



ANDREW HESLOP – Founder, Neighbour Day

Australia Day Address at Bungendore

Wednesday 26th January 2011

Good morning and thank you for such a warm welcome.

May I just say what a pleasure it is to have spent the night in Bungendore at the stunning Carrington Inn. I am happy to say this is not my first visit to Bungendore but so far it is the longest – normally I'm here for only three minutes.

That's not because I'm speeding through, which I'm sure Sgt McGee will be very pleased to know! It's because I am on the not-very-fast CountryLink train between Sydney and Canberra, which I use from time-to-time.

Or the Canberra Eurostar, as I prefer to call it. Hoping that one day it might just be as fast and reliable and frequent.

I would like to acknowledge that today's event is being held on Aboriginal land and recognise the strength, resilience and capacity of Aboriginal people in this land, whose traditional owners are the Ngarigu people.

Cr Walter Reynolds, Mayor of Palerang Shire Council and General Manager Peter Bascomb; Michelle Olesen from Woolworths Queanbeyan, councillors, other distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you for your invitation to spend Australia Day with you.

This is my first year as an Australia Day Ambassador, a national program sponsored by the fresh food people ... Woolworths. I'm honoured to be considered a community leader and I'm honoured to be with you this morning, which coincidentally marks 20 years since I boarded an Australian Airlines flight from Adelaide to Brisbane.

That flight took me to live away from home, leaving behind a five year career in news talk radio to the embrace of the ABC in Queensland.

The devastating floods in Queensland, northern NSW, Victoria and Western Australia have dramatically demonstrated what a harsh, unforgiving land we live in.

A land European descendents have only known for 223 years.

But a land our indigenous peoples have known for 40,000 years.

Growing up in South Australia I was touched by the works of Australian author Colin Thiele, who so beautifully captured country South Australia in his books, especially 'The Sun on the Stubble' ... a novel about a German family in the 1930's facing the heat, and dust, and rain as they struggled desperately on the land.

As a child in the city, it painted in my mind the challenges and triumphs of living in the country. Of the droughts and flooding rains Dorothea Mackellar described in My Country.

Not so long ago your community, like many others, was dealing with the drought and its crippling economic effect.

Now towns are drying out from what is being called the biggest national disaster in Australian history.

Sadly, many of us know how a disaster or an emergency can bring people together. Many of us know that from first hand experience.

Whether the floods and the drought are the result of climate change ... or whether the floods are nature's healing response for the earth to recover from the relentlessness of drought and the raging inferno of a bushfire, there is one thing we can be certain about.

When these brutal forces of nature hurtle towards us, we can be certain that our neighbours will be there to help.

In recent weeks we have seen, through live television news coverage, communities facing certain disaster.

In a way never encountered before, we have heard and seen live national radio and television coverage from experts telling us - in the dry safety of our homes and offices - what will happen to those communities in the path of the deluge.

What we have heard and seen from the women and men facing disaster is the strength of their community. How ordinary people are planning to respond in order to protect their homes and families and livelihoods.

What we have heard and seen is the resilience of the Aussie spirit.

Our never-to-be-beaten attitude even when odds are so dramatically stacked against us.

Because no matter what happens our neighbours and our community will be there to help.

To me, that's what it means to be Australian.

To me, that's what we celebrate on Australia Day.

That overwhelming attitude of optimism and strength and courage.

Attitudes which are firmly part of our DNA and which are admired and respected and envied all around the world.

Who would have thought a penal colony would evolve so quickly to become a nation of opportunity?

A nation that in just 223 years has welcomed citizens from around the world seeking to make a new life and in doing so creating the mature, tolerant and inclusive Australia of today.

Nine years ago, I founded another national day – Neighbour Day.

Neighbour Day began because an elderly woman died alone in her home in Melbourne but she was not found for two years.

She had disconnected from her family and friends and her neighbours so purposefully, so successfully, that no one realised she was missing from the community.

By the time they did it was far too late – but only once the piles of newspapers, mail and store catalogues at her front door prompted a neighbour to call the police.

Remarkably, when police broke in they discovered the water, electricity, gas and telephone were all still connected – despite the bills being unpaid for more than two years.

Celebrated on the last Sunday in March every year, Neighbour Day has grown organically to encourage better relationships between neighbours – no matter where you live or your personal circumstances.

Whether you live in the city or the bush, in a house, an apartment or on a farm, it's the day to connect with old friends or meet new people who have moved in recently.

It's the day to say thanks for being a great neighbour, thanks for walking the kids to school or collecting the mail or for doing the shopping.

When I move around the country talking about Neighbour Day I am often asked if I think Australia has lost it's sense of community.

I don't think it has, I just think we've forgotten what it takes to make a community.

Drought and flood and bushfire brings us together. But so does a major accident on the highway at 2am in the morning when the police need Australian Red Cross and the SES and the Rural Fire Service to help out.

When the pager goes or the siren sounds, that scramble to voluntarily put on the uniform, knowing a family may soon get a call changing their lives, is the essence of community.

A volunteer who may be you. Or your neighbour.

Yet the footy or netball club's grand final will also bring us together, as will a fundraiser to send a group of local school kids on an excursion overseas.

But what is community? It's more than just the physical structures of our suburbs and towns. It's more than just the individual residents who collectively become the community.

To me it's the sense of connection to place that binds us to where we choose to call home, however temporarily. It's something Aboriginal people have known for thousands of years before we built concrete boxes on their land.

It's local traditions that keep the sense of community alive.

It could be a league championship on the dartboard. Or a game of pool that never ends. Or a fundraiser for the local hospital. Or the Bungendore Show this weekend.

But at the heart of it all is a series of individuals who care about what's happening around them and want to actively participate.

That's the essence of community.

Today in Queensland, New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia there are empty places where towns and businesses and homes once stood. The structures have been washed away but the residents remain.

Those residents are people like you and me. People with hopes and dreams and ambitions.

They may have lost everything in a swirling tide of mud and water and debris.

But what they have is each other. Behind them is the rest of Australia, ready to help them get back on their feet.

As we celebrate Australia Day here this morning, so far more than \$145 million has been donated to rebuild Queensland, including \$7.5 million put through Woolworths check-outs matched dollar for dollar by the company.

That's \$15 million which will make a real difference, just like Sunrise's Operation Bounce Back where qualified tradies - bricklayers, window installers, gas fitters and tilers – from all over Australia are volunteering for local community projects.

To me, the essence of Australia Day is our sunny optimism and our generosity. Our willingness to give our last dollar for someone doing it tougher than us.

To me, that's the real Australia.

Our communities are only as strong as the people who live in them. Happy Australia Day, Bungendore.