

SPEECH BY

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

ON THE OCCASION OF THE

**ORDER OF AUSTRALIA – ACT BRANCH – AUSTRALIA DAY BREAKFAST
AT THE**

CANBERRA SOUTHERN CROSS YACHT CLUB

‘AUSTRALIA - CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES’

WEDNESDAY, 26 JANUARY 2011

General Peter Gration (Patron, Order of Australia, ACT Branch) and **Mrs Ann Gration**

Mr Len Goodman (Chairman, Order of Australia, ACT Branch) and **Mrs Joyce Goodman**

MAJGEN Steve Gower (Director, Australian War Memorial) and **Mrs Heather Gower**

Air Commodore Peter McDermott (Deputy National President, Order of Australia) and
Mrs Heather McDermott

Professor Brian O’Keeffe (Secretary of the Order of Australia Association Foundation)

Branch Committee Members

Members 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 social condition within Australia.

I am especially proud to have been personally associated with two award recipients in today’s Australia Day Honour’s list: Corporal Ben Roberts-Smith VC, MG, whom I had the pleasure of inducting into the Special Air Service Regiment and later presenting him with a very well deserved Medal of Gallantry in 2006. What an incredibly able, dignified and gallant young man: And all he wants to do, like each of his SAS mates is to get back to Afghanistan to finish the job. I have no doubt they will do just that, and in the meantime provide genuine inspiration through their example to all of those Australians doing it tough in the horrific floods, the ongoing drought and the inevitable bushfires affecting this country.

The second recipient is Peter Andrews, OAM. A man who has fought almost single handedly for over 30 years, to bring about change through proven best practice in the way Australians manage their rapidly degrading agricultural landscape and water resources.

In dealing with this particular critical issue for the country and indeed the globe, there is both challenge and opportunity and it is on the general theme of challenges and opportunities for Australia that I want to address my remarks today, broadly on governance, education, family dysfunction, health, indigenous and food security issues.

Let's talk about governance. I feel there is an ongoing public disquiet and concern on the lack of political, media and academic definition, evaluation and debate on the significant issues of our times and thus the lack of 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 agree on a clear definition of the big issues; for example, health, both regional and remote, terrorism, climate change, education, infrastructure, population, broadband, food security and water, then argue over the details – timing, numbers, budgets etc; but let's at least see some continuity of focus.

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 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 preventative strategies.

I am told for every dollar spent on prevention, we can save of the order of 10 in attempting cure.

I wonder whether the Order could play some sort of politically neutral role in helping define the big issues of our time and put forward broad optional solutions, such that either political party could use the concepts suggested.

As an aside, I'll make a little wager with you, and that is in the aftermath of the catastrophic flooding of so much of the country, the proposed remedial measures will concentrate on blame, dam construction, house design, insurance issues, early warning measures etc. I will be very pleasantly surprised if the powers that be actually look at the key determinants of flood damage mitigation or even flood prevention, these being forest and soil regeneration, flood plain management, wetland recharge, riparian zone repair and bio diversity of ground cover.

As Professor Willy Ripl says 'Our intensive land use pattern, with no or little consideration of its impact on water and matter cycles, leads to a higher frequency of large floods but is also a

cause of the land drying out, soil fertility failing and clean water becoming a scarce resource'. Wisely said and absolutely true of the Australian condition and indeed much of the rest of the world.

Well, let me be a little more specific.

One area of national significance that has bipartisan support is the national, 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 from 60 000 years ago instead of from 1788. There would be obvious time lines; aboriginal, Portugese, 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 lone 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 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.

In such an environment, 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.

I think 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. There are now over a million children living in a single parent environment; mostly with Mum and with many of those Mums doing it hard, both in an economic and a quality time availability sense. They and their children often need help 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.

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 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.

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.

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 some 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 help sponsor.

The Australian community as a whole faces huge health challenges at a cost of over \$100 bn annually. More than 54% of Australian adults are overweight or obese, with men leading the charge at 65% and women at 45%. 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 a billion dollars annually. 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. 28% continue to live in overcrowded dwellings; sometimes 16 to a modest dwelling.

Employment levels and opportunities are no where 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 supports young Aboriginal youth to complete their year 12 and then provides assistance to find employment.

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.

Another excellent program is run by the Sydney based Engineering Aid Australia. It has been conducting Indigenous Engineering Summer Schools in Sydney for some years and recently ran its second course in Perth at which I was pleased to officiate. Not only does Engineering Aid introduce students to the opportunities for a career in Engineering and other science based occupations but they sponsor their students and work as an intermediary between the student and possible engineering or other employers.

With a potential labour force of 58%, 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 and the Indigenous Engineering Summer Schools?

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 recent 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 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 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.

Many aboriginal women in remote areas feel uncomfortable leaving their family environment to have a baby. It would be wonderful to see sponsorship of training of Aboriginal midwives. A local Indigenous woman who can provide assistance at birth and with child care centre health education would be a wonderful asset to many remote communities. Are their OA members who could help sponsor such training, perhaps through the aegis of the Royal Flying Doctor Service of which I am the very proud Chairman.

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 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. 80% of our essential wet lands 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 is rife at around a football ground per hour. Nationally wasteful and unnecessary evaporation of surface water is running at over 50%. Some 70% of essential forests and woodlands that have a major influence on temperature, precipitation and soil fertility, have been denuded.

The difference in Australia I suggest, 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 organizations dedicated to developing a national strategic plan to restore the health of the landscape; Outcomes Australia and Future Directions International. In essence we intend to establish around 15-20 demonstration farms around Australia that broadly replicate the

Australian landscape. By using proven but practical farming methods, we will measure productivity improvement and publish the results free of charge to the whole farming community.

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.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I have touched very briefly on a number of 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. How many issues could be addressed if everyone abided by that wonderful Rotary motto 'service before self'?

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 organisation with its intelligent and proven motivated membership can do more by taking on meaningful, but non political tasks that resonate with the Australian people. Think about it and see what you can come up with. I think you will be pleasantly surprised.

May I wish you all a very happy Australia Day.