

Launch of “Crossing Points”

Thank you, first of all may I also acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today: the Gadigal people, their elders past, present and future.

In launching “Crossing Points” today, following recent events in Gisborne in New Zealand with the 250th Anniversary of Captain Cook’s first arrival in Aotearoa, it seems appropriate that this acknowledgment of country is how we start events here in Australia today. An acknowledgement of the first people of these lands who existed long before the foreigners came.

As I said to my own team at the British High Commission in Canberra, the countdown towards Cook 250 events here in Australia next year began the moment events unfolded in New Zealand. But, in focusing on what this means we have an opportunity to address not just the past but to secure the modern relationship between the UK and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We are therefore developing an Indigenous Engagement Strategy.

Undoubtedly there is a part of our history that we have to confront. And it’s something that people find difficult to talk about. But we must recognise that the arrival of Cook, and what it led to – the arrival of the first fleet, fundamentally changed the landscape and the future of the first people here, and likewise the Maori in New Zealand.

So, as we look to the future and the relationship we wish to build with all Australians, work like that of the British Council, with amazing initiatives like their Accelerate Programme, the appreciation of art and culture as it translates into our people-to-people connections, has to be a key part of what we do and what we celebrate. I was going to say this must be our new endeavour when I realised that “endeavour” might be the wrong choice of word in this context! Or maybe not, maybe it is right to cast it as a shared inclusive endeavour for the future.

This compendium of essays, with perspectives from New Zealand, Cook Islands, Australia and Britain, gives us a moment to pause and reflect on our past, how this has shaped us – our present – and consider how we can draw on the truth of our histories, respective and shared journeys, to better shape our futures. To take the lessons of history and to ensure our future is better informed.

Friends, in Stan Grant’s essay, he referred to Australia’s history living in him because of his ancestry, both Aboriginal and Irish. His Irish ancestor was amongst the first convicts to be sent out here. This European ancestry sat alongside a much older one, for whom this was country, dating back millennia.

When I read Michelle Simmons’ essay about what brought her to this country from Britain and why she chose to stay, it highlighted, for me how we embrace change, new realities and opportunities.

And from New Zealand, Anthony Hoete's comment on two historically tied nations. He proposed part of our future, informed by our past, must be about the exchange of knowledge, about encouraging creative thinking.

My predecessor, Menna Rawlings, in her essay said "I found it personally hard at times to come to terms with the impacts of exploration and colonialism on the Indigenous people." But it is time, with Cook 250, to seize the opportunity to come to terms with this reality. I think whatever future we build with Australia, with New Zealand and with the Pacific Island countries, where the consequence of British colonialism changed the trajectory of those nations is that we have to find the positive learning from the very history we address. And we should not forget there is good stuff too in that history to celebrate.

For me that means finding and building new partnerships. In doing so we have to also recognise who we are today.

What does being British mean?

What does being Australian mean?

What does our future and, indeed, our current relationship mean?

Of course we say it is a relationship bound by shared values. But in a way, and something I think Helen touched on, in a world that seems less stable where the norms are under stress and challenged, actually securing partnership and people-to-people engagement around a set of shared values must be the goal. Values we should hold dear – equality and mutual respect. A partnership that we build together for the 21st century that is yet stronger because it is more inclusive.

In the 250 years since Cook's arrival, this region has become part of Asia's century. The geopolitics that we see playing out around us also sees a more contested and uncertain world. So this must be a moment in our shared history where we consciously take stock and hold our values closer still.

In doing so, there are voices to be heard, listened to and understood. Because it is that mutual recognition and understanding that I think lies at the heart of shared values and freedoms. Indeed the partnerships and collaboration we seek.

It is timely to reflect on why the British Council was conceived as a force for good. It was created in the post Second World War years, as Helen has said, to counter fascism and I fear that is on the rise in the world that we live in today.

So culture, arts, people-to-people connections, understanding the things that we individually as citizens, but as a global community too, need to rediscover and embrace. I don't want to distort history but perhaps we need a new doctrine of re-discovery of what lies at the heart of the values we share, of renewal, to propel us forward.

And we must work together in partnership as like-minded people, with both a

bitter and a positive history from which to draw. And on which to build for the better.

New Zealand, Australia and Britain can be at the heart of a new like-minded group where we celebrate our diversity, where we reach out to be more inclusive, where we address our past but we build our future and we do so together.

The Pacific Island countries are at the heart of the climate change agenda. They are not some distant land. They face an existential threat. The UK is at the forefront of leading the climate agenda. This is the kind of work where our collective partnership and endeavour matters.

Preserving culture and heritage is also important. Within this it is also about giving people voice – a means to connect and express themselves. Without voice who are we?

When I read Gina Williams' essay she spoke about voice, and the loss of language. In regaining her voice – her mother tongue – she comments that a community can learn together and heal together. And one of the devastating effects of colonisation in this country was that so many of the indigenous languages have been lost. Our task through art, through culture, through music, through voice, must be to make sure the ones that are left are preserved but more importantly heard as well.

And, finally, as the British High Commissioner at this point in our history with Australia, addressing what we do alongside the government, and working with them, towards Cook 250 here, will be an important part of my effort.

After all, how do we build relationships with all Australians?

I speak as a British High Commissioner without any Scottish, English, Welsh or Northern Irish blood coursing through my veins. I speak as someone who migrated to Britain aged eight having been born in Malaysia. I think about my British identity alongside all those other identities I have. My Chinese ancestry, my Dutch Burgher ancestry. I think about the country I was born in and the country I migrated to that is now home and that I proudly represent. I think about my Britishness through my citizenship and the values that stands for and that I now in my work promote and uphold.

But there are connections you never lose. I was reminded in Stan Grant's Essay that when he feels most connected to this land is often when he is flying and he is looking down at the land below. I think I know what he means. When I was flying into Malaysia to take up my last job there as British High Commissioner, I too felt a connection with the land below, the spirit of the place from which I came, and the lands beyond from which my ancestors came, both European and Asian.

I recognise the connection to country for the Indigenous people of this land is deep and a vital part of their identity.

So many people, many of you in this room, trace your ancestry back to Britain. I hope you feel that connection. But we must work to keep it vibrant

and relevant.

But an increasing number of Australians and New Zealanders trace their ancestry to other places. For them we need new connections with Britain on issues that matter such as our work on Climate Change and through our work on Art and Cultural connections too.

In building our partnership for the future, we must celebrate our diversity, we must be inclusive, we must build new connections with the first people of this country as well as the more recent arrivals. Our future partnership must embrace all Australians. A partnership built on understanding and respect. And essays like those in "Crossing Points" help us to do just that.

I am therefore delighted to be here to support you in launching "Crossing Points".

Thank you.