Speech

Address By

His Excellency Major General Michael Jeffery AC CVO MC
Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

On the occasion of

Farewell visit - Northern Territory

Government House, Darwin
19 May 2008

Tom, Thank you for your gracious words and with Tessa, for hosting this dinner to mark our farewell visit to the Northern Territory.

This is the eighth time I have had the pleasure of visiting the Territory in my term as Governor-General - twice to swear in the Administrator and at other times to visit indigenous communities, our defence force personnel and of course, to meet people from all walks of life contributing to this vibrant community.

And I will be visiting again in July to attend the presentation of a Guidon to 1 Aviation Regiment.

On each of our visits, Marlena and I have been delighted with the energy and enthusiasm of all concerned, perhaps deriving partly from your youthful demographic characteristics in comparison with the rest of the nation.

We have just had the pleasure of staying at and opening the Dugong Beach Resort on Groote Eylandt which I described in my opening remarks as: ‘paradise; fishing, golf, the superb facilities of the resort and not least, the opportunity to enjoy the beautiful environment and meet the traditional owners and learn more about their art and culture’.

The enthusiasm of the indigenous people to share their own culture and environment via well conducted tours was a pleasure to witness, not to mention the flow of benefits from increased employment opportunities.

It is just one example of many, of the dynamism and forward thinking here.

The Territory has played a significant part in Australia’s identity and history:

• with the strong and continuing connection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to their traditional lands;

• the overland telegraph in the early 1870s connecting Australia to the world;

• the indigenous walk-off at Wave Hill Cattle Station in 1966;

• the iconic Australian sites of Uluru, the Olgas and Kakadu National Park;

• the development of substantial mining, petroleum, cattle and fishing industries; and

• as a trading and tourism gateway to Asia.

The granting of self-determination with some limited exceptions to Territorians in 1978 has seen the Territory both mature and progress.

And the link-up of the Darwin-Alice Springs railway in 2004 was much more than a physical connection - it was the symbolic completion of a long-held dream to unite the continent East and West, North and South.
The plight of those indigenous peoples in the Northern Territory suffering disparities in life expectancy, health, education, housing and income remains of serious concern to us all, and I hope the so called ‘intervention’ will help to address some of the more immediate problems of alcoholism and violence.

In thinking of ways in which I as Governor-General could play a role, I have long believed that we can learn much from the wisdom of our indigenous people and their ability over some 60,000 years to live in reasonable harmony and sustainably in this land.

And hence my suggestion over the years to incorporate indigenous history into the history component of a nationally agreed curriculum; that is to teach Australian history from 60,000 years back, which I believe would do much to engender pride in all Australians, including young Aboriginal boys and girls, in the knowledge that we are a component of the oldest continuous civilisation on Earth.

There are aspects of indigenous culture that sensibly extrapolated could have a relevance to modern Australian society.

Might I draw attention to the activities of the Clontarf Academy in Perth. The program taps into a love of sport, particularly AFL and netball, and through its compulsory school linked academies, is very successfully turning around young indigenous lives.

This occurs through mentoring, leadership, skills training and most importantly, not just promoting the need for a good education, but recognising it as the essential “ticket” to participation in football and netball training.

The youngsters I have met on my visits there were some of the most impressive young people I have seen anywhere - physically, mentally and in their motivation.

This excellent and proven scheme is now taking place in some 22 schools at 18 different locations Australia wide, and with a pilot project planned for the Tiwi Islands.

Ladies and gentlemen.

The five years of our appointment have passed very quickly and been the most stimulating, wide-ranging and demanding of our lives - it has of course been very much a team effort, with Marlena and our excellent staff at Government House.

It has been wonderfully exciting, in frequently travelling the length and breadth of the continent to meet people from all walks of life and witnessing the courage and compassion of tens of thousands of our citizens working for the benefit of their fellow countrymen and the nation as a whole. In volunteerism alone, some 5 ½ million Australians give some 3 ½ hours per week of their time – an incredible contribution.

Some highlights include:

- The tremendous community response following the Maitland and Mackay floods, Mansfield bush fires, along with the Indonesian tsunami.

- Visiting Beltana on the Birdsville Track where the Reverend John Flynn conceived the idea of the ‘Mantle of Safety for Australia’ which evolved into the Royal Flying Doctor Service and participating in the wonderful School of the Air programs giving children in remote areas access to quality education.

