

2022 Tony Coote AM Memorial Lecture

The importance of legacy

Wednesday 23 March 2022

Strangers' Restaurant, NSW Parliament House, Sydney

Time allocated	20 – 30 minutes
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Mr Gary Nairn AO and Mrs Rose Nairn Chair Mulloon Institute.

Mr Joe Buffone PSM, Director General Emergency Management
Australia

Ms Margie Allison, sister of the late Mr Tony Coote AM.

Ms Nichole Overall MP, Member for Monaro. Congratulations on your recent election, I hope you take every opportunity to serve your community. Being elected to parliament is a unique and enduring privilege.

The Honourable Michael Yabsley, former Member of the NSW Legislative Assembly and Minister of the Crown and most importantly a co resident in college at ANU over 40 years ago.

Uncle Allan Murray, Chairman of the Metropolitan Local Aboriginal Land Council

CEO Vitasoy Carolyn Hall

I also want to acknowledge several my colleagues from the National Recovery & Resilience Agency who are in Sydney for meetings with our colleagues at Resilience NSW in the aftermath of the catastrophic floods to sweep the north and south coast of NSW.

I also acknowledge Board members of the Mulloon Institute and finally two old friends of mine who I have not seen for many years, Mrs Gillian

Storey AM and Mr. John Storey long time pastoralists from the Yass District.

Thank you for the opportunity to deliver the Tony Coote Memorial Lecture this evening showcasing the Mulloon Institute and its invaluable and transformational work that in the national reckoning will in time be seen as one of the most important initiatives in Australia's history.

If you are expecting an address solely centred on climate, disasters, farming or agricultural strategies then I am going to disappoint.

I will touch on those issues but in the context of a truly outstanding individual - Tony Coote AM.

What I want to speak to you about is what possesses, persuades a high network individual and his family to commit to such an enterprise far removed from their core business.

Why do people engage in philanthropic activity to make Australia a better place?

As the Chairman of the Order of Australia I see many examples of people giving back, to supporting worthy causes that impact our daily lives.

We are a generous people, and we prove it time and again in supporting worthy causes and projects.

Our response to disasters is commendable, our broader support for community and institutional causes greater still.

I want to talk about 'giving back' and the importance of legacy - something I feel strongly about, and a passion I share with the namesake of this lecture. You can have all the baubles, wealth and

social position but all that really matters is the legacy and reputation you leave behind.

I never met Tony Coote AM but I have become aware of his vision, ideas, his plans for Australia. They are remarkable and in my view understated in the broader Australian conversation.

I wanted to know more about this man and his dreams so I sought out members of his family. I am grateful that his youngest daughter Rebecca responded to my invitation.

I asked: "Tell me about your dad. Help me understand and share with my fellow Australians his story and why."

I'm grateful for her insight and assistance; I hope my presentation tonight does justice to her recollections and her father's vision.

Tony's and my background were different, but I think our values and our way of working would be similar. We would have had much to talk about.

Tony was conferred a Member Order of Australia in 1988 for services to industry and community.¹ That was almost 25 years ago; he kept giving and were he alive today I am confident a higher award would have been forthcoming. Recipients of the Order of Australia generally develop further service and Tony was faithful to that call and expectation.

As Chairman of the Order of Australia Council, I read about and assess remarkable Australians who demonstrate what we should celebrate, nurture and encourage others to aspire to.

These are people who go above and beyond for the greater good of the Nation.

They are the glue that holds the community together.

¹ <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6013105/an-incredible-legacy-farmer-and-businessman-tony-coote-dead-at-79/>

In Tony Coote AM we had a big bottle of araldite or Tarzans grip if you prefer.

I met with Rebecca to make sure I got a good sense of the man whose vision and propensity to challenge convention led to the establishment of the Mulloon Institute.

Rebecca describes a father who was gentle, fun and thoughtful. She said he was ‘a wonderful leader’, someone who because of his extensive business and board experience, was adept at bringing different parties to the table. He turned bold ideas into workable plans, and plans into reality.

From his base at Mulloon Creek Natural Farms, near Bungendore, Tony brought sceptical farming neighbours on board, right along the catchment. Now the Mulloon Institute is having a national impact.

