

Governor-General's Speech

National Interfaith Forum, Parliament Buildings

10-Mar-2008

May I begin by greeting everyone in the languages of the realm of New Zealand – English, Maori, Cook Island Maori, Niuean, Tokelauan and New Zealand Sign Language. Greetings, Kia Ora, Kia Orana, Fakalofa Lahi Atu, Taloha Ni and as it is the morning (Sign)

May I specifically greet you: National Interfaith Forum co-chairs Pushpa Wood and Joycelyn Foo; Ministers of the Crown and members of Parliament; Distinguished Guests; Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you for inviting Susan and myself to attend the fifth National Interfaith Forum here at Parliament Buildings today. Having attended the fourth Forum in Hamilton in February last year, it is good to see a number of familiar faces.

I have been asked to formally open the Forum, but before I do I would like to speak briefly as to the significance of your work.

Since I last spoke to you, the 2006 Census results on culture and identity, including religious affiliation, were released. The results revealed was that our country is becoming incredibly diverse, not only in terms of its ethnic make up, but also in its religious diversity.

Within the Christian group—to which just over half of New Zealanders said they were affiliated—the four major groups, Anglicans, Catholics, Presbyterians and Methodists, remained dominant although there were significant rises in Orthodox, Pentecostal and Evangelical religions.

Against these changes, and reflecting immigration from Asia, there were significant rises in those affiliated to non-Christian religions. While starting from much smaller bases, the number of Sikhs, Hindus or Muslims all increased by more than 50 percent.

And finally, 34.7 percent of all New Zealanders said they followed no faith at all, up from just under 30 percent five years earlier.

While I was educated, and remain, a practising Catholic, not all members of our household are Catholics. Our household, and those of my parents and Susan's parents, were places where people of many different outlooks were welcomed and accepted. We continue to have many friends of different faiths, as well as those who do not profess a faith.

With such a background, and being a New Zealander of Fiji-Indian descent, I believe this diversity has the ability to enrich our society, culture and economy.

But I also realise that it poses challenges. We know only too well that while religions can be instruments of peace, healing and love, they can also inspire war, death and exclusion. Religious beliefs can not only bring enemies and strangers together, but also pull families and countries asunder.

During the Cold War, it was often suggested that religion was no longer a significant divisor. But with the fall of the iron curtain, it quickly became apparent that such conflicts had not gone away—they had simply been suppressed.

New Zealand has not been immune from these conflicts. Issues such as the wearing of burqa in court, the desecration of Jewish headstones and the publication of the Mohammad cartoons show the challenges inherent in these social changes.

New Zealanders have long been known for people, with a live-and-let-live attitude to life and to others. In other words, so long as others do not intrude on our space, we've been happy to let people get on with their lives.

There is some merit to this approach but it hides a hidden danger because tolerance is effectively passive. Because there is no active engagement or communication, the opportunity for real understanding never occurs and preconceptions and stereotypes can often go unchallenged.

When times are relatively peaceful—and thankfully New Zealand has been spared the bitter divisions that continue to wrack many other nations—this has not been a great issue. But I have noticed that when contentious issues related to religious or cultural custom have been aired in the New Zealand media, the less than informed comment aired on talkback radio, blogs and in letters-to-the-editor has indicated a deeper underlying lack of understanding.

And so it was with great interest that I was advised that this Forum is focused on moving from tolerance to understanding. Real understanding requires interaction—to meet, to talk and to socialise with others who are different from us. It also means getting to know people as individuals on their own terms, and not as automatons whose behaviour is dictated by cultural imperatives.

Communication across cultural and religious differences will not be fraught or stressful if we are prepared to get to know people as they are, not as we conceive them to be. While forums such as this are an important first step, barriers will only be broken down if people communicate at a community and neighbourhood level.

By talking over the fence or over a meal or by watching sport together is how we get to know others. By talking about everyday things—parenting, schooling, paying the mortgage and working lives—we often find we have much in common with those who initially seem so alien.

Let the weighty discussions come later when that fundamental human base is established. When it is, even greater understanding will develop.

Understanding does not mean that one has to surrender their religion or culture but it does mean recognising that other faiths have inherent value. I wonder, for example, how many Christians realise that the Prophet Mohammed is quoted in the Koran as saying: *"Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, whoever believes in Allah and the Last day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there is no fear for them, nor shall they grieve."*

While I have said much about dialogue between faiths, we also need to recognise that there is an ongoing need for communication within faiths. As much as I urge Christians to understand Muslims, it is just as important that Catholics understand Presbyterians and that all those who hold a faith understand those who do not.

Last month, I gave my second Waitangi Day address and in it I quoted from the National Statement on Religious Diversity. The preamble, made a particularly a telling point when it said: *"At the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, Governor Hobson affirmed, in response to a question from Catholic Bishop Pompallier, [that] "the several faiths of England, of the Wesleyans, of Rome, and also Maori custom shall alike be protected"."*

That my predecessor, Governor Hobson, could specifically refer to the followers "of Rome" only 11 years after Catholic emancipation in Britain, and also those of "Maori custom," indicates that even as this nation was founded, a sound basis for religious understanding was established.

It is one we must continue to build upon, and so it is with great pleasure that I declare the fifth National Interfaith Forum officially open.

And so I will close in New Zealand's first language, Maori, by offering greetings and wishing you good health and fortitude in your endeavours. No reira, tena koutou, tena koutou, kia ora, kia kaha, tena koutou katoa.

The Honourable Anand Satyanand Governor-General of New Zealand