

NSW LAUNCH OF REFUGEE WEEK

National Maritime Museum, Sydney – October 22, 2006

ADDRESS BY COUNCILLOR CLOVER MOORE MP, LORD MAYOR OF SYDNEY

Thank you Max Dingle for your introduction. First let me acknowledge the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional owners of this land.

Today, as we mark the beginning of Refugee Week, it is important to remember that all non-indigenous Australians are immigrants to this land. To recognise that from the perspective of thousands of years of Aboriginal custodianship, the rest of us are newcomers.

The theme for this year's Refugee Week, "Journeys", is especially apt for our country. We, or our forebears, all journeyed here from other places.

Just outside this building is the museum's optimistically-named Welcome Wall. In a few days' time, more names of newcomers will be added to it, symbolising the hundreds of thousands of immigrants, from almost every country on earth, who have come to call Australia home.

Many of those whose names are engraved there chose to come to this country. But many others did not have the luxury of choice. They may not have been refugees in the commonly accepted sense of the word, but they were displaced, unable for any number of reasons to live in their own countries.

Perhaps our first true refugees were the German Lutherans who began arriving in South Australia in 1838 to escape restrictions on the practice of their religion in Prussia.

Within the next decade, the first great wave of the Irish diaspora arrived on these shores, desperate to escape the Great Famine in which almost one third of Ireland's population died. By any true definition these people, too, were refugees.

In ensuing decades, others came from other countries, fleeing wars, famine, injustice or persecution, fleeing fascism or communism, seeking the freedom to live their lives and raise their children in peace.

Since the end of World War II, Australia has become home to more than 675,000 refugees – Jewish Holocaust survivors, refugees from the Baltic states, from Hungary, and Czechoslovakia...

From the 1970s onwards came families fleeing persecution in Vietnam, Cambodia, and Latin America. More recently, we have seen refugees from conflicts in Yugoslavia, the Middle East, Africa and Asia.

Unless there is a genuine and concerted international commitment to human rights and to peace building, there will be more refugees from war and persecution coming to our shores.

And unless we see greater commitment to global economic justice and to solving environmental problems like global warming, we will inevitably see the emergence of new

sorts of refugees – including those seeking to escape the disastrous effects of climate change.

Our national anthem has always promised that “For those who’ve come across the seas, We’ve boundless plains to share...” So there is nothing new, or radical in our country being a refuge for refugees.

What has been new, in the last decade, is the cynical drive to politicise the plight of those very people who should have first call on our sense of compassion and decency, our sense of the “fair go”. The drive to encourage Australians to become fearful and small-minded, rather than generous and big-hearted. To peer timidly inward, rather than to reach boldly outward.

But I have been encouraged to see some signs that this era of suspicion and timidity may be coming to an end. That Australians are tiring of the manipulation, the mean-spiritedness and the downright dishonesty that has characterised so much of the recent national debate.

Less than two weeks ago, a Herald/AC Nielsen poll found that Australians regarded freedom of speech and religious and cultural tolerance as being of greater importance than the famous “mateship” we hear so much about.

The next most important qualities were “a fair go”, followed by “respect for democracy and encouragingly parliament”. The pollster said the result didn’t mean that Australians did not value mateship; simply that they valued other qualities more highly.

So if the obfuscations can be cleared away, if we can once again stand firmly for those real values of freedom, tolerance and a fair go within our democratic framework, we might see the so-called “refugee problem” for what it truly is: a chance for us to mature as a people, to exercise the best of our national characteristics, to learn and to benefit from what refugees bring.

For the irony has been that those who lost so much in fleeing their homes have enriched our society immeasurably. We have gained diversity, complexity and depth. We have been exposed to new ideas and new ways of thinking about the world.

We have gained individuals who have become high achievers in business, the arts, education, science and sport.

Above all, we have gained new generations of citizens with a passionate commitment to Australia’s freedom, and to its future. Citizens who will never take this country, and all that it offers, for granted. We can learn much from them.