Wherever I travel as Co-Ordinator General I encounter farming communities experimenting with regenerative practices of water, soil and vegetation management that create sustainable, resilient environments. with their leaky dams and land practices.

Tony’s goal was to prove that you could repair and nurture the land **and** still run a profitable farming enterprise. By all accounts he wasn’t opposed to wealth generation and profit. Its what you did with your wealth that clearly mattered.

Natural disasters, farming practices, an ever-changing climate – all the dots are connected if you think about it.

Invariably it falls to different levels of Government to play a role protecting and nurturing our agricultural sector, safeguarding our fragile environment and supporting the sustainability of our food chains to the

benefit of the wider community. We never want to be in the situation where we are a net importer of food.

That said the broader community has a responsibility to play its part and an organisation like the Mulloon Institute is front and centre in the conversation. It's an example of individuals stepping up. You simply cannot expect Government to do everything.

Arising from a key recommendation from the Royal Commission into National Natural Disaster Arrangements, the 'Bushfire Royal Commission' the organisation I lead, the National Recovery and Resilience Agency is the first ever enduring national Agency responsible for supporting recovery from natural disasters, drought and other hazards. The NRRA has specific responsibilities around resilience and preparedness.

Much of what we do can only be accomplished through collaboration. We work closely with our state and territory counterparts and with Local Government to support communities recovering from natural disasters. Our efforts are underpinned by the guiding principles of locally led, locally understood and locally implemented.

Since the 2019 North Queensland Flood, 154 disasters have been declared in 402 unique Local Government Areas with a total population of around 20.8 million. The scale of what I am dealing with at times beggars' belief.

In NSW, Agencies at State and Federal level are in regular contact, harnessing our respective resources to work with communities as they continue to clean up and assess the damage from the terrible flooding of a few weeks ago. Local Government remains critical to our efforts.

To give you an idea of what people are dealing with, in Lismore over 900 homes have been rendered uninhabitable. The town's infrastructure has been trashed, the CBD is no more – this is a catastrophe on every level.

In Queensland we're working hand-in-glove with the Queensland Reconstruction Authority. They face similar challenges.

The reconstruction challenge is exacerbated by a shortage of building materials and skilled tradespeople. I completely understand that people want to get back into their homes and on with their lives, and it is going to take time. Much like the Black Summer Bushfires, circumstances beyond our control will pose a significant hurdle.

That said such obstacles never deterred Tony Coote.

While he respected convention, Tony was not afraid to do things differently. He was open-minded and would ask 'What if?' and 'Why not?'

He encouraged innovation. It didn't matter if something didn't work, but it mattered if you didn't at least give it a go. That's a very Australian trait. We are a very innovative and creative people.

Convention also needs to be tested when it comes to agriculture and by extension natural disasters.

The Productivity Commission in 2014 estimated that we spent 97 % of all disaster funding cleaning up and only 3 % getting ready.² This has improved marginally over the past decade, but we need to do better.

To flip this and dial up the getting ready part, being better prepared, we need to challenge the way we have always done things. Tony Coote was good at that, it underpinned his whole approach.

² <https://insurancouncil.com.au/resource/ica-welcomes-federal-budgets-disaster-mitigation-funding/>

I have dealt with every flood since North Queensland in 2019. That doesn't include Katherine in 1998 when I was Chief Minister. I have been in flood affected communities from the start to well after the waters have receded and others have moved on.

I've seen too much heartache and devastation.

Collective action is needed so that Australians aren't repeatedly facing life threatening situations where they lose everything but the clothes on their backs.

Science tells us that longer, hotter, drier summers and more extreme weather are here to stay.

The current 'unprecedented' events tell us we need to change how we respond and how we prepare. The 'unprecedented' have become the new norm. I suspect Tony Coote would have made a very good Co-ordinator General. He would have asked all the right questions and fearlessly prosecuted the outcome.

This means not just building back, but **building back better**. There's no use restoring infrastructure like for like. When it comes to reconstruction, 'betterment' should be the rule, not the exception.

It means **investing** in ways that lessen the impact and severity of future natural disasters. We can't control the weather but we can look at ways to minimise the impacts through flood levees, cyclone shelters, early flood warning systems and the like.

