Address and Presentation of the Andrew Letten Gold Medal Award for Excellence to the leading Victorian apprentice plumber

Melbourne, VIC
20 July 2005

Mr Bill Durham, President of the Master Plumbers and Mechanical Services Association of Australia
Mr Phillip Barresi MP, Member for Deakin, Chairman of the Standing Committee on Employment, Workplace Relations and Workforce Participation
Teachers and sponsors
Award winners
Ladies and gentlemen

I am delighted to be here this morning to support the Master Plumbers and Mechanical Services Association of Australia, and to extol excellence in your industry.

It seems to me that trades people have demonstrated their skills so deftly and with such ease that their accomplishments are grossly undervalued. After an earthquake or even after a flood, plumbers restore the water and waste systems. Strip away the fabric of our housing, grand public buildings, hospitals, and sports centres, and what we find is a network of the plumber’s craftsmanship and ingenuity.

Trades people identify quality by performance. They know that actions, not words, are the true measure of a person. Trades people understand the material universe and the way things work. As Benjamin Franklin wisely noted: "well done is better than well said."

While many people may take for granted the mighty contributions of plumbing service to our contemporary lifestyles, it is also easily overlooked that for as long as humans have gathered in even the smallest of communities, plumbing, in one form or another, has been practised.

The trade is one of the foundation stones of our culture, even of civilisation itself. Men and women have had to be ingenious with water containment and delivery in order to survive hunger, enemies, and climate.

We look to one of the cradles of civilisation – the Middle East in the area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers from about 6,000 to 3,000 BC, where systems of writing and communication, literature, a codified set of laws, a calendar and a system for ascertaining time were produced.

Wheeled vehicles became common, and testaments to plumbing services echo in the irrigation dams, drains and basins, public sanitation, and personal bathrooms of their era's rich and famous.

Budding plumbers worked their ingenuity with the only available resource in unlimited supply – clay mixed with finely chopped straw.

Copper was known to some extent, while bronze was introduced about 2500 B.C. from outlying trade routes. Occasionally it was alloyed with tin, sometimes with antimony. Some working in lead was developing also, as tradespeople began to rivet, solder, hammer and anneal.
In ancient Rome, the artisan plumbed pipe, soldered, installed and repaired; he worked on roofs and gutters, down to sewers and drains; in essence, everything involving supply and waste. In fact, this general job description of plumbers' work lasted into the 20th century.

Over the past one hundred years the plumbing industry has met many challenges as markets in building construction have developed. However, the 21st century will be the most complex yet experienced by the industry. In the next three years it is forecast that Australia will build 450,000 new houses. Over the next twenty-five years, it is estimated that Australia will need more than 4.5 million houses and apartments.

This extraordinary growth must be achieved in a sustainable way, reducing greenhouse gas emissions, saving energy and water, and utilising recycled water and rainwater. Thus plumbers and the plumbing industry generally have a crucial role to play in protecting public health and creating sustainable communities throughout Australia.

Globalisation of environmental service providers in the markets of water, waste management and energy are identified as the source of the greatest environmental challenges and opportunities for the plumbing services sector. As the structure of the marketplace changes, there are opportunities for plumbers to lead the way as major protectors of the environment.

According to the Victorian Competition and Efficiency Commission, seventy per cent of energy saving within new homes will be achieved through sustainable plumbing products and systems such as rainwater collection, solar hot water, recycling including the use of grey water, and the implementation of new technologies in heating and cooling appliances.

At least seventy-six per cent of energy used in commercial buildings is delivered by plumbing systems. People are going to be asked to change their habits in many areas as environmental sustainability takes hold.

Energy efficiency has always meant a change of life habits to a population – particularly in our country where Australians are among the highest water users in the world with the average daily domestic water use at about 350 litres a person.

Mr Ray Herbert, the Executive Director of the MPMSAA noted at the 2004 Premier’s Business Sustainability Awards last November, that the environmental role of plumbers falls into several areas, namely:

$ using environmentally sustainable products and best work practices.
$ being prepared to implement new technologies;
$ keeping abreast of new plumbing regulations and government incentives; and
$ dealing with emergencies which could affect the environment.

