

Speech by Her Excellency the Honourable Quentin Bryce AC CVO  
Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia

## **McCarthy Mentoring Lunch**

13 August 2013

Ladies and gentlemen Good afternoon

Thank you Sophie for your warm welcome.

I want you to know how delighted I am to join this gathering of people making significant contributions to every sector of Australian life.

I appreciate your kind invitation to share some thoughts with you.

My friends

A few weeks ago, as I signed my report to the Prime Minister on my return from engagements in Canada and the USA, I reflected on the enriching experiences I had enjoyed, the privilege of representing our country overseas.

I thought too of the import of my discussions, and the serious concerns that some raised in my mind, and, I have to add, in my heart.

I am always conscious of the unique opportunities this role gives to me, and of my responsibility to share them – to contribute to our national conversations – ideas, insights, connections.

Again and again I hear myself saying to people:

*“I wish you could have been there with me”.*

The Governor-General's ceremonial and community duties at home are often spoken about and reported. I spend about 80% of my time in Australia, and around a third of that in regional and rural places.

Towns like

- Adaminaby, Jasper Gorge, Binjari, King Island, Papunya, Timber Creek, Boggabilla, Wee Waa.

And so many more.

My work abroad - the other 20% of my time - is less known.

Let me make some general observations about this, and give you some highlights of the international engagements across my term thus far, before moving to the central purpose of my address.

I should point out that Governors-General always travel overseas at the request,  
and with the agreement, of the Prime Minister.

In my view the international role of this office has grown, just as our self-confidence as a nation has:

- in a globalised and busy world,  
high level representation is appreciated, indeed, valued, for its symbolism and the profile it lends to international relationships.

Except for travel to the UK, no Governor-General went overseas on behalf of Australia until 1971.

This increased from the '80s onwards.

My two predecessors represented Australia on 23 occasions.

When the history of this office is written, when the archives are opened, it will be clear that the Governor-Generalship has increasingly been used to advance our national interest.

My friends

I have had the honour to represent Australia in 49 countries, and to host 34 visiting Heads of State and Heads of Government.

These figures themselves show how the Office of the Governor-General has evolved.

At Federation it served as a focal point for Australian imperial patriotism.

Today I am proud to represent Australia as the inclusive, multicultural, clever and successful country that it is; to voice, at the highest levels, the values, aspirations and ideals of our contemporary society.

These days, heads of government have an enormous range of international engagement.

Powerful forums like APEC, the East Asia Summit, the G20.

Regular meetings with long standing allies and partners –

- the USA, UK, China, Japan, and Indonesia
- and with emerging players like Brazil, South Africa, India.

In an increasingly complex international environment, Australia must pursue our interests with deftness, sensitivity and pragmatism.

With Prime Ministers of the day so committed to this purpose, it has been an astute awareness that a Governor-General can be deployed to parts of the world where State or Official Visits signify most publicly Australia's respect and bona fides.

- the tenth anniversary of Timor Leste's independence,
- a royal wedding in London,
- a royal funeral in Tonga,
- condolences following the devastating earthquake in Christchurch,
- Her Majesty's Diamond Jubilee, the inauguration of the first woman president in Seoul,
- celebration of 150 years of unification in Italy.

My visits fall into two categories.

First, in support of significant military commemorations:

## ANZAC DAYS

The Dawn Service at Gallipoli in 2010, poignant messages of heartache, on the gently tended graves, of hundreds of young Australian soldiers in Ari Burnu cemetery.

The next year: Hell Fire Pass on the notorious Thai Burma Railway, with frail veterans, men of courage, selflessness, courtesy and optimism.

In 2012, in Tarin Kowt with our modern Anzacs

This year in Port Moresby, where more than 3,000 Australian soldiers lie.

And standing in a clearing on the Kokoda Track, in quiet reverence and respect for those lost in one of the harshest conflicts we have known in our history – the Pacific campaign.

## ON THE WESTERN FRONT

In 2008 a grand ceremony, near Verdun, led by President Sarkozy to mark the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Armistice.

60,000 Australians were killed in that terrible great war when our population was just five million.

In Fromelles, a picturesque village in the French countryside where the sacrifice of Australians is revered,

I observed the science and tender care that has enabled the remains of 250 Australian and British soldiers to be re-interred close to where they lay, unmarked, for almost a century.

In the Asian theatre of World War Two, in the steaming jungle on the site of the Sandakan POW camp, a place of shocking forced labour, where, with other veterans and locals we remembered the 65<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death marches.

## VIETNAM – LONG TAN

I could tell you so much more.

My friends

My role as Commander in Chief comes into direct focus at these commemorations.

It is always special to be with members of our ADF, particularly in Afghanistan (that volatile, treacherous territory --- in Kabul, Kandahar and Tarin Kowt, where I have stayed overnight twice.

The most sombre military occasion of all – in the scorching heat of the desert at Al Minhad Base in the UAE, last September – the Ramp Ceremony for 5 of our soldiers killed in Afghanistan.

And now to the second category, State Visits.

- To 9 African nations – the stuff of deeply etched memories;
- Turkey, Malta and Cyprus – countries with significant communities in Australia;
- Vietnam, the Philippines and Brunei -- important regional partners that hadn't previously hosted a State visit from Australia.