It means **challenging planning decisions** that allow homes to be built in high risk areas without the right mitigating infrastructure and without mandating materials that are better suited to the conditions. Indigenous Australians warned Governors Phillip and Macquarie about the flood plains. They listened but subsequent generations have not.

It means **asking the difficult questions**, like “Should we rebuild here?” And if not, what do we do to help people relocate and re-start their lives? We have examples of where the tough questions, asked and addressed, have led to far less heartache in the longer term.

Take some of the residents of Grantham in Queensland’s Lockyer Valley³ who took the opportunity to move to higher ground after the 2011 floods which claimed 12 lives. While the town was still impacted in these recent floods, those who chose to take part in what’s known as the ‘Grantham land swap’ were unaffected.

They didn’t have to re-live the heartache and trauma of 11 years ago.

The challenge is how we collectively prepare ourselves for the next disaster while ensuring that we support those recovering from the last.

I am sure Tony Coote would have engaged in such a conversation.

Questioning convention led to the Mulloon Institute and the continuation of Tony’s vision to protect and nurture the land. It has also made a significant contribution to disaster preparedness and damage minimisation.

Tony was not from the land but the land held his heart. He spent school holidays on friends’ farms, and the family property at Castle Hill.

And while he went into the family business, he remained deeply connected to the land. He and his family purchased Mulloon Creek in the late 1960s and Rebecca recalls the many visits where their day was planned from breakfast...and at the completion of each task, the notebook and pencil would come out of his shirt pocket for checking off!

³ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2022-03-13/grantham-land-swap-a-model-for-future/100902758>

He shared his passion for the land with his children. There were walks in the bush where their father would make them sit still and listen to what was happening around them.

Listening and paying attention to what's around you is critical in my work with the survivors of natural disasters. They don't need someone coming into their devastated homes, businesses and communities and talking at them. They need someone who will listen. You learn more from listening than talking at people.

It's important that I visit communities as soon as possible after a disaster, taking care not to get in way of the first responders. I do this to understand the damage, talk to those on the frontline of the response and recovery, and talk to the survivors.

If I know what's supporting their recovery and what's frustrating them, I can make sure that we all work together to make their lives a bit easier at what is a stressful, challenging and sometimes heartbreaking time.

My trip into the Tweed, Byron Bay, Ballina and Lismore last week was in part harrowing and heartbreaking.

I make these trips to understand the impact, and to bring hope. I'm often told it means a great deal that someone in my role cares enough to show up and listen. I wouldn't mind a quid for every time someone has said to me: "You're the first person from Canberra in charge of something, who turned up!"

That does a disservice to Prime Minister Scott Morrison who has been front and centre in every disaster since I became involved.

I thought it remarkable that on his re-election he didn't fly off overseas for the usual lap of honour in Washington, Jakarta, Tokyo or London. He

returned to flood ravaged Cloncurry in North Queensland as he promised.

In a similar way, Tony Coote brought people with different perspectives and expertise, together with farmers, to look at ways to repair and nurture the land while at the same time earn an income from it.

It takes a clear idea of what you're trying to achieve, the ability to harness different opinions and to broker consensus, and often a good dose of patience.

Rebecca recalled one of her last visits with him, when a bird flew into a window and fell to the ground. He picked it up, held it gently to his chest and waited for it regain consciousness: "It just needed time to recover", he told her.

We all need time to recover...from drought, natural disasters, farming practices which may have been the way of things but with the benefit of hindsight have proven to be detrimental to the environment longer-term.

Sometime progress feels frustratingly slow and from the outside appears to have stalled. There are many factors outside our control.

We need to support recovery at a pace and in ways that are meaningful for the survivors. Just as Tony held the bird until it was ready to get back up, so must those charged with leading the recovery 'hold' individuals and communities until they are ready.

The National Recovery and Resilience Agency brings a national lens in its work with communities on their locally-led recovery.

This means we bring the lessons learned from supporting communities all around the country; draw on the expertise of some of the country's best and brightest scientists; make evidence-based decisions on where

to focus efforts to reduce the impact of future natural disasters, and ask people ‘What do you believe is needed?’

People need assurance that we’re there at the beginning, and we’re staying for the long haul. The Agency’s Recovery Support Officers – our eyes and ears on the ground right across the country – are and will always be a critical part of our operation. No one is forgotten.

