

ADDRESS BY
HER EXCELLENCY MS QUENTIN BRYCE AC
GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
ON THE OCCASION OF
DINNER IN HONOUR OF ROBYN WILLIAMS (ABC RADIO NATIONAL)
ADMIRALTY HOUSE, SYDNEY
3 AUGUST 2010

Ladies and gentlemen, I am really thrilled you could join me here at Admiralty House this evening.

There is something very Australian about this home that belongs to us all.

I love opening its doors, filling it up with the energy of Australian life, achievement and challenge, in all their richness and diversity.

Tonight we gather to honour the service of one who has been designated as a National Living Treasure.

If we don't know him, we surely know his voice.
And he's still surprising us.

A scholar of the natural sciences who thirty five years ago picked up a radio mike in an ABC studio and has been talking, walking, breathing and dreaming science nonstop ever since.

Would there be another zoologist anywhere who managed to get a spot on the likes of The Goodies, Monty Python's Flying Circus, and Dr Who?

On his own admission, he's spent as much time performing as he has studying.

And he's never wasted a second.

He's one of those people who leave most of us staring in rather defeated wonderment at his prodigious output over a far from finished career.

How does he not look and sound terribly tired and jaded?

Why, rather, is he still bursting with ideas, passion, talk and work for all things scientific?

I have little hope of adequately answering these questions - of revealing the magic ingredients.

But I can tell you what he's done for me and, I have no doubt, for countless others.
Scientist, journalist, radio broadcaster, author, actor, showman, social and scientific researcher and commentator, mentor, and veritable polymath:

Ladies and gentlemen, please welcome to our dinner the presenter of Radio National's Science Show, Ockham's Razor and In Conversation, an outstanding Australian,
Mr Robyn Williams.

Friends, I frequently confess to being a Radio National groupie - Robyn Williams is largely responsible for that.

And though I've never been brave enough to enter its scholarship, I am absolutely besotted by science -

Robyn Williams takes the rap for that too.

Over all these years of listening to that quick, clever, resonant voice, shaded ever so lightly with irreverence, I have realised something about its power.

To be a scientist one obviously needs to be fairly amply equipped - a phenomenal intellect, curiosity, discipline, rigour, gusto, confidence, faith and stamina.

And there are so many other qualities I can't even begin to know.

But to be simply captured and enthralled by science, as I am, all we need is a good imagination.

So, who among us are the ones who get into our mind's eye and allow us to see things that we would never have believed possible?

Who repackages the untouchable and the unfathomable.

Who makes sense of this bizarre universe and our place in it?

Storytellers do.

They give our imagination the means and fuel to do its work.

And who are the storytellers?

They are the ones who are prepared to be present in the moment, to stay connected with the story as it unfolds, to witness the truth, and to play out the truth for us.

Robyn Williams is a storyteller.

He is a witness to the truth of this bizarre universe and our place in it.

Through his voice; his scripts; his probing, provocative engagement with others, he plays out that truth for us.

That's his assignment, and he serves us well. Very well.

There aren't many of us who are so obviously and singularly meant to be.

Some of us do one thing for long enough, and get quite good at it.

Others of us, bounce along doing a string of bits and pieces and make an interesting time of it.

And then, oh so rarely, there's a Robyn Williams who, not for a single moment, shies or strays from the mission.

A mission whose rewards are shared with all who care to listen.

And the wider they're shared, the more they generate.

A mission that never remains static.

A mission that is revisited, refreshed and rewritten daily.

Ladies and gentlemen, Robyn Williams has achieved all of this by holding onto the truth and his passion for it over many decades.

By his collegialism within the ABC and internationally. His colleagues and interlocutors:

Norman Swan
Lynne Malcolm
Amanda Armstrong
Daryl Carp
Susannah Elliott

Alison Leigh who helped me to recall some of this remarkable professional life and eminent scientists, Paul Ehrlich, James Lovelock, Richard Dawkins, Martin Rees, Stephen Hawking, and the late Steve Schneider.

He's done it by showing young science journalists and broadcasters their wings:

Natasha Mitchell of All in the Mind
Paul Willis and Mark Horstman of Catalyst
and Bernie Hobbs of Science Online and
The New Inventors.

He's done it by picking up every thread of scientific discovery and insight, and by reading and questioning across every discipline those threads may lead to.

And he's done it by being generous and courageous.

When I mentioned irreverence earlier, what I really meant was a refusal to be seduced by celebrity status or big tickets or conventional thinking or anything that may compromise or dilute the truth.

Friends, it is with the greatest praise, admiration and gratitude that I now propose a toast to one of our finest Australian storytellers whose stories tell the truth of who we are.

To Robyn Williams.