In our immediate neighbourhood, I must be close to completing the “blue jigsaw” that is the Pacific --

- Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Samoa, Nauru, New Caledonia, the Federated States of Micronesia, Solomon Islands and Tonga.

Oh, the flowers, the feasts, the dancing! Harmony, swaying rhythms, arms and hips. Joy and generosity.

But a dark side too, with serious sustainability and social equity problems, not least entrenched attitudes toward women.

Ladies and gentlemen, I recently returned from Canada (*think of frozen white landscapes now, instead of warm blue ocean*).

There, for the first time, a Governor-General was accompanied by an Indigenous delegation

- a graphic way to demonstrate the achievements of Australian governments and to promote direct Indigenous engagement into the future.

I can't tell you how proud we were to hear Mr Tony Warramaarba speak to Canadian dignitaries about the way he led rigorous negotiations with BHP Billiton on Groote Eylandt.

How exciting it was to promote dialogue between our Indigenous delegation and the Inuit people in the Canadian Arctic

It's become a habit in each country I go to, to request a round table with women leaders from every sector, so that I can hear first hand about their concerns and perspectives

– That's how I find out about the things I really want to know.

Again and always the issues women raise are the same ones I've been involved in all my working life -- domestic violence, lack of access to education and training and to reproductive health services, maternal and infant mortality, economic independence.

These are omnipresent issues, depressingly ingrained and pervasive.

Yet, on a more positive note, their universality suggests common ground where we can work together with other nations on viable solutions and strategies.

And that brings me, my friends, to the particular matters that I want to share with you today.

From Canada we went to New York where I renewed my warm acquaintance with UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon; and Valerie Amos, Under Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator.

I also met with UN agency heads dealing with critical human rights and development issues.

The focus of our discussions was Syria, a country on the brink of catastrophe.

1.3 million refugees in Jordan and North Lebanon, six million others displaced from their homes.

Addressing the impacts of conflict on women and children is a key part of Australia's work in the Security Council, and we are specially active on protection of civilians.

The stories I heard in New York were of unspeakable depravity towards women and children in Syria and, disturbingly, even in the refugee camps. In a group of international humanitarian advocates we asked

- *“How can this be? How can these gross violations of human rights be happening?”*

Leila Zerronqui, Special Representative of the Secretary General for Children and Armed Conflict made the point emphatically:

- *“With impunity. Because there is no risk. No risk that the perpetrators will be held to account”*

Our Ambassador to the United Nations drew on that sobering axiom that

- *“the UN was not made to get the world to heaven, but to prevent it from going to hell.”*

The harsh fact is that the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict is still a reality in some parts of Africa today, and sexual violence continues to be a major issue in many conflicts.

Ultimately it is our individual outrage that creates a tsunami of action by governments.

There were two other critical issues:

First, achieving the Millennium Development Goals by 2015.

Time is short, and there has been uneven progress across the developing world.

E.g: I learnt in PNG when I was there recently that none of the MDGs will be met there.

Second: Universal access to quality education is the critical enabler of development and has to be a key part of the post-2015 development agenda.

My friends,

Australia does fantastic work in other countries, practical, hands-on stuff as well as strong advocacy for specific strategies to empower women and girls and those with disabilities.

I am disturbed and troubled by the theme that was repeated in my briefings at UN headquarters, that the rights of women globally are seen to be going backwards.

For a lifetime grassroots activist supporting women's rights, it was gravely concerning to hear that a global conservatism risks unwinding hard-fought rights.

My friends:

As a little girl in Ilfracombe, I could never have imagined that my life's journey would take me to:

/.....

- the Istanas of South East Asia,
- the palaces of Oman and the Emirates,
- to the Elysée Palace in Paris.

So many “pinch me” moments.

But it is not the chandeliers or the pomp and circumstance that will stay in my memory.

It is the human connections:

- talking with Dr Catherine Hamlin at her fistula hospital on the outskirts of Addis Ababa, the patients sitting with their woven blankets, all made by Australian volunteers.
- /.....
- the sanitation block built by AusAID at a girls' school in Nairobi, a small project that by itself increased girls' attendance at school
  - the thousands of school girls and boys lining the single street running through Tarawa, full of affection for Australia and what we do.
  - removing the eye patch of a patient in Vietnam, her sight restored by the life changing work of Fred Hollows and his Foundation
  - talking with families at the Za'atri refugee camp in Jordan, 15 kilometres from the Syrian border.

I will never forget the women, distraught with anxiety, asking

- *“why don't we matter?”*

That camp was set up out of nowhere, out of nothing, by Andrew Harper, a long, lanky Aussie from Wagga, who works for UNHCR.

Friends,

I've always believed in paying attention to the detail.

I like to sweat the small stuff, the uncomfortable detail at the edges.

That gives me a proper sense of the bigger picture.

Today I've shared just some of the detail of international engagement that I've undertaken on Australia's behalf.

Glimpses of the extraordinary, inspiring work Australians are doing every day throughout the world.

Equally, the detail reveals the depth and severity of suffering, inequality and disadvantage that remain --- remain crying out for our attention.

We have to illuminate the tragedies, as well as the triumphs.

And then we must use our voices to speak for those who have none.

Thank you for listening to my observations and concerns.

I hope they will find some echo in your conversations with others.

Hope is what it's all about.