

Occasional Address Annual Dinner Order of Australia Association WA

31 August 2011 Royal Perth Golf Club South Perth

Your Excellencies.

Western Australian Chairman of the Order of Australia Association Mr. Clive Robartson AM & Mrs. Cheryl Robartson

Association Committee members of WA

Recipients of the Order of Australia

Ladies and Gentlemen.

There's a recurring theme about domestic affairs in liberal democracies around the world at present – 'broken society' – sounds dramatic and it is. Look no further than the riots of England these last few weeks and the continuing economic freefall and social fallout in the USA to hear or read the commentary. We Australians had a brief glimpse during the Cronulla riots. Our political leaders tell us we live in a two speed economy – code for boom and bust - and that brings its own challenges of disadvantage, marginalised unemployed Australians and financial stress.

Before the GFC it would have been hard to get any focus on such a claim that society was broken; after all the world economy was booming, money was easy to borrow, the next deal paid for the last one and conspicuous consumption was on display everywhere. What was broken we may have asked? Life was good, in fact too good. To pick up that old saying "If it's too good to be true it usually is" and so it was as many self funded retirees will tell you in retrospect. Pope Benedict on ascending the papacy started to speak out on secularism in modern society; he was lone voice. In the traditional sense secularism is in essence the separation of church and state. There is a view that it has become much more and that in the modern world it includes disavowing

those fundamental Judaic Christian principles that comprised the glue that hold our community together. I am sure this view would resonate in a Buddhist nation like Japan, a Muslim country like Indonesia and a Hindu nation such as India where religious belief eschews certain behaviour and conduct. Whether you live in Perth, Jakarta, Tokyo or New Delhi stealing is wrong; you have responsibilities to your family; you believe in a better society. The common threads that unite us help define the type of community we live in. Not too many people were listening to the Pope; after all if you accepted what he was saying you might have to have a long hard look at yourself. Besides you had just received yet another unsolicited letter from your bank offering to increase your credit limit and Harvey Norman was advertising yet another special flat screen deal notwithstanding you already have a TV in every room. Sir Guy Green the former Chief Magistrate, Chief Justice and Governor of Tasmania and one time President of this Association delivered the Oration at our National Conference in Hobart this year. The theme *We are Australian – Unity and Australian Values* touched on the very essence of the conversation I am having with you tonight. Sir Guy's address was outstanding. He posed the question: 'what are the essential values which characterise and define Australian society and which we should be united in defending and promoting?' Great question but for many of us an awkward answer because if we are true to the ideals of community engagement we are going to question how we live, our beliefs and priorities. If we are fair dinkum about community then many of us have to change. Writing a cheque for your favourite charity as necessary and commendable as that is needs to be balanced by action. No better contemporary example than the Brisbane 'mud army' organised by Lord Mayor Campbell Newman. The importance of people coming together as a community to help others has been on display around the country; the QLD

floods, your devastating bushfires in February this year; the loss of 11 people, mostly children, to a house fire in Slacks Creek Brisbane last week have on each occasion brought out the best in us but not all of us. There are too many spectators and worse an occasional air of indifference and a shrug of the shoulders. As a Nation we run the risk of losing our way in aspiring to and defending those essential values Sir Guy spoke of – respect, not just tolerance; concern for and commitment to promoting the welfare of others in our community; recognition of the essential dignity and intrinsic value of every individual. How committed are we to preserving and promoting those essential values? It is true that Australians have a long history of helping each other; from time to time there is an attempt by our leaders to capture the sentiment and mood. John Howard called it ‘mutual obligation’; the British Prime Minister David Cameron calls it the ‘Big Society’. It turns out the Pope had an unexpected supporter in his commentary and well before the English riots; responding to Pope Benedict’s farewell speech after his State visit to Britain Cameron said: “Your Holiness...you have offered a message not just to the Catholic Church but to each and every one of us of every faith and none. A challenge to us all to follow our conscience, to ask not what are my entitlements, but what are my responsibilities? To ask not what we can do for ourselves, but what we can do for others?...this common bond has been an incredibly important part of your message to us. And it’s at the heart of the new culture of social responsibility we want to build in Britain. People of faith – including our 30,000 faith-based charities – are great architects of that new culture. For many, faith is a spur to action. It shapes their beliefs and behaviour and it gives them a sense of purpose. Crucially, it is their faith that inspires them to help others. And we should celebrate that. Faith is part of the fabric of our country. It always has been and it always will be. As you, your

Holiness, have said, faith is not a problem for legislators to solve but rather a vital part of our national conversation. And we are proud of that. But people do not have to share a religious faith or agree with religion on everything to see the benefit of asking the searching questions that you.... have posed to us about our society and how we treat ourselves and each other. You have really challenged the whole country to sit up and think, and that can only be a good thing. Because I believe we can all share in your message of working for the common good and that we all have a social obligation to each other, to our families and our communities..."