- Visiting the Tiwi Islands was another special experience, seeing new programs underway in education, community infrastructure and health services, and with an emphasis on education for the young, whilst inculcating a love of their heritage.

- The School Volunteer Program in Western Australia with some 2000 ‘grandparent equivalents’ who on invitation from schools, mentor some 4500 children annually who are lacking in literacy, numeracy and social skills.

- The great privilege of approving more than 40,000 Australians for honours and awards:

Among these wonderful Australians, was a lady who for over thirty years lovingly fostered three or four infants each year until suitable parents could be found.
Also, the many citations for bravery, including the Unit Citation for Gallantry awarded to 4RAR (Commando) of the Australian Army for outstanding service with the Special Operations Task Group in Afghanistan fighting the Taliban; and SGT Locke of the SASR, to whom I presented his SAS beret, his highly deserved Star of Courage just before he was killed in action, leaving a lovely young wife and son. And your own 8/12 Medium Regiment as the custodian of the Honour Title ‘Coral’ to 102 Field Battery for its magnificent performance in Vietnam in May 1968.

• Meeting our exceptionally talented Nobel Prize winners at the Swedish Embassy including the 2005 awardees Dr Robin Warren and Professor Barry Marshall who discovered the ulcer-causing bacterium Helicobacter pylori.

• Engaging with organisations such as the Scouts, Guides, surf-lifesavers, CROCFEST, Duke of Edinburgh Awards, the Sir John Monash Foundation, the school cadets and the Big Brother Movement has been especially rewarding - all devoted to the development and support of young people, to help them achieve individual goals of excellence, and in so doing make an enhanced contribution to our nation.

• Seeing so much innovation in our country including renewable energy technologies, semi-arid area agricultural development, engineering feats of excellence and in the arts.

• On the international stage, hosting world leaders such as Presidents Bush, Hu Jintao of China, Vladimir Putin of Russia and Prime Minister Michael Somare of Papua New Guinea - also the APEC conference which made significant advances in trade, environmental cooperation and fostering international goodwill.

We have completed 22 successful overseas visits, highlights including:

• Russia, China, the Netherlands, Saudi Arabia and Germany.

• Gallipoli 2006

• The weddings of Frederick and Mary in Copenhagen; Charles and Camilla in England

• Pope John-Paul the Second’s funeral

• Seeing the fine work of the Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands or RAMSI

• Visiting our magnificently performing Defence Force personnel in Iraq and Afghanistan and other theatres

• Visiting Papua New Guinea including the Kokoda Track and Wewak to commemorate 30 years of independence with some 8000 citizens lining the streets.

• Visits of commemoration to Belgium (Tyne Cot, Menin Gate and Polygon Wood)

• Audiences with Her Majesty The Queen

There are hundreds more experiences I could relate - but suffice to say, it has been a privilege to serve and meet the many people motivated by compassion, a capacity for hard work and an increasing desire to achieve excellence in all that we undertake.

For the future, I am keen to promote the building of capacity in this country in three areas: excellence, innovation and leadership.

In essence, I believe we will cement our future prosperity and security if we aspire to be a Nation of Excellence: The Global Example.

The stronger we are as nation in terms of our innovative capacity, our management and leadership skills, and our cohesion as a community, the better placed we will in terms of our international standing and competitiveness. To put it simply, we will be in a position where other nations will want to trade and learn from us, rather than confront us.

Of pressing concern is the issue of the world’s finite natural resources, energy and water.

One recent analysis suggests developed societies are already consuming around 20 percent more resources than our planet can
Thus with 8 to 10 billion people on our planet by the year 2050, we have to face the inevitable challenge of how to feed and support a population of this size in a sustainable way.

Science and technology will help to provide some solutions to these pressing problems. But we also urgently need to consider the social implications and adjustments that might be required if the world is to live in harmony with very finite resources.

Ladies and gentlemen

I know that the Northern Territory will continue to prosper as a lively, forward looking community, keen to continue building a strong and resilient society, in an environment of excellence, enterprise and optimism.

Marlena and I wish all here tonight, and the people of the Northern Territory, every happiness and success in the future.

Thank you.

Source URL: https://www.gg.gov.au/speech/farewell-visit-northern-territory