



ANDREW HESLOP – Founder, Neighbour Day
Australia Day Address for Wentworth Shire Council, NSW
Thursday 26th January 2012

A growing thirst for an Aussie icon

Good morning and thank you for such a warm welcome to Wentworth on my first visit to this region ... although I am very familiar with the River Murray after spending many years promoting the Red Cross Murray Marathon during my career with Australian Red Cross.

Thank you for resisting the urge to stay in bed, or potter around home, and instead come out to celebrate this morning. Thank you.

A special thank you also to Les and Carol McWhinney of Red Gum Lagoon for your fine hospitality and very comfortable accommodation.

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 Barkindji people.

Cr Margaret Thomson, Mayor of Wentworth Shire Council and General Manager Peter Kozlowski; Richard Madden from Woolworths Mildura who cannot be with us today, councillors, other distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

This is my second 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 21 years since I boarded an Australian Airlines flight from Adelaide, where I grew up, to move to Brisbane to work for the ABC.

I have to say it's probably a good thing Richard Madden can't be with us today. Last year, before my first speech in Bungendore at the dawn breakfast, I was having a chat with the local Woolworths manager Michelle Olesen.

In my bleary, sleepy state – juggling a sausage sandwich and balancing a cup of tea – I managed to throw the entire cup across the front of her crisp green shirt.

Because Woolworths staff plan for all contingencies, Michelle had a spare uniform in her car. Luckily. So I hope I can get through this morning without accidentally throwing a drink over any of you.

Australia is a nation defined by symbols, which possibly makes up for our relatively short national history since European arrival in 1788.

We certainly don't have the built culture of, say, the Parthenon in Greece - but if you travel to Nashville you can see a full scale replica of the Greek temple to the goddess Athena ... constructed for the Tennessee Exposition in 1897.

Given that the Greeks began building the original in 447 BC the replica is in somewhat better shape. And it probably sells jelly doughnuts. And coffee with cream.

But what we do have is a direct link with the oldest continuing culture on earth – our Indigenous people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders for whom every paddock, every river, every desert, every beach, every road and every suburb is part of a continuing story.

A culture that is embroidered through the land despite the concrete and glass temples to ourselves we descendents of those first European settlers have constructed since 1788.

In these jet set days I reckon you can now tell a lot about a country by its international airports.

To me airports really are the gateway to new experiences, new friends and new cultures. Some are similar to our own, yet different.

For example you can have Qantas land you at London Heathrow and be fairly confident that what you'll find is a heritage very, very similar to our own. Yes, some of the accents can be intriguing but you know what you get and what to expect.

It's a country built on its monarchy and the rituals and symbols that represents. A place where only one family will forever sit at the top of the nation.

A family born there and who have had interests and relatives and links embedded in it for generations.

As you arrive in the Old Dart you're washed over with Unions Jacks, images of red telephone boxes and double decker buses, towering homes like that featured in Downton Abbey and chocolate box countryside straight out of Heartbeat.

Yet fly across the ditch to New Zealand and the moment you step out of the air bridge you're immediately immersed in Maori culture.

This is not some kind of Disney-style attempt to leverage kudos by prominently displaying the pre-European heritage of Aotearoa. This, in my experience, is a country where the Maori, their culture and their language is seamlessly integrated into almost every aspect of everyday life.

Without fuss or question. It just is.

Because that welcome at Auckland Airport, from the warmth of traditional songs through to the artworks and photographs and giant carved gateway, or tomokanga, that greets you, tells you how fiercely proud Kiwis of all races are.

And so every time I come home from Auckland into Sydney International Airport what strikes me as I walk off the air bridge are the stark white walls and nondescript carpet. Then as I inch close to the duty free shops I'm bombarded with advertising.

That, too me, says so much about Australia today.

Despite our rich Indigenous heritage and our more recent history of vibrant and inclusive multiculturalism our welcome to international visitors at our front gate is a large blank canvas.

After Boxing Day I drove from my temporary home in Canberra to Melbourne down the Mighty Hume. It was one of those 7am starts with Waleed Aly on ABC Radio National breakfast for company. Or Aaron as they call it now.

I have no idea who Aaron is or his claim to fame but I'm intrigued as to why the ABC has named a national radio network after him!

Gundagai was my only planned stop – not for the Dog on the Tuckerbox (which I have never seen close up) – but for a taste of Australia that is seriously under threat. And under threat in a way that is almost unimaginable.

A threat that rips at the core of our national identity.

In urban areas convenience stores are sweeping across our cities like prickly pear.

Between Young & Jacksons and The University of Melbourne there would have to be at least a dozen up Swanston Walk.

