

## **8<sup>TH</sup> IHREC CLOSING REMARKS BY SEV OZDOWSKI**

**Montreal, 3 December 2017**

Distinguished panellists, ladies and gentlemen.

It is great to see so many of you here. Your attendance on a late Sunday afternoon at the closing session of the conference is the best witness to the conference success. There is no need for any further evaluation.

Today I will tell you two short stories, deliver one thank you and will do a bit of advertising.

The first story is about my inquiry into the mandatory system of immigration detention in Australia that I undertook some time ago as Australia's Human Rights Commissioner.

Upon my appointment I knew that the Australian immigration detention system breached a range of international human rights conventions. In fact, there was number of earlier inquiries, including an inquiry by my predecessor, that reported significant human rights breaches with recommendations to the government on how to redress the situation, but the recommendations were not acted upon. The government appeared to be unmovable.

Thus, the key question that I was confronted with was how to make my inquiry effective and deliver a change.

After considerable deliberations I decided to focus the inquiry on children's rights and to adopt methodology that broadly involved the public through public hearings, media reports and publicised visits to detention centres.

I focused on children because of the clear provisions in the Convention on the Rights of the Child that children could be detained but only as a measure of last resort and for only the shortest appropriate period of time. There were no equally clear provisions in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights on the rights of asylum seekers. Furthermore, when focussing on children, one takes away stereotypes of alleged illegalities associated with boat people; or to put it simply – children are innocent.

The open inquiry methodology was used because I was fully aware that the inquiry will be a battle for hearts and minds of Australians as some 65% of Australians were in support of mandatory detention policies. The inquiry was intended to result in a major change in public opinion. In fact, when the inquiry was completed some 65% of Australians were of the view that children and their families should not be subjected to long term mandatory detention.

Following the public opinion change and the approaching elections, one month after the inquiry report was tabled in Parliament, the government of the day released all children and their families from Australian detention centres.

The point I wish to make here is that human rights education forms public opinion which in turn impacts positively on government human rights practices.

But conversely, lack of public support for human rights sets limits for government action as governments will not go further than people will allow. Consequently, if you wish to have a government changing its policies to better reflect on your human rights objectives go to the grass-roots and convince the people that such change is needed. Winning the hearts and minds will add to your effectiveness.

My second story relates a plebiscite held in Australia two weeks ago on proposed changes to the Family Law Act definition of marriage, in order to allow same sex couples to marry. The outcome was that some 63 per cent of Australians voted to allow same sex marriages.

The time leading up to the referendum was on occasion quite ugly in terms of public debate; we even witnessed some bullying and occasional violence.

After the referendum delivered an outcome, it was clear that a significant majority of Australians accepted an extension of marriage rights to the LGBTIQ minority. The legislative change immediately followed.

What is of importance is that this significant redefinition of the well-established institution of marriage was achieved through a democratic process. The national plebiscite was a democratic measure.

I wish to use this example to underline the role democratic institutions play in keeping peace and social cohesion.

Our contemporary focus on respect, dignity and advancement of rights of specific social groups is important. But as some speakers have observed it may lead to some backlash against human rights.

So, let us not forget in our deliberations about the importance of civil and political rights. Our democracy and freedoms are clearly a cornerstone of civil society. These rights are also of importance to many countries in the developing world.

Now it is time to say thank you to Equitas for hosting this important conference. It took time and the efforts of many since 2015 when we started discussing holding the IHRE Conference in Montreal.

As we know, human rights education was elevated as an issue during the post-cold war Vienna world conference on human rights of June 1993. This conference recognised that human rights education is a key mechanism in assisting with the advancement of equality and liberty within the limits of modern liberal democracy.

Our conferences started a few years later – in 2010. By now, we have managed to build a community movement for human rights education. A movement that builds bridges

between people of different religions, cultures, ethnicities and genders. A movement that has clearly contributed to world peace.

These conferences would not have been possible without developing such a mass movement! I am confident that IHRE conferences will continue to contribute to human rights education in the future and to the strengthening of civil societies. So again, my warm thanks to Equitas that is not only a recognised member of our movement but also as a world leader in human rights education!

Finally – the advertisement: what about the future? Where do we go from here?

I am pleased to announce that the next conference is being planned to be held in Sydney Australia in late November 2018.

The 2018 conference plans to celebrate the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the UN Universal Human Rights Declaration. I will write to you as soon as the date is finalised.

Please write back, if you have suggestions about the Conference themes that need to be covered or about the conference format – how long; workshops versus plenary sessions, etc.

Please also contact me if your institution is interested in the organisation of a conference in 2019 and 2020.

Again, it was great to see some 350 people from over 45 countries participating in the Montreal Conference. I wish you a safe journey back home and see you in Sydney next year.

Thank you.