

**Australia Day Speech by John Hindmarsh for the
ACT Branch of the Order of Australia Breakfast
Canberra Yacht Club, 8:30am, 26 January 2013**

Good morning distinguished ladies and gentlemen.

I feel greatly honoured to be a recipient of an Order of Australia Award having spent most of my working life in Canberra doing things I have greatly enjoyed, seeing my children educated and becoming mature adults and providing my wife Rosanna and me with seven beautiful grand children.

Receiving an Award on Australia Day in Canberra's Centenary year makes it doubly enjoyable.

I have lived and worked in Canberra for 40 years and have watched it grow and develop into one of the world's most liveable cities and commend to you Heidi Smith's latest book of photographs of Canberra and its people.

As a result of my wife Rosanna's long standing role as a volunteer guide at the NGA I have over the last six or so years become actively involved in the arts through of the Council of the National Gallery of Australia as well as chair of its Foundation.

Last year I was appointed as Chair of the Canberra Cultural Facilities Corporation which embraces the Canberra Theatre, the Canberra Museum and Art Gallery and the historic houses of Lanyon, Mugga Mugga and Calthorpes House.

I am delighted to be able to speak to you today about Canberra, the cultural capital.

This seems a very appropriate topic in this, Canberra's Centenary Year and particularly on Australia Day because it is the cultural icons, the treasures they hold and the contribution they make to the Nation, which, in my view, earn this city the reputation as "the Cultural Capital".

The creation of the National Capital moved at a miserably slow pace for the first fifty years and for some time its future was in doubt. But when the funds and moral commitment emerged after 1955 things changed and to understand the speed with which Canberra rose to its present cultural heights a look at its formative years is useful.

Canberra was named and enshrined as the seat of Government for all Australia by the laying of a foundation stone in March 1913, after a prolonged battle between Sydney and Melbourne as to who should **NOT** host the Federal Parliament.

When it was decided that neither should do so, a review of various sites, resulted in the recommendation in 1910 by King O'Malley's committee that the National Capital should be established on these limestone plains.

Owing to delays caused by World War I and the various machinations of the administrators of the time, as to its location on the future lake shore or Capital Hill or somewhere else, the provisional Parliament House was not completed until 1927. It was intended to last 30 years, but in fact made do for over 60 years.

In the same year as Parliament House opened, hostels, including the present Hyatt Hotel, Brassey House and Acton House were completed, as well as Canberra's principal cultural venue, the Albert Hall. This remained the centrepiece of cultural and social activity for almost 40 years until the opening of the Canberra Theatre in 1964.

When Prime Minister Bruce opened the Albert Hall in 1927, he expressed the hope "that the building would be a defining step towards Canberra becoming the centre of art and literature" and "of everything that will uplift the Australian people - a centre from which we will radiate all those aspirations that are truly national". These aspirations were a long time coming.

Thousands of workers were involved in the early building of the national capital. They were accommodated in various campsites in Eastlake, Westlake, the Causeway, Acton and Capital Hill.

Many of these people were war veterans, and the principal "cultural" activities during the building period were probably drinking and frequenting brothels – much of which occurred in Queanbeyan because of prohibition which existed in Canberra until 1927.

At one point nearly 7 million alcohol bottles were collected from the various camps and transported back to Sydney breweries.

In Civic, which had been intended to be the major commercial centre under the Griffin Plan, the Sydney and Melbourne Buildings were opened in 1927 and a number of other small commercial enterprises, including banks.

However, Manuka and Kingston were by far the most active commercial and retail areas being near Parliament House and in 1931 on Australia Day, the Manuka Swimming Pool was opened.

By the time the provisional Parliament house was completed the Depression had taken hold and very little new work occurred until well after World War Two.

In fact, until the late 1950's Canberra could well have been regarded as something of a cultural desert. The general view of Canberra among the politicians was that it was a *"cemetery with lights"* and *"a waste of a good sheep station"*.

By 1950 the only significant places of cultural influence in Canberra were the provisional Parliament House, the Parliamentary Library, which incorporated the National Archives, the Institute of Anatomy, later to become the National Film and Sound Archives, the Australian War Memorial, which opened in 1941 and of course the Albert Hall, the centre of social activity.

Robert Menzies regained the Prime Ministership in 1949. Menzies proved that it was possible for people to change their mind about Canberra and in 1955 he set out to change the thinking of all Australians about their national capital.

