

DON DUNSTAN HUMAN RIGHTS ORATION 2005

Speech for the annual Don Dunstan Human Rights Oration

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In 1996 John Howard announced his vision for Australia, 'I would like to see an Australian nation that feels comfortable and relaxed' he said, and with few exceptions that's exactly what we are today. Comfortable. Complacent. Cocky.

And it is this attitude of complacency and arrogance that is allowing us to deny the human rights abuses that occur daily around the world. When it comes to defending the human rights of other people, what's required is empathy, acknowledgment and concrete actions to affect change – in essence it requires discomfort; it requires us to feel the pain of those that weren't born into fortunate situations. And that requires courage and commitment and compassion.

The enemy of human rights is prejudice and discrimination, saying these humans deserve these rights, but those other people don't. The universality of human rights is being eroded in this way. If you are a white male living in a developed nation, then the likelihood of your rights being met are far greater than most, and we have only to look at the situation in Darfur, or the continued persecution of Political activists in China, or the instances of rape as a weapon of war or other conflict zones to see this. However, we can look much closer to home to see our complacency leading to human rights abuses:

Australians in general enjoy the second highest life-expectancy among OECD Nations however the average life-expectancy of an Indigenous Australian is 20 years less than a non-Indigenous Australian. This gap increased between 1997 and 2001. Indigenous mortality rates are 2.5 times higher than for other Australian infants. In terms of deaths from preventable conditions, an Indigenous Australian is 3 times more likely to die from circulatory conditions, 4 times more likely to die from respiratory conditions and 8 times more likely to die from diabetes.

Australia has been condemned numerous times by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights for our policy regarding Asylum seekers. In fact, Australia was even taken before the High Commission for Human Rights in 1997, when a detainee challenged Australia, arguing that the mandatory detention policy and facilities were a violation of human rights: a decision upheld by the United Nations. And since then, our policy has remained largely unchanged, with another condemnation being issued in March of this year, by the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination.

Our complacency can even be witnessed as we hear, or rather don't hear, about the continued detention of David Hicks in Guantanamo Bay, where he was held

without charge or trial for years, and where there are ongoing questions about the legitimacy of the proceedings against him.

I for one find this a very scary development – and I wonder who is there to defend these rights? The rights of all people around the world, whether here or overseas, Australians or not? Are they too busy being 'relaxed and comfortable'?

I look around and I see leaders who as they have grown into the comfort of their positions begin to relax, be content, and start to erase the knowledge of injustice from their minds. And when I talk to other people my own age, they have this amazing and perceptive knowledge of what is unjust, yet it is the people in power who fail to act on this. So when I hear that tired cliché 'young people today are apathetic' it really makes me angry – how dare they accuse us of apathy when we care so much, yet are dismissed out of hand by politicians and decision makers as being "immature" or "unable to understand". This very attitude, and the structures of power that surrounds it, denies us the ability to speak out, and to create change, and yet we are accused of being apathetic!

Looking to the future I see a great opportunity to address the injustices of the world. Kofi Annan famously said 'we have come to a fork in the road' in reference to the value we put on multilateral, democratic responses to problems in our world. An example of one such fork of this road is the Millennium Development Goals, the United Nations has come together and created the Millennium development goals, a set of clear objectives that will improve the world for the majority of its population. You might be asking, why the United Nations? In short, the United Nations is the sum total of the aspirations of the world's six billion people and is the manifestation of our common humanity. As a young Australian, my generation will inherit the United Nations with its promise and its problems from the current generation of world leaders. That is why I advocate for the views of young people, we need to be heard today. As young people, the world needs our ideas, our minds, and our commitment to the framework for equality and justice contained in the Millennium development goals.

Now you may think I'm being altruistic here, thinking 'oh isn't that nice, a young person that wants to end poverty, how quaint and idealistic' but I'll let you in on a secret. I'm being entirely self-serving! Do you think I want to grow up in a world where climate change has wreaked havoc on our cities? Where my own children wear surgical masks to school? Or where half the world lives in abject poverty, eyeing our own wealth with angry eyes?

By trying to get policy makers to think about the future, I'm actually imagining the kind of world I that want to live in. (I'm behaving as the 'rational human' economists insist on describing us as, thinking of my own self interest).

When it comes to aid for the developing world, I think the most powerful tool we have is empowerment. While there has been a lot of talk about the wonders of micro credit, and I do think that's a step in the right direction, what's really required is investment in structures that people own, not necessarily the governments - which are often plagued with problems – but the people, thing like

a system of law, agricultural co-operatives, and community health initiatives. Projects that the people can feel some ownership of, as opposed to external standards that are applied to these countries, let them develop their own sense of worth. Now obviously I don't have the academic credentials to say 'this is what you should do' but I'm talking from a general point of view about the attitudes that prevail about the developing world, which I often have a problem with.

There is a mantra that I'm unable to escape. I hear it everywhere, from other students, to teachers to articles in the newspaper. 'That democracy is expanding, it is escapable and unquestionably successful' – I agree with this, it seems that never before have we had so many countries that call themselves democracies. But the essence of democracy, 'rule by the people' as the Greeks understood it, is, I think, more elusive. For example if the people really did control decisions, would they have voted for a war on Iraq? Would 'the people' have voted for the intellectual patenting of potentially life-saving drugs? Or for that matter, the manufacture of weapons of mass destruction at all?

When the self-pronounced zenith of democracy holds more weapons of mass destruction than the rest of the world put together, I begin to question how much control the people of the world really have over events.

Civil society is one of the most powerful tools by which we can influence our government, and governments around the world. It was through civil society that slavery was outlawed in the British Empire and slaves were emancipated in 1834, and it was civil society that continued this process that resulted in the Slavery Convention of 1926. It was through civil society that women gained the right to vote, with South Australia one of the first places around the world to allow women this right in 1895. It was civil society that led to the end of segregation in the United States in the 1960s, and it was civil society that brought about civil union for gay couples in Spain, Canada and the Netherlands. The right to not work in a mine for 12 hour shifts being paid a pittance is not the result of the invisible hand of the market exerting its magical influence, but the consequence of active citizens getting together and creating change. And it is civil society that brings pressure to bear on Governments to release prisoners of conscience through organisations like Amnesty International. So to defer responsibility to the abstract beast known as 'democracy' is a bit of a cop out – just like blaming the institutions of democracy is a cop out – what is required is your participation and involvement as a citizen, to put aside complacency and act with courage and compassion to change these situations, and to quote Ghandi, "be the change you wish to see in the world".

Moving from one great man to another, Nelson Mandela said "Overcoming poverty is not a gesture of charity. It is an act of justice. It is the protection of a fundamental human right, the right to dignity and a decent life", the ending of global injustice will not be easy, nor comfortable but it will be an act that requires tremendous courage, commitment and compassion, and one that I hope is eventually realised.

Tonight I have covered a few points from my own perspective, and you may disagree with me on some of them, but please, just don't call me apathetic.

(Public Report Card 2003 - Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health - Time for Action; Ring & Brown 2002, Indigenous Health: chronically inadequate responses to damning statistics, Medical Journal of Australia 2002;177:629-631)

(ABS, Cat 4704, 2003).

(Fred Hollows Foundation Fact Sheet: The Health Emergency, 2004)