

Auspire – Australia Day Council of WA

Breakfast to launch 2019 Australia Day celebrations in WA

Address by the Honourable Kim Beazley AC Governor of Western Australia

Wednesday, 23rd January 2019

Honoured guests, I acknowledge the Wadjuk people of the Noongar nation on whose ancestral lands we meet. I must deliver that salutation half a dozen times a week. But after the wonderful remarks we have heard from Reconciliation and Auspire leadership; from the four nominees we are sending to Canberra – Craig Challen, Frank Mallard, Noelle Martin and Chery Kickett-Tucker; and the inspirational welcome to country by Walter McGuire, I feel I must dwell on it. It is quite clear that the organisations and speakers have thought long and hard on indigenous issues and the need to acknowledge difficult components of settlement memory and use the event for unity building.

I want to say we are privileged to share the continent with our first nation peoples. When Australia was formally created on January 1st 1901 a unifying slogan was, “A nation for a continent, a continent for a nation.” On 26th January 1788 our forefathers and mothers entered a continent for 750 nations. Our land was inhabited by the oldest civilisation on earth after most of the species homo sapiens had been wiped out by the ice age. They survived. Less well known, but it is entirely possible, the same civilisation 30,000 odd years earlier became the first to control the environment as opposed to being controlled by it. I always recommend Bruce Pascoe’s ‘Dark Emu’ should be compulsory reading for all students. There is enough valid research to know now that we entered a continent not only of many nations, but a civilisation of great philosophical and technical capability. Some could but most of our ancestors could not recognise it. I would not normally engage this contemplation but it seems on this day we must.

While on indigenous matters I want to outline another impression. My period as Ambassador to the U.S. gave me something of a Rip Van Winkle experience in relation to my home state. We live life culturally like frogs in boiling water not aware of our changing condition. Absent six years from the phenomena, two things struck me on my return. One was how much wealthier and sophisticated this city had become. The second was that the biggest power shift in society and politics in WA was in the status of our indigenous community. The conversation still dwelt on injustice and race inequality. However the numbers of acknowledged Aboriginal voices, the respect accorded them, the size of their audience, the relevance of their issues had increased dramatically. No other shifts in the mental landscape were as dramatic.

That development is very much reflected in our four nominees, departing this afternoon for Canberra. They reflect that broader based WA agenda. Their unity of experience is courage, not just physical courage but moral courage. They have confronted danger in ways that amaze all of us but many also vicious and difficult threats that have required deep moral resources to overcome. Their behaviour and values represent all we West Australians aspire to be. Their success reflects well on our three organisational hosts at this gathering.

You should know Australia Day is a recently recognised moment in the way we celebrate it. It was only commonly acknowledged as such by the Commonwealth and States in the 1930s. It only moved into the current format in the 1980s and had that formalised in 1994. In a sense it is a creation of my generation of politicians interacting with our broader Australian community.

The Hawke Government had a thematic of nationalism and self-reliance. The anniversary opportunity was the bicentennial of January 26th 1788 in 1988. The sorts of celebrations we now have were perfected in the lead up. We became conscious too of the unhappiness in the indigenous population, so from the outset, attention was given to possibilities of reconciling concerns. A prelude that Prime Minister Hawke was most proud of was the passage in the British Parliament of the Australia Act and the Queen's subsequent visit to proclaim it here. By this act the British Parliament severed any legislative connection between the two states.

To give events a multicultural turn, citizenship ceremonies became prominent in official celebrations of the day. It should be pointed out that January 26th is not citizenship day. That was proclaimed in 2001 as 17th September, celebrating the proclamation in 1973 of the Australian Citizenship Act replacing the title of the Citizenship Act 1948-69. That in turn had been followed up in 1984 when laws were repealed that made our citizens subjects of the U.K. – a useful preliminary to the Australia Act. As well as various mechanisms we have for acknowledging the indigenous community, the citizenship ceremonies on the day remind us of the broad cultural base of our community, even if the date itself is of limited significance in the sign post dates of Citizenship significance.

There is just one other thing I want to mention and that is to look at what we have become. We have become without much fanfare, a more powerful nation than we believe ourselves to be. We look out at a complex world with not a little anxiety. It is not our way to big note ourselves or accord much value to individuals who do. Others however, are noticing us. The intellectual hegemony of the notion of a global liberal order challenged by a disruptive China and Russia is becoming more complicated. As the Trump Administration spurns American leadership founded essentially on American ideas, others become more interesting.

The indices of power, economic, military, industrial, resources, ideology, geopolitical capability, resolve and political structures are being measured in more interesting ways. For example, the Henry Jackson Society, in its Global Britain Programme, released this year its Audit of Geopolitical Capability. It is intensely mathematical and like all studies of its type is open to dispute. However, I have seen no more meticulous studies of this type. One of their conclusions elevates Australia to very high status. As they say,

“Other western powers – France, Germany, Japan, Canada and Australia – score prominently, as the world's fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth geopolitically most-capable countries, respectively.”

Another interesting study of Chinese CEOs ranking of growth prospects for their businesses did not feature Australia in the top 10 in 2018. This year we stand number one – Australia 21 per cent, U.S. 17 per cent, Japan 13 per cent, France 13 per cent and Canada 11 per cent. A less significant measure than those above but further indication the world now is taking us more seriously. I found that when I was Ambassador to the U.S. When the U.S. contemplated combat we were seen not as a political flag but a capability. When it came to discussing global but particularly regional affairs we were seen as among their most valuable dialogue partners. We are a country worth celebration.

Well in 1994 the attributes of Australia Day, identified in the 1980s, became formalised. The Australia Day Council website points out families and those born overseas are most likely to celebrate the day. 13 million are participating in specific Australia Day celebrations this year. 75 per cent of us believe this should be a time to recognise and celebrate the country's cultural diversity. 54 per cent of us give a thought to how lucky we are to live in Australia.

We are lucky. Most of us won't be thinking of the history and detail of all of this. In a way many of us will be wrapping up the 'month of the family'. It started on Christmas Eve and it wraps up today. We will be looking for a joyous conclusion even if in reality most of us are already back to work.

Be safe. Happy Australia Day.