Letter from Australia

Six months into his first term of office, Australia’s youthful, Mandarin-speaking Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, seems unable to do anything wrong. His approval ratings are above 70%, seven times better than those of his hapless opponent, opposition leader, Dr Brendan Nelson. Two months after his election, he did what John Howard stubbornly refused to do: he made a formal apology to Australia’s indigenous peoples. Representatives of all aboriginal groups were invited to the House of Representatives in Canberra to witness a joint sitting of both Houses. The apology was broadcast live to the nation and around the world. With tears in my eyes, I watched it live via CNN at Changi Airport in Singapore, where travellers from all parts of the world watched transfixed to hear the PM say:*

“I move:
That today we honour the Indigenous peoples of this land, the oldest continuing cultures in human history.
We reflect on their past mistreatment.
We reflect in particular on the mistreatment of those who were Stolen Generations—this blemished chapter in our nation’s history.
The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia’s history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future.
We apologise for the laws and policies of successive Parliaments and governments that have inflicted profound grief, suffering and loss on these our fellow Australians.
We apologise especially for the removal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children from their families, their communities and their country.
For the pain, suffering and hurt of these Stolen Generations, their descendants and for their families left behind, we say sorry.
To the mothers and the fathers, the brothers and the sisters, for the breaking up of families and communities, we say sorry.
And for the indignity and degradation thus inflicted on a proud people and a proud culture, we say sorry.
We the Parliament of Australia respectfully request that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation.
For the future we take heart; resolving that this new page in the history of our great continent can now be written.
We today take this first step by acknowledging the past and laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians.
A future where this Parliament resolves that the injustices of the past must never, never happen again.
A future where we harness the determination of all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to close the gap that lies between us in life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity.
A future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have failed.
A future based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility.
A future where all Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners, with equal opportunities and with an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this great country, Australia.”

Of course, there has been further discussion since then about whether or not the government will now consider paying compensation, especially to the members of the so-called Stolen Generations, the children who were removed from their families and placed in white families so that they would forget their aboriginal identity. This has yet to be resolved, but nevertheless, Australians generally feel a great sense of relief that at last, we have said ‘sorry’ to our indigenous brothers and sisters.

Kevin Rudd then provided the nation with an astonishing demonstration of consultative democracy. The Australia 2020 Summit, held at Parliament House Canberra on 23 and 24 April, brought 1000 of Australia’s ‘best and brightest’ together to ‘help shape a long term strategy for the nation’s future’. Newspaper photographs of the PM sitting on the floor, sharing a simple boxed lunch while informally chatting to delegates, said a lot about the personality of the man. The sessions on health generated ideas on preventive health, fixing the funding system for hospitals, workforce issues and the creation of a trans-ASEAN collaborative healthcare group to tackle infectious diseases. One idea likely to be implemented quickly was that revenue gathered from taxes on tobacco and alcohol should be used to fund programmes designed to make these products less attractive. Victoria has piloted this with great success and as a result, tobacco advertising has all but disappeared. Last week the federal government increased taxation on ‘alcopops’ (sweet alcoholic pre-mixed beverages designed to appeal to the young) by a massive 70%. Participants at the summit, who were drawn from all parts of the community and from all political parties, were ecstatic about being involved.

Discussions on the environment at the Australia 2020 Summit called for a nationally consistent approach to water management and carbon emissions. Southern Australia is in the grip of a 10-year drought and water reserves in major cities such as Melbourne are down to 30% of capacity. Water restrictions have become second nature. Householders receive a subsidy if they instal tanks to catch rainwater. Some provincial cities have not been allowed to water their gardens for 4 years! Ironically, the northern half of the continent is experiencing record rainfalls and floods, which prompted the Governor-General to suggest that a major infrastructure development in the north (presumably, at the expense of the south) might be the way to go.

The Australian economy is booming, thanks to an explosion in mineral exploration and mining in Western Australia. The Chinese cannot get enough of our iron ore, everyone wants our uranium, and we have virtually unlimited amounts of coal and natural gas. Sadly, however, the American prime mortgage collapse has had a serious effect on the housing market here and the government has recently increased home loan interest rates by no less than seven times. First time home-buyers are finding it extremely difficult to get into the market. Since 1982, salaries have gone up 3-fold, but houses cost 8 times what they did then. This is a matter of great current concern here.

Kevin Rudd’s dream run continued when he made his first world tour as Prime Minister. He told the Americans that Australian troops would be out of Iraq by mid-year but that we would continue to support the war in Afghanistan. In China, he gave a lecture in Mandarin to Peking University students, complete with jokes that drew appropriate laughter, and boldly commented on the great concern of Australians about ‘significant human rights
problems in Tibet’. The Chinese government was predictably furious, but in the eyes of Australians, our Prime Minister could not have done better.

