a very important motion that we speak on today: the right of all Australians to enjoy equal rights and be treated with equal respect, regardless of race, colour, creed or origin. It is a very important motion and I am proud to speak here today in the people's place, in Parliament House, where we reaffirm our commitment to ensure that all Australians can enjoy the rights and respectful treatment that is often taken for granted by some of us. This is an important matter, irrespective of whether you are an Indigenous Australian or your ancestors migrated here as convicts or free settlers or arrived here recently from Holland or wherever, or even if you came here seeking asylum, or any other permutation of those. We are not first-, second- or third-generation migrants; we are all Australians who have some of those other characteristics. It saddens me greatly when I hear that members of the multicultural community, especially in my electorate of Moreton, have been treated disrespectfully. My dear departed mum taught me that good manners are always important, and I know that my mum never got anything wrong, so I think she was on the money. Sadly, it still happens that people are treated disrespectfully, as we have heard from speakers in the bipartisan support for this motion.

In fact, just last week, members of the Taiwanese, Rwandan, Indian, Fijian, Egyptian, Filipino, Bosnian, Pakistani and South African communities joined me in my electorate office to hear the member for Cowan talk about her experience of growing up in a multicultural community. It was a fascinating discussion but, sadly, many of those present at that table shared their own stories of being the victims of racial discrimination. They shared their very real concerns about the possibility of racial discrimination laws being watered down. I am fortunate that my community on Brisbane's south side is pretty much a model of inclusive cultural diversity. I am not being naive; I know that there are still some racists in the community who sometimes get frustrated and articulate things that are horrible, and every now and then there are some manifestations of racism. But, on the whole, our community—like much of modern-day Queensland, I would suggest—celebrates our diversity and the contributions that members of communities have made to Australia irrespective of where they have come from.

I would just like to mention a few of these considerable contributions. The Sunnybank RSL, with the support of the local Chinese community, created a memorial for all those Chinese Australians, or people of Chinese heritage, who have served Australia in past wars. The memorial recognises soldiers like Billy Sing and Caleb Shang, who fought in the First World War, and Jack Wong Sue, who served Australia in World War II, to name but a few. There are many other great stories of courage and bravery by the Chinese Australian diaspora, and they have been commemorated by this memorial. Just one of the stories, a well-known story, is that of Private Billy Sing, who was a sniper with the Australian 5th Light Horse Regiment. He was a kangaroo shooter originally but went over to Gallipoli and was conservatively credited with more than 150 kills in Gallipoli. He was known to his fellow soldiers as 'the assassin' and was awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal for conspicuous gallantry as a sniper at ANZAC.

The memorial itself was a labour of love for the Chinese community and it has contributed to stronger links between that community and the local RSL. It is a continuing reminder of the diversity, cooperation, understanding and friendship that exists on Brisbane's south side, and it also goes a long way to recognising the slights and racism that existed, perhaps, 100 years ago when people were allowed to fight and die for their country but were not allowed to own land because they were seen to be not Australian because they were Chinese—and there are others.

I also point out that the success of the Chinese war memorial has inspired a commemoration of contributions from other communities. There is currently a project underway, which I am excited to be a part of, to erect a memorial for the Indian Australian service men and women who contributed to Australian war efforts in the past and are doing so now. I was pleased to attend a dinner just a few weeks ago, where the winning design for this memorial was announced. We had a mock-up of the winning design, and 11 students from Griffith University turned up at the dinner. I think it is going to be a great project, so I look forward to working with the Indian

Australian community and to seeing that completed memorial in due course. Like the Chinese memorial, there will also be bursaries associated with the memorial, so you will have the physical memorial but then you will have the living bursary where students from local high schools will be urged to research and tell those stories.

I would also like to mention the contribution of another Australian. I was very pleased to attend an event on the weekend where the member for Fisher was representing the Prime Minister. It was for the Australian African community and, at the event on Saturday night, an award was given for an act of incredible bravery by a former refugee from Sudan. Aguek Nyok came to Australia as a refugee from Sudan and now drives a taxi in Brisbane. He took a break from collecting his passengers to get a haircut at the local Moorooka shops one day last month, and as he left the hairdresser's shop he saw smoke billowing out of a bus on Beaudesert Road—at a bus stop that I walk through every morning when I am in Brisbane. Aguek saw passengers trapped inside and bashed open the back door and, by his bravery, saved 11 people who were trapped inside the bus, which was filling up with toxic fumes. This was an incredible act of bravery. Many people would not run towards flames, especially in a bus that might explode. But this brave Australian says:

I just helped people and that is what I am expecting from my fellow Australians if I was in the same situation.

We can all learn from his bravery and, dare I say it, his humility. Aguek Nyok was the very worthy recipient of the African Australians Bravery and Heroes Award at the celebration of African Australians national awards held at the Brisbane City Hall on Saturday night.

As I said, I am very lucky to be constantly reminded in my community of the valuable contributions that can be made by all Australians in a diverse and inclusive community. This motion reaffirms our commitment to maintaining that successful inclusive community. The success of our multicultural communities is in large part dependent on continuing to denounce racial intolerance. The recently announced inquiry into freedom of speech will look at how our laws that prevent racial hate speech are working. It is important to remember that freedom of speech has no explicit constitutional protection. Commonwealth, state and territory legislative protections are not absolute. They contain necessary limits to accommodate the countervailing public interest. There can be a natural tension between one person's right to be free from racial discrimination and another person's perception that they have a right to speak freely. The total freedom of one will negate the rights of the other. It is necessary for good governments to balance these important rights.

Prime Minister Gough Whitlam introduced the Racial Discrimination Act in 1975. From memory, I do not think it was broadly supported by the Liberal Party, apart from Neville Bonner, the senator from Queensland; nevertheless, the Fraser government did not do anything to abolish the Racial Discrimination Act when it was in power. This important legislation has been protecting individuals against discrimination for 41 years. Then, just over 20 years ago, the protections in section 18C and exemptions contained in section 18D were added. Then Attorney-General Michael Lavarch said in his second reading speech to introduce the bill:

This bill is an appropriate and measured response to closing the identified gap in the legal protection of all Australians from extreme racist behaviour. It strikes a balance between the right of free speech and the other rights and interests of Australia and Australians.

In the years since 18C was added the Human Rights Commission has received about 100 complaints a year, and most of these are resolved through a conciliation process. Only about five end up in court annually. Obviously the claims are limited. I am supportive of the idea that we do not offend people because of their race, obviously. Religion is something to discuss as another topic. I thank the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition for this motion before the chamber.