



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
VICTORIA

ARAB AMBASSADORS LUNCH AT THE EMBASSY OF KUWAIT

Wednesday 21st March, 2018

Your Excellency Mr Najeeb Al-Bader, Ambassador of the State of Kuwait to Australia

Your Excellencies

Distinguished guests

First, I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land upon which we are gathering and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

Tony and I – and our Official Secretary, Joshua Puls – are delighted to be here with you all, to recognise the friendship between Victoria and the Arab nations you represent, and to discuss some of the wonderful opportunities that exist between us.

I would like to thank His Excellency Mr Najeeb Al-Bader, Ambassador of the State of Kuwait to Australia, and the Embassy of Kuwait for extending such a warm invitation.

I had the pleasure to meet His Excellency during his recent visit to Victoria. I very much enjoyed our discussion, and I was delighted when he suggested this lunch in this beautiful setting.

It is always a pleasure to be in Canberra, our nation's capital, but I do hope that you will understand that today I am speaking to you specifically from my perspective as the Governor of Victoria.

Accordingly, my comments are focused on that particular part of our country: a part of the country that you will not be surprised to hear me say, I think is especially interesting and exciting.

Yes, that is an admittedly biased view, but one which I hope you might be able to agree is not without some foundation.

But let me start at the beginning.

There is no template for an Australian State Governor.

We each bring our own mix of skills, insights and professional experiences to our role.

And the responsibilities of my role traverse the guardianship of our Constitution, the nurturing of democracy at its grass roots throughout the community, and the celebration and promotion of citizenship, industry, endeavour, diversity and social harmony.

The majority of my career was in the law. And for the final 18 years of my legal career, I was a judge in the Family Court of Australia. That experience impressed upon me the importance of relationships.

Now, several years into this role, that impression is fully confirmed.

I am convinced that the features that underpin successful personal relationships also underpin business, community and international relations. This is: a genuine effort to learn about each other, mutual respect, trust, an acceptance of difference and a focus on all that unites rather than divides us.

And so, as I meet you today, I am aware of our shared aspirations and opportunities, and just how well they are underpinned by our people to people connections.

First, Victoria is a diverse community. We come from more than 200 countries and speak more than 260 languages and dialects. Almost half of us were born overseas or have at least one parent born overseas. (I am one of this large and lucky group).

We see our diversity as a great strength. It is a foundation stone of our culture and our economy.

And amongst our diverse community, we have 100,000 Victorians who were born in the Middle East or North Africa, and almost 200,000 with ancestral ties to those regions. And this is a rapidly growing part of our community.

More than 160,000 Victorians speak a Middle Eastern language at home, Arabic now being the fifth most commonly spoken language other than English.

Of course, there are also many thousands of students from the Middle East and North Africa who are enrolled in Victorian schools and universities.

May I just say something to you about them.

Please have no doubt that when parents in your countries choose to send their children to Victoria, we are well aware of the trust and the extraordinary privilege they extend to us.

Your young people, like ours, are hungry for opportunities and eager for global experiences. (It is why our two adult sons are currently experiencing work overseas).

When your youngsters are here, they are keen to learn our language and culture, but in Victoria, we are conscious that in turn, they bring their language, culture and fresh ideas to our own students.

(I should add that just a few weeks ago, a brave young Saudi man studying in Melbourne, selflessly jumped into the Yarra River to save a stranger who had fallen in: what a great example of a fine young guest in our State!)

Indeed, education can cross borders, with our local Box Hill Institute, for example, now having joint campuses in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. And I am aware that Monash University and the Alfred and King Saud Medical City share a partnership in training and healthcare systems for trauma care.

Together, our young people are forging relationships that will hold them and our respective nations in good stead.

We cannot know precisely what research collaborations, or trade and business negotiations will unfold down the track.

But we do know that the friendships that they forge will open opportunities – many of which we cannot even foresee as yet – and it will be to the benefit of all our countries. Our mutual prosperity rests with them.

Now, let me tell you a little more about Victoria.

Our State profited from the discovery of gold in the mid-nineteenth century.

Melbourne grew swiftly. It was very wealthy.

And the bounty of gold gave us the most beautiful public buildings, cultural and sporting institutions, a well-laid out city and lush gardens and parks across the city centre.