Their efforts during the current disaster season underscore the merits of having regionally-based staff who live and work in the communities they support.

Tony was appointed a Member Order of Australia in 1988 for services to industry and community.⁴

The Order of Australia is not just a pat on the back; it’s an acknowledgment that you have made a difference. That you have contributed over and above what might normally be expected of people in your role. You have gone that extra mile.

I believe we don’t encourage, reward or acknowledge people who go that extra mile enough.

In 2020, one quarter of Australians aged 15 years and over participated in unpaid voluntary work through an organisation. This was down from one-third the year prior.⁵

In its 2016 report “The State of Volunteering in Australia”, the country’s peak body for volunteering reported that many organisations struggled to get the volunteers they needed.

⁴ <https://www.canberratimes.com.au/story/6013105/an-incredible-legacy-farmer-and-businessman-tony-coote-dead-at-79/>

⁵ <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/people-and-communities/general-social-survey-summary-results-australia/latest-release>

As Coordinator-General of the NRRRA I see first-hand the positive contribution of volunteers and not-for-profits before, during and after natural disasters.

If I may take one example it was the North Queensland floods.

From 25 January to 14 February 2019, regions of North Queensland experienced exceptionally heavy rainfall and major flooding – the result of an active monsoon trough and a slow moving low pressure system.⁶

The region hit new rainfall records. Floodwaters up to 700 kilometres long and 70 kilometres wide covered 15,000 square kilometres in the Flinders and Norman River basins. Some areas, including Townsville, exceeded their average annual rainfall, recording 2,000 millimetres.

The personal toll was immeasurable. People lost livestock and saw sheds and fences they'd toiled so hard to build, wash away. Kids saw their pets perish. People were isolated on properties, and some had to be airlifted from rooftops as the floodwaters lapped the eaves.

It was in the process of managing this disaster when I first became aware of Mulloon during a visit to Worona Station near Charters Towers. I later revisited the property in the context of the drought and was captivated by when I encountered. The owner was actively demonstrating regenerative practices of water, soil and vegetation management that create sustainable, resilient environments.

Our sponsorship of tonight's event and promotion of the Mulloon Institute in our Agency communications, recognises its vital work with land repair and rehydration, and nature-based flood mitigation and drought preparedness.

⁶ https://recovery.gov.au/sites/default/files/attachments/2019%20Queensland%20Monsoon%20Trough%20-%20Report_1.pdf

Much like this recent flood crisis across Queensland and NSW, the devastation of the 2019/20 Black Summer Bushfires across five states and the Australian Capital Territory demanded government and non-government 'step up' in ways not often witnessed.

The collective response presents a compelling case for unified action to care for our families, friends, and neighbours who have had the absolute worst thrust upon them.

The collective efforts arising from various disasters encapsulate the sort of society I would like to think was the norm, not the exception – and the sort of society we must all seek to foster and one that Tony Coote was committed to.

As an aside permit me the observation that in relation to the most recent devastation, before floodwaters receded in Queensland and as the emergency continued to play out in New South Wales, the Morrison Government responded. The first disaster payments were made in 24 hours. Don't believe the critics, it was the fastest Federal response in history.

For the record, over 1 million Australians have received emergency cash payments and income support.⁷ Over \$1 billion has been paid out (to 20 March 2022). This is an important part of the hand up response of Government.

'Giving back' and offering a 'hand up' to others, goes to the heart of a great Australian society and visionaries like Tony Coote embraced.

If we are going to tackle the massive problem of reducing the impact of more frequent and severe weather events, we need more great men and

⁷ <https://minister.servicessaustralia.gov.au/media-releases/2022-03-17-federal-disaster-payments-delivered-more-one-million-flood-impacted-australians>

women who have both vision and passion and are not afraid of hard work or of challenging the 'status quo'.

Upon Tony's passing in 2018, Mulloon Institute chairman Gary Nairn, AO, said 'the earth has lost a great man'.⁸ The Australian community was the poorer for his passing but his dream and legacy lives on.

In closing, I offer something for you to think about when you leave this evening and, in the days, weeks and months ahead.

The Mulloon Institute is Tony Coote's legacy – what will yours be?

⁸ <https://aboutregional.com.au/our-earth-has-lost-a-great-man-vale-tony-coote-am/>