

**“WHAT THE OFFICIAL SECRETARY SAW...
SOME PERSONAL REFLECTIONS”**

AN ADDRESS BY

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AUSTRALIA DAY BREAKFAST

ORDER OF AUSTRALIA ASSOCIATION

CANBERRA ACT

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General Peter Gration, Patron of the ACT Branch of the Order of Australia Association, and Mrs Anne Gration, Commander Derek Robson, Past Chairman, ACT Branch of the Order of Australia Association, and Ms Gael Knox, Air Commodore Peter McDermott, National Chairman of the Order of Australia Association and Mrs Heather McDermott, Fellow Members of the Association.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Before I begin today, may I especially acknowledge the presence of Major General the Hon Michael Jeffery, our twenty-fourth Governor-General and former Chancellor of the Order of Australia, and Mrs Marlena Jeffery. Together they were a power duo for whom I had the great pleasure to work for over five years as they occupied the highest office in the land and performed their roles with enormous distinction, dignity, dedication, grace and charm.

Good morning ladies and gentlemen and may I wish you all a very happy Australia Day 2014, a day when we can celebrate under our Australian flag our nation and the people we have become.

As the lyricists Bruce Woodley and Dobe Newton have so poignantly written¹:

*‘We are one, but we are many
And from all the lands on earth we come
We share a dream and sing with one voice:
I am, you are, we are Australian’.*

Today, with our fellow Australians at home and abroad, we celebrate our affection for, and pride in, the many different things about our country that mean much to each one of us.

¹ For the full text see <http://alldownunder.com/australian-music-songs/i-am-australian.htm>

In doing so, I take to heart the message from The Queen in her 2013 Christmas Message. In the year that followed the Diamond Jubilee, giving us all much to reflect on, The Queen suggested:

*We all need to get the balance right between action and reflection.
With so many distractions, it is easy to forget to pause and take stock.*²

As a former Secretary of the Order of Australia, it is a delight to be among so many distinguished members of the Order today, including, of course, those for whom I had the pleasure of personally signing your warrant, and to pause and reflect with you on just some of those achievements.

These awards were some of more than 6000 made from more than 11,000 nominations considered by the Council for the Order of Australia during my five and a half year tenure as Secretary.³

Managing the administration of the Order of Australia was part of broader opportunities to serve and participate in national affairs as Official Secretary to two estimable Governors-General — Dr Peter Hollingworth and Major General Michael Jeffery. Of course, I was just a cog in the larger and far more important wheel of managing the affairs of this country by our nation's top leaders, but these and other positions gave me a unique insight into the depth and breadth of workings of government, and the people who make the nation tick. And over some 36 years, there is much to reflect on.

Being Secretary of the Order was a high point of my career and a great privilege, in offering constant association with the nation's highest exemplars of service to the community and the nation.

Although nothing is ever perfect, as the commentariat will no doubt remind us with the awards published today, I can tell you that the Order is held in high regard here and especially overseas for its apolitical nature and impartial recognition of Australians of singular merit. I made inputs to recent major reviews of the Honours systems of both the UK and Canada, and the overwhelming comment made to me was that the Australian model was regarded as 'best practice'.

Our honours and awards are scrupulously independent of political intervention thanks to the role of the independent Council for the Order of Australia, currently chaired by Air Chief Marshal Angus Houston, and the Honours Secretariat located at Government House, Canberra, and not within a government department.

Today, the 2014 Australia Day honours were announced, and I offer my warm congratulations to all those so recognised. They deserve to feel the community's and the nation's pride in their achievements, and just as surely I know that they too will be humbled by the experience.

² For the full text, see <http://www.royal.gov.uk/ImagesandBroadcasts/TheQueensChristmasBroadcasts/ChristmasBroadcasts/TheQueensChristmasBroadcast2013.aspx>

³ Actually 11,300 nominations resulting in 6200 awards between May 2003 and September 2008.

I reflected only recently on some of the hundreds of awards presented by the Governor-General as Chancellor of the Order at Investiture Ceremonies at Government House. Investitures are special occasions not only for the individuals honoured and their families, but also for their communities. Typically, many local newspapers had bumper circulations on the day when local citizens were so acknowledged.

I recall, for example, when Nicole Kidman was invested with her AC in 2007. Here was an Australian gracing the world's stages and cinemas everywhere. She said that for her, her AC meant more to her than any of her Oscars or Logies. High praise indeed. And like so many others, she was humbled and inspired after hearing the citations for the awards given to her fellow recipients. She said,

'It was wonderful to be able to hear all of the contributions...all these people who are working so hard to represent Australia and take care of Australia...It inspires me listening to what everyone else has been doing to keep forging ahead.'

