

Australia Day Address, 2021
Derby and Fitzroy Crossing, Western Australia

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Reconnection and respect

Australia Day is an opportunity for each of us to think about what we want for our country. I equally think about why I love our country, where it can be better, and what role I have in achieving that.

Australia Day can, however, be awkward for us. Across six states, two territories and over 300 First Nations and language groups, summing up a singular Australian experience is far from easy.

What we have seen in the past year is a new Australian story emerge, breathing new life into mateship. Reminding us that we have a lot more in common than what divides us, and we will help and support each other.

This past year showed us the best aspects of what it meant to be Australian.

Though every country has experienced the pandemic, we now have a uniquely Australian experience that will sit with us for generations, and continue in our day-to-day lives.

One Sunday in late February 2020 I was at the supermarket going to buy some frozen vegetables, just in case. I wasn't the only one, it was very busy and emotions were high. With people flurrying around determined to get necessities for the most uncertain situation many of us have ever faced, we didn't push each other out of the way, we helped each other.

One of my friends who bought one of the last toilet paper packets saw an elderly couple stressing because they had missed out by moments. Instead of walking away, he gave them the packet he had just bought them. The relief on their faces was indescribable, their day and week had turned around because of this.

The same situation happened to me with the mother of twins just wanting some hand sanitiser for her family. I had one of the last bottles in the pharmacy. I knew it was easier and less stressful for me to go without it than it was for her.

It was on this bedrock of respect that we reminded ourselves that we do good things for ourselves, our communities and our country.

We then went to where we were safest. Being with our families in uncertainty reminded us of who we were and what we want for ourselves and our country. The safety of mum and dad can be liberating.

To do this, many Aboriginal people went back to the safety of their traditional lands. This has been hailed as an unparalleled success by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commissioner June Oscar, a Bunuba woman, Professor Fiona Stanley and the leading medical journal The Lancet. To date, there have been no deaths of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people from the virus and the major outbreaks were traced back to healthcare workers from out of town.

“When Aboriginal people are in control of their own destiny, they get it right”, said Professor Stanley recently. We can all take pride in this, because while these were the decisions of some of the most disadvantaged Australians, it proved that with a voice they – and we – can change the narrative.

We spent more time with our family than we had in a long time, a test some of us are happy not to repeat.

We worked and studied from home, because the world keeps spinning. For many, Zoom became a noun and verb. As a single, childless man who can barely look after myself, I am inspired by the strength of families who managed this and are still talking to each other. Though I do not envy you.

We took this connection to a new level - and a different place: the driveway.

From here, we worked to support each other, too. In foldout chairs on the driveway we sat metres away from our neighbours to keep having drinks and making sure they were ok.

At the same time, Telstra reported an increase of 50 per cent in calls being made, fuelling our need to stay in touch.

Underneath this is the realisation that we were acutely aware of the mental issues that could arise and wanted to stop them where we could. When other parts of the nation did it tough, like Melbourne where my brother lives, we didn't send thoughts and prayers - we sent care packages with tangible goods.

Finally, we trusted both the experts and those on the frontline to do the right thing, they didn't let us down.

State and Federal Chief Medical and Health Officers, Brendan Murphy and Andy Robertson aren't natural celebrities, but we listen when they talk.

For Aboriginal communities, government and community-led health services came into a new prominence. A cohesion which, as I said, has saved lives.

What most people don't know about 2020 is that it was the International Year of the Nurse, celebrating the bicentenary of the birth of Florence Nightingale, the founder of modern nursing. A statistician with compassion, we have a lot to thank her for.

Only nurses could have had a pandemic interrupt an international year of celebration. Nurses are the backbone of our health system, and instead of complaining they did what nurses have always done: they got on with the job and worked to save Australians. Few people worked harder than nurses last year, and that cannot be forgotten.

Nursing is a profession that is over 90 per cent female. For many of us, women were the strength in our nation, our communities and our families. That is not always appreciated, especially when men are the faces of decisions and do the speaking.

But this reminds me of a story from my father's family, who migrated from Greece just over 100 years ago. Some years ago the story of our people was expertly told, *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* was so accurate it could have been a documentary about our family.

Maria Portakalos, the mother of the main character, shares some advice on how things operate. She says "the man is the head, but the woman is the neck. And she can turn the head any way she wants."

I hope you excuse that digression and it doesn't take away from my central point, that we have together saved this country and have breathed new life into mateship.

We can go confidently forward telling a new story about Australia. Built on respect of our history with a modern voice.

Thank you for listening to me today. I wish you well, with a safe 2021.