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New Zealand Federation of Ethnic Councils Dinner, Awataha Marae, Northcote, Auckland

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

May I specifically greet you: Pancha Narayanan and Prem Singh, President and Vice-President respectively of the New Zealand Federation of Ethnic Councils; Hon Pansy Wong, Minister for Ethnic Affairs; Delegates from Ethnic Councils from throughout New Zealand; Distinguished Guests otherwise; Representatives of Awataha Marae; Ladies and Gentlemen.

Thank you for inviting me to attend and speak at New Zealand Federation of Ethnic Councils Delegates Dinner here at Awataha Marae.

On such a visit as this, my wife Susan would usually be with me, but she is currently in London with our daughter Tara who gave birth to our first grandson, Joshua, in January.

I would like to speak briefly the role of New Zealand's Ethnic Councils and our nation's growing diversity in the context of the difficult times New Zealand and the world currently faces.

As will no doubt be common knowledge to people in this audience, in recent times, New Zealand has become a substantially diverse nation—culturally, ethnically and religiously.

New Zealand is a nation of migrants. Some travelled in canoes from Polynesia. Others in sailing ships and steamers from Europe and Asia. Others came in liners and aeroplanes from the Pacific and Asia. As noted New Zealand historian, the late Dr Michael King said:

“In a country inhabited for a mere one thousand years, everybody is an immigrant or the descendent of an immigrant.”

That increasing diversity is enriching New Zealand's society, culture and economy. The 2006 Census revealed that more than 22 percent of New Zealanders were born overseas, a significant increase on five years earlier.

A hundred years ago, almost all of those foreign-born New Zealanders hailed from Britain or Ireland. By last year, that had dropped to 28 percent—exactly the same proportion as from Asia.

In many ways, my appointment as New Zealand's first Governor-General of Asian and Pacific descent reflects that increasing diversity.

While born in New Zealand, as one whose grandparents were born in India and migrated to Fiji, and whose parents were born there and migrated to New Zealand, I join those who believe this growing diversity is enriching our nation's culture, society and economy.

One only has to look at how New Zealanders have embraced festivals such as the Chinese New Year, Matariki, and Diwali to see how that diversity can enrich our society. In promoting these, and many other ethnic festivals, the Ethnic Councils have played a valuable role.

But I am also keenly aware that New Zealand's growing diversity also poses challenges. For the migrants, there are issues around understanding a new society and its nuances, and often learning a new language.

Many of those issues are magnified many times over if those migrants are also refugees, and New Zealand has a long-standing and honourable tradition of accepting refugees from around the world.

It is important that those new to New Zealand are able to be New Zealanders and to 'be themselves'. It is equally important that other New Zealanders recognise, respect and understand the various cultures that make up our country in the 21st century.

Again, the Ethnic Councils, and other groups representing particular ethnicities, have played an important role in assisting those new to New Zealand.

While there have been the inevitable growing pains, the generally tolerant, live and let live attitude of most New Zealanders, has ensured that tensions have been generally kept to a minimum.

The hidden danger is that 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 and underlying lack of understanding.

As we all now know, New Zealand and the world are entering a difficult economic period. History is replete with examples that when times are tough and people are under stress, that they often seek scapegoats for their concerns.

That is why the Ethnic Councils and the Federation have an important role to play to continuing to promote cultural, ethnic and religious understanding.

Earlier this year, I issued my first New Year message, in which I urged New Zealanders to become involved in voluntary organisations.

I noted that volunteerism is the glue that holds our society and economy together. I also noted that voluntary work not only has its own intrinsic benefits—making friends and even offers of employment—but it also adds strength to our wider communities.

In promoting ethnic understanding and as we work towards the future, I urge you to reach out to other community organisations and to work collaboratively with them on projects to assist people and communities in need. Neighbourhood support groups are one example that springs to mind.

I believe that by working together, initiatives will not only be more resilient, but they will also promote greater understanding. It is by working together with people who are different from ourselves, by getting to know people, that we really develop understanding.

So while I offer this challenge to you, I also wish to congratulate the Federation and New Zealand's ethnic councils for your ongoing work.

To close, I will give an example of the contribution that migrants make to our nation are many and varied. Late last year, I read that the first Somali refugee had graduated from the Waiouru Training Centre as a member of the Army in the New Zealand Defence Force.

Ajiil Farah told *The Waikato Times*, and I quote him:

"The biggest success for me is being able to show my community that they can do anything in this country that they want to do, especially the young people coming up."

And on that heartening note, I will close in New Zealand's first language Māori, by offering everyone greetings and wishing you all good health and fortitude in your endeavours. No reira, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou, kia ora, kia kaha, tēnā koutou katoa.

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