Thank you to the Federation of International Human Rights Museums for hosting us for this important conference, to the President of the Federation David Fleming and our hosts at the International Museum of Democracy. The Museum of Freedom and Tolerance Western Australia is proud to be a member of your esteemed organisation.

INTRODUCTION

Sitting on the western edge of our continent, Perth has long been called one of the world’s most isolated cities, yet we are the Australian capital city placed on the edge of the Indian Ocean, described by geopolitical strategist Robert Kaplan as the theatre of the 21st century. Five hundred years from the conquest of the great oceans, the global power balance is tipping south once again. We see no better time and no better place for a Museum committed to advancing freedom and human rights.

We are home to a diverse community of settlers, with the arrival of 1.3 million migrants in the last five years, mostly from India and China. More than a quarter of people living in Australia are born overseas. Thirty eight per cent of students at our universities or in tertiary education are born overseas. Mandarin is now our second most commonly spoken language. The ‘Asian Century’ reflects strongly in our demographics.

Australia’s development as a thriving, economically successful nation is largely the result of our migrant population. The children of immigrants do well at school, and skilled migrants have a higher than average participation in the workforce. Around 80 per cent of immigrants living in Australia more than 10 years have become citizens: we are happy to be Australians because we feel that Australia for the most part embraces our diversity.

Yet many in our community continue to face personal and institutional racism on a daily basis. A report released by the Australian Scanlon Foundation found that 54 per cent of respondents with an African background and 59 per cent of people with an Aboriginal background experienced racial discrimination in the last 12 months.

More than half the complaints by the Australian Human Rights Commission in relation to the Racial Discrimination Act were made by Aboriginal Australians, who also suffer twice the reported rate of racism in the workplace.

The social researcher Hugh Mackay observed that in Australia, we come from at least 231 different birthplaces; and our original inhabitants represent several hundred different

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1 Robert Kaplan, Monsoon: The Indian Ocean and the future of American power, 2011
2 2016 Census, Australian Bureau of Statistics
4 Dr Tim Southphommasane, Race Discrimination Commissioner, Sydney Institute, 9 March 2016.
nations, tribal groups with different languages, stories and cultures. We still have work to do to construct a more inclusive narrative from our rich human tapestry. How do we do this?

THE FOUNDATIONS OF OUR MUSEUM

Established in 2012, a grass roots organisation of passionate West Australians with diverse backgrounds began an audacious effort to reinvent how to foster cohesive societies free from racial and religious prejudice by sharing our most difficult human stories.

We knew in our bones that the evolution of humanity owed a huge debt to the ancient universal practice of sitting together, face to face, sharing stories of “us and them”, of hope and peace, of pain and suffering, of those that came before us and by those that can still sit and share with us today. Meaning and values are passed down through the stories we share and these stories continue to shape our societies.

Humanity has witnessed the lasting effect of racial and religious discrimination all around the world and paid a high price to learn the values of freedom, tolerance, respect, and fairness. With the world around us changing rapidly, we knew that time was against us and that we had to act with a sense of constructive urgency.

Throughout our journey, we have found many others that shared our passion and desire to create the Museum of Freedom and Tolerance Western Australia – as a very special place of significance in Western Australia. A virtual and physical place of truth and compassion, a hub of energy and excellence for exhibits, artistic expression, outreach activities, a meeting place for communities and a global think tank.

We know that any intervention to address racism and prejudice carries enormous and far-reaching responsibilities that need to be taken seriously. But we also know that our nation’s most pressing moral obligation is to acknowledge and address Australia’s inability to deal with its tragic, difficult, and often violent history of discrimination towards the First Australians.

We have the context, as a Museum, to progress this moral obligation by empowering our community to reflect on and better understand the long history and culture of anti-Semitism around the world and how it relates to modern events. In the words of Kofi Annan, anti-Semitism has throughout history “been a unique manifestation of hatred, intolerance and persecution”. He eloquently stated that “the rise of anti-Semitism everywhere was a threat to people everywhere… in fighting it, the world was fighting for the future of all humanity”.

