

MIGRANT RESOURCE CENTRE
ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING
28 October 2008

Hello everyone – it is **so** nice to be here with you and to have been asked to speak here tonight.

But first I must acknowledge that we are here courtesy of the Mouhenenna people, the original owners of this land.

I have been asked to give you a little bit of an insight into the people of Burma or Myanmar as we call it, and their culture, multiculturalism and my experience as the past Manager of Multicultural Tasmania.

The Burmese

We people of Burma are a diverse lot, made up of many ethnic groups, Kachin, Kaya, Naga, Rakhine, Padaung, Chin, Shan, Karen and Burmese to name but a few. The Burmese make up the largest ethnic group and mainly come from the Irrawaddy Valley (the river that almost cuts the country in half vertically) and Upper Burma. The Chin are from the Indian/Bangladeshi border and the Shan and Karen from the Thai border. Among ourselves, we can mostly identify each other through our physical differences, body language, names, accents, clothing and of course the use of the Burmese language. Tonight, I will use the term ‘Burmese’ to cover all the people of the country.

Each group speaks a different language although in a very few cases dialects apply. Some languages are written as well as oral, others are oral only. There are many religions, including spirit worshippers, Buddhists of all denominations, but particularly Theravada, Muslims, animists and many Christian denominations. It is not unusual for Burmese families to have several altars in the home or office, each to a different religion.

It is not unusual either, for a Buddhist to visit another religious denomination’s prayer site, pagoda, or church to say a prayer for a friend of that particular religion.

We are all pretty superstitious, regardless of religion and will often engage a fortune teller in a time of crisis.

The day of the week on which we are born is important to us – our names are chosen to recognise that day. The first five letters of the Burmese alphabet are used for those born on the first day of the week, and so on. So, upon introduction, we know each other’s day of birth and consequently, know too how we should handle each other, as people born on certain days of the week may not always be compatible!

All our names have a meaning, usually, giving an insight into our character. We do not have family names although part of a parent’s name may be given to a child. Women do not take any part of their husband’s name. We have only one given name (made up of one, two or three

words). This throws the form filling and computer programs of the Western world into some chaos...because the bureaucracy deems EVERYONE should have a first, middle and a last name!! So, a young person I know, whose name is Nanda is now officially in this country as Nanda Nanda –not his given name!! Perhaps, soon, consideration and understanding will prevail!!! The bureaucrats may one day recognise the culture of others!!

Regardless of ethnic background, the groups largely get on well together, but of course can be parochial. However, those of us who have left Burma and many who are unable to do so are as one in disliking what the regime has done and is doing to the country and its people since 1962. Many of us have fled the country for fear of our lives, many have remained to fight the regime, yet a number have remained to fight **with** the regime – once again, regardless of ethnic background. So, when we get to a place like Australia, our focus is on helping each other settle in peace.

The recent arrivals from Burma are mainly from the hill states of the Chin and Karen – both tribes are cool country people. There are also a few Karenni (Red Karens). The Chin are being settled in Launceston and the Karen and Karenni are in Hobart. I have been privileged to have met the early arrivals and have been helping some of them with their English. As a result I have made a number of friends and even though I do not speak their individual languages, my own Burmese language skills are getting better. The Chin, because of their experiences, are fluent in Hindi and Malaysian, while the Karen are able to speak Thai. Many are multilingual in the languages of Burma, with some speaking quite fluent English as well.

I recently discovered that the Chin wanted to meet with the Karen and so, took three Karen up to Launceston. The occasion was something to behold – they greeted each other with much friendship and affection and were glad to have the opportunity to exchange experiences. As a result, I would like to see Immigration settle a mixture of people in each city instead of separating these ethnic groups. Also, it would be nice to see the two MRCs get together to enable more frequent meetings of the two groups.

Our food is similar to and very like Thai food although we do not use as much coconut and sugar. We prefer hot chillies, fish in any form (dry, salted, pickled, fermented, sauce) and anything that is sour and hot!