Last week an event occurred in the centre of Melbourne that reminded us about how many Indian people are living here now. Following the brutal stabbing of a taxi driver, who happened to be an Indian student, by a mentally ill HIV/AIDS sufferer, taxi drivers staged a 3-day blockade of Melbourne’s main downtown intersection. Almost every taxi driver was Indian. Happily, their blockade was fruitful and their demand for government funding to support the fitting of protective shields around the driver’s seat was granted with little argument.

When measured as a proportion of the total population, Australia has the largest migrant population of all countries of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) except Luxembourg, and 23% of Australians, or 4 million people, were born in other countries. Of these, about 1%–2% are from India. When they all crowd into the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) to support the Indian test team against Australia, one might be excused for thinking that about one-third of all Australian residents are from the subcontinent.

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GARRY WARNE

* For the full text of the Prime Minister’s apology, log on to http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Speech/2008/speech_0073.cfm.

Letter from Chennai

VIOLENCE AGAINST DOCTORS

There has been a sharp rise in violence against doctors, especially in small towns and rural areas. Whenever a person dies, the family and friends assume it is the fault of the doctor and the hospital, and summary justice is administered with a large crowd assaulting the team. Both Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu have seen many such incidents, and the medical community is up in arms.

Following one such incident, the Indian Medical Association (IMA) of Andhra Pradesh (AP) organized a 2-day strike, and successfully forced the government to take action. On 18 December 2007, the Governor of AP promulgated ‘an ordinance to prohibit violence against medicare service persons and damage to property in medicare service institutions and for matters connected therewith and incidental thereto’. It defines an offender as ‘any person who either by himself or as a member or as a leader of a group of persons or organization commits or attempts to commit or abets or incites the commission of violence under this ordinance’.

Violence too is defined as ‘causing any harm, injury or endangering the life or intimidation, obstruction or hindrance to any medicare service person in discharge of duty in the medicare service institution or damage to property in medicare service institution’.

The penalty is also prescribed: ‘Any offender who commits any act in contravention of section 3 shall be punished with imprisonment for a period of three years and with fine, which may extend to fifty thousand rupees.’ Further, such offence shall be cognizable and non-bailable. The offender will also be liable to pay twice the purchase price of medical equipment damaged or loss to the property, and other provisions of the law could also be applied against him in addition to those under this ordinance.

Will this be deterrent enough? I have not seen any reports of violence in AP hospitals since that day, and hope doctors will be able to get on with their work, free from the fear of physical violence.

Tamil Nadu has not been exempt from this rough justice, and the state branch of the IMA decided to stage a similar protest. In addition to protection against physical violence, the IMA sought protection from the police, who respond to unfounded complaints against doctors by arresting them. A judgment of the Supreme Court dealt with this matter and gave guidelines for the circumstances under which doctors could be arrested. The IMA wanted the government to issue orders on both these matters. The government had assured the IMA that orders would be passed, but no action had been taken, and the IMA organized a ‘Black Friday’ protest on 7 March 2008, with all its members wearing black badges. Many doctors joined the protest, but the government has done nothing as yet in response, and the IMA is thinking of more drastic protests, maybe a strike like that of our brethren in AP. It would be sad if the Government of Tamil Nadu failed to respond to what seems an eminently reasonable request.

THE NATIONAL RURAL HEALTH MISSION (NRHM) IN REVIEW

How many of you are aware of the NRHM? I was lucky to be given a copy of the report of the Common Review Mission (CRM), which was charged with the task of studying the working of the NRHM. I cannot effectively summarize the report, which runs into 157 pages, but let me give you a few salient points. The NRHM represents an entirely new direction by the Central Government’s Health Ministry. In the past, the Centre ran certain health schemes, but under the new dispensation the money is being given to bolster state health systems. The Centre will now channel more of its resources to poorer states in an effort to bring them up to the standard of the best. The aim is to increase spending from 0.9% of GDP to between 2% and 3% of GDP. It will not just be a question of pouring in money. The states will also be taught how to use the funds effectively. The pillars of the scheme are increased participation by the community in health planning and in the running of local hospitals and primary health centres (PHCs), inculcating management personnel into the system so that overall efficiency improves, making money available where it is needed most, recruiting, training and holding on to health workers of different categories, and setting standards and making sure that the standards are met.

The review mission comprised 26 officials of the health department, 4 officials from the states, and 20 non-official members,