

2013 Australia Day Ambassador's speech - Portarlington

I would like to acknowledge the **Wathaurong** people who are the traditional custodians of this land and pay respect to elders of the Kulin Nation, both past and present, and extend that respect to other Indigenous Australians with us today.

May I also acknowledge:

- **The Hon. Lisa Neville**, Member for Bellarine
- **Councillor Lindsay Ellis**, City of Greater Geelong
- President, Portarlington Golf Club: **Mr Tony Meagher**
- **Mr Rod Elms** of the Portarlington Australia Day Committee
- **Mr Peter Nash**
- **Ms Vicki Walker**, representing Woolworth - Drysdale

Welcome to all of you, and thank you for inviting me to come here to Portarlington to share in your Australia Day celebrations.

I don't manage to come to the Bellarine Peninsula often but I know my way around and I've had some interesting experiences here.

1. In the early 70s as a science student I worked with an undergraduate colleague to undertake a sediment analysis of Swan Bay for the Port Phillip Authority. We managed to do a fair bit of bird watching in the process over that summer. It wasn't all buckets of mud.
2. I sailed out of Royal Geelong Yacht Club in the early 80s so I know Corio Bay pretty well.
3. A few years after that I had a girlfriend who's parents lived at Curlewis so I had an opportunity to explore the entire region over a number of weekends and discovered many of the private "out of the way" locations that are available.

So I feel very much at home here with you today.

I am one of 145 Australia Day Ambassadors in Victoria adding our voices to today's celebration of Australia. I am proud to be part of this national program - Australia Day Ambassadors are today participating in celebrations right across the country, in every State and Territory.

Each year I am given a speech to read. It's not a bad speech, and I will certainly include parts of it, however, I don't think that you invited me to come to **Portarlington** to read a "carbon copy" of a speech written by a person I don't know very well from the Premier's Office.

There's a sentence in the prepared speech that says, "*I am proud to be an Australia Day Ambassador because*"

Because it's an honour to be asked to present my Australia Day views to you? Not really.

I think it's because, and I'm being as honest as I can now, I'm pleased to be acknowledged as someone on the community who perhaps has made a contribution; who has provided a useful service, but I don't really know how to answer that question.

Am I proud to **be** an Australian, ... and do I enjoy **being** an Australia Day Ambassador? The answer is an unequivocal "yes".

I consider myself privileged to be invited to participate in your celebration. I love seeing new members of our community becoming citizens. I'll enjoy playing golf on your golf course this afternoon and meeting you all today. I just enjoy our lifestyle, our friendliness, our ability to enjoy each others company.

It's just good to be here; that's what is so wonderful about being in Australia.

One of the components of Australia Day that I really enjoy is the citizenship ceremonies that will be taking place all over the country and the joy and pride in the faces of those people who have chosen to become Australians.

I'm lucky – I was born here. So were both my parents. But can you think of a better country to be a citizen of? I can't. It's a good day to reflect a little on the things that make us glad to be an Australian.

What's important is that those of us lucky enough to be Australian are a model for all **new** citizens about how we can contribute and embrace the values of this country in a spirit of harmony, dignity and generosity.

Democracy is the cornerstone of citizenship and we should acknowledge today that we are lucky to live in one of the few countries in the world with over 150 years of unbroken democracy.

Of course **Australia Day** means different things to different people.

Officially it commemorates the day in 1788 that Captain Arthur Phillip unfurled the British flag at Sydney Cove and proclaimed British sovereignty over the eastern seaboard of the continent. Of course there's been some discussion over the validity of that process and our High Court determined that he should've asked if anybody lived here already.

For many Australian's today is just a day to do the things we really enjoy – a game of golf, a day at the cricket, to relaxing on the beach or at the river's edge and a picnic with friends or family, or meeting family and old friends at events like this.

For many other Australians it's just another day at work – in a hospital, an aged care home, in the emergency services or the local pharmacy. Let's not forget all those who are working today so we can be safer and better looked after. In the Defence Forces, on fire grounds and in hospitals.

On Australia Day we should also remind ourselves about all those Australians who work on a voluntary basis to support their communities. Sports coaches, school lunch makers, 'Meals on Wheels' deliverers, and others who visit the aged and infirm in our communities.