Multiculturalism / Multicultural Tasmania

As to the work I have done..... over the years, I have lived and worked on three continents. I enjoyed all the positions I held and it was always a wrench to move on. However, the icing on the cake was the last position.....I enjoyed it, with all its many challenges, from the day I started as a Policy Officer. No, I would not have stayed any longer, because, some ten years ago, I decided on a retirement date and stuck to it.

I do not miss the bureaucratic wrangles and deadlines because I was not made in that mould and always bucked the system. My commitment was always to serve the community and it was **their** interests that were closest to my heart. So, that's why I like my work as a volunteer.

My responsibility at Multicultural Tasmania was to provide government with policy advice by working closely with the communities. In this way, government became more aware of the

services needed at the coalface, rather than to decide for itself what was best for the communities!!

As for the work I did - those who were ignorant about my methods may have thought that it was all consuming, that I didn't have a life outside work!! I have to say, that those who **really** know me, know better - that my life outside the office was totally different - I know that some of the newer members of staff used to be quite amazed at the sorts of activities I got up to out of office hours!!

Speaking of which - over the years, I have had some fantastic people working with me and it is **they** I have to thank for making my work so much easier and I am so pleased that all have been able to move on to much bigger and better positions of responsibility. My philosophy was always that I would not give them any work I couldn't do myself and to treat them as **I** would like to be treated. This continues to work for me in what I do today. My door is always open to those who think I can help.

Some of the changes I managed to introduce to State government services include:

- **The Multicultural Policy** for State Government, which all agencies are required to adhere to and report on annually;
- **The interpreter card** – for distribution by service providers to all those who require the service;
- **The Language Services Policy**, which was close to being presented to Government when I left – to ensure or encourage departments with a service provision role to set aside a budget to cover interpreter services. This policy includes Auslan, the language of the hearing impaired, because there are migrants who have that need;
- **The Work Placement Program** which gives new arrivals the opportunity to work in State Government offices for two weeks each year to give them the opportunity to learn about governments' workplace culture. A number of participants over the years have managed to secure some very good positions and this program has also given public servants the opportunity to get to know, understand and befriend our new migrants.
- The introduction of a no interest loan scheme, administered by the NILS Network of Tasmania, which enables refugees to borrow money towards the cost of one way airfares for relatives they sponsor from overseas.

I was also able to obtain Heritage listing for the site and help the International Wall of Friendship Committee in their quest to have an Aboriginal presence at the Wall. The successful submissions for funding meant that the image of a painting by an indigenous artist, was able to be transferred to the ceiling of the site. I am so pleased that the current owners of the site are very supportive of the project.

These changes would not have been possible without the tremendous help of the Advisory Council on Multicultural Affairs.

In my quest to obtain better services for all migrants I encountered many barriers and much aggression, with remarks like “....**why don't they learn our ways before they come here? Why should we have to help them ...?!**” I am happy to say though that in all these encounters I managed to make people see reason and agree to change their attitude towards

refugees in particular and now most of those organisations have introduced cross cultural awareness training for all new staff.

To me MULTICULTURALISM is about being proud of where you came from and your heritage but above all being a proud AUSSIE. And I think most of us feel that way.

Too much is currently made of the relationship between terrorism and a particular religion or people without any real thought about understanding and consideration. It seems we tend to tar the whole group with the one brush and I feel, having had an extremely multicultural upbringing myself, that this attitude is **most** unfair. We have to stop the 'knee jerk' approach to every problem that we are confronted with and ask the question - WHY? We cannot expect everyone to think the way we do in the First world countries.

I feel that the greatest challenge to multiculturalism going forward, with or without a new name, is the threat of racism dressed up as national security!!!

I think that the Generation "Y-ers" are the ones who will make the change and so, we need to find ways of better engaging with young people, at their level – using Facebook, text messaging, etc. As I have said before - to politicians, bureaucrats and decision makers especially – **We Need to Think Outside the Square and have better understanding.**

We need to take a strong hard look and think about what sort of world we want to leave as a legacy to our children and grandchildren.

Social inclusion, for instance, will be **for nothing** if we only pay lip service to what it means. Neither should we sit back and expect services to be provided by governments, nor should governments expect to provide services which **THEY** deem appropriate, without extensive and inclusive, consultation with the communities they serve, **not** just those who provide the services. No longer does one size fit all – what may be good for the goose is definitely not good for the gander!!!