President John F Kennedy posed the question: "Ask not what your country can do for you...ask what you can do for your country". David Cameron has captured that sentiment and put it in context.

In the aftermath of the riots David Cameron in an article concluded: "There are deep problems in our society that have been growing for a long time: a decline in responsibility, a rise in selfishness, a growing sense that individual rights come before anything else."

Where do we In Australia figure in this? For my part I know I live in a selfish society and I know that I have contributed to that; my generation of 'baby boomers' has but we are not alone. It might be said we have set a bad example for future generations who have been indulged and spoiled by our economic prosperity. We who are materially rich but spiritually poor should take time to reflect on what we have become. We live in a community where we buck pass responsibility to the State at every turn and we all do it. We have allowed ourselves to be captured by consumerism and have lapped it up in our new high tech world where writing a personal letter or reading a news paper is no longer 'cool'. We talk and text in hieroglyphics and have by and large lost the

art of conversation, debate and public speaking. We check out at the supermarket without interacting with an individual; we check in at the airport by machine as we likewise withdraw money from the bank through a hole in the wall. We book, buy and sell on line. People figure less in this new paradigm as we blithely go along with the new way of transacting business. We are captives to this new world which has brought so many constructive new benefits and advances but which tears away at our sense of humanity and self worth. Our children and grandchildren largely accept that a people free zone is normal. Socialization of the human species is being displaced by technology.

Slogans and one liners substitute for well crafted policy. Our political leaders, captains of industry and union leaders talk in cliques. When it comes to important and compelling challenges in the community people talk, they don't do. Some Australians think because they walked over the Sydney Harbour Bridge and supported the Apology they fulfilled their obligation to indigenous Australians – box ticked. Some of our citizens believe they discharge their responsibilities to the poor by putting \$5 in the Salvo's collection tin.

Let me assure you I have not become a grumpy old man railing against the new order uncomfortable in the technological age. I have a blackberry, iPad and can do almost anything I need on my computer. I can program and use all instrumentation on my boat as I can a GPS on land. I refuse however to accept the unbridled depersonalisation of human relations that is being foisted on us.

A community turns on its human interaction; not emails and text messages. Sense of community is driven by people who share, support, respect and value each other. Families bond by sitting down and having a meal together; spending time on family holidays; turning up to school functions; getting to

know the neighbours and welcoming newcomers into your street regardless of their ethnicity, colour or creed.

I still use cheques, refuse to self check my groceries and insist on being boarded by a person and not a machine. I want to greet, know and interact with people in my community. When I read of a plan by Universities to engage their students completely on line with graduation an optional extra I know we have taken a wrong turn. There are certain rites of passage that remain intrinsic to our human development. You may think I am swimming against the tide; perhaps so but I intend to persist. Our problems are manmade and as such can be fixed by man.

The way back to a more cohesive and caring community is to instil a respect and appreciation for values that once mattered - respect, not just tolerance; concern for and commitment to promoting the welfare of others in our community; recognition of the essential dignity and intrinsic value of every individual. To achieve those lofty ideals we must communicate, interact and socialise as human beings.

We have so much to do to help reshape the framework of our community. For example we will never eliminate crime but with the right strategies in place we can regrow the right values and beliefs and start to reduce the incidents of assault, vandalism, theft, deception and fraud. It might be a long bow to say that the UK MP's who rorted their allowances belong in the same moral pen as the rioters but they do. Likewise the rapacious bankers, financial advisers and brokers who manipulated the system and robbed people of their life savings and financial security only to be bailed out by Governments. They are all in this together and are symptomatic of a broken society top to bottom.

As a political leader I confess I used on more than one occasion the borrowed cliché 'It's the economy stupid'. It has become all about the economy to the point where political leaders jostle over who is the most 'economic conservative' while the very social fabric of what underpins our country plays second fiddle. As important as the economy is we must not overlook the social framework that can determine what kind of society we are. The social framework defines our humanity.