Indeed this is a great day to pledge or recommit your own support to your local community as a volunteer. Because our population is small we need to constantly replenish the ranks of the volunteers whose service we sometimes take for granted.

We also celebrate today those people who have been honoured in the announcement of the Order of Australia Awards and the Australian of the Year Awards and I expect there are some in that group with us today too. Congratulations to you all for your unselfish work.

Now I deviate from the prepared script a bit.

Because, what we are in danger of today is spending a day telling ourselves how wonderful we are in a wave of nationalism, or preferably patriotism, without any real reflection on some current matters that might be worthwhile of consideration on such a day of reflection.

When I was a university student back in the early seventies I was caught up in the tail-end of the first global environmental revolution. It was probably initiated by **Rachel Carson** through her book "*Silent Spring*" which revealed the impact of pesticides and other persistent chemicals in our environment.

Paul Ehrlich and his wife Ann wrote "*The Population Bomb*"; Garret Hardin wrote "*The Tragedy of the Commons*" in 1968. These were the foundations of a new understanding of global environmental issues.

Garret Hardin used the concept of the feudal system "Common" to explain how we utilise resources. Community members grazed their animals on the "Common" with the animals of other villagers to mutual advantage.

Eventually though each herdsman endeavours to maximise his gain by adding another animal to the herd and each herdsman does the same until the Common is overgrazed. The model is for increase of the herd without limit on a Common that **has** real limits. The modern analogy is our atmosphere which, having discharged colourless, odourless carbon dioxide into it for more than a century but mostly over the last few decades, we're finding now also has real limits.

But with all the talk of the global climate and the impact (NOT) of a so-called "carbon tax" we've lost sight of the other important issues that are not discussed by our media, our politicians or for the most part by ourselves.

A quick “**Critical State of the Planet**” summary goes like this:

1. **Half** the world’s once-great **forests** are gone - 6 billion hectares, and we’ve taken the best wood first and left behind the degraded forests and we’re losing an amount the size of Nepal every year.
2. Some 6 million hectares of productive land turns into **desert** every year because of industrial agriculture, global warming, logging, draining aquifers, and redirecting river water. (Sahara grassland/desert, Syrian cedar forest/desert, Aral Sea/desert)
3. We’ve depleted over **half** the carbon and nutrients from our **soils**, polluted soils with toxins, and washed topsoil into the sea. In the past century, we have lost some 500 billion tonnes of topsoil. We still lose about 26 billion tonnes of soil every year.
4. Humanity is now causing the fastest rate of **species collapse** in 64 million years. Since 1974, terrestrial species biodiversity has dropped by 40% and since 1990, in twenty years; the marine species index has declined by 21%. Today, over 30% of all remaining mammals, and 20% of all birds, are endangered with extinction.
5. We have depleted most of the **large commercial fish species** by 60-80% and some species by 90%, including the tuna, marlin, swordfish, cod, and halibut. We destroyed the North Atlantic cod fishery and now face the demise of west coast salmon.
6. World **bee populations** are plummeting. Since 1960, the United States has lost half its bee population. Bee colonies are dying off in Europe, Central America, Asia, and elsewhere through pesticides, industrial gases, urbanization, and habitat and food destruction. Of these natural services like pollination by bees, which are provided to humankind by nature free of charge, nearly two thirds are in decline.
7. **Carbon-dioxide** in our atmosphere has increased by 43% since pre-industrial times; methane has more than doubled. After 20 years of climate conferences emissions have been greater and greater every year, not less.
8. Half the summer **arctic ice** is gone
9. **Oceans** are 30% more acidic and hotter
10. We’ve lost over a third of the world’s **coral reefs** because of hotter and more acidic oceans caused by industrial CO₂, destructive drag net fishing, and pollution.
11. We have depleted virtually every non-renewable industrial and economic **natural material** in the world including wood, aluminium, copper, phosphorus, nickel, tin, zinc and platinum and again we took best, cheapest, easiest materials first, so the remaining stores are more expensive to extract, with greater energy, human, and ecological cost.
12. For the first time in our human history, humanity can no longer increase its **energy** output. We have reached the peak of net energy input into society. Conventional oil production has peaked and is in decline. In one century, we’ve used up our store of easily accessible hydrocarbons – representing 500-million years of solar energy (fossil sunlight) stored as biomass and oil in the Earth’s crust.
13. Over 1.2 billion people lack adequate **water** every day. Over 2.3 billion people, 1/3 of the human population, lack fresh, clean drinking water. We have polluted and drained our aquifers and rivers. Water tables have dropped by 50 meters in Mexico City, Beijing, and Madras.
14. There are now over 7 billion **people** on the planet and we add 75 million every year. One billion go hungry every year and 30,000 starve to death every day.
15. About 1 billion people consume 85% of the planet’s **materials and energy**. The richest 2% owns half the world’s wealth.
16. Wealthy industrial nations spend some \$2 trillion each year on **weapons** and military destruction.

