

AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR VALEDICTORY SPEECH

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IT SEEMS A LIFE TIME SINCE I ATTENDED THIS LUNCH 12 MONTHS AGO...AND NOW HERE I STAND, FEELING IMMENSELY HONOURED AND HUMBLLED.

WHAT AN EXTRAORDINARY YEAR IT HAS BEEN – BUSY BEYOND BELIEF, STARTING FROM THE MOMENT PRIME MINISTER JULIA GILLARD, ANNOUNCED THAT I WAS THE 2013 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR.

IT'S THE KIND OF ANNOUNCEMENT THAT TAKES YOUR BREATH AWAY, A MOMENT IN TIME THAT CHANGED MY LIFE.

AND, AS I WAS TO LEARN AS 2013 PROGRESSED, A MOMENT THAT SIMILARLY CHANGED THE LIFE OF PROFESSOR IAN MADDOCKS, THE DISTINGUISHED 2013 SENIOR AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR.

HALF WAY THROUGH THE YEAR IAN SENT ME A MESSAGE SAYING THAT MAGGIE BEER, THE FORMER 2010 SENIOR AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR, HAD WARNED HIM HIS WORLD WOULD BE TURNED UPSIDE DOWN.

“SHE’S RIGHT,” IAN SAID, “IT IS.

“HOW’S YOUR WORLD?” HE ASKED.

“UPSIDE DOWN,” I REPLIED.

UPSIDE DOWN NOTWITHSTANDING, I WILL CHERISH EVERY MEMORY (SOME EXTREMELY PRECIOUS) OF MY TIME AS AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR... MEETING PEOPLE FROM ALL WALKS OF LIFE THROUGHOUT OUR COUNTRY, VISITING SCHOOLS AND TALKING WITH STUDENTS, AND SEEING FIRSTHAND THE INCREDIBLE CULTURAL DIVERSITY THAT EXISTS IN MANY OF OUR SCHOOLS THESE DAYS. THE SCHOOL PLAYGROUND HAS CHANGED SIGNIFICANTLY SINCE MY SCHOOLDAYS.

WHEN I COMPLETED MY SECONDARY STUDIES AT DOVER HEIGHTS HOME SCIENCE HIGH SCHOOL IN SYDNEY IN THE LATE 1950s, MANY OF MY FELLOW STUDENTS WERE OF EUROPEAN ORIGIN AND THEIR FAMILIES (IN PARTICULAR THOSE OF MY JEWISH CLASSMATES) HAD BEEN DRAMATICALLY AFFECTED BY THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND IN SOME INSTANCES COMMUNISM.

SOME, I REMEMBER LEARNING, HAD TRAGICALLY BEEN RENDERED HOMELESS.

OVER THE YEARS INCREASINGLY MORE AND MORE PEOPLE FROM OTHER COUNTRIES HAVE MADE THE JOURNEY TO OUR SHORES AND BLENDED THEIR TRADITIONS AND OPINIONS INTO THE RICH TAPESTRY OF OUR CULTURE AND HELPED SHAPE OUR IDENTITY.

I CAN'T THINK OF ONE ASPECT OF AUSTRALIAN LIFE THAT HASN'T BENEFITTED FROM THE CONTRIBUTION MIGRANTS HAVE MADE TO OUR NATION. IN THIS REGARD, WE ARE INDEED A LUCKY COUNTRY.

WHEN I BECAME AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR I SAID I WOULD USE THE YEAR TO RAISE AWARENESS OF A NUMBER OF ISSUES ABOUT WHICH I FEEL STRONGLY – IMMIGRATION IS ONE – BUT FRONT AND CENTRE WAS TO PROMOTE A MORE POSITIVE APPROACH TO AGEING – TO TACKLE WHAT I PERCEIVE AS AGEIST ATTITUDES IN OUR SOCIETY; TO DELIVER ON ALZHEIMER'S AUSTRALIA'S *FIGHT DEMENTIA* CAMPAIGN AND TO SHINE THE SPOTLIGHT ON MEDICAL RESEARCH.

