



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR  
VICTORIA

## **INSPIRING AUSTRALIANS ORATION**

**Friday 24 February 2017**

**The Honourable Bruce Atkinson**, President of the Legislative Council

**Mr Paul Wheelton**, Chairman of the Order of Australia Association, Victoria Branch

**Distinguished guests,**

**Ladies and gentlemen**

I also acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathering and pay my respects to their elders past and present, and to any elders with us this morning.

It is an honour to be presenting the INAUGURAL ‘Inspiring Australians’ Oration. It spares me the anxiety of looking back to see the illustrious speakers who have gone before me, with the added pressure it inevitably brings. On the other hand, it does occur to me that there is another, different pressure in delivering the first oration. That is, I wouldn’t want to be the sole cause of the first one being the last!

This topic, of inspiring Australians, is both an easy and a difficult one: easy, because there is no paucity of people to choose from, and difficult for just that same reason.

The choice will often depend on context and perspective.

It is most likely that a young swimmer will be especially inspired by a Dawn Fraser AO, a young doctor by the likes of Fred Hollows AC, or a soldier recruit by General Sir John Monash GCMG, KCB, VD.

Certainly, those who have inspired me have differed according to different contexts.

At school, it was 'Mrs Taylor' - as I knew her - my English teacher, who brought Shakespeare alive to a class of girls who, but for her, were non-believers. Or my university equivalent - the Honourable Justice Marcia Neave AO - who taught me the rather complex subject of Equity, showing not only her brilliant legal mind, but her pedagogical skills too, in distilling esoteric legal concepts in a clear and digestible way.

In law, I was inspired by, at close range, Ian Dunn, a partner at what was then the firm of Wisewoulds, (before various iterations over the subsequent years), who taught me the ethics of legal practice, the need for generalist legal skills as well as any specialty of choice, and the responsibility to keep the needs and welfare of the client to the fore at all times.

In football, Jimmy Stynes OAM impressed and inspired me: as a person of substance as well as a player of grit and skill. In particular, his commitment to community work with young people set him apart.

In footy too, Jason McCartney OAM inspired me for his extraordinary courage when he recovered from horrific burns to 50% of his body, suffered in the Bali bombing in 2002, to play (and kick a memorable goal) in North Melbourne's defeat of Richmond in Round 11, 2003, before he immediately announced his retirement.

And, finally, like many others, I was inspired by amateur footballer, Jason Ball, whose open stance on sexuality has helped to advance community attitudes, and assist the

mental health of many young people who have otherwise felt ostracised, anxious or depressed.

In the arts, when I served as a Trustee of our National Gallery of Victoria, I saw the Director, Tony Ellwood, as an inspiration. He brought an energy and creative edge to our gallery, ensuring not only that our outstanding collection is shown to advantage, and that the gallery lives up to its scholarly roots, but also that blockbuster exhibitions of art, sculpture and design have made the NGV the world's 21<sup>st</sup> most visited gallery. An amazing achievement for a gallery located so far from many of the major population bases of the world.

And having embarked on this dangerous course of naming some names, I might continue by mentioning Tony Wheeler AO and Maureen Wheeler AO for their contribution to the intellectual ferment in our State, via their generously endowed Wheeler Centre, and John Wylie AM for his leadership in ensuring that our magnificent State Library will again see, no, will exceed, its past glory days.

And when it comes to the arts, to my mind, the final accolade must always be reserved for the creative geniuses who thrill us with their painting, music, dance, design, circus or humour. They inspire us with each creation.

But since 1 July 2015, I have had a different and most privileged perspective of inspiring people. I have chosen a handful to share with you this morning. They are all Australians, but they are also Victorians. You will forgive me as the Governor of Victoria for not straying beyond our borders. But there is simply no need.

In July last year, I received a very special letter from the School Captain of a school in East Bentleigh, Valkstone Primary School. The Captain, Lolly Seligmann, was inviting me to write a congratulatory letter to her Principal, Mrs Marilyn Koolstra, to wish her 'Happy Birthday' and to congratulate her on her 60<sup>th</sup> year at Valkstone Primary, having

started there as a student in 1957, and gone on to become a teacher and then the Principal of the school.

Lolly's letter was so obviously motivated by kindness, thoughtfulness and gratitude. In it, she said:

Mrs Koolstra ... is the most amazing leader and inspires me to do my best. Our school motto is "Aiming for Excellence", and I love to fulfil this motto and do my best because of the great job I see Mrs Koolstra and the other teachers do every day. I'm passionate about being at school because the environment is such a happy and welcoming place to learn and make friends. Mrs Koolstra offers a great supporting hand in everything I do...

She deserves recognition for such a fantastic achievement and being a truly amazing person to look up to....

I am ... really grateful to have such a strong leader as Mrs Koolstra, who works really hard to set such an inspiring example.

