

Welcome Wall Address

Delivered by Dr Sev Ozdowski OAM FAICD, Chair of the Australian Multicultural Council, at the Unveiling Ceremony of names added to the Welcome Wall of the Australian National Maritime Museum, Pyrmont Wharf, Sydney on 6 December 2015.

Good morning to all proud Australians. Allow me to acknowledge:

- Ms Deanna Varga, an Assistant Director at the Australian National Maritime Museum;
- speakers Anne Versitano and Julie O'Hara; and the
- traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation.

Today's unveiling ceremony provides an opportunity to welcome new arrivals and to celebrate:

- the contributions migrants make; and
- the nation we have built together.

We have much to celebrate! And I am pleased to say that like my fellow speakers Anne and Julie, my name is also on the Welcome Wall.

My migrant story began in 1975 when my wife, my son and I migrated to Australia after spending two years as refugees in West Germany.

I remember our arrival very clearly – it was a cold, early morning in mid-June. After landing at Sydney airport, an old bus took us to what was then known as the Villawood Reception Centre, in the Villawood Westbridge Hostel. I must confess we did not like what we could see from the bus windows. We even thought that perhaps we had made a mistake choosing to come to Australia.

After the initial welcome at the hostel office, we were taken to our new accommodation; we were delighted! Finally, after two years of moving from one room to another in different parts of Hamburg, we had been given our own two bedroom apartment. What a luxury!

Then the hard work started. We had to learn the English language – and fast. I remember the walls of our apartment being covered with stickers of different English words which we had difficulty remembering. And hours in front of a mirror learning how to pronounce “the” – for us English was an enormous tongue twister.

We also had to make important financial decisions. Agents from both the Commonwealth Bank and the then Bank of New South Wales (now Westpac) were telling us how good their respective banks were and asking us to open an account with them. We could not decide who we should bank with for a few days, but finally decided to open accounts with both banks, just to be safe.

Soon my wife found employment with the Ralph Plywood Factory in Homebush – now the Olympic site. In Poland, she was a civil engineer, and her first job was as a quality control technical officer. I was a lawyer, by training, so my wife organised a manual job for me on a night shift – I was pressing plywood on a large hot press machine. It was not the job I aspired to (especially as it was already a hot Australian summer), but at least one of us could look after our son when the other was working. Not paying for child care allowed us to save some money.

The breakthrough came in January 1976, when I was awarded a Commonwealth Ph.D. scholarship from the University of New England in Armidale. In early 1980, we moved to Canberra where I secured a job with the Attorney General's Department. We worked there for the next 16 years in a

range of departments and authorities. Then, in 1996 we moved to Adelaide, where I worked as the CEO of the Office of Multicultural and International Affairs. In 2000 we moved to Sydney where I was appointed as an Australian Human Rights Commissioner.

Our professional opportunities exceeded our wildest dreams. And I believe that it was only possible because of the nature of the country we had chosen to settle in.

Australia is a country with arguably the highest levels of positive sentiment towards migration in the western world, as shown from the national Scanlon Foundation surveys:

- In 2015, 60 per cent of those surveyed considered the current intake of migrants to be 'about right' or 'too low'.
- By contrast, in the United Kingdom, 73 per cent disapproved of how their government manages migration.

Looking at European attitudes, we find that multiculturalism is often viewed as an area of policy failure, while in Australia, there is strong support for it. For example:

- 86 per cent of respondents agreed that '*multiculturalism has been good for Australia*' [Scanlon Foundation, 2015];
- 75 per cent of respondents agreed that multiculturalism contributes to our economic development [Scanlon Foundation, 2013]; and
- 71 per cent of those surveyed agreed that multiculturalism encourages migrants to integrate [Scanlon Foundation, 2013].

Acceptance of migration and cultural diversity is particularly strong amongst our youth:

- 85 per cent of young adults agreed that '*we should do more to learn about the customs and heritage of different cultures*' [Scanlon Foundation, 2015].

In fact, at a time of global unrest, Australia remains a strong and cohesive society, where:

- 93 per cent of those surveyed have a '*strong sense of belonging in Australia*'; and
- 85 per cent have '*a sense of pride in the Australian way of life and culture*' [Scanlon Foundation, 2015].

Australian multiculturalism is such a strong brand, in part, because:

- it reflects a demographic reality – almost half of our resident population are either first or second generation migrants;
- it is supported by national policy and institutions; and
- it is centred on a social contract that is built on mutual respect and shared rights and responsibilities.

We should all celebrate and take pride in such a remarkable achievement; and the contributions we all make to our nation's success.

My congratulations to the Australian National Maritime Museum on its initiative to establish the Welcome Wall.

And [my congratulations] to you all, for coming here to celebrate our national success.