ANOTHER OF MY GOALS WAS TO ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO ADOPT PREVENTIVE HEALTH STRATEGIES ESPECIALLY IN RELATION TO CHRONIC DISEASES SUCH AS DEMENTIA, ARTHRITIS, MACULAR DEGENERATION AND DIABETES...THAT AFFECT SO MANY AUSTRALIANS AS WE GROW OLDER.

I WAS OVERJOYED TO WATCH MY WORDS FALLING ON RECEPTIVE EARS.

AND I WAS OVERWHELMED BY THE DELUGE OF TEXT MESSAGES, EMAILS AND LETTERS THAT FOLLOWED AS MANY OLDER AUSTRALIANS SHARED THEIR PERSONAL EXPERIENCES WITH AGEING AND DISABILITIES.

SOME ADMITTED TO BEING LONELY; OTHERS TO FEELING UNWANTED; A COMMON THEME WAS BEING INVISIBLE. "I WAS WAITING TO BE SERVED AT A MAJOR RETAILER," WROTE ONE 70 PLUS WOMAN – "A YOUNGER WOMAN CAME UP TO THE COUNTER AND WAS SERVED IMMEDIATELY. IT WASN'T THE FIRST TIME I HAD FELT INVISIBLE IN SUCH A SITUATION."

ANOTHER COMMON COMPLAINT – THE RAISED, OVERTLY SLOW AND CLEARLY ENUNCIATED VOICE! “WHY DO PEOPLE FEEL THEY HAVE TO SHOUT AT ME?” ASKED ONE 80-YEAR-OLD. I AM NOT DEAF. NEITHER AM I STUPID!”

THIS IS NOT AN ISOLATED CASE. OLDER AUSTRALIANS SAY IT HAPPENS TO THEM A LOT. THE PREVAILING THINKING SEEMS TO BE THAT IF A PERSON LOOKS OVER 65 AND HAS GREY HAIR THE ONLY WAY TO COMMUNICATE WITH THEM IS BY SHOUTING AND ARTICULATING EVERY SYLLABLE IN AN INFURIATINGLY PATRONISING WAY.

IT ISN'T.

THERE HAVE BEEN PLEAS FROM OLDER WORKERS ASKING ME TO HELP THEM GET A JOB

I HELPED LAUNCH A HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION REPORT LAST YEAR WHICH INCLUDED A SURVEY SHOWING THAT ONE IN 10 RESPONDENTS ADMITTED TO HAVING AN AGE ABOVE WHICH THEY WILL NOT RECRUIT... THAT AVERAGE IS 50. CAN ANYONE HERE IMAGINE BEING WRITTEN OFF AT 50?

MANY OLDER WORKERS TOLD ME THEY HAVE BEEN DENIED EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITIES BECAUSE THEY ARE “OVER QUALIFIED” OR WON’T FIT IN WITH THE COMPANY CULTURE.” SOME DON’T EVEN GET A RESPONSE WHEN THEY APPLY FOR A JOB.

LIKE RAY, WHO SENT ME THIS EMAIL:

“I AM 60 YEARS OLD AND HAVE NOT WORKED FOR TWO YEARS DESPITE APPLYING FOR OVER 200 JOBS I HAVE APPLIED FOR JOBS AUSTRALIA WIDE IN THE CONSTRUCTION AND MINING INDUSTRIES TO WHICH I RECEIVED NO RESPONSE. I AM STILL PERFECTLY CAPABLE AND FIT ENOUGH TO PERFORM ANY DUTIES THAT ARE REQUIRED. IF THERE IS ANY ORGANISATION OR BODY THAT IS WILLING TO HELP WITH OLDER WORKERS SEEKING WORK WOULD YOU BE ABLE TO PASS THAT INFORMATION ON TO ME.”

GIVEN OUR AGEING POPULATION AND DECLINING WELFARE PURSE WE SHOULD BE ENCOURAGING MATURE AGE WORKERS TO STAY IN THE WORKFORCE, NOT PRECLUDING THEM, AND VALUING THEM FOR THE KNOWLEDGE, WISDOM AND EXPERIENCE THEY CAN BRING TO THE WORKPLACE. IT'S A MESSAGE I FREQUENTLY DELIVERED IN 2013.

