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Australian Intercultural Society, Victorian Parliament IFTAR Dinner

Thank you very much for the privilege and honour of speaking tonight at this wonderful event.

On behalf of the Australian Football League, I want to congratulate the Australian Intercultural Society and thank you for all the great work that you do.

Can I also add my acknowledgement of the traditional owners of the land, and pay my respects to Elders past and present and future. The AFL is honoured by our relationship with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and we look forward to continuing to work with First Nation Australians on their journey to full recognition and equality.

To our Muslim friends and community, could I also say Ramadan Mubarak (Moo-barak), and the AFL sends its greetings and best wishes to the community during this holy month.

I am in a very privileged position to be working for a game that I grew up with and I love, and all the more privileged because our game is loved and cherished by so many people and communities in Australia.

To be one of the guardians of the game – even for a relatively short time given its long history in our country – is something I would never take for granted.

As the Head of Women’s Football, I have been part of sport as its absolute best – a vehicle for positive social leadership and change.

We know that sport delivers health benefits for individuals and society.

But we also know that sport delivers connections and belonging.

And the sense of belonging delivers enormous benefits to our communities and indeed to the nation.

Not only do we not take this for granted at the AFL – it has become central to our strategy to grow and strengthen the game.

A few years ago, the AFL refreshed its purpose –

And we all agreed as an organisation that our purpose was to Progress the Game so that everyone can share in its heritage and possibilities.

(PAUSE)

.... So **EVERYONE** can share in its heritage and possibilities.

And to be true to our purpose, we need to make sure our game is truly open and welcoming to all Australians.

A few years ago, Waleed Aly came to speak to the AFL CEO's and our Executive at the AFL – and he talked about the 'mirror test'.

That is – you can't be what you can't see.

His challenge for the AFL was to ask if the game that he loves could really stay Australia's number one game – if it didn't truly reflect modern Australia.

And we need to step up to this challenge.

Our country is one of the most successful multicultural nations on earth - we have come from nearly 200 countries, representing some 300 languages and nearly one in four of us is born overseas.

We know our game needs to not only reflect this diversity, we need to celebrate it, and nurture it.

We celebrate it by rejecting racism and division. We celebrate it by promoting unity and inclusion. We celebrate it by working respectfully with multicultural communities.

We nurture it by promoting and supporting leaders like Bachar Houli from Richmond, and Haneen Zarioka from the Giants, our first Muslim woman to play at the national level.

And we nurture it by committing resources to programs that encourage kids from all backgrounds to play our game, like the Bachar Houli and Next Generation multicultural Academies. We nurture it by investing in specialist staff and multicultural ambassadors.

When sport steps up – and we do things well– we don't simply just reflect society – we can also lead.

And there really has been no better example of this social leadership than the AFLW.

As our CEO, Gillon McLachlan said after our first season in 2017 – the AFLW was like a revolution – and it changed our game forever.

But we know it didn't just change **our** game – it has had a huge impact on many girls and women, and indeed on our whole community.

The messages of equality and inclusion have resonated far beyond the boundary line – and we have been part of a broader Australian discussion about women's sport and the right of girls to equally participate at every level of the sporting landscape.

The AFLW and Women's Australian football have changed clubs from the elite to the grass roots level – with an enormous influx of girls and women at every level.

And the women who play AFLW have become role models - there are many fantastic stories of inspiration and achievement.

That inspiration has continued in 2019 with season 3 of the AFLW, culminating in 53,000 people attending our grand final at Adelaide Oval.

They say a picture tells a thousand words and I would like to share with you 5 images captured by celebrated AFL photographer Michael Willson.

They are the images of season three of AFLW, but they are so much more than that.

1. The Future – a competition that provided inspiration in every state and territory in our nation.

Opening night in Geelong. New heroes and role models. Georgie Rankin.

The opportunity.

The passion, the possibility, the visibility.

2. 921 Days – Signed to AFLW in July 2016, a knee injury September 2016 – debut against Melbourne at Casey Fields February 2019.

Kiara Bowers, nicknamed Turbo. Unwavering dedication to her dream of playing AFLW through immense adversity. Don't let anyone tell you to give up on your dreams.

3. Its more than just football – The moment that our hearts where in our throats. Oh no, not our Erin. The first to her side, her co-captain and friend Chelsea. Although the body was broken in that moment, the unbreakable bond of your team and in deed a moment that highlighted the bond that is women's football with opposition players with their own defining moment coming to Erin to show their respect and admiration.
4. It really is more than just football – Michael Willson's image of Tayla Harris I hope is a moment in time where we all reflect and take time to consider the way we interact and deal with each other as human beings. It is an image of an athlete, a footballer in full flight, doing what they love, their passion. What they are good at and what they are paid to do, their job. The fact that this athlete is female should not be relevant to the narrative.
5. 53,034 flocking to Adelaide oval. They kept on coming and coming. Australian Football, women's football. A record crowd. More than a crowd – fans, supporters, community, our future. GenW.

I also want to highlight Haneen Zrieka from the Giants tonight. (**Haneen image on screen)

As I said, she is our first Muslim AFLW player, drafted by the Giants in 2017, delisted at the end of 2018 after not playing a single game and picked back up at the draft later that year and she finally played her first game in the opening round of 2019 against Brisbane.

This is a big deal for Haneen, her family and her community.

On Friday the 15th of March, Haneen was in Canberra due to play a game against the Geelong Cats at the Manuka Oval, when the peaceful worshippers in two Christchurch mosques were attacked, and 51 people murdered.

Haneen's first reaction was that she could not play, that she should not play, but her mentor from her junior club in Sydney's West, Amna Karra-Hassan called her and implored her to play the game for the sake of her community. "People from our community need hope today" Amna said to her.

Haneen has talked since about the role of the Club that day. Her coach, Alan McConnell asked his players at the pre-game meeting - "Has anyone seen the news today?" – and continued: "We have a young Muslim player, we need to get around her, and we are going to wear black arm bands to show our sorrow and respect".

Haneen's family was well and truly extended that day to include her AFLW family, that wanted to support her, protect her and lift her up when she needed it most.

Both clubs that day observed a minute's silence, and their actions helped lead the AFL's response to those terrible events.

Post game, Zrieka received a flood of messages from AFLW colleagues from other clubs – players she had never met offering her support.

This is our vision of inclusion at the most simple and personal level – standing with our friends, teammates and colleagues during that terrible traumatic time, and rejecting the racism and fear that underpinned that act of violence.

This is connection and belonging.

And at the national level, The AFL is extremely proud of our relationship with the Australian Muslim community, and I am pleased to say we are hosting our own IFTAR dinners in Melbourne and Sydney over the coming weeks.

And it would seem that there has never been a more important time for leaders in sport, Government and the community to stand together to celebrate diversity, inclusion and equality.

At the Preston Mosque in the days following the events of Christchurch, our Premier, Dan Andrews said to the community – “You are supported, you are valued, you are a central component of that multi-faith, multicultural Victoria that we have built over a long time.”

The AFL also stands strong with the Muslim community, and we know that

real sports fans don't see colour, race, religion or background – they see athletic talent, loyalty to club, courage on the field of play, and commitment to team.

Thanks so much for the opportunity to speak tonight.