

ADDRESS BY LES MURRAY AM TO SYDNEY LAUNCH OF REFUGEE WEEK 2008

SBS football broadcaster Les Murray AM was guest speaker at the NSW launch of Refugee Week 2008 at Customs House, Sydney on June 13. This is the text of his speech:

Jesus Christ was a refugee. I make this point early in order to demonstrate to you that the great JC and I have something in common, although I have to admit that that is where the similarity ends. I mean, imagine me standing before Pontius Pilate, having to choose between liberty and being nailed to the cross...‘Son of God? Who me, Mr Governor? You must have me mixed up with someone else. My father was a carpenter. Give Caesar my best wishes.’

My father was not a carpenter and, goodness knows, he was no Jesus Christ either. He was a machinist in a Hungarian metal factory, basically minding his own business, donning his overalls every morning, trying to raise a family – until an uprising against Soviet rule, dictatorship and tyranny hit in 1956. That’s when the problems began.

My father suddenly ceased to mind his own business, opened his big mouth, jumped on soap boxes, joined committees, rallied people to the cause, attended flag burning demonstrations, and generally made a nuisance of himself to the variety of cowards and quislings who stood by, looking on, taking notes, plotting how they might settle scores with him once the revolution was crushed.

The revolution was crushed. The Soviet tanks rolled in, surrounded the capital and – not unlike Genghis Khan’s generals did in 1248 – said, either you surrender or we’ll smash you. The recalcitrants declined the offer so they were smashed. And no sooner than they did, men in dark suits and sunglasses began to round up the trouble makers.

So my father, being one of the trouble makers, said: ‘OK. Plan B. Time to make a move.’ Making a move meant waking up his three young sons, of which I was one, at three in the morning, in the dead of winter, hauling them onto the back of a truck and beginning a journey of no return. All but the clothes on our back, some small items of luggage and some trifle valuables, were left behind.

We were headed west, toward the Austrian border. No one knew of it, not our closest friends, not our dearest relatives. Only my parents knew the plan. All we were told, us kids, was that if someone asks where we’re going, we were to say we are going to a country wedding. There was no wedding of course, country or otherwise. It was all a pack of filthy lies, told in the interests of gaining freedom and escaping persecution.

So we wound our way toward the border, huddled and clinging to each other, edging forward but always trembling in fear of getting caught. At one point we were hauled off the train. My father was given a big smack across the mouth by a man in uniform who accused him of lying, which of course he was. My father was interrogated for five hours as the rest of us in the family were made to wait in another room not knowing if he was alive or dead.

At another point we were told that danger was near and that we should hide, buried in a mound of hay, and to stay silent and try not to breathe until we got the signal that the coast was clear. The people who told us this were people who had been arranged, by my parents and their co-conspirators, to help us make our escape. They were a family of farmers in a small village, located barely a kilometre from the border.

They were what you would now call people traffickers, that is people who assist other people, for a price, to make their escape into freedom – people who, in recent times, have been

demonised as all manners of evil. But are they so evil, given that they facilitate, albeit for a fee, the passage of the desperate, and the endangered, into a world of liberty and equal opportunity?

The man who finally guided my family across the border, a young, simple country boy, called Louis, was a people trafficker. As the clock ticked to midnight, Louis gathered us around him and led us on a walk. We walked silently, with barely a word spoken. Louis held my hand in one of his, and the hand of my younger brother, Joe, in the other. The rest of the family followed behind. When we reached the border we stopped. Louis said this was as far as he could go. He embraced and kissed us all, told us to keep walking in the same direction and then turned back, disappearing into the dark winter night.

We walked ahead, not knowing where we were going and what was to befall us. As we did we began to hear noises. Singing. Someone was singing, getting louder and louder as we walked. The singing was by a pair of Austrian village drunks, staggering home after a night at the local beer keller. My father, who was fluent in German, spoke to them and explained. One of them exploded into a howl of laughter, smacked my father on the back and said: 'Well, welcome. You are free.'