That year (1955) a Senate Enquiry Report stated that *"After 40 years of development the important planned areas stand out, not as monumental regimes symbolising the character of the National Capital, but more as graveyards of departed spirits awaiting resurrection of national pride."*

Following the Senate Report Menzies was quoted as saying *"I cannot honestly say that I liked Canberra very much; it was for me a place of exile but I soon realised that the decision had to be taken that Canberra was and would continue to be the capital of the nation and it was therefore imperative to make it a worthy capital; something that the Australian people would come to admire and respect; something that would be a focal point for national pride and sentiment. Once I had converted myself to this faith I became an apostle."*

In 1957 Menzies established the National Capital Development Commission headed by Sir John Overall to push ahead with the development of the City.

Within its 100 years of existence it is only in the last 50 that it could be argued that a real national capital has emerged. Unfortunately along the way we have in large part abandoned the planning principles that Griffin enunciated.

The earthworks for our lake were completed in 1964 and the lake filled enough for its official opening, (because of a drought it would be two further years before the lake was full). Completion of the lake was influenced by English planner Sir William Holford who also had

proposed major changes to the Griffin Plan and influenced the dispersed Canberra city we have today.

To meet population growth the NCDC came up with the Y Plan (nothing of this sort was proposed by Griffin) and planners of the day, in their enthusiasm for the growth and opportunity to develop a green fields city, adopted the “Y-Not Approach”.

They decided that we would have at least three town centres, Civic, Belconnen and Woden, separated by urban green space. We now have six town centres and a further one in prospect, including the airport development, with the attendant cost of servicing the most dispersed population of any significant city in the world.

Notwithstanding the total departure from Griffin's concepts, development of our cultural capital moved apace. Within 45 years, between 1964 and 2009, no less than 14 major national cultural facilities have been developed.

The Canberra Theatre opened in 1965

The Mint also opened in 1965

The National Library, which now holds over 10 million items, in 1968

The High Court of Australia in 1980

The Australian Institute of Sport in 1981

The National Convention Centre in 1981

The National Archives between 1973 and 1981

The National Gallery of Australia, with over 165,000 works, in 1982

The National Film and Sound Archives in 1984

The National Science & Technology Centre in 1988

The New Parliament House in 1988

The National Museum of Australia in 2001

The National Portrait Gallery in 2008

The Museum of Australian Democracy in 2009

All of these institutions, whilst embedded in the national capital, have enormous outreach programs and nearly all are significant publishers of culturally related documents. They all embrace extensive research and conservation programs and provide access to all people of Australia for research and study.

For example last year the National Gallery of Australia, the largest art publisher in Australia, celebrated its nine-millionth visitor to its travelling exhibitions. The National Museum, the National Library, the National Archives, New Parliament House and others – all have comprehensive travelling programs.

The heart of our cultural heritage has been housed and developed in modern Canberra in less than 50 years. Why should we not call ourselves the Cultural Capital?

But behind the icons and their activities lie the people of Canberra who work in, study, enhance and donate to these wonderful institutions.

To quote a contemporary journalist, Jack Waterford *"This place has got a bloody expert on everything in the world. There are people here who know about ancient Icelandic languages. There are people here who've just got a Nobel Prize in Chemistry. At the Canberra Times you are banned more or less from saying this is "the first" or "the biggest" because without doubt someone will ring up and correct it. In Canberra we do look out to the world...this is the cosmo capital of Australia in the sense that everybody is engaged with the wider world."*

In another quotation he says *"You won't find a whole, settled, essentially stable community that is so smug, so bourgeois, so comfortable, so well-educated. I mean this may be (bloody) paradise. I am not saying it is, but it is as good as it gets."*

Not only is the National Capital the keeper and presenter of Australia's treasures it is a place in which our artists, authors, scientists and teachers flourish. Our treasures are not only displayed in our galleries, they are dispersed throughout our universities, memorials and Parliament House and they travel all over Australia and overseas.

Thousands of Australians visit their national capital without fully comprehending the enormous reservoir of history and our culture, both indigenous and non-indigenous and which is readily available to view and use.

Whilst we are often described as a transient community, and this remains partially true with almost 10% of the population relocating every year, there is emerging within the community a genuine belief in self and great pride in our growing city.

An increasing part of this self-belief is an understanding of Canberra's cultural institutions and associated talented people. These institutions and people of Canberra have a key role in representing, displaying and holding in trust our cultural heritage for all Australians.

It has only been through the extraordinary efforts of many eminent Australians who have contributed to the growth of the National Capital and its cultural institutions that we have reached such a level of cultural maturity in less than 50 years.

But the world doesn't stand still and there are still many challenges ahead. There is a pressing need for a new 2000 seat theatre, replacement of the dilapidated and out of date Convention Centre and enhancement of storage and display space for many of our collection institutions.

I am confident that we will meet these challenges and further reinforce our role as the "Cultural Capital".

John Hindmarsh

26 January 2013