It's not just at the AC level, but especially with the Medals of the Order, the OAMs, and in between too that we hear some amazing, heart-warming stories of people who give so much to their communities, selflessly, voluntarily, and endlessly. Theirs is just like the service many of you here today have given over the years – for which this country has acknowledged and thanked you in a small way.

I also commend to you the awards made on the recommendations of the Australian Bravery Decorations Council of which I had the privilege of serving as Secretary. The sister organisation of this Association, the Australian Bravery Association, does very good work in supporting many recipients of Bravery awards who go through life sometimes carrying huge emotional burdens often as a result of their selfless acts of bravery. Those are stories that reflect powerfully on the Australian character.

Ladies and Gentlemen, many before me have spoken about the things that characterise us as 'true-blue Aussies'. And I can do no better than to refer to our ACT Branch Patron's address in 2010 where General Peter Gration spoke of 'the idea of a Fair Go, of Mateship, and of a certain irreverence for Authority'.⁴ To these I would add the trait of resilience, or determination in the face of awful adversity, seen so much in these past years especially in times of shocking natural disasters – fires, floods, cyclones, and droughts.

I witnessed first-hand many of the characteristics we describe as 'uniquely Australian', and the part they have played in making our great Southern Land the special one it is. These were the people, the attributes, which presented themselves to those Governors-General I worked for.

And in the near future, I am sure we will hear from the Prime Minister about the appointment of Australia's twenty-sixth Governor-General who will follow his or her predecessors in reaching out to all Australians across this vast country, seeing the nation and its people whose qualities and attributes we

⁴ <http://www.theorderofaustralia.asn.au/downloads/100126-GenPeterGrationAddressAustraliaDay2010.pdf>

celebrate today, and encouraging, articulating and representing those things that unite Australians.

Let me provide some insight into the role by reflecting on my service with our twenty-fourth Governor-General.

A Governor-General's life is an incredibly busy and demanding one – much more than I think most people understand.

I have spoken and written elsewhere about the role of a modern Governor-General⁵. Suffice it to say that there are three major roles - I call them the three Cs – the constitutional role, the ceremonial and the community roles.

The community and ceremonial roles are probably the most visible – a Governor-General will in any one year attend over 250 functions throughout the length and breadth of this vast continent, deliver around 200 speeches, open the Parliament after an election, take part in major commemorative services such as those on ANZAC Day, Remembrance Day, and Australia Day, take part in Investiture ceremonies, travel overseas to represent Australia on numerous occasions, host welcoming functions for visiting Heads of State and other dignitaries, and receive the credentials of all newly appointed Ambassadors to our country, a process which allows them credence to work officially in Australia on behalf of their countries.

And a Governor-General and his spouse will personally meet thousands of Australians in the course of their everyday work, be it official or voluntary. Together with his or her spouse, they are Patrons of several hundred organisations, and I know from personal observation that General Jeffery and his wife Marlena took a very keen personal interest in those organisations, well beyond noting the fact of their patronage on stationery and websites.

I invite you to reflect on this fact – a Governor-General meets these thousands of people in a totally apolitical environment and can reflect views, concerns and issues to the Government of the day in a totally apolitical way, much more so than can any politician, who by definition is partisan. And I saw the positive outcomes of these meetings as General Jeffery would always meet the various Ministers after an Executive Council Meeting and pass on things seen, heard or experienced from his meetings with people from across the country.

A Governor-General's public duties embrace every part of the country, as well as overseas. At home, they acknowledge the vast number of organisations, institutions and individuals who contribute to the betterment of our society and our country. Abroad, they are about representing and strengthening Australia's interests in so many ways – national security, economic, trade, cultural, people-to-people links etc. Of course, the policy responsibilities rest with the elected government of the day, but the Governor-General, as the constitutional head of state, reinforces those links. I can't emphasise enough how important those high-level, personal links are in the conduct of our diplomatic efforts abroad.

⁵ Hazell, M 2008, *The Role of the Governor-General: An Address by Mr Malcolm Hazell CVO, Official Secretary to the Governor-General*, 14 June, Wagga Wagga; also published in *Public Administration Today*, Issue 15 April-June 2008 pp 63-70

Today, I shall step lightly through some of the personal highlights from my career, with just a couple of serious offerings at the end for your further reflection, appropriate to our Association's charter and this gathering on our national day. And I don't claim to represent a total picture of all of a Governor-General's activities, merely a quick snapshot.

Firstly though, lest you think no one ever laughed, let me recount a story from the inside. This is better told by one of my distinguished predecessors, Sir David Smith, then Official Secretary to Sir Ninian Stephen, but I was there to witness it in another capacity.

