

Australia Day

26th January 2010

Melbourne, Victoria

We meet here on the lands of the Kulin nation. As we pay our respects to their elders we are reminded of the different ways Australia Day has been, and is, understood across this continent. Australia Day commemorates the landing of the First Fleet, the day on which Captain Arthur Phillip claimed the east coast of Australia for the British Crown. With this action, the sovereignty of the Cadigal or Eora people over these lands was swept aside.

By the afternoon of 26th January 1788 around 1,300 people, some military and many convicts, landed at Sydney Cove, and began the settlement that in time became a nation called Australia.

That this day was only sporadically celebrated over the intervening decades says something not only about the Day, but also about the becoming of Australia.

Australia Day was adopted by Victoria in 1931 and was strongly supported by the ANA (Australian Natives Association) the forerunner of Australian Unity. It was not always called Australia Day, being variously known as Foundation or Anniversary Day. And it was not until 1946 that the Commonwealth and all Australian states declared unified celebrations. A single national public holiday on 26th January was only put into place in 1994 (Kwan, 2007). It is, therefore, largely in the lifetimes of the people sitting in this room that Australia Day has assumed an important place in the ceremonial and symbolic life of the nation.

So in response to the generous invitation from Australian Unity to speak this morning, I would like to consider the meaning of Australia Day. I realise this is both well-trodden and difficult ground. This question is debated each year as we consider why we gather and how we should gather on this day. For on this day we say something to ourselves, and to others, about Australia. Each year there are concerns that the Day encourages nationalism that is really jingoism; that the celebrations through barbecue, beer and beach, trivialise rather than promote

serious engagement with citizenship; and that we remain unsure of how we should approach this national moment and what it means to us.

I think of all the people who will gain their Australian citizenship today in town hall ceremonies across the nation. A friend of mine from Bute in Scotland (a location with a wonderful punning quality for Australians) along with her brother will gain Australian citizenship today. My husband Glyn and I will celebrate that event with her later. Like her, those who choose to become citizens today have made a conscious decision to join us. Unlike those who gained that right by birth, they gave thought to why they would choose Australia and what they expect. It is a solemn decision - but one made easier by the fact that Australia allows dual citizenship. We give our new citizens the right to maintain a formal link to their homeland. This says something about Australian nationhood - we embrace our immigrants.

Indeed in this lies one key to how we understand Australia by acknowledging its diverse people - whether we are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, our parents and grandparents were born here, we were born here, or we chose to belong here. Of the people celebrating Australia Day today, around one quarter was born outside Australia. When the 2006 Census asked us to nominate our ancestry, over one third of those who answered nominated Australian, meaning almost two-thirds claimed ancestry from other countries or that they were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders. These dry statistics make clear our diversity - one nation bringing together many origins.

And so, the slow and recent development of an Australia Day mirrors the unfurling of the idea of Australia. We are not a nation born of rupture from another realm, nor of splintering from empire. We are young and still unfinished, since we remain tied constitutionally to a kingdom that gave us much of our past, but will not be so central to our future. We are still in the process of unfurling this nation of ours. Its future political and constitutional shape remains contested, and we all know it is not finished. I would argue that before us remains the task of bringing to fruition a political settlement for our nation that recognises the indigenous occupation that is our foundation, the British and European legacy that has shaped our democracy and our values, and yet brings into being an independent nation, a republic, that formally enshrines the equal standing of our citizens.

Australia Day is significant because it marks a beginning, but not an end, to the becoming of the Australian nation. So we cannot seek the meaning of Australia Day in the politics or constitution of our nation, or in symbols like the flag, or in a notion of ourselves as a single people. Australia Day represents the enfolding of many peoples in a celebration, not only of who we are but who we might be. The meaning unfurls slowly over decades, as we become a nation with stories to tell. Some stories, such as Gallipoli and the Anzacs and the Kokoda Trail came quickly to national consciousness and have become the stuff of pilgrimage. These tragic moments of loss and bravery represent some, but definitely not all, of our stories. To find our stories and to turn them to purposes that bind but do not suffocate, that inspire but do not provoke, should be the purpose of Australia Day.

I would like to touch on stories of country, of bonds and of fate, since these themes capture some of our history, our experience and our attitudes. Today many Australians will go to that place we cling to - the beach, where land and sea meet. We have the luxury in many parts of this land of walking alone on a beach stretching beyond our sight. We turn to see our footprints brushed away by the wind that sweeps from the shore. Understanding Australia as country, vast and unpredictable - a space in which we are insignificant - is something shared by the most recent arrival and the oldest indigenous person.

Not for nothing did every schoolchild of my generation learn to

*"love a sunburnt country,
A land of sweeping plains,
Of ragged mountain ranges,
Of droughts and flooding rains,
I love her far horizons,
I love her jewel sea,
Her beauty and her terror"*

...

