

COMMENTS BY HON. FRED CHANEY AO, CO CHAIR OF RECONCILIATION AUSTRALIA
AT THE OPENING OF
A HISTORY FOR TODAY and COURAGE TO CARE EXHIBITIONS
WESTERN AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM

As the 7th speaker to an audience which has been on its feet for a long time, it is necessary to be brief, both your legs and your ears must be close to exhaustion.

I want to thank the Museum for its recognition of the fact that these exhibitions are relevant to issues we have to deal with in Australia today, and in particular to the issue of Reconciliation.

Both of the exhibitions are powerful and moving. What is evident is that they are relevant as lessons for the day. What I will take away from them and what I would like to see people take away, I can put in the mouths of others. These are the messages which I have received and which I would like to see everyone else take away from here.

One of the photographs in the Anne Frank exhibition is of a non-Jewish Dutch woman, Miep Gies. Miep Gies was one of the devoted people who ensured that the hidden family of Anne Frank was fed and looked after during their long confinement. She, like others, risked her life to help her Jewish friends. The caption set against this photograph is as follows:

“During the war, Jews were often dependent on non Jews for help but only a small portion of the non Jewish population actively offered their assistance. Most people remained passive. That small active group consisted of very ordinary people whose decision to help under extremely difficult circumstances made them extraordinary.”

This brief inscription, like the photographs in the (other exhibition) are a powerful reminder of the choices we all face. When we see wrongdoing, do we engage or disengage? Are we, in that, ordinary or extraordinary?

Many in this audience would have been to the Yad Vashem Museum in Israel. It is full of haunting reminders of the horrors of the Holocaust. As you leave the Museum there is a small blue and white boat in the yard. The plaque near the boat tells you that it is a fishing boat which was one of many used to ferry Jewish people from Denmark to boats which would carry them to neutral Sweden. The story of Denmark is told. When the Nazis decided to take action against the 8,000 or so Jewish Danes, they instructed Jews to wear the Star of David displayed on their clothes. As I recall it we are told that the King of Denmark said that everyone should wear the Star of David and he himself rode his horse through the streets of his capital with the Star of David attached to his coat.

Effectively the Danish people refused to cooperate. They refused to cooperate in the identification of their Jewish fellow Danes. Instead they smuggled the Jewish population out to a neutral safe place and only a tiny proportion was ever apprehended. The whole point is summed up at the end with the statement along the lines of “this is what it could have been like everywhere”.

That is of course, one of the core lessons that we need to learn from the Holocaust. Holocausts can only occur when good people (or at least otherwise good people) cooperate in the suit of evil ends. How many good Catholic and good Protestant boys collaborated in the death of so many Jews? How could this happen in a country with an incredible tradition in science, literature, philosophy, music and all of those things we associate with western civilisation. The lesson is that good people anywhere can be conscripted to cooperate in evil deeds. The only remedy against such evils is for good people to refuse to cooperate even at risk to themselves.

One of the heroic figures of my generation is the recently deceased Jewish-Australian Lawyer, Ron Castan QC. I had the good fortune to meet him when we were both students in 1961 and from that time I admired his life and his activities. Who can believe there would have been a Mabo Decision from the High Court without his decade-long devotion to that case – work of an extraordinary level of excellence, done I understand, without fee. Ron’s death was a huge loss not only to the Jewish community, but also to all of

us in Australia. Part of what he said in a paper which was delivered on his behalf by his daughter Melissa, at Monash University in the last year or so of his life, helps to explain what I see as the relevance of these exhibitions to us.

“As a teenager in the 1950’s, I read “The Scourge of the Swastika” by Lord Russell of Liverpool, an early review of the mass slaughter of the Jewish people by the Nazis between 1941 and 1945. The slogan “Never again” was coined among young Jews around that time, especially in Israel, as an assertion that we would not ever permit ourselves to become disempowered victims in the future. And as an unusually patriotic young Australian I took on myself the task of confronting head on, any manifestations, of anti-Semitism, whenever it raised its ugly head in Australia. This ultimately led to a direct conflict with the chief promoter of Holocaust denial in this country, one John Bennett...

As a young man I remained naively unaware of the existence of the Aboriginal people of this land and of the policies and practices that had been in place since first settlement and that were still in place in the 1940’s, 50’s and 60’s. I am the same age as John Howard – and I received the same nonsensical non-education about Aborigines as he did at school – one major difference between us is that I think that I have learnt a little more in the intervening years.

Nevertheless it troubles my conscience now, that it took me until 1971 to really commence to see that the determination not to stand by and see the Jewish people downtrodden and persecuted, was meaningless if I was standing by and seeing another oppressed people downtrodden and persecuted within my own country.

What was the meaning of the determination to do my part never to permit a future destruction of the Jewish people, if I just stood by and participated in the bounty and opportunity of the Australian nation? What would that mean without doing something to expose and expunge the legal lie which lay at the foundation of the dispossession, disempowerment and attempted destruction of an oppressed group of fellow Australians? This was not a mere matter of legal technicality. At the heart of the legal fiction of terra nullius, lies an obnoxious racism which involves treating Aboriginal people as less than human. The ultimate denial of the inherent humanity of one’s fellow human beings consists of saying that those persons, although manifestly physically present and alive, are not worthy of being treated as “people” at all – they are no more than part of the flora and fauna of the land.”

Ron Castan demonstrated by his activities internationally and within Australia, that when you see a dreadful wrong, you do not avert your eyes. You do not cross over the road to the other side to avoid having to deal with the issues. Yet how many of us here in this gathering can say that we have always acted in that way? How many of us can say that we have never averted our eyes to wrongdoing because it was easier to do nothing. These exhibitions are calls to action. They are calls to individual responsibility and they are a reminder that in the end, we are all capable of making things better by our actions.

We can all by our actions advance Reconciliation in Australia just as we can oppose racism in all its manifestations. We can all refuse to reduce human beings to categories which enable us to see them and treat them as less than fully human.