

**Australia Day Address, 2022**  
**Geraldton and Mullewa, Western Australia**

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**The Lucky Country Lives On**

When my brother was 15 he left school to train as a mechanic. Destined to do this from birth, Matthew was good at it.

One day during his training a car broke down near our home. Without hesitation, Matthew went to help them to get them back on the road, at least for a short while. I remember that moment vividly because it helped me understand what it meant to be Australian. For the lucky country to prosper, we do what we can when we can and we benefit from it.

The lucky country isn't defined by the richness of our natural resources or our most enviable environment in the world. Those things help, but the lucky country exists and persists because of the decency of our people.

You will find examples wherever you look.

When Cyclone Seroja tore devastation through Western Australia's Mid-West region in 2021 almost 900 buildings were damaged with more than 30 beyond repair. Essential services and communication were cut off. With many realising that silence can be the scariest sound of all.

In what were dark days and weeks saw some light. People from across the state came to volunteer their time in rebuilding, reconnecting and rehabilitating this area. Some are still doing this work. Their service reconnected the electricity, water and people. It's good to have a working phone, but it's better if you can see the person who you thought was missing.

Natural disasters devastate all parts of the country. The rebuilding of structures and towns is something we can all point to; but it is when we come together and help each other, in big and small ways, that we create something special. We create Australia.

A few months later the world was entranced by the Cleo Smith disappearance, just north of where Seroja hit. It felt like the world stopped. It was the combination of people with even passing knowledge and the capability of police to bring this all together that saw a successful outcome.

After the hard work of police and working with the community, what could have been the saddest story became one of the most hopeful. Nobody will forget the photo of her bright happy face when she was found.

At just the right time, it gave us hope.

It is in these experiences that we connect with each other. We are helping each other or a cause, but we are helping ourselves. It is social relationships that predict our happiness. These are formed in testing times. Crisis, ironically, builds connection and it leads to happiness.

Connected communities are important, not just for the feel-good moments. The Bankwest Curtin Economics Centre recently pointed out that the cost of loneliness is \$2.7 billion per year. Concerningly, it was young people who were more at risk of loneliness than other groups.

On the other side of things, research from the Boston Consulting Group shows when people are asked what sort of life they want, the first answer they give is that they want a happy one. A meaningful life comes immediately second. Very few of us put money as the litmus test of a good life, it is community that we seek.

The Australian story is richer than what we have in living memory. With more than 60,000 years of history to work through, the lucky country is complex.

It is that point I have thought most about because for us to continue to prosper we must reconcile with our past.

While there are countless missteps by those who lead the institutions put in place over the past 250 years, what we see is that when we listen to Aboriginal people and, more importantly, trust them then good results flow. Nobody knows what Aboriginal people need more than Aboriginal people themselves.

Reconciliation Australia points out that truth-telling and understanding the story of Indigenous people helps us understand our community and how we can make it better.

You can see this in other communities too.

Gay men like me have seen a profound change in community attitudes. When I came out to my family and friends in 2011, almost immediately I found a community of LGBTI people and allies who looked out for my best and have supported me along the way and helped achieve legal equality.

When my father's family came to Australia from Greece they had to register as illegal aliens. Now more than 100 years later, Greeks are part of Australian life. There's a joke in the Greek community that they used to be ridiculed for eating feta, dolmades, olives and all the other good things they brought here, but now they get charged exorbitant prices for what is now known as "antipasto".

That's not to deny the lingering challenges of these communities, but it should give us all hope that reconciliation is more than an idea, it is something we can do and have done.

Reconciliation isn't anathema to the idea of Australia, it is central to it.

The lucky country isn't an outcome, it is a work in progress. It requires us to confront the flaws in our community and rectify them. That's responding to immediate crises, but it is also looking at our past.

For me, this is learning the language of the country I live on, Wadjuk Noongar boodja. This is about understanding our first languages and having a better knowledge of the richness of the thousands of years of Australian history.

As social researcher Hugh Mackay has pointed out, this is through small actions of kindness and respect to each other and engaging with our community. It is when we break down, when nature strikes or when we confront our history.

Whatever it is, and whatever you choose to focus your time on, you will advance Australia if you do it with respect. Taking an interest in Indigenous cultures is central to what it means to be the lucky country in 2022. The richness of Australia can only be told when we see it all.

When I think of Australia I think of people who help when we can, learn when we are unsure and grow when we are challenged. That is the lucky country.