

Governor-General's Speech at 10th Holocaust Centre Anniversary Dinner



The text of the Governor General's speech is available here:

Rau rangatira mā, e kui mā, e koro mā, e huihui nei,
tēnei aku mihi māhana ki a koutou.

Nau mai, haere mai ra ki Te Whare Kawana o Te Whanganui-a-Tara.

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, warm greetings to you all, and welcome to Government House Wellington.

Shalom.

As Governor-General, I am asked to be Patron of many organisations. It isn't possible to support them all, so a lot of thought goes into assessing such requests.

However, it didn't take long for me to decide to become Patron of the Holocaust Centre.

I reflected that while New Zealanders have the good fortune to live in a constitutional monarchy – operating under the rule of law, with an independent judiciary – the Holocaust teaches us that such precious freedoms can be eroded or overturned – with disastrous consequences for civil society.

Robert Jackson, a prosecutor at the Nuremberg Trials after the Second World War, described the crimes of the Nazis as being “so calculated, so malignant and so devastating, that civilisation cannot tolerate them being ignored, because it cannot survive their being repeated”.

His statement signalled a return to Enlightenment principles underpinning civilised, rational, democratic and humane behaviour.

The Nuremberg trials secured token retribution for the unimaginable, incomprehensible suffering inflicted on millions of innocent people.

Punishment of evil-doers was just one part of the equation.

The other was to ensure that the genocide of Jewish communities in the 1930s and 40s was never forgotten.

We are fortunate that there were committed individuals here in Wellington who wanted to take on that challenge.

Our Holocaust Centre, established ten years ago, joins a network of similar centres around the world.

David and I are looking forward to meeting the staff and some of the volunteers when we visit the Centre ourselves next month. A few years ago we visited the memorial to the murdered Jews of Europe in Berlin. While that memorial is seen as controversial by some, we found it haunting and very evocative.

I appreciate that visitors to the Holocaust Centre of New Zealand have the opportunity to learn about the monstrous consequences of state-sanctioned prejudice, scapegoating and discrimination.

We owe it to the memory of those who suffered so terribly, to reflect on how we, in the present day, can prevent racial and religious differences from becoming yawning divides.

An inclusive society, embracing and celebrating the diversity of our multicultural communities, will deliver a safer, more prosperous and more just society for all.

As Desmond Tutu has so wisely observed, “My humanity is bound up in yours, because we can only be human together”.

I am ashamed to say that New Zealand did not promote that ethos in the 1930s, when Jewish people fleeing Nazi persecution were desperately searching for a safe haven.

Few found it here.

Following the difficult years of the Great Depression, some New Zealanders were worried about immigrants taking their jobs.

At that time, non-British immigrants were discouraged, and some parliamentarians thought Jewish people would not be easily assimilated into what was a much more homogenous society than the New Zealand of today.

In fact, this country has benefited immeasurably from the energy, enterprise, and accomplishments of Jewish people who have been able to make this country their home.

Fortunately, New Zealand has changed significantly since as we the 1930s and 40s and I believe it is a far better place for it. We have a more expansive world view. And, to quote Justin Trudeau, we are stronger for our diversity.

Tonight, we mark the 10th anniversary of our national Holocaust Centre; we honour the memory of those who died in the Holocaust; and we affirm our dedication to uphold, into the future, the freedoms that they lost.

We also celebrate the extraordinary contribution of Jewish New Zealanders who have made their mark in the cultural and economic life of New Zealand – and have participated to such effect in civil society and government.

Mazeltov – congratulations once again

Kia ora, kia kaha, huihui tātou katoa, and please enjoy the hospitality of Government House.