I was so moved by Lolly's message that I paid a visit to Valkstone to congratulate Mrs Koolstra in person on her remarkable service.

She was, indeed, as inspiring to me as she was to Lolly. She was embarrassed by the fuss around her, and was quick to reflect any glory onto her teaching staff, her family and of course her little students.

What I saw in Mrs Koolstra (as I continued to call her, following Lolly's letter) was a person who had committed her life to educating youngsters. There are many others like her: committed to the development of each child in their care. A contribution that is essential not only to the welfare of each individual child, but also to our collective future.

These teachers are so often the quiet and unsung heroes of our communities. Marilyn Koolstra epitomised their skill and dedication.

As the Governor, I have had many opportunities to reflect on the inspirational lives, acts and sacrifices of the hundreds of thousands of young men and women who have served our country in war, and in peace keeping forces, around the world.

A little over a year ago, while welcoming a small group of our Victoria Cross recipients at Government House, I reflected on those brave men who had been recognised for their outstanding service. I met Douglas Baird. He had not received a medal. He was there to represent Corporal Cameron Baird, his son.

Cam Baird had been killed in action. His dad left a booklet for me to read about Cam's life. His story could not help but touch and inspire.

Like many of us, Cam was in love with AFL footy. Unlike most of us, he was a particularly talented player. He won his Club's Under 16 Best and Fairest, and was selected in the Victorian TAC league, where he played amongst youngsters who became household names: players like Jude Bolton, Ryan O'Keefe and Paul Chapman.

But Cam, at 19, chose to enlist in the Defence Force.

On 22 June 2013, on his fifth deployment to Afghanistan, his Special Operations Commando Task Group came under heavy fire from an enemy-held building. On three separate occasions, Cam drew fire away from his brother soldiers. On the third occasion, after charging at the compound entrance, the enemy was neutralised, but at the cost of Cam's life.

His valour, his devotion and his self-sacrifice saved the lives of his friends, and saw him awarded the Victoria Cross, only the 100<sup>th</sup> such medal for an Australian soldier.

Cameron was an exceptionally modest man who, when on home soil, spent significant time supporting the Commando Welfare Trust, an organisation that supports the families of service men and women in the event of serious injury or death. Cam's parents and close friends founded 'Cam's Cause', in association with the Commando Welfare Trust, to raise funds for the Commando Welfare Trust, and to pay tribute to him.

In Cam's locker he had the words "Aspire to Inspire". He succeeded in that aspiration, although tragically he paid the ultimate price.

In September last year, I spoke at the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the Women's Suffrage Petition. This was the Petition presented to the Victorian Parliament in 1891, containing an astounding (and unprecedented) 30,000 signatures of women - demanding equal voting rights for women. It was an extraordinary achievement.

By way of interest, the 'monster petition', as it is referred to, still exists. It is 260 metres long, and takes 3 people 3 hours to unroll it from one spool to another. But that is an aside.

While I was researching that speech, I reflected a great deal on the foresight, strength and courage of those suffragist women; women who preceded, by at least  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a century, the women of my generation. That is, the women of the Women's Liberation era of the 1960's, who often (erroneously) think that they had invented women's activism!

Some of the women involved in marshalling the Petition were from prominent Victorian families. Women like Jane Munro, interestingly, the wife of the Premier of the day, James Munro. But I discovered inspirational women who were not from the same side of the tracks, as it were.

One, Bessie Lee, stood out to me. Bessie was an inspirational woman.

She was born in 1860 at Daylesford. Her father was a butcher and a miner. Her mother died of consumption when Bessie was aged only 8. As her father was unable to keep his five children together, Bessie was sent to Melbourne to live with relatives. She was mistreated by them when they were drunk. She was given little formal schooling, but she read voraciously, and she found religion.

As a young woman, Bessie immersed herself in social activism, touring slums, refuges and gaols, and launched a career of evangelical public speaking, most actively on temperance. She attracted a huge following amongst women, with her skilful and stirring writing and speaking.

She was an avid campaigner and had the 'pulling power' for many of the signatures on the 1891 Women's Suffrage Petition, the largest petition in the world at that time.

She advocated that women would use the vote to, as she put it, '...shield the weak, to denounce the wrong, and in every way uplift and ennoble the individual and the nation.'

While it was another 17 years before women gained the right to vote in Victoria, the petition still played an important role in Federation. After all, in 1901, Australia became the first nation in the world to give women both the right to vote and the right to stand for Parliament.

Bessie Lee was a woman well ahead of her times. With little advantage in her background, and in an era when the powerful anti-suffragist movement loudly declared the activist women as trivial, selfish, weak, too emotional for political vision and, of course, bad mothers to boot, she was an inspiration.

In November just gone, at a White Ribbon Breakfast we held in the Ballroom at Government House, I met a woman Angela (Anj) Barker for the second time. She had previously attended another event .