*"An opal-hearted country,
A wilful, lavish land ..."¹.*

And to recognise the force in Kenneth Slessor's

*"And over the flat earth of empty farms,
The monstrous continent of air floats back,
Coloured with rotting sunlight and the black,*

¹ Dorothea Mackellar "My Country"

Bruised flesh of thunderstorms:"².

Artists caught and were caught by the haunting combinations of the desolate and the brilliant light, from Arthur Streeton, through Sidney Nolan and Arthur Boyd to Fred Williams and Rosalie Gascoigne. Many of our writers speak of life in the landscape from Marcus Clarke to Eleanor Dark and Patrick White. And Aboriginal stories of the dreamtime and symbolic representation of country in works from artists such as Rover Thomas, Clifford Possum Tjapaltjarri and Emily Kngwarreye speak of Australia to the world.

In word and song and picture the symbol of country, intense and unyielding, enduring, running to its own rhythms, speaks strongly to all of us. The vastness of this land, with what Marcus Clarke called its 'weird melancholy' or the 'beauty of loneliness' reminds us how faint are our footprints.

And from this great loneliness, what are the ties that bind us and of what are they forged? This day recognises our beginnings as a British penal colony. 26th January is also the date of the Rum Rebellion of 1808, argued to be our first constitutional crisis, with the overthrow of Governor Bligh led by Major George Johnston of the NSW Corps. (And in my own family history is a little piece of that rebellion).

In this early history we see antecedents of Australian social character. A penal colony brings with it a deep and ambiguous relationship to authority. Popular views of convicts have emphasised subjection and punishment, harsh and sometimes undeserved. Yet it is clear from early days that there was rule of law, notions of what was government time and personal time, of reward as well as punishment. There developed a level of administrative impartiality, an expectation by convict, emancipist and free alike that they could apply to the authorities for redress of wrongs and protection of property and person.

There were few, and no successful, convict uprisings. The so-called Rum Rebellion can be argued to be over the proper application of the law. It was a dispute between the Governor and the military, resolved peacefully through the courts and the installation of a new Governor, Macquarie.

² Kenneth Slessor "South Country"

In 1855 before all transportation of convicts to our colonies had ceased, the first Acts creating parliamentary democracy in New South Wales and Victoria had passed and the vote extended to a much wider section of the male population (including workers) than in Britain. By 1856 Victoria had become the first place in the world to legislate for the secret ballot, which prevented pressure on voters. And, in the next few years, full manhood suffrage and a range of other changes safeguarded democracy. By 1895 women in South Australia had gained the vote and the right to sit in their parliament - a first for the world. In 1902 women gained similar rights at Commonwealth level ahead of every other country³.

As John Hirst reminds us, this was a colony 'in which no permanent bars or exclusions at odds with a free society ever took hold'⁴. In Australia's beginnings economic success rather than hereditary privilege was paramount. The social distinctions between those who came free, those who became free, and those who were born here were limited. The stain on this record was not the convict but the lack of recognition granted to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

The land of the 'fair go' is one that requires law to be applied fairly to all. It has respect for the impartial authority of the law, if not necessarily for personal authority derived from position. We see this in the larrikin in Australian popular culture, an idea that remains strong with its notion of not taking authority too seriously. But this egalitarian streak stands alongside, and relies on, a system that treats all with fairness. These are not values shaped in the overthrow of authority, more in the gentle jesting at position. This is not social support of the rebel but tolerance of the maverick.

With this egalitarianism, and from the cauldron of World War I, came a strong affirmation of mateship, the loyalty that binds people together. Mateship has become a loaded term in Australia. But at its purest it is the story of tribes not bound by religion, race, status, (or even by gender). Mateship speaks of a social bond that is vital for people drawn from all quarters of the globe. So while the stories of egalitarianism and mateship and even

³ New Zealand women gained the right to vote in 1893 but not the right to sit in parliament until 1919.

⁴ John Hirst, "Freedom on the Fatal Shore", Black Inc, Melbourne, 2008, p.75

the 'fair go' have their dark side, they also speak to and from the experiences of our young nation.

And finally for Australian character there is the role of opportunity and fate. For in Australia, much is made of luck or what Tim Winton in *"Cloudstreet"* called "the shifty shadow". The luck in the lucky country combines the opportunity to seize a future not previously imagined, as well as to live a life buffeted by circumstance as in the dark fate of Henry Handel Richardson's *"The Fortunes of Richard Mahony"* or the humorous fatalism in Joseph Furphy's *"Such is Life"*. The Australian story recognises the opportunities provided, but sees luck or fate in many of the outcomes.