It is our challenge as a Museum to mobilise our community with this knowledge so they can stand with us in support of hard-won values, and against collective bigotry and the preconditions of racism and prejudice.

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6 Hugh Mackay, Untrue blue: myths obscure a beautiful diversity, Sydney Morning Herald, 25 August 2013

7 ‘Jews everywhere must feel that the United Nations is their home, too,’ Secretary-General tells seminar on anti-Semitism’, UN press release HR/4773-PI/1589, 21 June 2004
2014: LITERATURE REVIEW

Talking, thinking, listening and researching was the first order of the day. We knew that our planning journey had only just begun. We learned two big exciting lessons from our literary review in 2014:

1. Museums around the world have been turning outwards and becoming hybrids, their future is a dynamic, shared sacred space where things happen and are created, as much as where things are kept and protected. We learned that museums can be powerful instruments of social change.

2. Humanity still has a lot to learn about the causes of and solutions for intergroup prejudice. The research pointed to exciting clear findings, clues about what to do. However, the research also showed profoundly complex and unpredictable risks in not getting it right.

2015: ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN

Our environmental scanning journey provided us with the evidence that we were on the right track, having identified a clear need for social action and valuable insights as to how better to refine our mission, scope our methods. Our museum concept started to take shape, with the following mission and structure:

Objects

To foster and promote a cohesive and plural society in Western Australia and the surrounding regions,

Where all people enjoy the freedom to live peacefully alongside each other,

With mutual respect and tolerance, free from racial and religious prejudice and discrimination.

Five key pillars

1. Museum – exhibitions that share stories of racial and religious tolerance and intolerance from around the world.

2. Art Gallery – facilitation of artistic expression that aligns with the purpose of the Museum.

3. Outreach Community Programs – programs that are focused on education and community development.

4. Community Hub – A central place for people to converge, collaborate, converse and share.

5. Research Centre and Think Tank – Hosting events, presenting and providing commentary to initiate dialogue.
2016-2019: TOUCHSTONES PROJECT

In 2016, after our concerted period of thinking and listening, we were ready to start learning by doing. In ‘doing’, we would first begin to build a movement; then an organisation; and only then a building.

One of our key projects is an international Symposium, to be held on 20 and 21 February 2019 in conjunction with the Western Australian Museum. We will host the gathering in Fremantle, on the shores of the Indian Ocean at the height of our summer, with the support of the Perth International Arts Festival and the Perth Writers Festival.

We invite you to join us here, to share your difficult stories of institutional prejudice and discrimination. Why it was so important to do so, and what we can learn from the success of these efforts. We would like to hear from South Africa, Rwanda, Cambodia, Ireland, Argentina, USA and Germany, everyone and anyone that wishes to contribute to our learning journey, so that we may find our own unique way to tackle and facilitate the telling of our contact with First Australians in a way that brings about positive change and a more inclusive, multicultural narrative for our country.

One unique challenge we would like to make you aware of is the story of Rottnest Island, or Wadjemup in local Aboriginal Noongar language. For nearly a century, the Island was a prison with three thousand seven hundred Aboriginal men and boys that were brought from around Western Australia to imprison in harsh conditions. On to this little Island, came Aboriginal people from tribes across Western Australia, many of whom were never to return.

Rottnest Island has gone on to become one of Western Australia’s most popular holiday destinations, with an ethos of simple holiday life at an accessible price so that all Western Australian’s could enjoy the beauty of this Island and pleasure of a holiday together. It is very much a part of the fabric of Western Australia society.

Yet, this occurs upon the grounds and in close proximity of the unmarked gravesite of three hundred and sixty-nine prisoners, the largest deaths in custody site in Australian history.8 The most significant sites are returning from private hands to the Western Australian State Government next year and there is a dedicated initiative underway to properly commemorate the Island’s dark history being undertaken by the local Aboriginal community.

