

ADDRESS BY
HER EXCELLENCY MS QUENTIN BRYCE AC
GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
ON THE OCCASION OF
CIVIC RECEPTION
THE CONNECTION CENTRE, SHEPPARTON
22 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 to your gorgeous inland Australian town.

Your local names are national icons - SPC, Ardmona, Goulburn Valley, Campbell's Soups.

Those labels: so distinctive; ubiquitous in kitchens all over Australia.

I've always felt that we could have done more with Andy Warhol's obsession with soup tins!

And Shepparton, home of the Furphy. I know about the famous water carts, but what I'm really keen on is hearing some decent tall stories in my travels.

Indeed, I've had a few travels recently.

Bourke, Prattenville, Menindee, the Barrier Ranges, Broken Hill, Mildura, Nangiloc, Red Cliffs, Wentworth, Goolwa and the Lower Lakes.

Towns and districts, two weeks ago, I didn't know well, but soon enough they felt like old friends. We had plenty to catch up on.

At every stop along our travels through the northern and western regions of the Murray Darling Basin, Michael and I were welcomed with such generosity and affection.

Women and men, young people, families, elders and leaders, paused in the midst of their troubled times to open their arms to us and lead us into their lives and communities.

How privileged and humbled we were to pull up a chair at the table, share a blanket on the riverbank, get sand in our shoes, even have a few laughs, with these people whose livelihoods and spirits have been almost eviscerated by the workings of natural and human action over many decades.

And so on Monday we arrived in Albury, beginning the second leg of our Murray-Darling expedition - into its more southern parts. And from tomorrow, we head off to Echuca, Deniliquin, Blighty and their surrounds.

Another precious opportunity for me to learn about your indigenous, white settler and migrant histories, your economic roots, your urban growth, and your place in a vital rural network.

Information so important to me in my new role:

. one that spans our nation;

. that demands of me deeper and broader insights;

. and 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 life here;

. the impact of changing economies and natural environments, locally and globally;

. your responses, your concerns, your 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, I am honoured and grateful to have witnessed this capacity in you.

Thank you for having us, Shepparton.

Thank you Mr Mayor, to you and your staff for the thoughtful planning in ensuring our time here has been enriching and rewarding.