

Australia Day Address Australian Unity Australia Day Breakfast 2001

by:

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Mr Castleman, Mr Sibree, Mr Clarke, ladies and gentlemen. First of all I would like to pay my respects to Mrs Joy Murphy and the other Wurundjeri elders, to acknowledge that we are meeting on their land and to thank them for sharing this occasion with me.

Secondly, I would like to acknowledge Australian Unity, it and one of its predecessor bodies - the ANA - has a proud record in promoting national development, the national spirit, and in the context of today's celebration, since 1883 the promotion of Federation. The ANA sponsored lecture tours, printed and distributed pamphlets, and discussed the issue at countless meetings and conferences. Perhaps most important were the Corowa Conference 1893, supporting John Quick's call for a Constitutional convention, and the Bendigo Conference in 1898 which cemented Victorian support for the Constitution Bill. Since 1888, ANA also strongly promoted the celebration of Australia Day, 26th January, as a National holiday.

It is, of course, a very great honour to give this 2001 Australia Day address. I bring three particular perspectives to the occasion. First, until 8 hours ago, I served as Australian of the Year and as such travelled extensively to every State and Territory and interacted with a wide diversity of community groups. It is a matter of great satisfaction that the Australian Day Council has chosen such a distinguished Australian of the Year for 2001, General Peter Cosgrove, whose appointment will be welcomed by everyone.

Secondly, until a month ago, I was Deputy Chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and met so many wonderful people from our indigenous communities. Thirdly, in my capacity as Chairman of the Centenary of Federation Victoria Committee, I have been helping over the last two and a half years to plan Victoria's celebrations throughout 2001 for this very major birthday. We wish to do this with dignity and serious purpose, Australia's 100th birthday year should leave something substantial behind. I very much acknowledge Australian Unity as a most generous sponsor and as our educational partner.

Aboriginal Reconciliation

Inevitably the first issue we must address is how to embrace the first Australians, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, into an inclusive view of today, the 26th January. I am of course aware of the fact that some indigenous activists would like to term the 26th January "Invasion Day" and would like to see the date of our National day moved. I believe the much bigger challenge is to face the fact that the 26th January 1788 changed the lives of Australia's first peoples radically and irreversibly. It gradually opened up an alternative way of living, but with insufficient thought and effort going into the question of how the better aspects of the alien culture could mingle with the ancient traditions, spirituality and artistic heritage of the first nation's people. All the work of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation has made it abundantly clear that the great majority of indigenous people want to live in one Australia; want to share in its destiny; want to participate in and contribute to its progress; but at the same time, want the recognition and respect that their status and millennia-old civilisation so clearly warrant. This is the central issue in symbolic reconciliation, twinned with practical reconciliation as the two faces of a coin.

The people's movement for Aboriginal reconciliation in the Year 2000 was marvellous to behold: A million people participating in the various bridge walks; two billion people witnessing an Olympic Games redolent with indigenous achievement and reconciliation symbolism; tripartisan commitment to greater effort in redressing indigenous disadvantage. As our Federation embarks on its second century we must ensure that the momentum in both practical and symbolic reconciliation is maintained. This means that all of you must give your utmost support to the new Foundation, Reconciliation Australia, so ably led by Shelley Reys and Fred Chaney as Co-chairs.

The Knowledge Century

Australia's second century and the world's 21st century will most assuredly be the knowledge century. In a largely borderless, highly deregulated, harshly competitive and internet-linked world, knowledge, skills and technologies will be the new currency. Education at all levels, primary, secondary, higher, technical, continuing and workplace-based, will hold the key to progress and prosperity, both for individuals and for nations. Such a century should, logically, be able to build a better world. But how to harness this knowledge to good purpose in a world riven with strife, marked by an increasing gap between "haves" and "have-nots", confused by the competing claims of further economic development and the health of the global eco-system? Only, I believe, by recognising several essential and simple truths. First is the role of science and technology. There is in each one of us a deep longing for harmony with nature. Who does not thrill to a beautiful sunset, a pristine rainforest, an azure sea lapping at a white sand beach? This thirst can lead to an Arcadian illusion; a hankering after some simpler, purer past; a belief that science is a monster, responsible for all our problems. The truth is more complex. Before the industrial revolution, Arcadia belonged to the few. Ignorance, poverty, hunger and disease were the constant companions of the many. Of course the power of science and technology is immense and it can be misused. Yet paradoxically the only methods of correction depend on more science and technology. Cities and rivers can be cleaner, soils can be less saline and more fertile, the horror of drug abuse can be combated, the reduction of biodiversity can be halted, but only through disciplined use of the fruits of appropriate research. Moreover, the research will not depend on the natural sciences alone, increasingly the multifactorial nature of our problems demands research in the social sciences and the humanities as well. Cooperative multidisciplinary teams will be the engines of progress.