Change won't occur over night; it will be incremental and intergenerational but we need to start somewhere. Families and schools are first on my list. We all muse about what it was like when we could go out and leave our home unlocked; leave the car in the drive way with the keys overnight; trust the kids to play in the local park and not fear the stranger who came to the door. We will never recapture that era but with a change of emphasis in society on a kaleidoscope of issues and Government policies we can gradually recapture our sense of community. It will all turn on communication and interpersonal relationships. Our children and grandchildren need to learn what is important. The human intellect is society's greatest asset so let's make the most of it.

How many of you can name the most recent Nobel Peace Laureate? Compare that memory lapse with how many of you recall the name of the teacher who had the greatest impact on your life? Can you name the five wealthiest people in the world? You can't but I bet you can name the five people who have taught you something worthwhile and made you feel appreciated and special in your life time. The people who have made a difference in your life are not the ones with the most credentials, the most money or the most awards. They are the ones who cared the most about you.

People learn by example and unless they interact with other people they will grow up in vacuum. How can we expect our fellow Australians to respect, to show commitment to promoting the welfare of others and to recognize the essential dignity and intrinsic value of every individual in such an environment? This is the challenge of our times.

As a Nation in more recent times we have been having an argument with ourselves about whether we celebrate achievement, reward excellence and grade people according to their performance. Call me old fashioned I have always believed that we must acknowledge those who make a difference whether they welcome the attention or not. Anonymity does not set an example.

Young people learn by example and they need to see and understand what makes a good Australian; how can one be aspirational if you don't witness the bench marks of being a good contributing citizen? As recipients of the Order of Australia we have a responsibility to encourage young Australians, our fellow citizens to be responsible, caring and contributing members of our community. Most of you here tonight have been honoured by your country because you are among the few that serve the many. Whatever your award your country thanks you as it should. Over 700 million hours of voluntary work is undertaken each year in Australia. Volunteerism makes for a profound contribution. To quote Sir Guy "...volunteerismmakes our community more cohesive, more agreeable, and in short, more civilized ...it is a priceless asset. No amount of money, no amount of marketing can create the ethos from which volunteerism stems – that has to come from within people themselves".

The numerous volunteers, the exceptional teachers, nurses, police officers, firemen and ambulance officers; the political leaders who actually have a go

and are not content to be managers of the status quo, the business people who provide inspiration as entrepreneurs and role models of good employment and trade unionists who passionately represent their members. Those who have made an outstanding contribution in local government and through the arts; those working with youth, heritage, ethnic groups and the community generally are among Australia's finest; our home grown philanthropists who share their wealth and good fortune. My list is not exclusive – in all walks of life there are Australians who define our country by their contribution.

My great sadness is that we miss so many good people who are never recognised. These awards are not just handed out and nor should they be. The success rate of Nominations between 1975 and 2008 was 52% - that has marginally improved. But awards don't just happen; someone has to identify and nominate other Australians. Whether we be '*big wheels*' or '*small cogs*' all are defined by our contribution and hopefully that does not end with an award. In conferral there is a mutual obligation; the award carries responsibilities – it is expected that you will continue to set an exemplary example for your fellow Australians, that you will do more and further nominate others so we might celebrate their contribution.

My friends thank you for inviting me to speak tonight.

I want to thank the organisers for such a wonderful evening and again acknowledge your State Chairman Clive Robartson AM who has done such a wonderful and outstanding job as your State Chairman.

Do not be shy about wearing your medals; there is no excuse for not wearing your lapel pin in everyday clothing.

I want to share with you an observation about many people I have met in my public life. The test of a person's character is how they take praise and how they wear their honours and appellations.

Some of the most humble people I know are among the most decorated.

Notwithstanding the challenges ahead of us we are a lucky country in more ways than one. We change Government without a shot being fired. Not too many countries can make that claim. We celebrate our cultural diversity, we are a compassionate people; notwithstanding our short European history we punch above our weight in regional and world affairs. Our engagement with our indigenous population has improved but we still have a way to go. We can always do better but by and large we have made a decent fist of it in just over 200 years. However we need to learn the lessons of elsewhere to ensure we remain a country that keeps true to those Australian values I have spoken of.

Finally let me leave you with this message - be known by your deeds and good works; be known for how you carry yourself as an Australian invested in Australia's most senior civilian award the Order of Australia and our community will be a better place.

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