

ADDRESS BY

MAJOR GENERAL MICHAEL JEFFERY, AC, AO (Mil), CVO, MC (Retd)

ON THE OCCASION OF

THE ORDER OF AUSTRALIA NATIONAL SYMPOSIUM

AT RYDGES LAKESIDE

**"AUSTRALIA IN THE 21ST CENTURY - CHALLENGES AND
OPPORTUNITIES"**

FRIDAY, 15 FEBRUARY 2013

**The Honourable Shane Stone, AC, QC (National
President)**

**Air Commodore Peter McDermott, AM, CSC
(National Chairman) and Mrs Heather McDermott**

Mr Derek Robson, AM (Chairman, ACT Branch)

**Mr Len Goodman, AO (Conference Chairman) and
Mrs Joyce Goodman**

Association Members, Partners and Guests

Ladies and gentlemen. Friends all.

It is a pleasure to be with such a distinguished and long established group of nationally minded citizens, who through their individual and collective efforts have made such sterling contributions to the well being of Australia in all forms of public and private sector endeavour.

Today, we come together to examine practical ways in which the Association can further contribute to the prosperity of our nation. Australia starts from a base of decided advantage. Given who we are and what we stand for, we can show an increasingly troubled world there is a way for many cultures and religions to live together in harmony, albeit in accordance with fundamental Australian values.

Because the values that underpin a decent life universally - justice, tolerance and democracy - are part and parcel of our national ethos.

We live in a land blessed with space and resources - with creative and hard-working people. Our institutions are strong - with checks and balances in place to keep them that way.

We're genuinely multi-cultured and much the wiser and better country for it. We believe in enterprise - in "having a go". And we believe in justice for all, meaning "a fair go".

It is these values and attributes along with humour, the Outback, ANZAC and the Ashes that have shaped our particular identity.

Of course we face challenges that of themselves often bring opportunities and it is on just a few of these that I wish to address my remaining remarks.

Let's talk about governance. I feel there is an ongoing public disquiet and concern on the lack of political, media, public service and academic definition, evaluation and debate on the significant issues of our times and thus the lack of the essential longer term strategies to deal with them.

Personally I would like to see more public discussion and involvement, along with more bipartisan political agreement on key issues affecting the nation. Should major parties, both state and federal, agree on the broad directional focus on the big issues; for example, health, both regional and remote, terrorism, adapting to climate change, education, infrastructure, population - size and shape, food security, water and

soil, then argue over the details - timing, numbers, budgets etc; let's at least aim for some continuity of focus.

And why not bring in more expertise from the private sector and the universities to advise Ministers and the public service?

Can we and should we concentrate more on preventative measures, including the causal problems, as opposed to trying to fix things by closing the gate when the horse has already bolted. In a policy development and implementation sense, prevention might not have the political glamour attached to crisis action implementation: to be seen to be in charge, to be seen to be doing something, to be seen to be decisive, but potentially we could save the nation billions and in the case of health for example, so many

lives, if we opted for earlier and longer term preventative strategies. (Trachoma)

I am told for every dollar spent on prevention, we can save of the order of six or more in attempting cure.

We need a totally different approach to fiscal and budgetary management. Why can't our finance experts in the Order look at this?

Let's also rid ourselves of duplication of effort and employ as a starting base for the solution to most problems, the concept of finding and utilizing where practicable, world leading proven practice, be it in organ donation processes, soil and water management, urban design, or teaching kids to read, write, speak and add up.

We would save hundreds of millions in unnecessary report writing, and policy development and

implementation costs. It could change the whole culture of our public service for the better.

Let me now turn to some specific areas where the order might play a useful role.

One area of national significance that has bipartisan support is the common core education curriculum - a sensible approach well overdue. A component of that and of specific interest to me and perhaps OA members, might be in the way we address the teaching of Australian history.

I think we could do a great deal for both Aboriginal and national self esteem, particularly with the young, if we revamped the way we do it, by teaching it, warts and all, from 60 000 years ago instead of from 1788. There would be obvious time lines; aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, Portuguese, Dutch, British,

Modern. Could OA members help push this concept, and perhaps look at how best we could gather the necessary information to input into the national school history program?

