

01/07/2001

Great changes in Australian attitude in past century

K.C. Boey

MOMENTOUS. Such have been the changes Australia has undergone over the past century, reflected in the year-long celebrations of the centenary of the federation.

Nowhere has this been more in evidence than at the commemoration in Melbourne, in May, of the first sitting of Parliament in 1901.

It was clear. Attitudes have changed. Australia remains a constitutional monarchy in name, if at all. There was no royalty in sight.

There was repeated acknowledgement of Aboriginal Australians. And the symbolism was striking in the selection of Hayley Eves to speak on behalf of the future.

Women, Asian Australian, and the youth were encapsulated in the 15-year-old student Eves, who was born in Korea.

Political scientist Professor Allan Patience may well have cause to revise his thesis on the Australian hard culture. Patience had identified that hard culture grounded on masculinism, populism, racism and secularism.

On the basis of the Melbourne commemoration, one might question the first three strands of Patience's hard culture. What of the fourth?

For High Court judge Michael Kirby, "the most significant absentee from the Melbourne ceremony was not a royal personage or the jingoism of a century ago".

"What was missing was any invocation of God to open or close the ceremony," he says. "Indeed there wasn't any mention of God at all."

Kirby notes that it wasn't so long ago - in 1986 - at the opening of the new Federal Parliament in Canberra, that there was both royalty and religion.

Queen Elizabeth did the honours. Prayers were said by leaders of the Christian, Jewish and Muslim faiths.

"By 2001, that feature of public occasions had disappeared," says Kirby. "No prayers. No hymns. Welcome to secular Australia where one of the fastest-growing census groups is 'no religion'."

Kirby was speaking at the launch in Melbourne of the book *Religion and Culture in Asia Pacific - Violence or Healing?*

The book is a compilation of papers presented at an international conference held in Melbourne last October, and the workshop findings from the conference.

Much of the attention of the conference was devoted to the cultural and religious dimensions of conflict. Were religion and culture part of the problem or part of the solution? On both counts, the balance favoured religion and culture.

The solution lay in dialogue. As Archbishop Peter Carnley, head of the Anglican Church in Australia, put it in his opening remarks: "As we hear of one another's stories and they become part of our own, we enter more deeply into a single regional community of harmony and peace."

The causes of conflict lay elsewhere. Conference organiser Professor Joseph Camilleri nominates three in his summation.

The first is the misuse of power. The second is related to the first; what Camilleri terms psychic numbing. That is the "peculiar state of mind which renders us oblivious to the actual or potential suffering of others."

The third problem is social and economic inequalities - within and

between countries.

"Conditions of poverty, dislocation and thwarted aspirations for a better life are obviously a breeding ground for discontent," writes Camilleri.

"Given the appropriate spark, these deeply felt resentments can translate into violence, with religion and ethnicity used as justification for these actions. Poverty is the breeding ground for intolerance."

For Camilleri, the conference points "not only to an enriching dialogue, but to the enormous potential for an on-going conversation".

And he sees Australia as being well placed to facilitate exchanges between people of different faiths.

But the lingering question remains for Kirby: "Is Australia well placed because it is now a multicultural society that permits the uninhibited activities of every religious persuasion?"

"Or is it because most Australians now generally exhibit a lack of passion about religion because an ever-increasing proportion of our people regard it as irrelevant to their lives?"

"Is our ethos tolerance or indifference?"

Religion is still a vital force in most parts of Asia and the Pacific, says Kirby. "Australians, coming to grips with the geography into which their history has placed them, must explore this critical dimension of the part of the world they live in."

Camilleri has a specific proposal. He suggests a Regional Centre for Civilization Dialogue and Reconciliation. Such a centre would go into research, promote education, and have an advocacy role.

And Camilleri sees Malaysia playing an important part.

Malaysian enthusiasm is already evident. The Melbourne conference was jointly organised by the International Christian Peace Movement (Pax Christi) Australia, the Uniting Church of Australia, and the International Movement for A Just World based in Malaysia.

Malaysian participation was much in evidence in Melbourne. The conference followed one that JUST hosted in Shah Alam in 1997, in co-operation with Pax Christi.

Camilleri, professor of international relations at La Trobe University in Melbourne, is president of Pax Christi. As he tells the New Sunday Times, if there was one country Australia could share with in the constructive exchange of views and ideas on religion and culture, it was Malaysia.

He notes the shared multiculturalism in Malaysia, and the involvement and interest of the political leadership and intellectuals in matters of religion and culture.

Not least of these is the establishment of the Centre for Civilisation Dialogue at Universiti Malaya, and initiatives for dialogue in Kuala Lumpur between Islam and Confucianism.

Camilleri is not surprised by the remarks of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on the unifying role of religion on all of humanity when Dr Mahathir opened the Christian World Evangelical Fellowship general assembly in Kuala Lumpur in May.

"There is greater understanding of this kind of thinking in the region," Camilleri tells the New Sunday Times.

"The ground is fertile", with countries in the region going through enormous change - economic, political and social.

"There is something comparable happening in each country," says Camilleri. "There is much to learn from each other."

A Regional Centre for Civilization Dialogue and Reconciliation would be an Apec of a different kind.