While services for migrants (at all levels of government) are better now than when I first arrived in 1961, there is much much more that can and should be done. In fact, I fear that with the current epidemic of contracting out services, governments are now shirking their responsibilities. And when the services fail, they are only interested in the fact that '... there is an agreed contract...' and therefore nothing will change. So, as long as the provider reports that a service is being delivered for a particular fee, it doesn't seem to matter how and if at all, that service is actually delivered in an equitable manner to successive recipients.

In addition, Governments and other such entities do not seem to want to tap into the immense skills base that is within our migrant communities. They focus on (or hide behind) their legislated skills requirements, nomatter at what level.

There is no real encouragement given to newcomers whose skills are not recognised in this country....no lateral thinking ... surely there is a way of introducing a scholarship scheme or a test of some sort to assess skills, recognition of prior learning, etc, rather than to spend squillions of dollars going overseas on junkets to attract migrants with skills we recognise ...

and then in some cases, mop up a mess and in the long run, take much needed skills away from another country.

We need to think of ways to better recognise the skills we have within our established migrant communities and new arrivals. We need to look at ways of harnessing those skills.

Migrants who have been here for a longer period should be encouraged and nurtured to assist with the settlement of new arrivals.

Volunteers – we should not take their work for granted and continue to overtax them – we tend to use them as whipping posts, yet do not take heed when they raise concerns – **which are usually genuine!!** This to me, is taking unfair advantage of their good will and they need to be taken seriously.

So, I still see problems with the tunnel vision of the majority of politicians and bureaucrats and unfortunately, see the philosophy of bringing in skilled migrants or allowing students who have studied here to remain in this country under certain conditions, as no different to the rules and regulations of many years ago! Indeed, we don't seem to want you as a migrant unless you under the age of 45....while the Australian resident is being encouraged to work beyond the age of 65! I don't see the logic - given the stringent medical tests required pre-migration.

International students with Australian qualifications cannot remain without passing an English language test that I would doubt a Year 12 student would be able to pass!! Why do we give them qualifications if they are not job ready when they attain them? What does that say about our qualification system? That Universities and Colleges – around the country see every incoming International student as dollars in the bank!!!

Successive State Governments seem to want to lay all migration matters at the feet of the Australian Government – well, its time the States and Territories took more responsibility if they want to keep their migrants. There is much that can be done in this area - providing affordable housing notwithstanding, ---- assistance with job applications, helping people through the quagmire of red tape and providing more assistance with their settlement, than to just pay lip service to it and provide the bare necessities. After all nomatter where they come from, or how educated they are, ours is a different culture to theirs!!

Local Governments can help build communities better by educating their residents in the benefits of having a diverse population. Community activities could be geared towards making life easier for the new arrivals, nomatter where they come from. Do not wait for new arrivals to settle in your jurisdictions - make them welcome - invite them to come and stay!!!

NGOs should also be thinking about increasing their work with all levels of government, and vice versa, not just having talkfests, but how to do some positive things to help. It seems to me that before anything tangible is delivered, there has to be research into the research, comparisons and then assessment after assessment before there is any talk of budgeting for or providing a service....has anyone thought how much it costs to get to that point? Research is good, but is often overdone!! Or forgotten after a media moment!!

My experience is that the corporate sector in this state is largely ignorant of the talents and expertise that can be harnessed from migrant communities and to this end the NGOs such as the MRCs, Anglicare, Centacare, Colony 47, etc will need to put in more work towards bridging those gaps in some way. Most are doing an excellent job, but so much more can be done....I think that many private sector organisations feel that employing new arrivals in particular, is too much like hard work and in fact, in some cases, are very wary of their differences!!! Funny ways and accents, you know!!

If I had my time over again I know I would be even more vocal and assertive than I was in my commitment to bettering the services for all our migrants, nomatter how long they have been here. I would be the proverbial squeaky wheel!!!

Thank you for listening to me tonight.

Lyn Andersch