I think that the legacy of that period has played into Melbourne being named as the world's most liveable city for 7 consecutive years – and never outside the world's top 3 such cities according to the Economist Intelligence Unit.

I am proud to say that we have received the perfect score in infrastructure and healthcare, as well as education.

In fact, as we speak, we have an infrastructure program afoot, of some \$40 billion, the largest in the history of the State.

It is exciting.... and it is necessary.

Although Sydney is presently a little bigger than Melbourne, Victoria is the most rapidly growing part of Australia, and Melbourne is on track to be Australia's most populous city within the next 30 years.

We are fortunate to have experienced almost a quarter of a century of uninterrupted year on year growth which, with stable political and economic institutions, has created our AAA credit rating and favourable business environment.

I mentioned Victoria's healthcare.

Our state is home to more than 150 biotech firms, and over 10,000 researchers and clinicians in over 25 major facilities.

Half of all ASX Listed life sciences companies are based in Melbourne.

These centres are situated in two big clusters: one in Parkville around the University of Melbourne – Australia's top university according to the Times Higher Education World University Rankings. And the other in Clayton around Monash University – Australia's largest university.

These universities and clusters are part of the attraction for overseas students to come to Victoria.

They also hold the potential for ground-breaking collaborations with centres of excellence in your countries too.

Agriculture has always been important to Victoria. The State accounts for only 3% of Australia's land mass, but 23% of Australia's total Gross Domestic Product (GDP).

Thanks to our fertile countryside and strict safety guidelines, we are able to produce some of the world's highest quality food and fibre. For example, 80% of dairy exports come from Victoria.

It is impossible to talk of the land in our part of the country without talking of drought. I know that many of your nations also face the challenge of limited water resources.

By necessity, Victorian engineers and agricultural experts have created water management systems to meet the challenges of drought, in urban use as well as in agriculture.

I am proud that our technology and expertise is used in many parts of the world.

I have no doubt that another factor that plays into Melbourne's liveability has been the strength of our cultural and sporting life and major events.

The National Gallery of Victoria is one of the world's 20 most visited art museums in the world, drawing more than 2.5 million visitors a year.

And we are lucky each year to host one of the tennis Grand Slam events with the Australian Open. We also host the Formula One Grand Prix, and the spring racing carnival.

Next year, we will host the President's Cup Golf tournament, when business leaders and CEO's from around the world will converge on Melbourne.

A great deal of this is not news to you. One of our several world class stadia is named for Etihad airline, our iconic Melbourne Cup has been sponsored by Emirates airline, and Emirates, Etihad and Qatar airlines are generous in their sponsorship of AFL football, soccer, our Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, the gallery and many of our events.

I will be urging you to spend more time in Victoria. And I can assure you that it is worthwhile – in every sense – to join us at the time of some of these major events.

The Victorian arts and sporting events calendar certainly brings people to Victoria from across Australia and overseas.

And there is no question that the quality of the Gulf airlines has enhanced these (and other business and investment) opportunities, with nearly 50 direct return flights per week, connecting Melbourne to the Gulf hubs.

And so, let me conclude with this reflection.

When looking at the periods in Victoria's history that were defined by insularity, it is apparent that they were the least successful.

In the early 1900s, for example – during a period of insularity – Victoria went from being the world's richest colony to the Australia's weakest state economically.

On the other hand, Victoria's strong growth over recent decades has coincided with an open approach to a diverse and inclusive community, and international engagement.

It is why we value our international partnerships.

It is why Victoria was the first Australian state to establish an office in the Middle East and North African region, more than 20 years ago now, in 1997. This office – in Dubai – reflects Victoria's long-term commitment to investment and partnership with your region.

It is why there have been 8 State Ministerial visits to your region in just over 3 years, since our current State Government has been in office.

And it is why, as the Governor of Victoria, I have relished the occasion today to meet with each of you, and to explain a little more about our state.

But the particular privilege for me today is to learn more about each of your countries. To hear more from you about the complimentary needs and capabilities in our respective economies, and the mutual benefits that can flow from our collaboration.

I hope each of you will find your way to Victoria before too long and, when you do, that you will come and see us at Government House.

Your Excellency, thank you again for your very gracious hospitality here today. It has been such a pleasure for us to attend.