

HUMAN RIGHTS DAY – 10 Dec 2015 – Toowoomba
Talk by Gitie House

Distinguished Guests,

I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land, the Jarowair and Gyabul people and thank them for being so patient, forgiving and loving in their struggles for their human rights.

I am very honoured to be part of the flag raising for Human Rights Day. Human Rights is a vast topic with hundreds of dimensions. I can only lightly touch a few issues today.

1. The first is that Human Rights must be cherished and protected. Australia is considered to be a lucky country. But really it has been a lot of hard work and sacrifices to make this country what it is. We can look at the shortcomings and fall into despair, but Australians have accomplished a lot more than most countries in the world. The reason we have a refugee crisis in the world is because so many parts of the world do not have even the basic human rights that we take for granted here in Australia.

Human beings can do the most amazing things – and unfortunately they also do the most horrible things. The propensity for violence in humans is huge and a big weakness in the human gene. Human Rights is the endeavour to strive as a society towards ensuring that everyone is treated fairly and protected from the worst of human actions.

Human Rights has a long and rich history. In Western tradition we recognise landmark documents such as the Magna Carta (1215), the US Constitution (1787) and The French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1791), the Geneva Convention (1864) and the UN Declaration of Human Rights (10 Dec 1948 – which has 30 articles outlining basic human rights.)

The constitutions of most democratic nations include a lot of these rights. These rights must be cherished and valued. They have not come easily. Thousands of people across hundreds of generations have suffered and many lives have been lost in seeking to gain and to retain these rights. It takes an enormous effort to build something and very little to lose it. I'll give you some examples from history.

What is not as well known is that as early as in 539 BC – are the actions of Cyrus the Great the King of Persia. When he conquered Babylon -- instead of doing the usual actions of conquerors like killing & looting – he issued several decrees - he freed the slaves, he gave people the freedom to follow their own religion and he established racial equality. His decrees were recorded on a clay cylinder in the Akkadian language (cuneiform script) and is recognised as the first charter of human rights. The United Nations has translated this into all its official languages and included it in their book “the Story of Human Rights”. King Cyrus's work spread to other parts of world including Greece and the rest of Europe and they began to adopt his ideas. These freedoms were lost to Persians soon after Cyrus and when you look at modern day Iran you would not think that it ever had a king that established these rights.

But the quest for human rights is much older than modern history. The quest to be treated with fairness, dignity and respect is inherent in being human. They are as old as humans themselves. In the ancient Hindu epic of Ramayana which has been dated to be around 7400 BC (based on the detailed positions of the stars & planets) we find extensive commentaries on the different aspects of human rights.

Prof. H.H. Wilson in his book on Indian History says that: 'It may be confidently asserted that in no nation of antiquity were women held in so much esteem as amongst Hindus. God in Hinduism is formless and gender-free. Women enjoyed equal opportunities and privileges with men in the classical Hindu life.' But this too was lost for thousands of years. Today the Indian constitution incorporates many of these rights – but Indian society is still lagging behind.

I am sure that if we were to study more historic texts of bygone ancient cultures we would find many examples of human rights. Epic legends and Hero stories are mostly striving to make things fair for the downtrodden.

Here we are in the 21st century – the age of technology – where we can send a spacecraft 3 billion miles to Pluto and get images of its surface and reply within 9 hours. We can videoconference with people we've never met from all over the globe. We can chat and share our lives with our friends almost anywhere in the world in real time. Even in India where there is a lot poverty. Those who have even a small low paying job get a mobile phone to stay in touch with their families in remote villages whom they may not get to visit for years. New innovations are announced every day with miraculous advances in Medical science, robotics, genetics, engineering and architecture and more.

All of these achievements are not the works of just one person nor were they accomplished in a day. They have taken years of education, training and sustained efforts over generations involving millions of people and systems and institutions that support these endeavours. It is extremely important that we don't take these for granted and lose them in other distractions.