It concerns the then 'Vice Regal dog', Sadie, a wonderfully friendly golden Labrador. Sadie had the run of the house, including the Drawing Room and Dining Room, even when guests were being entertained. She developed the habit of wandering up and down under the dining table, for she had learned where the best tid bits came from. It is a very long table, with 25 guests down each side, and one could always plot Sadie's progress under the table by the sudden change of expression on the face of each guest as she suddenly thrust her head and cold nose into each unsuspecting lap. Regrettably Sadie has long since left us, but I have a formal photograph taken with The Queen which has Sadie lying in front of us all, to Her Majesty's delight.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Governor-General holds office in the service of all Australians, not just one favoured segment or another, and all were welcomed hospitably and with dignity and respect.

Let me recount another story that highlights the hospitable nature of our fellow countrymen and women, especially in the more remote parts of rural and regional Australia.

With great pride, the residents of the smallest hamlet would make extensive preparations for a visit by their Governor-General.

Local dignitaries and the townsfolk would gather, bounties of local produce would be lovingly displayed, speeches would be delivered, and impressive musical and other performances would occur.

As you can imagine, the region's superb bakers would prepare a feast for morning or afternoon tea, in the proud tradition of generous-hearted country folk.

However the challenge for all in the travelling party was to give these culinary delights their due in a day involving many events.

I remember once confiding to Mrs Jeffery as we travelled to the next afternoon tea that I could not possibly eat another scone or cake.

She smiled, and said with that unmistakable twinkle in her eye: "Malcolm, you will just have to eat for your country". As you can see, it was a terrible chore!

The Jefferys also welcomed many tens of thousands of visitors to Government and Admiralty Houses as part of official visits, open days and frequent visits by thousands of school students from across the nation – demonstrating to all that these are houses of the people.

Let me tell a particularly poignant story. It was the practice of the Jefferys to host Children's Christmas parties in Canberra and Sydney for several hundred severely disabled or disadvantaged children. There were several in each city and they went over several days, and involved my fantastic staff in some of their most wonderfully caring work.

I especially recall one day at Admiralty House, Sydney, where there were many young children who were being treated for cancer, or who had severe physical and mental afflictions. One day, a dear little boy, I think about 8 or 9, with cerebral palsy was heard to say to his mother, who had struggled in the December heat to bring him in his wheelchair,

'Look at this lovely place Mum. We must be the luckiest people on earth to be here today!'

Now that brought a tear to many of our eyes and those events made each of us give thanks for the many blessings we had all been given.

Ladies and Gentlemen, the Constitutional role of a Governor-General is probably the least understood by the public, but in many ways the most significant, especially as the powers of the Governor-General originate from the words of the Australian Constitution.

The Governor-General is not a delegate of The Queen but a representative. His or her powers are specifically prescribed in sections 2 and 61 of our Constitution. And these are traditionally the powers of a head of state.

A Governor-General's powers also include, amongst other things, the power to appoint or dismiss a Prime Minister and to call an election.

The power to appoint and dismiss a Prime Minister, clearly used sparingly, can become especially important in the case of a hung Parliament – and all here will recall that for modern-day Australia this was a recent occurrence.

And each time a Prime Minister wishes to call an election, he or she must first seek the Governor-General's concurrence. I can tell you that the Prime Minister's request is always carefully scrutinised and contested. It is not a matter of rubber-stamping at all. And I know of several occasions over the years where a Prime Minister has been required to go away and give further consideration to the matter. Incidentally, that advice is usually tabled in the Parliament for all to see subsequently.

What I feel is often not given sufficient weight, is how these Constitutional roles and powers can be recognised in the history of our democracy with the establishment of a forerunner of the Executive Council in New South Wales in the early 1800s, but also dating much further back to the very beginnings of our parliamentary democracy in Britain, as part of an unbroken chain of sometimes volatile, but ultimately successful refinement of democratic governance.

Nevertheless, the inheritance and subsequent evolution of our Constitutional democracy through Britain does not mean the approaches to office of our Governors-General and indeed our democracy are anything other than Australian.

We are in a uniquely fortunate position of having inherited a strong and stable system of government, a parliamentary democracy under a constitutional monarch, which people of foresight and immense national pride have adapted and improved to reflect the Australian character and our national and international requirements as an independent power.

So on this Australia Day, I am prompted to offer two further reflections on how we can live out these shared ideals.

Today, I am told that about 18,000 people will speak aloud the pledge that seals their new life as citizens of Australia. For many of our newest citizens, this will be a life-changing transformation. There will be tears of joy and profound gratitude for the opportunity to be a citizen.

Earlier this year, I spoke to a man recently arrived from Egypt under the Government's Refugee Migration Programme.

He was a lawyer in his home country but came to Australia to escape religious persecution, and is now doing manual work to earn a living.

He was curious about the conduct of the recent election and asked me:

'How come there are no fights in the streets?'

