

## **Australia Day speech at the Southern Cross Club**

**26 January 2010**

It is an honour to be speaking to you tonight, because this day is special, one in which we reflect on what it means to be an Australian. More than 220 years have passed since Europeans came to this continent, and we still puzzle over who we are and what our nation is all about. It is not, and here I agree with a letter writer to the *Canberra Times* on Sunday, about having a barbecue, wearing thongs and shorts, and drinking beer. That is only style, and anyone can do it, anywhere.

In a diverse society like our own we can often wonder what it is that holds us together, apart from simple residence. As far as residence itself is concerned, around a million people live and work in Australia who are not citizens, and may or may not even think of themselves as Australians. There are also nearly a million Australians who live and work overseas, and they have not chosen to become citizens of the countries in which they work. Simple residence is not enough. What makes us 'Australian' is not our passport or our citizenship, though these are important. It is that, on top of residence and passport and citizenship we also demonstrate a common set of values and a common outlook on life. You could summarise it by saying that these values and attitudes constitute our national character. There is room for considerable disagreement about what these values and attitudes are. I am going to propose five central values to you, and then I want to draw some historical comparisons, because a basic point here is the issue of how universal these values are, across time and across our world. In short, how 'Australian' are these values? And how permanent are they?

My five candidate 'Australian values' are equality, fairness, tolerance, aspiration and respect. I would like to argue that the five together constitute an Australian outlook on life, and enable us to live in harmony with one another. Although I will emphasise that it is the set taken together that is really important in considering values, let's consider each one in turn.

Equality comes first. In Australia we use it in a special way. You could call it an 'equality of manners'. It is an early Australian value, developed during the convict days. At its core is the notion that each of us is a valid human being, deserving of equal respect from anyone else. We men have learned

over the last century to add women, migrants and latterly indigenous people into the notion that each of us is a valid human being, whatever we look like. Australia is not about aristocracies, castes or classes.

Let me move to the second value: fairness. Like all human beings, we grow up with an acute sense of fairness and unfairness. 'That's unfair!' and 'Fair go!' register our belief that each of us deserves just treatment, especially by those bigger and stronger than us, including our government and big companies. A strong sense that unfairness is wrong runs through our history. All of us have our own sense of unfairness and injustice, and you can provide different examples from your own experience.

Fairness is a blood brother to equality, especially in our country. It is increasingly clear that every human being is born with the same attributes of high intelligence and creative potential. All of us can become competent at almost anything, given sufficient encouragement, preparation and motivation. I think that human beings have intuitively recognised this since they began to live in societies, and it is that recognition that fuels so much of our politics, and political sentiment everywhere. What happens to us after birth is out of our control, at least while we are infants and children, and that often leads to a feeling that the world has been unfair.

You can see that I could spend the rest of the evening on just this one value, but some of you will want to go home earlier rather than later. So I move to my third value, that of toleration. There has been considerable debate about this one too. Were we tolerant or intolerant to the first few waves of postwar refugees and emigrants half a century and more ago? It depends on what you are comparing us to. Given that a society of just 7.5 million people in 1947 had welcomed another six million people by 2002, without civil unrest of any notable kind and with much inter-marriage, we can consider ourselves and our forbears reasonably tolerant.

Tolerance is also the younger brother of equality and fairness. To recognise that others are no less valid as human beings as ourselves both reduces the likelihood that we will behave unfairly to them and makes us more relaxed about their differences, as we see them. We tolerate our fellow citizens' peculiarities, recognising that we need to be tolerated sometimes ourselves. As an old saying goes, folks is peculiar, save for thee and me, and I sometimes wonder about thee.

Those first three values — equality, fairness and tolerance — allow us to aspire to try to achieve whatever personal dreams we have. We are not a society where activities of one kind or another are automatically available for some people but ruled out for others. 'Go for it!' is our contemporary slogan. Aspiration is about hope and endeavour. Life is a great gift, and a good society will encourage all of us to develop that gift, both in our own interest and in the interest of the society itself. Australia is a good place in part because aspiration has not been, and is not, blocked.