After that it was a series of refugee camps for us, and the hundreds of thousands of other Hungarian refugees who made similar escapes, and waiting to be accepted by a third country of destination. We were housed in various dormitories, converted hotels, at one point we lived on a parked train for a number of weeks, army barracks and the like. Actually by some of today's standards of refugees in transition, in Africa or the Middle East, we were quite pleasantly off. We slept in shelters, in warmth, we were given food, clothing and even a small amount of cash.

The hardest part was not knowing where we would end up, where we belonged, where we would find a place called home. We were refugees, asylum seekers, displaced persons. All we knew was that if we got lucky enough to be accepted by some country, we would be forever grateful to that country, and we would have to work hard, probably harder than any local, to give ourselves a decent life.

After six months lingering as refugees in Austria, we came to Australia, the land of milk and honey, the land of opportunity, where money grew on trees, where fences were made of sausages and where kangaroos hopped around in city streets. Or so we thought.

The first Australian we saw was when our plane had a refuelling stop in Darwin. He was a tall skinny man, standing in the doorway of the terminal, wearing an akubra hat, bermuda shorts, long socks, rolling a cigarette. He looked down at me and said: 'How ya goin?' I thought to myself, money growing on trees? These people can't even afford ready made cigarettes.

We were taken to the notorious Bonegilla migrant camp, where we stayed for only around three weeks after which my father got a job at the Port Kembla steelworks and our settlement began. We were so called 'new Australians' at first – a term, by the way, which I always found warm and welcoming – and some years later Australians, living, learning, working, paying taxes, just like other Australians.

Australia has successfully settled 700,000 refugees since the end of the Second World War. It is something we in this country should be proud of. Contrary to the mythology, refugees are not a burden on their host societies. Statistics show that over time refugees, like all immigrants, pay out far more in taxes than it had cost to settle them. So there is a net economic gain to the country. And then there is the social dividend.

Refugees, given their special determination to make a success of the daring step they took to leave everything behind, work harder than the average citizen. That is why many of them tend to be successful. They work in business, in the public service, in politics, in the arts, in sport, creating wealth, both commercial and social. Refugees are more ready and willing than other immigrants to assimilate and embrace their new homeland, because they want to give something back. This is what the misguided, the primitives and the xenophobes do not understand. Frank Lowy, himself a refugee, once famously said of the boat people: 'Let these people in. And let them live next door to me.'

Last year, in the same week that former immigration minister, Kevin Andrews, was attempting to put the brakes on African immigration, four African teenage refugees were picked for the Joeys, the Australian national under 17 football team. So much for African refugees not assimilating and not contributing.

Frank Lowy, as head of Football Federation Australia, didn't shy away from making the point to delegates of FIFA when they were in Sydney two weeks ago. Lowy, whose federation is bidding to host the World Cup in 2018, was attempting to lean on FIFA's sense of social responsibility. To show FIFA what football is doing in Australia for the less fortunate and how football is acting as a catalyst for assimilation, social cohesion and human development. That's what Australia, as a country, is doing by accepting refugees and must continue to do.

There is a modern trend in business, particularly the more successful businesses, based on the notion that when we are successful we have a duty to share some of that success with the rest of society. It's called corporate social responsibility. We, as a nation, have our corporate social responsibilities.

That is what was denied by our heartless government when it tried to stop the Tampa from offloading its boat people: our sense of social responsibility.

Of course you might say that I, a football nut, have a far more ulterior motive for supporting the intake of refugees from Africa. And of course you are right. Those four African kids, Tedros Yabio, from Sudan, Million Butshiire from the Congo, Kamal Ibrahim from Ethiopia and Julius Davies from Liberia, might win us the World Cup in 2018 or even earlier. One or two of them might become national heroes, like a Harry Kewell, a John Aloisi, a Tim Cahill or a Mark Schwarzer.

So I say, to paraphrase Frank Lowy, let them in, and let them live next door to me.

Thank you.