I replied:

'There's a lot of talk and debate, some of it robust. On election day, we all vote. Some people will be happy with the election outcome, some will be disappointed. But the next day, we wake up and just get on with our lives again. It's as simple as that.'

I could see he found this hard to believe. Finally, he said:

'Thank God for this country then.'

When I see the priceless value of Australian citizenship through the eyes of those gaining it, it reminds me of my own good fortune in automatically becoming a citizen of Australia by birth.

The reality is those of us who were born here do not undergo this transformational experience.

We don't make a life-changing decision to embrace our country.

We don't study determinedly for a citizenship test to learn about Australia's history and values.

We don't always take to heart the Pledge that will ring proudly around the nation today:

From this time forward

I pledge my loyalty to Australia and its people,

whose democratic beliefs I share,

whose rights and liberties I respect, and

whose laws I will uphold and obey.⁶

⁶ This is the non-denominational form of the Pledge.

I wonder how many of us born as Australian citizens even know this Pledge, and have thought about what it means?

How many of us make the effort to inform ourselves about our democratic systems and the things they embrace?

How many of us know about our rights and liberties not only for ourselves, but also for our neighbours, and the sense of obligation each and every one of us has in this regard?

Extraordinarily, more than one million eligible people were not enrolled to vote at last year's election, with equally staggeringly large numbers casting informal and donkey votes.

We have this high level of disengagement, despite the right of universal suffrage having been hotly contested and hard won.

I expect the reality for many people is that most of their knowledge about democracy comes from a fairly superficial study of history and civics at school.

We are at a point where the risk of losing the benefits of being one of the world's most successful democracies is increasing, due to the unedifying reason of apathy and ignorance about our democratic platforms.

If in the future, if we are to make significant changes to our democratic system of governance, we should do so from a base of informed debate about our current system.

Among some things I have taken up since leaving Government House, I am a Director of the Constitution Education Fund Australia (CEFA) which is endeavouring to redress this deficit through the development of effective and apolitical education programs for young people. CEFA is an independent, non-partisan and non-profit organisation committed to increasing public understanding and appreciation of the Constitution, its history and contemporary relevance.

I commend the work of CEFA to you, and on this Australia Day, I ask everyone to consider what we can do to improve our own and each other's understanding of our democracy and its benefits.

And that brings me to my last reflection.

One of the ideas that seems to gain currency is that if a person dislikes the current system, or dislikes an individual office holder, then apparently it is reasonable to be openly destructive of our present arrangements.

I find this idea quite dangerous.

In my view, to fail in full support of our current systems of governance because of mere personality preferences, diminishes our individual and national integrity and does a disservice to our proud history. Let's debate and talk about the issues rather than personalities.

For my part, I also find it unhelpful to be told, especially on Australia Day, that somehow it is 'more Australian' to support a change in our governance arrangements to a republic.

Our present system of governance as a parliamentary democracy under a constitutional monarch is uniquely Australian, and has been so for many decades. It underpins our national stability because our Constitution exhibits a carefully calibrated set of checks and balances involving key roles for our Governor-General and our elected representatives. Compare the provisions of the Australian Constitution with those of Canada and New Zealand, with whom we share many other things in common, and you will see how uniquely Australian it is.

And until such time as someone puts up a decent, sensible alternative, I for one will not be supporting any change to a system that has been the hallmark of our stability as a nation since federation. For me, the grass on the neighbouring cricket pitch is nowhere near as green, probably because it has no roots to survive the searing heat of close inspection.

Of course I recognise that discussion and debate will occur – and so it should. But let's base it on fact and not on jingoistic rhetoric.

Ladies and gentlemen, whatever our individual views, overall I know we share an understanding of our very good fortune in being part of this nation, as well as sharing a love of our country, and great pride in our significant national achievements, recognising that what really holds us together is our political culture and our historic traditions. Of course there are always challenges and there is always room for improvement – but let's work at it in a **constructive** way.

As Official Secretary, I was privy in some way to almost every aspect of this extraordinary progress and the wonderfully resourceful, thoughtful and compassionate people who contribute to those achievements, typified by the thousands of worthy recipients of the Order of Australia and our other national honours and awards.

As we celebrate Australia Day, our national day, let us pause, reflect and rejoice in who we are, knowing our nation's future is ours to grasp, and then let us resolve to do so ourselves and to actively encourage others so to do for the sake of our children and grandchildren.

In again wishing you, your families and friends a wonderful Australia Day 2014, may I urge you – before you throw another prawn on the barbie, before you doff your cap in front of the Don Bradman statue or whoever is your sporting hero, before you proudly wear your beetroot-stained shirt and eat one of *those* burgers as the advertisements exhort us to do – I urge you to pause a moment and reflect on why this nation is the stable and special one it is. And never take it lightly or for granted.