Finally, all four values — equality, fairness, tolerance and aspiration — seem to me to embody a respect for one another and for the kind of society we have. That respect is what leads to our general belief that no one is superior to the law, or that anyone should think that he or she is. You can see that in the way in which company directors, politicians and judges — people who ordinarily are regarded as leaders in our society, and appear to have behaved wrongly — are brought before the courts. Our basic attitude, at its best, is an application of the Golden Rule: we like to treat others as we would want them to treat us.

I would like to spend more time on each of these values, because I feel I have only skimmed over the surface. But I must move on to my two further questions: are these values in any sense reserved for Australia? And how permanent are they? Let's take the Australian-ness of these values first.

You could argue that most good societies will have these values, and I would half agree with you. I think that they are the values that any civilised society needs in order for people to flourish. But they are often there at the level of rhetoric only, and this true to some extent in Australia. So we move fairly quickly into an arithmetical question: how characteristic are these values within the whole society, and compared to other societies? They are never universal. For example, I believe that we ought to be able to say that in Australia women have the same status as men, and that a woman is never the possession of a father or a husband. But no one here would agree that every Australian man today thinks so. It remains an aspiration that is slowly growing in reality.

Let's be comparative. I have lived for some time in both the USA and the UK, and visited each country many times in the last forty years. I would be prepared to say that my candidate values are more characteristic here than they are in either America or Britain. In particular, our sense of equality and

fairness is, I would argue, sharper and more characteristic of Australia than of either the UK or the USA. But I have also visited Canada and New Zealand many times, and as a historian and political scientist, know both countries through wide reading as well. I would have to say that both exemplify these values too, if not with quite the same intensity as we do, because neither has our convict and settler heritage. There is, then, an ‘Australian-ness’ about this set of values, and I think we should prize it.

That takes me to the last question: how permanent are they? This is a tricky one, because there is a tendency for people to suppose that we have always had these values, and always will have them. I don’t think so at all. A few years ago I published a book, *What Was It All For. The Reshaping of Australia*, comparing the Australia of 1951 with that of 2001, mostly to the credit of the more recent Australia. If you knew that you were going to be born again, but you would not know your sex, your physical and mental attributes, the nature of your parents or their social and economic situation, and so on — *but*, you could choose whether you were born into the Australia of 1951 or that of 2001, then on any reflection and reading you would choose the more recent Australia. It is simply a better society, more creative, more tolerant, better educated, more able to support you in whatever you wanted to do, and so on.

If we were to go back to 1951 — and that is the point of this comparison — and ask what the Australian values were at the time, I think that equality and fairness would have been hardly less important (although, as I said, women, immigrants and the indigenous had yet to qualify for consideration), but tolerance would have been rather less important. Aspiration would have been much less important, because the material and social conditions that allow us now to dream of what might be, and then undertake it, were much less present than they are today. The one domain for aspiration that was powerful then, as it is powerful now, was sport.

In world terms, too, we are a different nation, in the family of what is now 200 or so nations. We are in the top 20 in terms of wealth, and even higher in terms of wealth per capita. In 1951 we were the wealthy former colony of a dying empire, struggling to find an independent place in the world. Today we are best described as a middle-level power, highly desired by immigrants and students, respected internationally not simply for sporting prowess but for our creativity in art, music, theatre, film, education and research. I cringed a bit last night when I heard people say enthusiastically that we are

the best country on earth — most people in most countries think that about their own country — but I think we can say, modestly, that we have done a great deal in the last hundred years to make Australia a country which is good to live in, work in, and raise a family in. I would say the same about Canada and New Zealand, too, and if through some mischance I could no longer live here, I would resettle in one or the other.

