

Prime Minister of Australia

Speech

Transcript of Address to The Gala Presentation Dinner Ethnic Business Awards Four Seasons Hotel, Sydney

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E&OE

Tonight we're here to celebrate achievement and tonight we're here also to celebrate achievement against the odds. And we're also here to celebrate achievement that has added to this nation, Australia's great strength.

And that is those who have achieved in this great field of business.

As I was reflecting tonight on the work of Joseph Assaf, it in itself is a story which I think speaks to the heart of Australia. This book, which hasn't been launched yet Joseph, *In Someone Else's Shoes*, is a great story writ large about the lives of so many who have come to this country from afar and made this country great.

The story of a young Joseph, 40 years ago, lining up at the airport in Beirut, as a young Lebanese, who didn't even have the gumption to tell his parents that he was coming to Australia, and to discover at the airport that he had to have a new, clean pair of shoes in order to get past Australian customs and quarantine.

And then having been turned back the first time because the flight was cancelled and gone back home to reappear on a subsequent day, and to be then told that the pair of shoes that he had had, which were then new and clean, on the previous few days, were no longer new and clean. They had a bit of dust on them. And so he could not be allowed on the aircraft.

Well enter into central casting some nameless Australian immigration official who shall be forever sainted, whoever he or she was. Because in the great spirit of Australia, and probably us being the convict colony, he resorted to some forms of felony instead to help the young Joseph out.

He procured another pair of shoes. I didn't say nicked, he procured, obtained is the neutral word. And having done so, provided the young Joseph with a new pair of shoes, tan in colour, Joseph's favourite colour. In fact he hates tan.

Twice the size of his normal size in shoe and there he was allowed to board the aircraft and begin his new life in Australia.

And so goes the circumstance and the happenstance of so many people who make their lives here in this great country of ours. Not just this century, not just the one that has passed, not even the one before that.

So many different stories from so many parts of the world, each rich in its own depth and diversity. But each united in one thing – coming here to Australia not just to make a new life but with a sense of determination to make that life an absolute success.

The good thing about the Joseph story though, is his reflections contained in this book - which hasn't been launched yet - but let me read you something from it.

It's about what you pick up when you arrive here in Australia. And if there is a theme to this book, it seems to be that the great thing which has crafted his business career, that through it, what crafts the success of so many business careers here in this country, is not just a celebration of diversity but the actual deployment of diversity for what you do in business and in life.

He says here, 'I enjoy the fruits of thousands of years of collective wisdom'. That is an elegant phrase. He says also that 'from my own people, the Lebanese, or the ancient Phoenicians, I've learned how to learn from everyone else'.

If you anything of the history of the Phoenicians and their role in the history of the Mediterranean prior to the rise of the Greeks and prior to the rise of the Romans, the Phoenicians knew everybody, they knew everywhere, they knew every language, and so they traded.

There was a great wisdom in the work and lives of the Phoenicians and he says, coming from Lebanon, the land of the Phoenicians, 'I have learned how to learn from everyone else'.

He goes on to say, in a celebration of some of the cultures he encountered here down under, 'I quickly began to understand the cultures of the Arabs. It was they who opened my eyes to the meaning of hospitality. That welcoming smile and that genuine desire to open ones' heart and home to both friends and strangers.'

He speaks also of his second language, French. 'And with this linguistic tool I was able to mix with a new set of friends who taught me a healthy respect for language.'

He then talks of his arrival and dealings with genuine Aussie mates, who encouraged each other to be fair dinkum.

I am not sure what the Ancient Phoenician for fair dinkum was, or what the Arabic term for fair dinkum is. But that became part of Joseph's experience.

And then he speaks of his encounter with his wife, who is herself, an Italian. Angela Bianca, who he has described, I think in the introduction, as 'my angelic Bianca, or my white angel'.

And he says 'while the Italians taught me about what it means to be passionate, indeed my wife Angela is Italian and she taught me a lot too'. And he says with some modesty, 'and not just about passion'.

What is nice about this book, what is elegant about this book is that it is a story of reflection, about one man's experience of arriving on these shores of Australia from distant shores and absorbing all that we had to offer, in all of its diversity and then adding some. A new richness, a new depth, a new diversity.

Which brings me to why we are here this evening. Each one of you, from whichever community from which you come, brings to this great land Australia something new and something different. Something quite wonderful.

I have often said, as someone who is 100 per cent Anglo Celtic, that were it not for the arrival of so many of the ethnicities represented in this room, this nation in its second century and its third century would have been condemned to a future based entirely on English cuisine. Could you think of a fate worse than death?

But it is not just that. It is that what you bring to this country is a sense of determination to succeed. A sense that you will make not just a success for yourselves and your families but a success for your new land Australia.

My family has been in the country since the days of the Second Fleet. But you know that each group of Australians who arrive here by boat, by plane, they bring something new, something special and something different, and something which then becomes quite uniquely Australian.

In business, and Joseph made mention of this in his remarks before, there is something more for us to be grasped in terms of the diversity which you give us in our place in the commerce of the world.

You are our automatic bridge to the world. In so much of what we do in commerce, export, in imports, in trade and investment and what is now the worldwide economy transacted digitally, you form such natural, wonderful, diverse, fluent, culturally sensitive human bridges to the rest of the world, that you are for us an enormous national strength and one to be celebrated.

And so in these days when we are confronted with the global financial crisis, becoming a global economic crisis, becoming in turn, a global employment crisis, the passions and the talents and abilities and the capacities of the women and men of commerce represented in this room becomes even more important for the nation and for its future.

And so my invocation to each of you as men and women of Australian business is - as the days get harder, and they will, to draw on every element of the talent and the skill and the linguistic and cultural connectedness that you have with the rest of the world, to get out there and to work hard and to carry forward with confidence the great name of Australia in business.

And I am confident you will.

For those of you who are here tonight as finalists in these ethnic business awards, can I say as Prime Minister of Australia, congratulations. Whether you win, whether you come second, whether you come third, congratulations. It is a great thing that you are here.

Because you represent the hopes of us all.

I conclude with these remarks of the author, whose book has not been launched, this is it, he did not know I was bringing it this evening and that is true, and therefore his work I could not possibly quote in anticipation of the release date, but I have.

There have got to be some advantages in being Prime Minister.

But I conclude with these words, more eloquent than mine and by the author himself, he says:

'Multiculturalism is not a passing fancy. It is not a hobby. It is not a Government policy. It is not a nice thing to do or a marketing opportunity.

'Equally, diversity is not a choice. It is not an option. It is not a public relations exercise or an employee relations program. In Australia diversity is a fact of life and multiculturalism is a way of life. May it ever be so.'

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