

Australia Day Address, 2019
Albany, Western Australia

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Communities of Opportunity

Last year I went all across Australia. From here in the Great Southern to the Kimberley, from where I live on the coast in Perth to one of the iconic Australian beaches: Bondi, in Sydney.

In my travels across our wide brown land I have met Australians who are wealthy, who are poor, who are just like me and those who I share nothing in common with, those who feel they have a voice to those who wish someone, anyone would listen to them.

These last twelve months, more than any other, made me see the successes and gaps in Australia. We are not a perfect country, but our head is not in the sand and many people, many of you, are striving to make it better.

In being with so many different people I became truly aware of the opportunities Australia has gifted me. And I wanted to know how we can better share them with those who currently do not access them.

I realised that, in Australia, opportunities are dependent on our communities. Resilient communities which support one another and take pride in making sure everyone has a fair go.

I am not alone in being supported by Australia.

Susan Kiefel was born almost directly opposite here, in far north Queensland. She ended up leaving school, like many did and do, at the end of Year 10 at a public school much like the one I went to. She was a receptionist to a builder and then a lawyer. After a while her boss turned to her and encouraged her to study law.

A few decades later she became the Chief Justice of Australia. Her words shape the way our society functions. And if the last couple of years are anything to go by have politicians lying awake at night with that simple question: “am I a dual citizen?”

I also think about my father’s family, who came from a tiny island in Greece after WWI. They spoke little, if any, English and lived for a long time on the poverty line.

This set many of my family on a determined path. They were, come hell or high-water, going to do their best. The proudest example my family has is of one of my uncles who, despite being raised speaking only Greek, ended up completing his PhD in chemistry. He became a leading professor in his field and helped found a host of health and medical courses at Curtin University.

These realities are possible for you and me because of the Australian commitment to the compassion we know so well and see in our communities.

Family, friends and even colleagues and bosses who encourage the best in us give us our opportunity.

This support can also come out of nowhere, from our empathy. Like last year when we saw farmers from this region and others send hay bales to the drought-stricken farmers in New South Wales and Queensland. There was no incentive, there was no requirement for you to do this.

In the past month attention has been paid to Indigenous imprisonment and suicides. Across Australia people have raised money to pay off fines for people who otherwise could not and some are offering their services to communities suffering mental health epidemics.

This happens because the heart of Australia beats strong. We know that we should be there for one another.

We often hear that Australia is “the Lucky Country”, but those examples tell me that we are “the Resilient Country”.

When times are tough, for ourselves, our loved ones and our community, we get up. We have a go and we support each other.

I see this when I work on homelessness. People are quick to give toiletries and sanitary items for those who need it. One woman, in her late eighties, once gave me 200 knitted scarves to give to homeless people in winter.

Actions like this happen all across our country, up and down the coast in our cities and in the middle of nowhere. The Australian spirit runs throughout our towns and families. It runs through us all.

The heart of our communities are on show when we act for each other, whether our next-door neighbour or those thousands of kilometres away. You can find these stories every day and, like me, I hope they give you the encouragement to contribute to making a great country even better.