And I'll finish with some thoughts about the city we live in, which just happens to be the capital city of the Australian nation. It is a peculiar thing, this city, because it was planned from the beginning, is still being planned — I hope that it will always be being planned! — and because there is truly no other city like it in the world. There are four more or less planned federal capital cities — in order of creation, Washington, Ottawa, Canberra and Brasilia. Of the four, Canberra is the most distinctive: at its heart is the idea that in the city neither nature nor the built form should dominate. To make that possible, the whole of the Australian Capital Territory is owned by the people of Australia, and managed by the Commonwealth Government, with a considerable delegation to the ACT Government. The assumption that the national capital should be planned, so that its essential character should be preserved and enhanced, has been accepted by successive governments since 1911.

The result is twofold. First, the building of the national capital has never stopped and is never finished. Second, the national capital of Australia has become, over the past century, the largest work of art in the world, a huge national inheritance. It is a work of art, of creativity, because planning itself is a creative act, and planning a city in which more than 350,000 people now live is a task that calls on the best talents of architects, landscapers, planners and designers. We tend to take it for granted, but we are most fortunate to be able to enjoy the outcome of their work. And, as I said, that work is always unfinished.

Yet I think that there has been a tendency on the part of the Commonwealth Government, and of the governments of the states, to see it differently. When the ACT gained self-government in 1988, so some perceived, that was an indication that the work of building was over. Canberra was finished, done, in place, and big enough to govern itself. In consequence, an interest in the future of the national capital seemed to wane. We can see that feeling, to give an example, in the lack of money for maintenance, of all kinds. But the city is continuing to grow. If the Prime Minister's projections of the

Australian population are correct, then Canberra will hold around 600,000 people by 2050.

Where will they all live? How will they live? Where will the centres of work be? Where will the water and energy come from? These are all questions that planners have to deal with, and the sooner they start working on them the better for the final outcome. If you don't like planning, then go to Washington and contrast the great designs of L'Enfant the founding architect, and the city's fine public buildings, with the slums and squalor within a few kilometres of them. The District of Columbia holds 600,000 people in its 160 square kilometres, while the great metropolitan area of Washington holds about 5.5 million. Ottawa is a fine city, but its National Capital Commission has to deal with the Canadian government's interests in what is a large National Capital Region, in which the national capital is not a separate administrative district at all. That takes a lot of patience, time and energy. Brasilia, which I have not visited, is grand in scale — you could almost say gigantic — and it is not said to be human-friendly.

But this city is human-friendly and human-scale, and it will remain so while we are able to plan it. In world terms, it is seen as a great success. In finishing this address on Australia Day, let me ask you always to remember that we live in two cities, our national capital and the city of Canberra. The national capital is a hundred-year-old statement that Australians thought that they could do something special when they decided to federate. They, our forbears, and we, who succeeded them, have built a fine country, with a fine capital city that displays our creativity, our concern for the natural environment we live in, and our delight in beauty. But we who live in it have a problem. As you all know, those who don't live here sometimes knock their own capital. The better the city becomes, the more they knock it. Some of that is jealousy, much of it is ignorance, all of it is thoughtless. But we have to live with it, and counter it by welcoming every visitor from elsewhere with the greeting 'Welcome to your capital city!'

And we have to point out to ourselves, again and again, that the national capital comes first. Were Canberra not the national capital, it would not exist, and none of us would be here. But we need also to ensure that the city we live in, the Canberra of 350,000 people pushing on to 600,000 and then, past my time, to a million, is an agreeable city in which to live, that we can move around it easily, that its schools, hospitals and municipal services are of high quality, in short, that it works.

In my view the period of self-government for the ACT has been a great success, but it requires, and always will require, a high degree of co-operation between the two governments with an interest in the national capital and its future. That co-operation is as necessary in areas of broad strategy, as in the planning for the Canberra of 2050, as it is in what to do about the Brodburger structure in Bowen Park. I think we have that co-operation now, and I will do my best to ensure that it continues in the years ahead.

I thank you for your attention and patience.