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**CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY**

Australia Day allows us to reflect on our history, to express our pride in Australia, and to honour our great achievers.

It also marks the true start of the New Year. Everyone's back at work, the kids are heading back to school, the tennis is about to finish and football's about to take over the sports pages. Australia Day marks the moment when most of us move from sun, surf and sand back to the hard grind of ordinary working life.

Australia Day holds mixed meanings for our indigenous people. Unlike the national day of many other countries it doesn't celebrate triumph over external enemies, independence from colonial masters, or unification of disparate tribes. That's why it's as much a moment for reflection as for celebration.

As we face the commencement of 2009, the public mood in Australia could best be described as apprehensive. Our mood is different from a year ago. A new government, a supercharged mining boom and a soaring national income made early 2008 an optimistic time. We felt good.

As we all know, the Australian community's optimistic assumptions were brutally overturned by the global financial crisis during the ensuing year. While Australia faced the impact of the global crisis in better shape than almost any other country, everyone has been affected by the economic and financial turmoil that followed.

There is little doubt that 2009 is shaping up to be tough. But exactly how tough is partly up to us. Australian governments, businesses, and workers aren't inert objects in the midst of a freak storm. How we respond to the challenge is just as important as the challenge itself.

2008 was an amazing time to be a senior minister in a new government. We had to fulfil our election commitments, recalibrate fiscal settings, then change them again. And in my case, start a complete overhaul of the public sector, reforming the way government functions.

We begin 2009 with a great deal on our plate. We have a lot of short-term challenges. We have to stimulate growth and jobs. We have to strengthen our financial sector. We have to rebuild our dilapidated infrastructure.

But we will never lose sight of the longer term. Investing in skills, in economic capacity, in sustainability. Our central goal is long-term sustainable growth. We have to revive growth in the face of the global economic crisis, but we've also got to ensure it's sustainable.

The Australian cricket team is in a similar position. After years of outstanding success driven by McGrath, Warne, Gilchrist, Hayden and Langer, the wheel has turned. It always does. Mining booms don't last forever, and nor does sporting dominance. The rebuilding moment inevitably arrives.

History shows that the path to sporting resurgence requires you to do three things: attack, change, and invest in youth. And Australian optimism and energy invariably do the job.

A modern nation isn't quite the same as a national sporting team, but the same principle applies. When things get tough, we have a choice. Do we go on the front foot, or the back foot?

It's easy to be overwhelmed by the tidal wave of bad news. Australia's economy is already copping a serious battering. But recovery won't just happen. Our collective commitment will determine how well we weather the storm, and how quickly we return to strong growth.

It's the nature of public debate in a democracy that it invariably focuses on what's wrong, not what's right. The pessimism and fear generated by the global financial crisis has dominated our media for months.

I think that Australia Day is the ideal moment to pause and take stock about what is *right* in Australia. High living standards, immense natural beauty, skilled adaptable people, individual freedoms, robust businesses and democratic governments are all things that we take for granted. Our markets are broadly competitive and well regulated, our governments are functional and our citizens are fairly physically secure. Sure, there are plenty of problems and plenty of flaws. There are lots of things I want to change about Australia, but I still believe we inhabit the best country on earth. We aren't the world's best at everything, there are many things that need improvement, but the overall mix is hard to beat.

What we make of our innate strengths in challenging times is a true test of national character. Introspection, hand-wringing and vacillation won't protect us from the global economic slowdown. They'll make it worse.

As a longstanding student of Australian history, I've always seen the phrase "have a go" as emblematic of the Australian character. Emancipated convicts establishing farms, diggers scrabbling

for gold, soldiers volunteering to fight in world wars, migrants adapting to a new life, workers building a modern nation, all helped shape this spirit.

We can see this “have a go” spirit in Lionel Rose’s amazing journey from Jackson’s Track to world champion. In John Cade’s path from prison camp to discovery of lithium treatment for bipolar disorder. In Weary Dunlop’s indomitable resolve in the face of unspeakable horrors. In Kerryn McCann’s amazing win in the Commonwealth Games Marathon.

We can see our spirit in the extraordinary story of Takeover Target, the horse bought for a song by a Queanbeyan taxi-driver that has taken the world by storm. Only last week we could see it in the emotional public embrace of Jelena Dokic. Australians ignored her troubled past and earlier rejection of our country, because she’s been able to put that behind her and have a go.

Australians revere survival against the odds. That’s why the extraordinary stories of Stuart Diver, Lincoln Hall and the Beaconsfield miners captivated the nation. We are slowly beginning to recognise the amazing strength and resilience of Australia’s indigenous people in the face of overwhelming challenges. That survival against the odds lies at the heart of our national story.

The Australian character forged in the modern era is a proud and distinctive one. We try hard, we attack, and we take risks. We’re pragmatic, energetic and resourceful.

Crisis points in our history have invariably brought out the inner strength and resilience in our character. From indigenous Australians responding to European settlement through to depressions, world wars and genuine threats to national survival, our distinctive national character has been forged in tough times. Australia’s history has been punctuated by periods of great challenge and tribulation. The human cost of responding has sometimes been vast, but those responses have shaped who we are.

I believe the Government’s response to the global financial crisis reflects this spirit. We moved quickly to stimulate the economy. We moved quickly to protect our banking system. And we refused to abandon fundamental reform tasks like tackling climate change.

As 2009 unfolds, you’ll see more in the same vein. We’ll keep fighting for jobs and growth. We’ll keep pursuing major reforms. We’ll have a go.

I think Australian businesses and workers will do likewise. We’ll roll up our sleeves and get on with it. We’ll take risks. We’ll work hard. And we’ll overcome the spirit of gloom and pessimism that’s rampant around the world.

The global crisis is about psychology as well as economics. Recovery won’t just be about the national balance sheet. It will also be about the national character.

Around this time 38 years ago Australian cricket was also at a turning point. Terrorised by English fast bowler John Snow, thwarted by dour, defensive batsmen, the Australians seemed out of their depth. Yet as the series unfolded, things began to change. Greg Chappell made a hundred in his first test. Dennis Lillee played his first test and took five wickets in his first innings. Rod Marsh hit his straps after a shaky start. Ian Chappell was made captain.

To a passionate fourteen year old cricket fan, a single over symbolised the change that occurred in the Australian team. In the very first over of Australia's first innings in the Adelaide test, Keith Stackpole hit 16 runs off John Snow. He belted Snow's first 2 balls for four. The sense of inferiority that had dogged the Australians was broken. Australia still lost the series, but went on to dominate world cricket for many years thereafter.

Defiance in adversity is at the heart of our national character. When the going gets tough our natural instinct is to attack. We go on the front foot.

We're a nation of fighters. The tougher the challenge, the greater our effort.

I believe that we can look forward to 2009 with a sense of resolve and cautious optimism. It will be tough, there's no doubt. But we will get through, meet the challenges and emerge stronger. And I've got no doubt the Australian cricket team will do likewise.

We'll recover from the shock the world has delivered to us and we'll rebound. On Australia Day 2010, I believe we will look back on a year of great achievement in the face of enormous adversity.