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Response to ‘The Apology: to the refugees we say sorry’

Presentation by

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Refugee advocate, daughter of former Prime Minister of Australia,
the Right Hon Malcolm Fraser

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Video and audio versions of this speech are available at
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About the presentation:

Malcolm Fraser is remembered as one of the fiercest advocates of the rights of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia, a Liberal Prime Minister. Although Malcolm is no longer with us, the ideals, passion and work ethic are still here today. Malcolm’s Daughter, Phoebe Wynne-Pope is also a strong refugee and asylum seeker advocate. She also has a great deal of hands on experience assisting with aid programs throughout the world.

Dr Phoebe Wynn-Pope

Before I begin, I'd like to acknowledge that we're gathering on the land of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation and pay my respects to their elders — past, present, and emerging — and to pay my respects to any other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here today.

Denis has asked me to give a vote of thanks to David Manne for the apology that he's given today, and also to say a few words on behalf of my father, Malcolm Fraser.

First, though, I'd like to say "David for Prime Minister!" Maybe then we wouldn't have to wait till 2030 for that apology and could get it a bit sooner.

This is a particularly poignant task for me today. If my father was alive, it would be his eighty-ninth birthday.

Much missed is his voice, and the far-ranging discussions that we would have on international peace and security, the looming demise of human rights, the challenges and the need for reconciliation. And, of course, so often, front of mind, the unimaginable plight of asylum seekers and refugees seeking a better life throughout the world, but particularly those stuck on Manus and Nauru.

Malcolm's record on refugees is well known, and it's been mentioned a couple of times today. I'm going to speak at length about it, other than to say that back then there was even a special humanitarian program that enabled the department to resettle people who fell outside the strict legal definition of a refugee, but who nevertheless were in desperate need of protection. Imagine that!

Today, the world is a very different place, and global and national solutions to the largest numbers of displaced people and asylum seekers in history continue to be elusive.

The offshoring and securitisation of what is fundamentally a humanitarian issue is getting traction in many parts of the world, sadly. As a consequence, some of the world's most vulnerable people – people who are merely seeking freedom from persecution – are caught in a no man's land of policy frameworks unsuited to the problems they're seeking to address and without a vision for the future.



One of the things that underpinned Malcolm’s approach to refugee and immigration policy was a clear picture of the strong and increasingly sophisticated diverse society that Australia had become and would and should continue to be. I thought that today, in the context of the current refugee policy, it would be interesting to reflect very quickly on his words as he launched the Institute for Multicultural Affairs in 1981.

The key elements of multiculturalism, he said, can be simply stated. They’re based both on realism and idealism.

“The starting point is the recognition and appreciation of the fact that the Australian population is derived from a wide variety of ethnic and cultural back-grounds, and that these backgrounds are important to the way Australians see themselves. The sheer duration and magnitude of immigration into this country, the plain facts of the composition of Australia's population mean that even if we wished otherwise ethnic and cultural diversity can neither be ignored nor readily extinguished.

We know that the attempt to enforce conformity holds high costs both for the individual and the society. It denies people their identity and self esteem. It drives a wedge between children and their parents. Ultimately it poses a real threat of alienation and division. We cannot demand of people that they renounce the heritage they value, and yet expect them to feel welcome as full members of our society. Realism alone dictates that cultural differences must be responded to in a positive way.

But multiculturalism is concerned with far more than the passive toleration of diversity. It sees diversity as a quality to be actively embraced, a source of social wealth and dynamism. It encourages groups to be open and to interact, so that all Australians may learn and benefit from each other's heritages. Multiculturalism is about diversity, not division — it is about interaction not isolation. It is about cultural and ethnic differences set within a framework of shared fundamental values which enables them to co-exist on a complementary rather than competitive basis. It involves respect for the law and for our democratic institutions and processes. Insisting upon a core area of common values is



no threat to multiculturalism but its guarantee, for it provides the minimal conditions on which the well-being of all is secured.”

These words of his are still powerful, and as we think about the development of effective refugee policy today, perhaps this is a missing piece of the puzzle. We need to consider not only the challenges of the world today, but also the kind of a world we want to live in. We need to have a clear vision for the future in which to frame our policies and to move forwards.

David, your apology was extraordinary, it’s an incredibly powerful way of reminding us all that there’s still so much work to be done.

Thank you for all the work that you do, and thanks to so many of you in this room today whose daily work contributes to building a strong and just society for us all.

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