



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
VICTORIA

**AUSTRALIAN INTERCULTURAL SOCIETY'S VICTORIAN PARLIAMENT IFTAR
DINNER**

Tuesday 12 March 2024

Acknowledgments

The Honourable Ingrid Stitt, Minister for Multicultural Affairs

John Pesutto, Leader of the Opposition and Shadow Minister for Multicultural Affairs and

Ahmet Keskin, Executive Director Australian Intercultural Society, as Co-hosts of the Victorian Parliament Iftar Dinner.

I join the previous speakers in acknowledging all our distinguished guests tonight.

I begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the unceded lands on which this building stands – the Wurundjeri people – and pay my respects to their Elders, past and present.

It is a very great pleasure for me to join you this evening for the Australian Intercultural Society's Victorian Parliament Iftar Dinner.

This is the 18th Victorian Parliament Iftar Dinner organised by the Society.

It is also my first time attending this dinner in my current role.

Tonight, I reflect on the message sent by this dinner, in a time of conflict, humanitarian crisis, hurt, anxiety, and fear.

All of us gathering here is a truly heartening testament to our great democracy and our great State.

Indeed, there is something very important underpinning the people who are here tonight and have chosen to be here.

They are representing the people of Victoria in one form or another.

Some have been elected by them, to speak for them, and they have chosen to be here in that collective way to say, *"We are speaking for humanity, we are speaking for peace, we are speaking for the betterment of people in our society and around the world."*

We also have representatives of key institutions that speak to our cultural traditions whether legal, religious or educational.

Together, we are sending the message *"I will be here."*

That is a very powerful statement because it is made by action and by taking agency in a context where there is deep division and hurt.

And the great strength of democracies is that they are built on the notion that we can believe, support and speak to different beliefs, with respect.

We know that early in this country's colonial period, workers from Afghanistan, Pakistan and India, came to make their mark in this nation and on this State's history.

They played vital roles in establishing networks across the country despite their small numbers.

Those Afghan Camaleers were some of the earliest Muslim Australians.

The early settlers brought their religious beliefs and traditions to our community and though it would be many years before a much larger Muslim community would develop in Victoria, today, we have a much larger Muslim community and a much more diverse population in Victoria.

The Albanian Mosque in Shepparton, built in the 1950s, is the earliest surviving purpose built Mosque in Victoria.

It wasn't until the 1960s that significant Muslim migration would begin, with many coming from Turkey.

The growth of these communities has been quite rapid and approximately 40% of Australia's Muslim population call Melbourne home now.

Collectively, they attend more than 25 mosques, many of which participate in the annual Open Mosque Day, organised by the Islamic Council of Victoria.

The day encourages Victorians to visit their local mosques and, as organiser Mohamed Mohideen explained, *"build dialogue and friendships while sharing mutual respect and understanding."*

Iftar dinners, like this one, offer another avenue through which to form connections across religious and cultural lines.

It's important that we have moments to celebrate understanding of other traditions that are not ours but that we respect and support.

As our population has grown, so too has the rich multiculturalism that defines our way of life.

It is a multiculturalism built in those democratic traditions that are based in respect.

Increasingly, Victorians of all religious beliefs, participate in celebrations for Diwali, Lunar New Year, Passover, and many others.

They are not celebrations only for those associated with that culture or tradition, but are celebrations for us all.

Public spaces like Federation Square have become home to festivals, performances and ceremonies.

Each event is an opportunity for Victorians to come together and gain greater understanding of one another.

The Australian Intercultural Society is founded on a belief and desire to encourage greater connection between different communities, regardless of faith or background.

Board members and volunteers of the society have worked tirelessly to encourage greater social cohesion and I congratulate them on their ongoing work in 2024.

Tonight, we are able to reinforce cross-cultural connections.

And share the joy of a well-cooked meal.

This is an evening for us to speak across cultures, feel those connections, feel that respect, and recognise that a great democracy is a multicultural democracy.

Our greatest strength is our diversity but also our shared belief that all should have a place and a voice in Victoria so long as that voice is respectful.

I hope this evening's meal brings each of you happiness as well as a greater sense of connection with your colleagues and fellow Victorians.

Tonight shows that we can all work together and ensure conflict is not part of our lives but respect for difference is.