For many years I have been concerned with the very high levels of family dysfunction in this country, with over 20% of our youth living in single parent families who often, through no fault of their own, are overly represented in our poverty statistics. Low income families have less representation in preschool participation, which impacts school readiness, subsequent academic performance and thus decreased employment opportunities, both in quality and quantity.

Family dysfunction is a huge challenge; indeed a critical challenge. So what can we do about it?

I have no doubt that the most important nurturing influence of all is a stable family environment, preferably, but I know not always possible, with Mum and Dad living happily together, providing love, guidance, care, financial support and sensible discipline, whilst inculcating ethical and spiritual values to their children. On the latter point, let me quote Leon Kass of the National Academy of Sciences:

"Here, perhaps is the most pernicious result of technological progress - more dehumanising than any actual manipulation or technique present or future. We are witnessing the erosion, perhaps the final erosion of the idea of man as something splendid or divine, and its replacement with a view that sees man, no less than nature, as simply raw material for manipulation and homogenisation."

It is only in such a caring family environment, that a child's social and intellectual development can flourish, and he or she can develop strong feelings of self worth and a sense of identity as a valued human being.

Broadly speaking, what a child absorbs through its mouth, ears and sight from 0 -3 years of age, sets its future course as a human being. So let's develop social policy parameters accordingly. Can the Association do some thinking on this?

I think also that society has to put far more effort in to preparing its young people to achieve stable relationships, be it brother to sister, boyfriend to girlfriend, husband to wife and so on. This is a fulsome subject in itself, but the impact of unstable relationships in the family sense is that too many children in our society do not have a stable base from

which to learn, develop and thrive and this is where the concept of mentoring comes to the fore.

Of course, mentoring is not a new concept.

Ancient civilizations, including our Indigenous Australians, mentored their young people in formal and testing preparation for assuming the responsibilities of adulthood. Perhaps we should consider some form of passage of rights into adulthood (voting age) for all our young people. It might involve community service of some sort, or knowledge of our history or system of government. Something that puts meaning into being privileged to have a vote.

Youth groups managed by good leaders provide a strong mentoring base, such that if every young boy and girl has the opportunity and encouragement to

belong to a well led organisation such as the cadets, Scouts, Guides, Police Rangers, surf lifesavers, environmental cadets, St John Ambulance and others, they will strengthen their sense of community belonging, learn new and valuable skills, challenge themselves to higher levels of achievement, increase their self esteem and markedly improve their employment opportunities.

As Governor of Western Australia, I was a strong supporter of a number of youth group organisations, where mentoring was a strong component of the programs taught. These programs had an immediate and positive impact on the participants, many of whom were previously marginalised or disadvantaged. There were measurable and substantial reductions in local juvenile crime and drug use, in social and intellectual development, and in substantially enhanced employment prospects.

A helping hand at the right moment; sustained encouragement and demonstrated belief in their charges' potential abilities – all of these can make a world of difference in forming the strength of character and attitude that produces adults who participate actively and positively in the working and social life of their communities.

But let's reduce the suffocating bonds of unnecessary red tape now binding youth group organizations, particularly in respect to an over-emphasis on safety that nullifies both enjoyment and challenge, and reduces the numbers of potential volunteer leaders because of the burden of paperwork involved.

I have the privilege of being Patron to the School Volunteer Program in Western Australia and also here in the ACT. SVP recruits and coordinates approved

volunteers as mentors into requesting schools. Many volunteers come from the seniors community and they mentor students identified as benefitting from one to one assistance at school, in consultation with the class teacher. The benefits to the participants are considerable, including improved literacy, numeracy and self esteem of the students. The mentors often feel that their service gives a reason and purpose to their lives and there is positive development of intergenerational relationships. The school community is supported, and in particular, the hard working teachers.

It is a wonderful program and I am sure that many Order of Australia members would be perfect as mentors, as part of the SVP, or could recruit suitable people to this proven initiative. Ultimately I would like to see this program expanded nationally. I cannot commend highly enough those SVP volunteers who

give of themselves and provide such sterling service to the wider community. Perhaps State branches of the order could take this up.

Another very good mentoring group is the school chaplaincy program which started off when I was Governor of WA in 1993 with I think 17 full time school chaplains. I gave it very active support at state and national levels. Now around 2600 schools Australia wide have highly appreciated access to chaplaincy services.