Today, human activity has pushed **nine critical systems**, near or beyond critical tipping points. They are:

1. biodiversity,
2. temperature,
3. ocean acidification,
4. nitrogen and phosphorus cycles,
5. land use,
6. fresh water,
7. ozone depletion,
8. atmospheric aerosols, and
9. chemical pollution –.

Four critical systems, climate change, species loss, nitrogen removed from the atmosphere, and phosphorus washed into the oceans, have already crossed the boundaries of a “Safe Operating Distance” for humanity.

So, there’s more than global heating for us to think about while we contemplate another snag from today’s barbeque. There’s an argument that shows that humanity has overshot the productive capacity of Earth. We now use about 50% more resources each year than the Earth can replenish. We’re living beyond our ecological means.

We need to make some changes to the way we “think about things”, for our children’s sake and on behalf of their children. When we talk about the “greater good for the greater number”, that’s not us, it’s generations to come.

There’s one final matter I’d like to you to think about, and I hope **you** talk about it later.

It’s called “**Democracy Plan B**” and is being promoted by group called the **New Democracy Foundation**, which has been working for some years to break down some of the worst aspects of Australian political life and build something more constructive.

It’s backed by former State Liberal and Labor Premiers, leading academics, and businesspeople and holds the proposition that we need to see **an end to adversarial politics** in this country.

Why?

Because the current pattern means that it is impossible to be collaborative, make big decisions, on principle, with a longer term view - that **adversarialism** and **short-termism** is really holding us back at the moment from making some important decisions.

Imagine a bipartisan policy on public transport, or health, or education, or national infrastructure.

We are now going through a period of rapid change in our modern society. Our population is growing, we are rapidly consuming resources: water, oil, fish, gas, minerals, food, energy; creating mountains of waste; exhausting our soil, nitrifying our waterways; warming and acidifying the oceans; polluting the atmosphere; increasing deserts; removing the habitat of other species; salinising river valleys; melting ice and increasing sea levels.

We have bigger fires, bigger floods, more frequent heatwaves, more tornadoes and bigger tropical cyclones.

We have changed the landscape more in the last 50 years than at any other time in human history; arguably more than at any time in the last 10,000 years of the stable climate of the Holocene. As some scientists are now saying, “*Welcome to a new geological epoch, the **Anthropocene** - the Age of Man.*”

We are now challenged with the need to understand a new suite of challenges, think longer term, recast our objectives, change our behaviour, redesign our culture.

It is an onerous task for our generation but given that ours will be the first generation that will not see the consequences of our actions, we have a great responsibility to future generations to demonstrate a new capacity to respond to the challenges that I have briefly identified. No sector of society should be exempt from this task.

These are important matters for Australians to think about on Australia Day.

In conclusion I would like to acknowledge the important sponsorship of Woolworths Safeway that makes the Australia Day Ambassador Program possible. The support of Australian companies such as Woolworths Safeway in promoting Australia Day, as part of their service to the community, is greatly appreciated and I encourage others in the business world to join them in supporting Australia Day activities, especially at a local level.

It is through events such as Australia Day that our true sense of community can be expressed and this is made possible only through the hard work of many people within the community. Thank you!

Happy Australia Day and my best wishes for the coming year.

Rob. Gell
26 January 2013

Refs:

- P2P Foundation: Critical State of the Planet http://p2pfoundation.net/Critical_State_of_the_Planet
- State of the Planet Declaration: http://www.essp.org/fileadmin/redakteure/pdf/others/PUP_declaration.pdf