2. There are still many challenges facing us. How to create a violence free society? Violence of any kind is a violation of human rights.

On the social front we have to be just as committed. In recent times there has been a tendency to be more slack. We have taught people their rights and forgotten about teaching them responsibilities. There are big gaps in teaching people values, morals, ethics, discipline, duties and responsibilities. It is assumed that people will just know or absorb it from their surroundings, should they so desire. But these are not options to be exercised in good times. The investment in teaching people how to responsibly handle difficult problems and stresses in their daily lives in a non-violent and drug free way that is respectful of others is one of the big things that has fallen behind.

The biggest challenges facing Australia and Qld are: Domestic violence, sexual abuse, treatment of the mentally disabled, the elderly, treatment of asylum seekers, and many others. It is a long list.

Domestic violence is high on the agenda. In her report on domestic violence the Hon Quentin Bryce says:

"Domestic and family violence, in all forms, is a violation of basic human rights. Everyone, regardless of their sex, religion, nationality, race, language, relationship, or living arrangements, has the right to feel safe and be safe in public and at home. Domestic and family violence, which is perpetrated in the home or among family members, is as much a matter of public concern as crime in the streets. It must not be accepted or excused.

The majority of people who experience domestic and family violence in Queensland are women. This is not to say that women cannot be the perpetrators of fear and violence upon male victims. Men can be and are victims of violence and coercive control, and are victims of domestic and family violence homicides. Any domestic and family violence, regardless of who the victim and perpetrator are, is unacceptable."

The Bryce report outlines a lot of recommendations to combat domestic violence. In my opinion it does not cover some key aspects – but it is important to implement these recommendations and to build on them.

The report outlines the need for cultural change and developing a holistic solution – this cannot happen in a vacuum. This requires consistent and concerted effort to continuously build people's capacity to deal with life's difficulties in non-violent ways. "Fight or flight" is the instinctive response in all creatures.... The opportunities for flight are not feasible in most situations – we have to continuously teach people alternatives to 'fight' and this is not always as simple as doing anger management courses.

Unpopular as it is research has shown that the greatest deterrent to crime and violence is consistently applied punitive action. Which means that the legal systems must be strengthened to consistently apply the punishments for breaking these laws instead of being soft.

A lot more research is also needed into what causes violence and extremism in the human mind. And Life skills education has to be continuously enhanced and imparted to enable people to make better choices.

3. Toowoomba's demographic is becoming more diverse. We already have people from over 200 backgrounds living here. Toowoomba is also a Refugee Welcome Zone and is striving to be a model city of peace and harmony. This beautiful region which has been a gathering place for thousands of years is now a melting pot for the cultures of the world. This is an exciting time for all of us. As the world continues to become smaller – we all have to learn the lessons of history – to let go of the ways of conflict and to learn to live in peace. This can only happen if we respect the rights of all the people and adopt ways that do not violate each other's human rights. In our policies, laws and actions we must strive to benefit all those affected and not harm anyone. This is the Principle of Goodness and a fundamental planetary ethic for lasting peace.

In the Rig Veda which is one of the Hindu scriptures believed to be over 6000 years old we find the saying:

'No one is superior or inferior; all are brothers; all should strive for the interest of all and progress collectively'. – Rig Veda (6000 BC) --

This encapsulates so well the spirit of the Human Rights Declaration.

4. Lastly I'd like to pause and reflect on how much Australia has accomplished. It is easy to look at what still needs to be achieved and feel low and demoralised. Australia values democracy, freedom of speech, freedom of religion, equal rights for people regardless of sex, race or religion and many other individual's freedoms and rights. Above all Australians value life like no other and values the individual's rights to choose. All of these are basic human rights and are to be cherished, nurtured and protected. We must respect and be grateful to those who have made all of this possible. As we continue towards improving ourselves we must also educate the rest of the world to also embrace these principles.

Thank you.

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