What a challenge of truth and reconciliation; and what an opportunity for our Museum of Freedom and Tolerance to provide support to our Aboriginal community as they forge ahead with this bold initiative.

Whilst we prepare for the international Symposium, we have outreach programs into schools where we invite the students themselves to prepare for a Youth Summit where they can share with us their projects for addressing racial and religious prejudice in our society, and how best to promote our mission.

Finally, we are calling on the creative industries across Western Australia to come together in multidisciplinary teams to apply their creative genius and their own exciting ideas to

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reimagine artistic expressions, exhibits, to create any form of multimedia art or other form with the stated goal of moving the observer to action.

**2020: TAKING OUR LEARNINGS AND CREATING A FOOTPRINT**

We see the story of Aboriginal persecution as utterly essential to the Museum of Freedom and Tolerance’s mission. The potential of the Museum of Freedom and Tolerance Western Australia lies in enabling curatorial and programing decisions that reflect our nation and regions and our own landscape of prejudice, both to tell our own truths and engage our communities.

As a nation of immigrants, many of our own stories link back to stories of prejudice and discrimination right around the world. With the resurgence of anti-Semitism, often the canary in the coalmine, and with a growing intolerance for difference, we have no time to lose.

We have such a rich tapestry to weave, and it is critical that we do it in a way that respects multicultural communities and multidimensional narratives. We need to ensure that the infrastructure we develop encourages diversity, and that our citizens have a means and a platform to tackle and counter intolerance, prejudice and discrimination.

**2021: BRICKS AND MORTAR**

The next few years will be an exciting time for us, as Western Australia develops its own world class New Museum project\(^9\) and Australia takes a place on the UN Human Rights Council.

We will be working locally, nationally and internationally, to assert the ideals and values of our Museum, to combine the lessons of the past with the learnings of the future, and to develop partnerships, with the Western Australian Museum and other institutions that will enable us to realize our long-term vision of a physical museum.

For Australia at large and Western Australia in particular, we have an opportunity to invite our First Australians to lead us in building Australia’s first international museum of human rights – The Museum of Freedom and Tolerance Western Australia.

ENDS

*(1700 words)*

SPEAKER BIOGRAPHIES

Adam Levin, Chair, Museum of Freedom and Tolerance Western Australia

Adam Levin, Partner at Jackson McDonald law firm has over 20 years leading commercial and tax legal experience. He is known for his ability cut through complex matters to provide practical solution focused advice to his clients. Adam is recognised in a number of national and international publications for his expertise in developing trust and benefit management structures, strategic legal planning and governance across the spectrum. He leads the market in the establishment and operation of Australian Indigenous trusts, large member based organisations and not-for-profits, charities and foundations, plus private clients and families of wealth offering bespoke legal advice in the areas of wealth and risk management, taxation and philanthropy.

Adam is the founding Chairperson of the Museum of Freedom and Tolerance Western Australia (MFTWA) and the Forum for Directors of Indigenous Organisations (FDIO).

Krista McMeeken, Director, Museum of Freedom and Tolerance Western Australia

Krista is a young Nyoongar woman, practicing lawyer and human rights and reconciliation advocate.

She devotes her spare time to mentoring youth, developing and participating in forums that bring Australians together to generate new ideas for the success and sustainability of our communities.

In recognition of her hard work and commitment to community issues, Krista was inducted into the Western Australian Women’s Hall of Fame in 2011, awarded the Human Rights Awards Young People’s Medal in 2012, listed in the Australian Financial Review and Westpac’s 100 Women of Influence Young Leader category in 2013 and a finalist in the Telstra Business Women’s Awards in both the Corporate and Private and Young Business Woman categories in 2015.

Krista has also represented Western Australia in international forums including the U.S. State Department’s International Visitors Leadership Program in 2015, Child Rights Taskforce and UNICEF delegation to the United Nations reporting on Australia’s progress under the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 2011 and as an Australian delegate to the Harvard Model United Nations (Harvard MUN) in the United States in 2010.