When WA principals were surveyed as to what they thought of the chaplaincy program, 93% replied that not only were their chaplains worthwhile, they were ‘indispensable’ to the social well-being of the school.

School Chaplaincy is a program some of you might well support.

The Australian community as a whole faces huge health challenges at a cost of over \$110 bn annually. More than 54% of Australian adults are overweight or obese, with men leading the charge at 65% and women at 45%. Many will be prime candidates for diabetes 2. Indeed 1.5 million Australians now have it and after 20 years with it 75% will contract diabetic retinopathy; severe vision impairment.

Further, even with all the education about the pitfalls of smoking we still have approximately 23% of the adult population on cigarettes. Our young men are statistically the highest group of smokers. Tobacco smoking is the largest single preventable cause of death and disease, mainly heart disease and lung cancer. The financial cost to the health system as a direct result of tobacco smoking is over 31 billion

dollars annually and smoking related diseases kill 15,000 people per year.

Adding to the mix is that 21% of our smokers drink at risky or high levels. Our alcohol consumption per capita is nothing to be proud of either with 2 standard drinks per day being the average consumed by 15 year olds and over.

Obesity, alcohol consumption, and smoking – all huge drains on our health system, our taxes and most significantly on the people whose health, wealth and life they impact.

How do we meet these challenges? Peer group leadership can be a strong incentive to positive change, particularly among the young. Sponsorship of peer group role models – for example in sport - can do wonders in reducing lifestyle risk. Could OA

sponsor one such role model in a particular sport on a sustained basis?

Sadly our Indigenous community is still overrepresented in health related issues with considerably lower life expectancies: 67 years for a male and 72 years for a female. 45% of our Indigenous are daily smokers and 17% drink alcohol at chronic or high risk levels. Too high a percentage continue to live in overcrowded dwellings; sometimes 16 to a modest dwelling.

Employment levels and opportunities are nowhere equal on a per capita basis and again there is a cycle to this. Employment is influenced by years 10 and 12 participation and tertiary attainment – these are influenced by school engagement and early childhood encouragement. Environmental factors such as substance abuse and family and community attitudes

affect all these outcomes, as do parental income, employment and education levels. But simply by reducing overcrowding at home we could rapidly improve health, school attendance and performance, and reduce substance abuse and family violence.

Perhaps there are members of our organisation with skill sets in designing relatively cheap but adequate modular or kit homes, and in training indigenous builders to both build and maintain them. But with such construction there also has to be training and accountability in basic home management.

School retention is greatly improved where special programs for Indigenous youth have been introduced. Take for example the work of The Clontarf Foundation under Gerard Neesham in WA. The Foundation trains young Aboriginal youth in elite sports but the quid pro quo is that the youngsters must

attend and perform at school. Gerard has established some 37 such sporting centres around Australia, all linked to school attendance. From my observations these young people represent some of the finest physical and mentally alert youngsters I have seen anywhere around the country.

Our Indigenous youth need support to get to school, stay at school and have the opportunity for a productive working career. Could OA members support the Clontarf Foundation in some way?

We can address much of our Indigenous Health issues at the grassroots level. So many young aboriginal children suffer from Otitis media – the main cause of hearing problems. You can imagine how hearing problems impacts on school performance. Where an indigenous community has a well run local swimming

pool the skin infections and ear perforation levels decrease markedly.

I have learnt from my own travels to the Aboriginal community of Yuendumu near the Tanami, that it is not just the building of a swimming pool that needs to occur but the ongoing maintenance and running of it. A local pool can have so many advantages in remote communities – including health benefits, something to do, or even as an educational incentive; ‘no school, no pool’.

At Yuendumu it was also clear to me that basic hygiene education needs to be addressed when the children are little; namely 2 - 5. This can be as simple as teaching and monitoring handwashing at the child care centre, then through primary school. A program of washing hands and faces, teaching the little ones that there are bugs they can't see – this sort of

education can be communicated to the Mums and the whole community benefits. We would solve 60% of aboriginal health problems at source, including blindness caused by trachoma through this one simple action. So let's reinforce the *upgrading* of childcare support in remote/outback communities and encourage capable people to serve there, including on a sustained part time, volunteer basis.