Anj is a young woman who grew up in Benalla. She was a popular teenager who excelled at sport. She loved netball, high jump and soccer.

When she was 14 she fell for an older man. As their relationship developed, he began to isolate her from her friends and family. Eventually, the relationship developed into one of both repeated verbal and physical abuse.

In 2002, when she was just 16, Anj was brutally bashed to near death by this man. She suffered severe brain damage, and the prognosis was that she would remain in a vegetative state for the rest of her life.

Anj spent three years in hospital, rehabilitation and a nursing home, before being able to return home, but with full time care.

Despite profound pain and suffering, her remarkable strength and determination saw make incredible progress. Despite serious residual disabilities, in 2010 she moved into her own flat, and in 2014, she obtained employment at the National Australia Bank.

Anj is an exceptional young woman who has displayed extraordinary strength and courage in the face of her injuries. She is also an inspiring family violence prevention campaigner. She works hard to educate the public on this difficult topic, and has reached tens of thousands of students, health workers, police, politicians and prisoners. She has inspired many to come forward and courageously speak about their own experiences of family violence.

In 2011, Anj was named as Victorian Young Australian of the Year, and in 2013, the Financial Review named her as one of Australia's 100 Women of Influence.

In December 2016, we hosted the Victorian Premier's Volunteer Champions Awards at Government House. There were joint winners of the prestigious Premier's Volunteer of the Year Dame Elisabeth Murdoch Award. They were different from each other but equally inspiring for their selfless volunteering for the good of others.

Celia Tran is a 23 year old Vietnamese Australian. She is the daughter of Vietnamese refugees. They came to Australia with nothing, but always encouraged Celia to give back to the community that had given to them.

Having volunteered from the age of 16, Celia is a champion of youth empowerment, and has been involved in countless causes and organisations supporting multicultural youth, refugees and asylum seekers, and disadvantaged young people in Melbourne's west.

She is the youngest board member of Western Chances – an organisation assisting young people in that western region to realise their potential.

She is an executive member of the Vietnamese Community in Australia – the peak body representing Vietnamese Australians residing in Victoria.

She is the sole Victorian Youth Ambassador to the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network Australia, advocating multicultural youth issues in Australia.

Celia has worked with the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre helping to run a youth empowerment program for asylum seeker youth, and has worked as a public speaker for the Centre for Multicultural Youth Shout-Out Program.

She has led fundraising efforts and been involved in the design and delivery of youth programs that support and empower asylum seekers, and foster leadership in Vietnamese Australians.

Remember, she is still only 23 years of age!

If I tell you that Bruce Pennicott, the joint winner with Celia of the Dame Elisabeth Murdoch Volunteer of the Year award is aged 94, you will understand why he and Celia so delightfully represent the breadth of wonderful people who volunteer so generously to the betterment of life in our State.

Bruce, with a team of men from the Balmoral Gardens Retirement Village Men's Shed, designs and builds specialised mobility and therapy equipment for children with severe cerebral palsy.

Over 15 years, he and the team have donated over 700 chairs, 350 tables, and countless paintbrushes, art boards and more.

Thanks to his efforts in sourcing donated materials from the local community, he is able to donate his handcrafted aides to the Cerebral Palsy Education Centre and the families of those children, at no cost to them, making a huge difference to their and their children's lives.

At 94 years he is going strong, and hopes to continue his good work for years to come. What a useful way to spend his days. His goodness, his energy and his commitment to the 'kiddies' he and his group are helping is truly inspiring.

May I conclude by saying this.

I hope this wonderful initiative of the Victorian Branch of the Order of Australia Association is repeated next year and each year thereafter. I have had to discipline myself to stop here because there is no end to the inspiring Australians to whom I would dearly like to refer.

I could talk of the clever people of Brim whose recently painted wheat silos have spawned a new tourist industry; of the leaders a Muslim girls' college who have collaborated with indigenous elders on a powerful exploration of historical links; of the strong people at the Bendigo Croquet Club who ensured that their clubhouse was swiftly rebuilt after a fire; or of the brilliant engineering genius of Marita Cheng who is designing robotic arms to assist people with mobility issues.

And of course, I could talk of the inspirational people we have recently seen up close – as first responders to the tragedy in Bourke Street; in our hospitals; and in the Red Cross whose volunteers so selflessly offered comfort to the members of the public overcome by emotion as they attended to add to the carpet of flowers, teddies and notes that spontaneously grew outside our GPO.

The material for future speakers will never run out.

And I say this is a wonderful initiative because it gives us all the opportunity to be inspired. We are all the better for the inspiring deeds of others. We are all enriched. A high tide truly does lift all the boats.

Thank you to your Association's very active and dedicated Chairman, – himself an inspiration – Paul Wheelton AM, and to all of you for being here today.