A little personal family history gives examples of the way opportunity and fate conjoin in Australian stories. There are many people in Australia who share these family histories or the kind of experiences recounted here.

Among my earliest male forebears were two members of the Rum Corps, one an officer, the other a sergeant, arriving in 1807 and 1793 respectively; two convicts, one transported for life at age 23 in 1811 for horse stealing: the other, a blacksmith and father of 35 years, sentenced in 1831 to 7 years for stealing brass; a merchant marine arriving in the 1820s; a gentleman arriving in the 1870s, all from England, as well as a gentleman from Scotland arriving in 1820 and a teacher from Limerick in Ireland in the 1830s. The women - harder to trace - were in general either poor Irish immigrants who came to New South Wales and Victoria in the early to mid 1800s, or were born in Australia, the first in 1797.

Both those members of the NSW Corps (to give its respectable title) were involved in deposing Bligh and in the subsequent trial. Both received land from various Governors, the sergeant in Sydney and the officer more substantial holdings in the Hunter. Both held positions where they dispensed justice, the sergeant as town constable and the officer as a magistrate. The merchant marine and the Scottish gentleman shared these opportunities, benefiting from government land grants in the Hunter and from convict labour, and as with other station owners they became magistrates in the district. There are stories of rough and also of humane justice from these men, and of involvement in the early politics of the colony. As early settlers they had engagement with the local indigenous people, but apparently no history of them or their workers being in direct conflict. The only direct conflict appears to have been

a confrontation with bushrangers. The ex-mariner was at one time dismissed from his magistracy and charged unsuccessfully with cattle stealing. The most mild-mannered and gentle of these men appears to have brought the plant pest, the prickly pear, from Scotland to the plains of New South Wales!

The New South Wales-born daughter of that Rum Corps sergeant worked as a parlour maid on the Macarthur's Belgenny Farm in Camden. There she met the convict transported for horse stealing, who had become a coachman. They married in 1814 and had 13 children. This convict, transported for life, was given a ticket of leave and eventually an absolute pardon on the testimonials of the Macarthurs. He became Australia's first Royal Mail coachman, running coaches from Sydney to Parramatta and pioneering the mail coach run over the Blue Mountains from Parramatta to Bathurst. He ended his life a respected church-going man of property. His children remembered their grandfather, the ex-sergeant, as a man who often urged rebellion against their parents.

The other convict, a blacksmith, was posted to an employer in Maitland, had a ticket of leave within four years of arrival and a certificate of freedom four years later. Supported by his employer, he petitioned successfully soon after he arrived to have his wife and four children join him from England. He also acquired property and lived out his life in Australia blamelessly, eventually leaving Maitland for Sydney. And his family married Irish immigrants, who lived their lives at work in the city of Sydney.

The daughter of the merchant marine married the boy from the station next door. And he lost the family property in Scone during drought, as her father had done with their station in an earlier drought. Her daughter married a recent English gentleman immigrant. Together they had 12 children born across the east coast of Australia from Rockhampton in the north to Barnawartha in the south. Among these children was one, my grandfather, born in Santa Rosa, California. He married the daughter of the family descended from the convict coachman and the currency lass.

And in this group of those who came free, became free or were born free, not much can be read of their future from their beginnings. Convicts gained tickets of leave and pardons and acquired considerable property, some to be held and some to be quickly lost. Some gentlemen prospered and some did not, ending in gentle penury. The

Irish, whatever their beginnings lived working lives. Some were part of great events and explorations of the land. Not all that was done or said by them bears close examination from today's vantage point. By the 1840s the men, including those emancipated, were contributing to the community and participating in its elections. Life was what they made of it and they took their chances. Property was gained and lost in droughts and downturns; jobs were won and lost in strikes and depressions. And such was life.

To be Australian meant being able to rely on current and future actions and not remain in your assigned place. As fate would have it, chance was fickle; the shadow could fall as well as rise.

So many of our Australian stories reflect these themes of country, of fate and of the bonds we have forged from our freedoms. Others will see the stories differently, because each of these themes has darkness and light. But taken together they suggest something of the experience that has shaped our expectations and us. As citizens of Australia, I would suggest we say on this day

- That we should tread lightly on this great south land of ours respecting 'its beauty and its terrors';
- That we will cherish the freedoms that allow us to be treated as equals and extend this to others, recognising that mates don't ask who you are or where you are from, because as the anthem says 'we've boundless plains to share'; and
- That we should rejoice in our luck and the luck of others for the opportunities we all have, but reach out with compassion to those the 'shifty shadow' has dashed down.

And be joyful. Australia Day is a moment for celebration of new beginnings. We can celebrate in the peaceful contemplation of country among friends and family. We celebrate having a say in the way our nation will unfurl. And this is just what we should expect.

Margaret Gardner AO