

**Embargoed until 9.30am
Monday, 27 February 2006**



Rt Hon Helen Clark Prime Minister

**Address at the
Third National Interfaith Forum**

**Legislative Council Chamber
Parliament Buildings
Wellington**

9.30 am

Monday, 27 February 2006

It is a great pleasure for me to address the Third National Interfaith Forum.

The theme for this year's event is 'strengthening spirituality - a shared path to peace'. Greetings to distinguished guests, Interfaith Council members from around the country, ladies and gentlemen.

I begin by congratulating the New Zealand Interfaith Group and the Wellington Interfaith Council for bringing together this event, and the organisers of yesterday's First Convention of Interfaith Women.

Thank you for your leadership in supporting the formation and strengthening of interfaith networks and councils around the country, and in liaising with government on interfaith and ethnic community issues.

I know that the New Zealand Interfaith Group has developed a useful website for increasing our awareness about faith activities, which includes among other things a multi-faith calendar. Those who visit the website will learn that events in March include the beginning of the fast for Baha'is in preparation for Nawruz or Iranian New Year, Lent begins as the fasting period for Christians and the Sikh New Year will commence. You can all check this and other information out on www.interfaith.org.nz This year's Interfaith Forum is being held at a critical time in our history at a local, national and international level.

The gratuitous publication internationally and by some local media of cartoons depicting Mohammed, and the recent broadcast of a controversial episode of the *South Park* cartoon, have meant that religious and interfaith issues have been the focus of a great deal of discussion in the media and in our communities. A recent headline in the Dominion Post read "Catholic School's Muslim Head Girl". It is unusual to have the media pay such attention to issues of religion in New Zealand.

We had a number of incidents of religious and ethnic intolerance in New Zealand in 2004 that have focused our attention on faith groups and relationships with wider society: the desecration of Jewish grave sites; the attack on a group of young Somali men in Newtown; and hate mail sent to members of the Muslim community in Wellington. These were all the actions of a small number of people, but nonetheless have caused concern.

All of the events have led to increased debate about the relationships between faith and ethnic communities in our society.

It behoves us in these circumstances to step up our efforts to promote interfaith and intercultural awareness and understanding.

It is encouraging to see the constructive interest and support among faith groups in New Zealand in response to these issues.

Interfaith networks are key to promoting this discussion among faith groups and also to forming links with wider society. For example, the Muslim community organised a very successful series of outreach events for Islamic Awareness week last year.

These initiatives are fundamental to building an inclusive and diverse society.

I have signalled in my opening speech to our new Parliament last November, and again three weeks ago when this year's session began, that an ability to reconcile our past and adjust to the diversity of our present times is critical to building New Zealand's nationhood. We need more than ever before a commitment to social cohesion, inclusion, tolerance, and acceptance.

In government we are committed to a society where all peoples are *seen, heard, included and accepted*.

We are committed to leading by example, by creating and maintaining excellent relationships with faith groups and by employing a diversity of people within the public sector.

We also seek to recognise faith communities and the events which are special to them. For example, an event involving parliamentarians to celebrate the end of Ramadhan and the Silver Jubilee of the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand was held in Wellington in November last year. We are also celebrating Diwali annually in Parliament now. These events promote greater understanding and awareness of the many faiths and cultures represented in our Parliament.

I acknowledge the leadership shown by Dr Ashraf Choudhary in hosting these events and also his pioneering work as New Zealand's first Muslim Member of Parliament.

I also acknowledge the work of Joris de Bres and the Human Rights Commission in facilitating the New Zealand Diversity Action plan which has grown significantly since it was first launched in August 2004.

As well, the Human Rights Commission's facilitation of a meeting between media and religious representatives over the Islamic cartoon issue helped defuse a difficult situation. I also applaud the response of New Zealand's Islamic communities in helping to defend this country's reputation as one of peace and tolerance.

The Government has invited the Office of Ethnic Affairs to begin developing new ways of building links with New Zealand's Muslim communities. I understand this has strong support from the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand. We want to encourage ongoing dialogue within the Muslim community, and the development of outreach programmes to our wider society.

International networks and forums are also important to consider. The group that attended the Yogyakarta Dialogue on Interfaith Cooperation in December 2004, including Dr Ashraf Choudhary, Bishop Richard Randerson and Joris de Bres among others, recommended that a New Zealand process for ongoing dialogue at regional and national levels be initiated, and that a forum be established for dialogue between the government and interfaith groups.

It is encouraging that these recommendations have all been acted on – and that we are moving to a more co-ordinated series of meetings to conduct interfaith dialogue. Today's meeting is part of that ongoing work.

I encourage everyone attending today to share the outcome of this dialogue with members of your communities, your colleagues, and your families. That way we help

make New Zealand a place where diversity is valued and reflected in our national identity.

I wish you well for today, focusing on the theme of 'Strengthening spirituality – a shared path to peace' and look forward to the outcomes of this Third National Interfaith Forum.

I'd like to also take the chance to send best wishes to the Progressive Jewish Congregation of Auckland, which is celebrating its 50th anniversary next month, and to encourage you all to take part in Race Relations Day events around the country. Thank you.