This brings me to the second simple truth, namely the importance of leadership and trust. The role of governments in crafting and shaping the directions of change remains critical, both within each nation and even more importantly among the nations acting as ensembles. Our lack of trust in political leadership has gone too far, our cynicism threatens to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. Restoring civility to public debate must surely be a priority for the knowledge century. So must reform of the United Nations system, where the specialised agencies such as the World Health Organization, UNICEF and The World Bank have such a major role to play in applying research results in developing countries.

The third simple truth is the most important. The Darwinian struggle which resulted in 21st century homo sapiens has left us with a darker and a lighter side. The dark side, cruelty, aggression, selfishness surely conferred survival advantage in the jungle. The lighter side, a capacity for compassion and altruism, a brain adapted for abstract thinking and long-term problem-solving did so too, but this lighter side has also been much shaped by civilisation. To solve the quite unnecessary and scandalous problem of poverty in the world it is essential that the knowledge century sees the lighter side emerge triumphant. The total funding flows for overseas development assistance are simply inadequate. If the richer nations all acceded to the United Nations plea that 0.7% of GDP were made available for aid programs, poverty could be conquered within 20 years. Australia's contribution, for example, is only a third of that, and the United States' much lower again. Poverty is a major factor in disease, which is why scourges like HIV-AIDS, malaria and diarrhoeal diseases are so common in Africa and South Asia. Poverty foments

rebellion, threatening world stability. So there are really quite selfish reasons why the rich countries should invest in poverty reduction.

I have had the very great good fortune of participating in one major \$2 billion initiative in international aid known as the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisation, catalysed by a magnificent gift from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. This is bringing much-needed vaccines to the 70 poorest countries of the world, with possible saving of 3 million children's lives per year. This is one example where a public sector-private sector partnership really can make a difference.

Research and Development in the Political Spotlight

For the first time in living memory, research and development, innovation and entrepreneurship, and the educational underpinning thereof, are shaping up to be major issues in the forthcoming Federal election. The Government is poised to respond, next week, I believe, to several key reports all arguing for more support of R&D. The Opposition has already voiced its commitment to the knowledge nation. Perhaps we might even see a bidding war emerge, giving our somewhat embattled academic sector renewed hope.

This takes the debate about the knowledge century to a new level and it is my earnest hope that, after the necessary sparring cements in place the policies of the two major parties, we can then continue the debate after the 2001 Federal election in a bipartisan spirit. State governments, too, have a big role to play and I commend the work of Premier Brack's Knowledge, Innovation, Science and Engineering Council in this regard.

Australia Day and National Pride

Australia Day is about national pride, not in a narrow, jingoistic way but in a reflective, positive and forward-looking way. In this Centenary Year, as we learn a little more about the history of Federation, as we marvel at the emergence and growth of a free, stable tolerant, richly multicultural democracy, we should also recognise that there is a long way to go before the bountiful harvest of the first 100 years reaches all Australians. In the second century, let us build both the attitudes and the structures to remove ignorance, poverty and discrimination from Australia. There is room here both for our sturdy individualism and for concerted action by governments, community groups and corporations. Century of Federation Victoria's 100 hours project is a good example of such a partnership. It has been a privilege to share this first hour of Australia's 100th birthday with you, and I should now like to invite all of you to toast Australia and its second 100 years.