

ADDRESS BY
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GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
ON THE OCCASION OF
CIVIC RECEPTION
BACK O' BOURKE EXHIBITION CENTRE CAFE
5 OCTOBER 2008

I acknowledge the traditional keepers of the land on which we gather, their rich heritage and offering, and the efforts of those who have followed, in valuing and preserving their footprint.

My friends, thank you for welcoming Michael and me so warmly this evening - in this special place, at the heart of your community:

- . superbly designed and crafted, with the utmost respect and care for the region's history and environs;
- . the surrounding, sweeping curves of the Murray-Darling river system;
- . the unique perspectives of its dwellers and observers;
- . the ample space for every story to be told, for journeys to unfold.

Arriving in Bourke this afternoon was the start of a new journey for me, into our Murray-Darling Basin:

- . the Basin is an expanse I don't know well - like Lawson in 1891, I'm a "stranger to the Darling";
- . and yet I have a sense of its towns, landscapes, and meaning in Australian life that has been with me since I was a little girl growing up in central western Queensland;
- . the stories and poems I remember and cherish, and now visit upon me afresh as I experience their passion and colour first hand.

Bourke, the Metropolis of the Great Scrubs, on the banks of the Darling River, a waterway that sings its own praises and laments:

*I drown dry gullies and lave bare hills,
I turn drought-ruts into rippling rills...
I have watered the barren land ten leagues wide!
But in vain I have tried...
To show the sign of the Great All Giver...*

As a child, I was simply thrilled by this vivid beauty and terror; the real human grief and hardship largely passing me by.

I have since read an account of the devastating Bourke flood of 1890:

- . The fury of the church bells and steamer whistles, warning of the coming disaster;
- . The desperate urges to "save the women and children".
- . The dozens of men who stood in breach of breaking banks, with their heads above the angry, surging

waters;

- . The blackest of nights, the water stealing with serpent-like pace, all houses slowly but surely filled;
- . Our beautiful town sunk.

A far more comfortable look at a drought broken came 13 years later when New South Wales Governor Sir Harry Rawson visited Bourke.

Like Michael and me, he and his wife were received affectionately and entertained beautifully.

After 45 years at sea, he confessed to needing to reacquaint himself with the ways of the people.

Yet he was confident enough to say that he had no fear for the country given the pluck and determination the people of Bourke had exhibited in the recent disastrous drought.

Precious messages, my friends, from ageing verse and copy.

They are others' renditions of course.

I too have had a privileged glimpse of this town - although brief and some 15 ago - when, as chair of the National Childcare Accreditation Council:

- . I came to see what excellence in early childhood education and care was all about - the Bourke Early Childhood Centre was an exemplar, for its fine professionals and groundbreaking programs;
- . I travelled with Professor Kim Oates - an eminent and much-admired paediatrician:
 - . he was chair of Paediatric and Child Health at the University of Sydney, and later, Chief Executive of the Children's Hospital at Westmead;
 - . he was a leader and advocate in the prevention of child abuse and neglect;
 - . a sterling and most humble champion of children's health, welfare, and rights
- . He ran clinics in Bourke that he would often bring his medical students to as an introduction to rural Australia;
- . He told me that if I wanted a lift, I had to be at Bankstown aerodrome before dawn to make the curfewed flight out.

They were times I treasure for what I learnt; the people who mentored and guided me; and their reminder of the power of networks and collaboration.

And now, I return, in a new and different role:

- . that spans our nation;
- . that demands of me deeper and broader insights;
- . a keener engagement with all issues, which, by virtue of their vast and diverse territory of origin, are complex and testing.

I come, therefore, to this town, this district and region, to seek to understand:

- . the issues that are central to your identity, your livelihood and future;
- . your contribution to our country's social, cultural and economic fabric;

- . the contemporary challenges of rural life here;
- . the impact of changing economies and natural environments, locally and globally;
- . your responses, your concerns, our vision and hopes.

It is a tough undertaking to serve and support the community we love.

Community is a word that is used often; but more often to lament what we fear is slipping away from us.

The ingredients of modern life are producing a mix that in many ways defies our shared existence:

- . individualism;
- . people distanced by income, age, education, language, ethnicity, and loss;
- . frenetic schedules at work and at home;
- . rare spaces to talk quietly and reflect.

And yet we have begun to talk more:

- . of place and being;
- . of our connectedness with one another;
- . our shared passage and belonging.

Local councils, enterprises and cooperatives, individuals, in their public and private roles, are taking the lead in community building and rebuilding, engaging us, helping us to retrieve that collective sense, to resume it into our daily lives.

The uncertainty we feel at the workings:

- . of volatile financial markets worldwide;
- . of fire, flood, drought and acid mud on the Murray-Darling Basin;
- . and of our own actions over decades,

tells us of our need for unity and leadership.

Through widespread upheaval, we see too how communities take shape and evolve; of how ideas can divide, galvanise, and ultimately mobilise people.

Ladies and gentlemen, there's a poem I'm fond of, by an American writer, Marge Piercy, called *To be of Use*. A part of it goes like this:

*I love the people who harness themselves, an ox to a heavy cart,
 who pull like water buffalo, with massive patience...
 to move things forward,
 who do what has to be done, again and again...
 ...the people who submerge in the task and move in a common rhythm...*

My friends, I am honoured and grateful to be in the company of those people this evening.

And hope, like Lawson "in Ninety-one and two", to feel no longer a stranger, and offer "my name for Bourke to keep".

Thank you for having us, Bourke.