

“ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP”

Address to OAA - ACT Branch Australia Day Breakfast 2010

By Branch Patron - General Peter Gratton AC OBE

Introduction

Good morning ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to this celebration of our National Day – marking the 222nd anniversary of the establishment of the first settlement in Port Jackson in 1788.

Today is the day that gives us Australians – wherever we may be around the world – an opportunity to come together to celebrate our country and our culture. And we can be sure that in many corners of the world wherever a few Australians gather together, there will be a celebration of some sort.

The mood of the day is celebratory. It is a holiday – a day for picnics, sport and fireworks; a day for citizenship ceremonies around the country to welcome those newcomers granted Australian citizenship. It is the day on which we announce the Australian of the Year Awards and the latest list of recipients of awards in the Order of Australia

I suggest it is also a day to reflect on the achievements of the nation and perhaps to explore ways to make our country even better in the future.

I want to pick up on that theme and in particular to share some thoughts with you about Australian citizenship. I will remind you that good citizenship is a central concern of our Order of Australia Association; I will offer some thoughts on what we mean by that word “citizenship”; I will point out the unique quality of Australian citizenship, in which we can all take pride; and I will encourage us all to continue to embrace what we call “active citizenship”.

The Order of Australia Association

When it comes to citizenship, we here this morning are a pretty special group. Every member of our Association has carried out some meritorious act of service to the Australian community, and has had that service publicly recognised. And the great majority of our spouses and partners here have also contributed, if only by providing essential support. The common bond linking

our very diverse membership is therefore service to Australia, or putting it another way, proven good Australian citizenship.

This focus on good citizenship is reflected in our Association's objectives. Two of the most important are to do with citizenship. They are:

- To foster love of and pride in Australian citizenship, and
- To promote good citizenship by example, by encouragement and by awards to individuals, institutions and organisations.

Citizenship

So our object is to promote good citizenship, but what do we really mean by those words "good citizenship"?

Most of us would be pretty sure that we know what good citizenship is and would recognise it when we saw it, but people do find it hard to describe it precisely. Something to do with "doing the right thing by the community" perhaps, but can we get a bit more specific?

Yes we can. There is a commonly accepted definition of citizenship as being a member of a political community (in our case, of Australia) who enjoys the rights and assumes the duties of membership.

This is alright as far as it goes, but we know that Australian citizenship is a good deal more than simply enjoying rights and meeting obligations. It is coveted by many who do not have it, and should be highly prized by those of us who do.

Being highly prized does not mean we should become defensive and close the gates to the rest of the world, but it does mean we should continue to be prudent and careful in the way we extend citizenship to others.

Nor does having love of and pride in our citizenship mean that we think of ourselves as living in some sort of Camelot without blemish. Of course Australia has its share of evil-doers and social ills, and we as a nation have made plenty of mistakes since that first Australia Day in 1788. We know that most indigenous Australians do not see today as a day to celebrate. But we also know that we have peacefully assimilated people from many lands, into a stable, democratic, prosperous and multi-cultural society in which the pluses

far outweigh the minuses. We can indeed take pride in our citizenship. I have lived in other countries around the world, and I can tell you the more I have seen, the better I feel about being Australian.

For we are fortunate to live in a society with a particular and unique quality of its own – different to all the others - a society where the majority of people consciously or unconsciously embrace a set of values we sometimes refer to as the ANZAC spirit. We call it that because the World at large first recognised these values as distinctively Australian during the First World War through the exploits of the men of the 1st AIF fighting on Gallipoli, in Palestine and Syria, and in France and Belgium almost one hundred years ago.

I know that some are uncomfortable with the idea that our core national values were founded in war. This is to miss the point. The men of the 1st AIF were almost to a man citizen soldiers who brought to the conflict values that had already emerged over the previous hundred years in the Australian bush, on the outback stations, in the mines, and in the cities too. So the ANZAC Spirit was the expression in war of values that had already formed in our first century and a quarter of settlement.