The Association’s “Green Plumbers” program, supported by a range of national partners, is assisting plumbers understand their role in the delivery of the highest environmental and public health standards. I commend this outstanding initiative, and I understand that already up to 3,500 plumbers have completed one or more Green Plumbers training sessions.

Not only are trades viewed favourably by the community and are well paid and in high demand, the value of apprenticeships to businesses should not be underestimated. Training an apprentice within a company provides a strong foundation to the staff base and demonstrates commitment to the future development of both the business and the industry.

Another powerful tool to support potential apprentices is voluntary mentoring programs where grand-parent equivalents help youngsters with learning difficulties to become literate and numerate, and thus capable of taking on post secondary studies, including plumbing and other apprenticeships and traineeships. Mentoring has special relevance in indigenous communities with its power to transform lives.

And as part of that critical educative process I want to commend the trade teachers in our secondary and TAFE colleges for the magnificent contribution they make to Australia’s technical and economic well being.

Indeed, I consider teaching to be a noble profession.

But to return to the main theme. Ladies and gentlemen, why does the Plumbing Industry host these annual awards? There must be more to public recognition than simply acknowledging talent, important as that quality is.
Perhaps I can borrow from one commentator whose views provide a frame of reference for these awards.

He wrote: “The society which scorns excellence in plumbing as a humble activity, and tolerates shoddiness in philosophy because it is an exalted activity, will have neither good plumbing nor good philosophy: neither its pipes nor its theories will hold water.”

Within this context, plumbers have an increasing responsibility to create a safe, innovative and environmentally friendly society. As members of one the world’s largest and most dynamic trades during the most significant and complex era in the history of technology, plumbers are a key driving force in shaping the way we live and delivering the services we need to survive.

The Longitudinal Study of Australian Youth which tracks the activities of a sample of young people over a number of years, has found from its research that five percent of students who commenced in Higher Education subsequently move to Vocational Educational and Training; students cite interest rather than academic ability as a principal reason in their decision-making.

As a general comment on trends, it is encouraging that commencements in traditional apprenticeships numbered 57,500 for the twelve months to December 2004, a twenty-three per cent increase over the 46,600 commencements for the same period in 2003.

Nevertheless the number of apprentices and trainees in training in December 2004 dropped by 2.8% over the previous 12 months after some years of sustained growth.

And so as we look to the future, in this era of an ageing workforce and some lower than desired participation rates by apprentices in study, the plumbing industry needs to think hard on how to capture young minds and hearts with the promise and the reality that plumbing is an exciting, diverse and essential force for good in the community.

How does your industry give young people the tools to transform their natural creativity into valuable contributions to the future wellbeing, prosperity and environmental sustainability of the nation.

Does your industry maximise its contact with younger Australians? Do you support programs that get in early, hosting events in regional communities that tap into or create a market that engages with young secondary students.””> I am sure many older hands in the industry, and highly motivated young plumbers would welcome the opportunity to help spread the message about your trade and the opportunities in the trade as teachers, supervisors, project managers, contractors, administrators and managers.

May I recommend to the plumbing industry the magnificent Croc Festivals held annually throughout regional and outback Australia – the two and three day life skills learning programs for thousands of indigenous and non-indigenous youngster living in rural and remote Australia.

I have recently returned from opening the Thursday Island Croc Fest meeting with workshop facilitators, teachers, community leaders, parents and local citizens providing learning opportunities and career information for the hundreds of youngsters there. I can see great value in the plumbing industry hosting its own information centre at Croc Festivals to advise and guide thousands of young people both indigenous and non indigenous, on plumbing as a career option.

Ladies and gentlemen. We look to young Australians. We rely on young plumbers moving through the ranks valuing and utilising time honoured and proven practical skills. We also look to them to devise new solutions to old problems, to add value to their knowledge.

And so I applaud the apprentices and apprentice graduates who will receive awards today. You set a fine example of character, application, dedication and knowledge.

The years of study, the hard work, the commitment, the occasional failures, and the triumphs – these are things that you are really sharing with us in receiving these awards.

You have proven, most convincingly, that nothing comes without effort. Congratulations to each one of you on all your achievements.
I look forward to presenting the Andrew Letten Gold Medal shortly.

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