Within these fluorescently lit dens of conveniently chilled soft drinks and salty snacks that are open all hours an unseemly and so far unreported death has occurred.

And that is the death of the milkshake.

That once great icon of an Australian summer has been felled by the pre-mixed bottled and cartoned, pasteurised and homogenised, flavoured milk.

As a child growing up in the 70's it seemed that no hamburger with the lot – pineapple, beetroot, egg, bacon, cheese, tomato sauce, onions and meat patty – could be consumed unless it was washed down with a milkshake.

Today it makes me feel rather sick that such a greasy, salty meal was followed by a pint of cold dairy. It makes me more unwell to think that in the 60's and before, when milk came in a glass bottle with a thick wad of cream at the top, there was extra fat to top off the fat from the burger.

But my 9am stop in Gundagai was for a very good reason - to reacquaint myself with an old friend: the art deco Niagara Café.

It's here, five miles from the Dog, where the best chocolate milkshakes in Australia are made.

Inside this heritage listed relic of a bygone era a familiar whirr froths ice cold milk, a generous dollop of ice cream and a sturdy handle of chocolate syrup into a creamy, silky dream of memories and fun.

Memories of sitting with my grandmother at Sally's long gone shop on Semaphore Road, Semaphore drinking a chocolate milkshake out of a blue anodised tin. Or sometimes a lime one from a battered green tin. Made with rich creamy Amscol vanilla ice cream and milk.

Now also gone.

So today I am using Australia Day not to call for a Republic ... not to question my fellow Australians on their reasoning that allows a resident of another country to be our Head of State ... or to point out that in the top left hand corner of our flag sits the flag of another country ... but instead I'm offering a rallying cry for the return of the milkshake. Today begins the journey for a milkshake-led economic recovery.

We need to get pineapple and lime milkshakes back on to shop counters all over Australia. We need to bring the chocolate and the strawberry lovers through the door. We must get the additional heaped spoon of malt back where it belongs.

We must demand convenience stores and corner shops make milkshakes.

As the founder of Neighbour Day, Australia's annual celebration of community, I have seen how communities have been regenerated when a long-closed store reopens. A store that once sold groceries and papers and sandwiches and ice creams and milkshakes but closed when Australians fell in love with the climate controlled shopping mall.

But through innovative residents and a commitment to buy local – and the hit of the controversial babycino cult added in – such stores have been reborn, giving streets new life and communities new purpose.

The National Broadband Network, for which I am proud to be a Champion, will also transform communities. It will, for the first time, enable regional communities like yours to engage with the world more quickly, more reliably and more easily.

For me, the NBN will bring many positive changes to regional areas and, I believe, will help to keep towns sustainable. It will allow creative industries such as web developers, designers and animators to take a 'tree change' and build their businesses away from the big cities because they will be in instant electronic contact.

They will be able to send large files, have the capacity to use faster versions of Skype to teleconference and enjoy all of the communications benefits people who work in big city offices take for granted every day.

I'm very glad to know that Wentworth Shire is right behind the NBN and also advocating for it to be available soon ... and so I encourage you to continue to inform residents and businesses about how Australia's largest ever infrastructure project will strengthen your community.

It's no secret that our dairy farmers are facing testing times – getting paid less for providing more milk. On Saturday Woolworths told Fairfax Media that the milk war, which has forced prices for private label milk to one dollar a litre, are unsustainable.

In that same story the Australian Dairy Farmers President said since the milk war began 30 dairy farmers in Queensland have left the industry, with the collateral damage hitting producers in Queensland, northern New South Wales and Western Australia the hardest.

People – just like you and me – who are the essential life blood of the community. For keeping the local economy strong. Who spend their income locally to support other locals.

This pain is the pain Australian consumers don't see but it's the one entrepreneur and philanthropist Dick Smith is talking about.

Nobody honestly likes to pay more for a product than they have to – but if they understood why paying a good price is better than the cheapest price – perhaps our primary producers and their families could sleep better at night.

In this age where we're conditioned to chase the lowest price no matter what it's time for some loud voices and serious thinking.

Some of you might recall what I think was one of the best advertising campaign ever. Not Louie the Fly or Mr Sheen or Robina Beard as Madge the Palmolive lady.

But the one which simply said 'Buy Your Kids a Job'.

A part-time job in a reinvented corner store for a teenager still at school.

A store that wants to stand up and be counted because the owner knows the value of a strong, vibrant local economy.

A store that sells milkshakes made with real milk from real Australian dairy farmers who get paid a fair price for the milk they make.

A store giving a start to a young Australian who might grow up to become our Head of State.

A Head of State who lives here every day of the year and will celebrate our national day with their fellow Australians – possibly with a milkshake.

Unless they're lactose intolerant.

Happy Australia Day.