

Reception for the Indian Cricket Team - 17 December 2011

Hon'ble Minister Martin Ferguson,

Hon'ble Members of Parliament and Senators,

Fellow Excellencies, led by the Dean of the Diplomatic Corps and my good friend, Argentinian Ambassador Pedro Raul Villagra del Velgado,

Members of the Indian Community, who have joined us here today from all parts of Australia,

Gentlemen, Ladies,

Please join me in welcoming the Indian Cricket team.

Captain, Mahender Singh Dhoni, an icon of young India,

Flamboyant Vice-Captain, Virender Sehwag, who shares a unique record with Sir Don Bradman, of two knocks of over 300 in Test Cricket;

Our fabulous senior batsmen – Rahul Dravid, our Little Master Sachin Tendulkar and the very special VVS Laxman

The two bowlers who were also here in 2007-08 – Zaheer Khan and Ishant Sharma

And our dynamic young cricketers, our future Greats

Ravichandran Ashwin, Gautam Gambhir, Virat Kohli, Abhimanyu Mithun, Ajinkya Rahane, Umesh Yadav,

Pragyan Ojha, Wriddhiman Saha, Varun Aaron, Rohit Sharma, Vinay Kumar, Praveen Kumar

And finally, Coach Duncan Fletcher, Manager Shivlal Yadav and all the support staff,

It is not every High Commissioner who has the privilege of welcoming the Indian cricket team both at the beginning and the finish of her tenure. But what can I say – we have our selectors too, and I am grateful to mine for giving me an extended 4 year tour in Australia, and for leaving me in place to see our boys here again.

Since the last time they were here, so much has happened.

In cricket; And in the India Australia relationship.

India won the world cup, edging out Australia. One of our great Captains, the Nawab of Pataudi returned to the Pavillion; Australia lost to England and we lost to England too, that common enemy, before winning the ODI series.

Both Bajji and Andrew Symonds are in India, Andrew Symonds in the Big Boss House and Bajji outside. But even if you put them together in Big Boss, they'd be mates; they've played together in the same team in the IPL.

Over the last four years, there have been ups and there have been downs. But we have moved past that, in cricket as well as in diplomatic relations between India and Australia, and here I would like to quote from an Oration I heard a few days ago:

".....relations between the two teams are much better than they have been as far as I can remember."

Yes, that was from Rahul Dravid's beautiful Don Bradman Oration. For those of you who have not heard it or read it in full, I would recommend that you do.

As one of my friends said, it answers the question traditionally left floating in the air, "If only walls could speak".

Well The Wall has spoken, and magnificently.

In fact, Dravid 's Oration covered so much ground and so eloquently, that I'm going to let his words speak for me this evening, on India, on India Australia relations and what cricket means to our country.

But first, I'm going to answer a question he put to career diplomats:

".....It is often said that cricketers are ambassadors for their country; when there's a match to be won, sometimes we think that is an unreasonable demand. After all, what would career diplomats do if the result of a Test series depended on them, say, walking?"

Well I'm not sure what other career diplomats would do, Rahul, but I tell you what this particular one would not do : she would not walk.

And then there was this comment, and I quote:

"But, as ties between India and Australia have strengthened and our contests have become more frequent, we realise that as Indian players,

we stand for a vast, varied, often unfathomable and endlessly fascinating country.....

In India, cricket is a buzzing, humming, living entity going through a most remarkable time, like no other in our cricketing history. In this last decade, the Indian team represents more than ever before, the country we come from - of people from vastly different cultures, who speak different languages, follow different religions, belong to all classes of society.

I went around our dressing room to work out how many languages could be spoken in there and the number I have arrived at is: 15 including Shona and Akrikaans. Most foreign captains, I think, would balk at the idea. But, when I led India, I enjoyed it, I marvelled at the range of difference and the ability of people from so many different backgrounds to share a dressing room, to accept, accomodate and respect that difference. In a world growing more insular, that is a precious quality to acquire, because it stays for life and helps you understand people better, understand the significance of the other."

I ask you, could a professional diplomat have said it any better?

Perhaps not even Duleepsinhji, who was a cricketer and the Indian High Commissioner in Canberra once upon a time; one of my very distinguished predecessors, but one who played for England, a little before Independence.

In conclusion, we stand at an exciting time today, both in cricket and in India Australia relations. They are both in transition, on the way up.

Both our teams are in transition too, and this series will play a critical role in that transition.

May the better side win, and may that side be India!

Well, we are running to a very tight schedule and I will hand over the mike, to the Hon'ble Martin Ferguson, Minister of Resources, Energy and Tourism, a Friend of India, someone who plays with a straight bat, someone who I've had the honour of working closely with, from the time I arrived in Australia, on issues that go to the heart of the India Australia relationship.

Thank you all for your presence this evening, to give a rousing welcome to the Indian cricket team and to wish them well.