OVER THE PAST YEAR I HAVE BEEN WORKING HARD TO SPARK A CULTURAL SHIFT IN HOW WE CONCEPTUALISE OLDER AGE.

IT'S TIME WE STOPPED THINKING THAT LIFE STOPS AT 65 AND RECOGNISE THAT OLDER PEOPLE MAKE AN IMPORTANT CONTRIBUTION TO OUR SOCIETY.

WHETHER THROUGH WORK, VOLUNTEERING, HELPING WITH GRANDCHILDREN OR CONTRIBUTING AS A VALUED "ELDER CONSULTANT" – LET'S COIN A NEW TITLE AND CREATE A NEW POSITION FOR OUR DISTINGUISHED ELDERS WHO POSSES A WEALTH OF KNOWLEDGE IN THEIR SPECIALISED FIELDS.

OUR OLDER PEOPLE HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO MAKE A HUGE IMPACT ON BOTH OUR ECONOMY AND OUR COMMUNITIES.

IT WILL TAKE EDUCATION AND STRONG INSIGHTFUL LEADERSHIP TO CHANGE THE MINDSET THAT EXISTS IN SO MUCH OF THE WORKPLACE AND SOCIETY ABOUT EMPLOYING OLDER WORKERS; TO REMOVE THE BARRIERS TO WORKFORCE PARTICIPATION FOR OLDER PEOPLE IN THE PRIVATE SECTOR AS WELL AS THE PUBLIC SERVICE AND TO FULLY EMBRACE THE MULTITUDE OF BENEFITS THEY CAN AND WILL BRING TO THE TABLE.

AS YOU WOULD EXPECT MANY OF THE LETTERS, EMAILS AND CONVERSATIONS I'VE HAD DURING MY YEAR HAVE RELATED TO DISABILITY, ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE AND OTHER DEMENTIAS, AND ALSO ABOUT THE QUALITY OF CARE IN SOME OF OUR AGED CARE FACILITIES.

THESE PARTICULAR CONFIDENCES HAVE BROUGHT HOME TO ME THE STRENGTH AND COURAGE OF EVERYDAY AUSTRALIANS AND REAFFIRMED MY PASSION FOR ACHIEVING BETTER CARE AND SUPPORT.

MANY AUSTRALIANS ARE UNAWARE THAT DEMENTIA IS THE SINGLE GREATEST CAUSE OF DISABILITY IN OLDER AUSTRALIANS AGED 65 AND OVER, AND THE THIRD LEADING CAUSE OF DISABILITY BURDEN OVERALL.

ONCE AGAIN, STRONG, COURAGEOUS AND FORWARD-THINKING LEADERSHIP IS REQUIRED IF AUSTRALIA IS TO MEET THE ENORMOUS CHALLENGE THAT DEMENTIA REPRESENTS.

THERE ARE CURRENTLY MORE THAN 330,000 AUSTRALIANS WITH DEMENTIA, AND WITHOUT NEW APPROACHES TO TREATMENT OR INTERVENTION, THERE WILL BE ALMOST 900,000 OF US WITH DEMENTIA BY 2050.

WHAT'S MORE, IN THE 36 YEARS BETWEEN NOW AND 2050, JUST OVER THREE MILLION OF US CAN EXPECT TO DEVELOP DEMENTIA, AND LIVE ANYWHERE FROM THREE TO 15 YEARS WITH THIS TERMINAL CONDITION, THAT'S WHY – ALONG WITH MY ALZHEIMER'S AUSTRALIA COLLEAGUES – I HAVE BEEN SO PASSIONATE ABOUT THE NEED FOR MORE FUNDING FOR DEMENTIA RESEARCH.

WE HAVE TO – WE MUST – FIND A WAY TO DELAY THE PROGRESSION OF DEMENTIA, TO COME UP WITH TREATMENTS AND HOPEFULLY A CURE AND DISCOVER WHY IT ATTACKS THE BRAIN THE WAY THAT IT DOES.