Not all these values are distinctively Australian. Most countries would want to have qualities like courage, integrity, responsibility and so on as national values, but I am talking about uniquely Australian things like the idea of a Fair Go – that everyone deserves a reasonable chance to make their way, free of class or other impediments. And of Mateship – the idea that we are all Australians and part of the team, and we stick by our mates in hard times, particularly those worse off than ourselves. And of a certain Irreverence for Authority for its own sake, and until that authority has proved itself worthy of our respect

And here I come to a key point. The important principle underlying each of these three – Fair Go, Mateship, and Irreverence for Authority - is the moral obligation to help those less fortunate than ourselves. This line of thinking has led us to an ideal of citizenship that goes well beyond rights and obligations, and we call it Active Citizenship.

Active Citizenship

Active Citizenship is the idea that citizens should work positively towards the betterment of their community through economic participation, public service, volunteer works, and other such efforts to improve life for all citizens.

It is an excellent concept, and it is the ideal of Australian citizenship that the Order of Australia Association embraces, and in which we wish to foster Australians' love and pride. Let's look briefly at the elements.

- Economic participation means having and doing a worthwhile job, consistent with your abilities. Theodore Roosevelt once commented that "The first requisite of a good citizen is that he shall be able and willing to pull his weight."
- Public service doesn't mean so much working for the government in the Public Service or the Defence Force (although there is nothing wrong with that), but rather doing things which contribute to the public good, often in your spare time and usually unpaid. Things like helping out with charitable works, or contributing to community development by organising, leading or taking part in community organisations.
- Voluntary means that you will do it of your own free will and from a sense of moral responsibility to be a good active citizen. You won't expect to be paid, but you will almost always receive a deep sense of personal satisfaction far exceeding the effort you have put in.

The OAA and Active Citizenship

And that brings me back to our Association and Active Citizenship. Because every member has already demonstrated and had publicly recognised good Australian citizenship, we above all groups in the country should be taking a lead in promoting active citizenship. It is not enough, having received an award, to sit back. More is expected, and we can't rest on our laurels. The Association's objectives require us to promote good citizenship by example, encouragement and awards - in fact to be active citizens - and it's very pleasing to know that we are getting on with it, both as individuals and as an Association.

As individuals, our members continue to be involved in a wide variety of voluntary community activities. I haven't done any sort of survey, but I am

willing to bet that well over half the people in this room are involved in some sort of voluntary work, organising, leading or taking part in community organisations.

At the Branch level, I was very pleased last November to present the first ACT Branch Student Awards for Citizenship and Community Service. One went to Radford College for an outstanding demonstration of citizenship, whereby Radford students in a Radford/Cranleigh partnership over a five year period have helped the disabled Cranleigh students in their classrooms, in sporting events, and with the annual Cranleigh art show. A second award went to Holy Family Primary School Gowrie, which over four years has made a sustained and increasing effort to help those less fortunate by providing support to a very wide range of charities – from victims of the Victorian bushfires, through cancer research and the RSPCA to Xmas giving not only in Australia but internationally.

And at the national level, the Association has now celebrated the tenth anniversary of the OAA Foundation. The Foundation awards scholarships each year to students in the early years of tertiary study, who would greatly benefit from the award. The objective is “To support the next generation of leaders by helping young Australians from all walks of life to achieve their potential for the benefit of future generations of Australia”. So far 19 scholarships have been awarded, with three more expected next month.

Conclusion

That is all I want to say. If someone asks you “What did he talk about?”, you could say two things:

- Firstly, that a central concern of our Association is good citizenship, and we its members have a special responsibility to continue to promote active citizenship amongst our fellow Australians,
- And secondly, while not ignoring our problems, we can be proud of our Australian citizenship - proud of our heritage, proud of our achievements, and proud of the values that make up that ANZAC Spirit that gives our Australian citizenship its unique quality.

General Peter Gration

Canberra

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