

ADDRESS BY
HIS EXCELLENCY MAJOR GENERAL MICHAEL JEFFERY AC CVO MC
GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
ON THE OCCASION OF
FAREWELL SPEECH TO MEMBERS OF FEDERAL PARLIAMENT AND PARTNERS
MEMBERS HALL, PARLIAMENT HOUSE, CANBERRA
26 AUGUST 2008

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today; their wisdom, enduring history and culture.

Prime Minister, the Honourable Dr Brendan Nelson and Presiding Officers; thank you for your very kind and generous words.

For Marlena and me it has been the ultimate honour to have served our magnificent country in the office of Governor-General. This has been a team effort and I publicly pay high tribute to Marlena for her totally dedicated and loving support.

May I congratulate Senator the Honourable John Hogg on his election as President of the Senate. May you guide it with wisdom, dignity and distinction.

Australia is a nation blessed with so much.

We have: the example of our indigenous inhabitants in living sustainably on this continent for many millennia; a stable democracy; a culturally diverse yet cohesive society, and a level of prosperity which while not yet including all, compares more than favourably with the rest of the world.

We also have: a skilled workforce; excellent healthcare and good opportunities for education and entrepreneurs; and high international standing - extraordinarily so in China from where I have just returned.

With these assets and advantages we have never been better equipped to respond to the challenges and opportunities of a rapidly changing society and a dynamic global environment.

Thus we should be confident in our ability to address key issues in indigenous and wider social disadvantage, climate change and the impact of rapidly increasing global pressures on finite natural resources such as energy, water and food.

In looking to the future, we should remember that our present prosperity and capacity is grounded in the foresight of wise men and women who have gone before us.

In particular, the founding fathers who framed our Constitution and those who created our principal democratic institutions based on the successful model of governance established by Magna Carta in 1215.

Today, our nation flourishes, supported by the wisdom and integrity of the Australian Parliament, the Executive Government, the High Court and other distinguished federal Courts, the Australian Defence Force and the Australian Public Service.

Each of these core democratic institutions has served us well individually and collectively for over one hundred years.

During my term, I have had the privilege of serving three Parliaments, and two governments of differing political persuasions; invariably consisting of hard-working men and women on all sides of politics, who from my long observation, invariably share a passionate commitment to the betterment of our nation.

In assenting to more than 850 pieces of legislation and approving several thousands of regulations in Executive Council, I have noted with appreciation, the policies, proposals and directions resulting from the extensive deliberations of the Commonwealth Parliament, its committees and sub-committees.

As we watch the political discord in so many nations of the world on our television screens each night, we can be thankful and proud of the smooth and harmonious transition of power following the election last year - a credit to the dignity and integrity of all involved and a further sign that our polity remains in good health.

I thank most sincerely all parliamentary members of the Executive Council and the Secretariat, including Jonas Mockunas and Malcolm Hazell, who have been so diligent in carrying out their important advisory roles to me as President of the Council.

The unrivalled reputation of our High Court for its independence, leadership, wisdom, integrity and impartiality continues, and I pay tribute for his exemplary contribution to the retiring Chief Justice, the Honourable Murray Gleeson. His has been a magnificent record of service to the nation.

At the close of more than fifty years proud association with the Australian Defence Force, I complete my term as Commander-in-Chief, satisfied that our Armed Forces, although relatively small, are well led, trained and equipped.

Their conduct of operations for many years in widely diverse theatres and circumstances has been exemplary. I would hope that the Parliament will always ensure that they have the tools - including the manpower - to meet the inevitable demands of the future.

And the Australian Public Service tasked with the drafting and implementation of government policy is recognised globally for its high ethical standards, apolitical approach and responsiveness to the legitimate requirements of the government of the day.

With these stable and healthy democratic institutions working on the nation's behalf, we are well placed to address the key challenges of the future; energy, water, food, environment and social condition.

In my five years as Governor-General, there has been some public debate on governance issues.

To examine better ways of governing ourselves is a good thing, but as I have strongly suggested throughout my term, if we are to criticise or debate the effectiveness of our core institutions, then we should do so from an informed perspective.

It is for this reason that I have urged all Australian governments to engage the community on the teaching and understanding of civics, including suggesting the establishment of mock parliaments, where students and citizens can play out all roles and functions of the parliamentary process. This has worked very well in Western Australia and here in Canberra, for example.

I suggest that if we can achieve a widespread understanding of the framework on which our present freedoms and prosperity are based, I believe we will be able, as a nation, to chart an even more prosperous and successful course for the future.

Ladies and gentlemen, ours has been a wonderful association, constitutionally and socially, with you all.

I congratulate the Parliament. I thank the Parliament for this evening's special function and I wish you its members and your families, every happiness and success for the future.

Thank you.