

**THE HON BILL SHORTEN MP
LEADER OF THE OPPOSITION
MEMBER FOR MARIBYRNONG**

**SPEECH
AUSTRALIAN FEDERATION OF ISLAMIC COUNCILS DINNER
TUESDAY, 27 MAY 2014**

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

[Acknowledgements Omitted]

As-Salaam-Alaikum

Congratulations to the boys and girls from the Islamic School of Canberra for that marvellous rendition of both verses of *Advance Australia Fair* to open the evening.

And congratulations to all of you, on this significant anniversary.

It is a great pleasure to be with you tonight to celebrate 50 years of the Australian Federation of Islamic Councils – now known as Muslims Australia.

For five decades you have served Australia's Muslim community and fostered cultural and religious harmony.

You are a leading voice for all Muslims in Australia as one *Ummah* to both government and non-government organisations.

Your golden anniversary is a tribute to the vision of your founders, those dedicated followers of Islam who set up school and prayer facilities here in Australia.

Of course, the connection between Islam and Australia reaches back much further than 1963.

Today we talk a lot about the opportunities of the Asian Century – and the importance of trade with China.

But more than three centuries ago, Muslim Makassan Trepangers were bartering and trading with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders for sea cucumbers – then a prized delicacy in China.

Followers of the Koran journeyed north as cameleers with Burke and Wills in 1860 – and those who followed them lent their name to the iconic Ghan train that still crosses our continent.

Australia's first Mosque was built in 1861.

So, we go back a long way.

It is an enduring relationship we celebrate tonight – and one with a venerable and rich history.

A history that I am pleased to say will be given new recognition following the opening of Melbourne's Islamic Museum.

And one that gathers new strength through sporting stars like Richmond's Bachar Houli or Rugby League great Hazem El-Mazri.

As we gather to salute the contribution of Muslim Australians, we also give thanks for the miracle of modern, multicultural Australia.

Migration and multiculturalism has remade Australia- from an isolated outpost of Empire to a vibrant, prosperous and diverse nation.

Before the Second World War, Australia was largely a nation with two traditions: a dominant British tradition and a marginalised Indigenous culture.

Our embrace of mass post-war migration has gifted Australia a tradition woven from all the people, all the countries, all the cultures of the world.

Yet in celebrating the intangible riches of cultural diversity, we should never neglect the demonstrable, concrete economic benefits of multiculturalism.

Multicultural Australia is not just a blackboard lesson in social co-operation. It is the key driver of our national prosperity.

In proof of this, we need only look at the people in this room.

Business leaders like Ahmed Fahour and Talal Yassine, community leaders and leaders of opinion, moral examples, role models from all around Australia.

All of you contributors to a fair and prosperous, tolerant Australia.

Thank you for what you do.

Tonight is not a night for long speeches, but I do want to touch briefly on the debate over Section 18C, because I know it is an issue of concern to many of you.

Labor is fundamentally and immovably opposed to any watering-down of the *Racial Discrimination Act*.

We are not interested in impugning the motives of the Government, indeed we have been at pains to direct our passion exclusively at the substance of the proposed changes.

We are, however, very concerned by this important national question.

Any move to weaken protections against hate speech is a most serious mistake.

It is a backward step that signals that this problem somehow isn't as serious as it was before.

That somehow, in some way, the need to be vigilant, to jealously guard Australians from prejudice based on their ethnicity or race is less urgent.

This is wrong.

There is no place for bigotry, no place for racism, no place for hate speech in the modern Australia. There is no right to bigotry in this country.

A modern Australia that is good to its diverse peoples, and delights in the different styles of eating, and clothing, and singing, and worshipping.

And any proposition that the prohibitions against hate speech are "anti-free speech" is disingenuous and a misreading of the law.

Section 18C does not prohibit free speech, rather it provides protection from racially-motivated hate speech.

If we neglect these protections, we risk ignoring the effect racial vilification has on an individual's sense of self.

No Government should ever make it harder for the people who contribute so much to our society and our economy to feel safe and welcome in the Australian community.

Labor never will.

I'm optimistic that our view will prevail.

It's not a question of "if" the changes to 18C will be scrapped – but when they will be scrapped.

Friends, I thank you for letting me share in commemorating your important milestone tonight.

And I wish you all the best for many more successes – and celebrations – in the years ahead.

As-Salaam-Alaikum