Finally I would like to address what I feel to be the most pressing issue of our times, not just for Australia but globally.

I speak of food security and no task is more important.

It is being recognised increasingly, that the greatest problem the world is going to face in coming years is in its capacity to almost double its food production to feed burgeoning populations (perhaps 9bn by 2050),

when the cleanliness, ready availability and distribution of fresh water is decreasing and much of the world's agricultural lands are being degraded or reduced (around 1% per year).

The same situation in respect to landscape degradation is broadly true in Australia where about 300m of our 550m ha of land is affected. I understand that up to 80% of our essential wet lands (the kidneys of our river systems) have been drained, there has been massive reduction of forests and woodlands, riparian zones have been destroyed, flood plains made inoperable, there has been over use of chemicals and leaching of residues into rivers, overgrazing etc, all of which have had a serious impact on soil health.

In WA salinity. Nationally wasteful and unnecessary evaporation of surface water is running at over 50% of our annual rainfall; five times the quantity of water in

all our rivers combined. Some 70% of essential forests and woodlands that have a major influence on temperature, precipitation and soil fertility, have been denuded.

The big picture however is that solutions are at hand. We simply have to recognise that we have them and then have the national will to implement them.

If we are successful and I am confident that we will be, we will not only ensure our nation's long term food security and prosperity, but we will show the way for so many other countries to quickly and economically fix their own landscape problems, and in so doing possibly help pre-empt the extreme social unrest and the ramifications that will surely follow, if hundreds of millions or more of the world's population goes hungry or thirsty.

So what must we do? Essentially we must manage our water, soil, plant and animal systems better, by regenerating our landscape through a greatly improved understanding and capacity to recreate where feasible, the unique natural processes that govern the productivity and resilience of our soils and in a nationally agreed and co-ordinated way.

I chair two groups dedicated to developing a national strategic plan to restore the health of the landscape. In my Soils For Life Program, we have established 20 demonstration farms around Australia that broadly replicate the Australian landscape and by year's end it will be 40. By using proven but practical farming methods, we have measured the sustainable productivity improvement and published the results on the web free of charge to the whole farming community.

Of new but great interest to me is the potential for algal farming to meet all our energy needs using the sun and brackish/salty water. I would have the scientists Order to follow this up with Julian Cribb as a first contact point.

I have also been recently appointed the National Advocate for Soil Health by the Prime Minister and am bringing together the various soil, water and land care, scientific and other relevant agencies to work together to recommend to government the broad national policy parameters needed measure our soil fertility as a first step, our water assets, availability shortfalls and distribution patterns as a second and the science then needed to support best practice regeneration methods across the country. Some of you may have technical, evaluation, research or writing skills that you could offer to help me in this vitally important area. If so, please get in touch.

I look forward to working with any individual or organization, including the Order of Australia, to achieve a common goal; namely a regenerated, sustainable landscape, leading to healthy soils, healthy food and animals and a healthier, more prosperous population.

May I conclude by mentioning the Queen Elizabeth Diamond Jubilee Trust, where in recognition of The Queen's outstanding 60 years of service as Head of the Commonwealth, CHOGM decided to establish a Trust whose key and achievable role will be to eliminate preventable blindness throughout the Commonwealth, with emphasis on trachoma.

In Australia this problem is one where thousands of our outback aboriginal population are at risk. We intend to deal with that, utilizing the know how of

existing global and national blindness organisations including World Vision, Vision 20/20 and the Fred Hollows Foundation. There will be spin offs from this program in more ably dealing with diabetic retinopathy and glaucoma in this country.

I am the Australian Chairman and we launched our fundraising program at Admiralty House on 11 February this year. It is a truly noble cause and it might be one in which the Order runs specific functions across the country in support. Please think about it.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have touched very briefly on just a few of the challenges ahead of us and hopefully provided insight into some possible opportunities to address them. In the end, effecting positive change comes down to individuals who work collegiately.

You all as recipients in the Order of Australia, have demonstrated individual capacities to go above and beyond the norm in improving the social condition, but the association with its intelligent and proven motivated membership can do more, by taking on meaningful tasks that resonate with the Australian people. Think about it and see what you can come up with as individuals, States or the national body. I think you will be pleasantly surprised.

Thank you.