ONCE AGAIN IT SEEMS MY WORDS BACK IN JANUARY 2013 FELL ON RECEPTIVE EARS. I HAVE BEEN PLEASED TO LEAD ALZHEIMER'S AUSTRALIA'S *FIGHT DEMENTIA* CAMPAIGN WHICH HIGHLIGHTS THE NEED FOR MORE MEDICAL RESEARCH ON DEMENTIA.

WE HAVE BEEN ENCOURAGED BY THE FACT THAT BOTH MAJOR PARTIES MADE A COMMITMENT TO DEMENTIA RESEARCH PRIOR TO THE 2013 FEDERAL ELECTION.

THE COMMITMENT BY PRIME MINISTER ABBOTT TO INVEST AN ADDITIONAL \$200 MILLION OVER FIVE YEARS TO DEMENTIA RESEARCH IS SOMETHING THAT BRINGS OUR GOAL OF A WORLD WITHOUT DEMENTIA SLIGHTLY CLOSER.

DEMENTIA RESEARCH HAS BEEN A POOR COUSIN TO THE OTHER MAJOR CHRONIC DISEASES FOR FAR TOO LONG.

WE NOW HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO BUILD A SUSTAINABLE CAPACITY IN DEMENTIA RESEARCH THAT SPREADS ACROSS MEDICAL, PREVENTIVE HEALTH AND CARE.

I AM LOOKING FORWARD TO WORKING WITH THE GOVERNMENT AND THE NATIONAL HEALTH & MEDICAL RESEARCH COUNCIL (NHMRC) TO DETERMINE THE STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES FOR THE USE OF THIS FUNDING, AS IS EVERYONE ELSE WORKING IN THE DEMENTIA RESEARCH FIELD.

I DON'T THINK I'VE EVER COMMUNICATED WITH PEOPLE AS MUCH AS I DID DURING 2013. I'VE CERTAINLY DONE A GREAT DEAL OF TRAVEL. THE SECURITY GUARDS AT ALL OUR CAPITAL AIRPORTS CAN VOUCH FOR THAT. ONE MORNING, A SECURITY WOMAN GREETED ME WARMLY.... "YOU AGAIN, MISS BUTTROSE".

I HAVE BEEN BACK AND FORTH ACROSS AUSTRALIA MANY, MANY TIMES IN THE LAST 12 MONTHS...FROM SYDNEY TO PERTH, MELBOURNE, BRISBANE, THE GOLD COAST, NOOSA, HOBART, ADELAIDE, WAGGA WAGGA, BOWRAL, CANBERRA, WERRIS CREEK, BROKEN HILL AND EVEN OVERSEAS TO SINGAPORE – AND ON JUST ABOUT EVERY OCCASION, I HAVE BEEN ABLE TO FIND A WAY TO TALK ABOUT THE ISSUES FACING OLDER PEOPLE, AND THE IMPACT OF ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE AND OTHER DEMENTIAS, AS WELL AS PREVENTIVE HEALTH STRATEGIES – THAT OTHER GOAL OF MINE I SET MYSELF.

THERE IS NOW IRREFUTABLE EVIDENCE THAT WORLDWIDE APPROXIMATELY HALF OF THE CASES OF ALZHEIMER’S DISEASE ARE POTENTIALLY ATTRIBUTABLE TO RISK FACTORS SUCH AS DIABETES, HYPERTENSION, OBESITY, SMOKING, DEPRESSION, COGNITIVE INACTIVITY AND PHYSICAL INACTIVITY.

A REPORT RELEASED BY THE BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL, *LANCET*, IN 2012 REVEALED THAT WORLDWIDE, PHYSICAL INACTIVITY RESULTED IN 5.3 MILLION PREMATURE DEATHS. IT'S A STAGGERING FIGURE.

PHYSICAL INACTIVITY IS QUITE SIMPLY BAD FOR OUR HEALTH. WHAT'S MORE HEALTH EXPERTS SAY ITS IMPACT IS COMPARABLE TO THAT OF CIGARETTE SMOKING. NOW THAT IS A SOBERING THOUGHT.

KNOWING THIS YOU WILL APPRECIATE WHY I SEIZED EVERY MOMENT DURING MY SPECIAL YEAR TO TALK ABOUT AUSTRALIA'S FIRST DEMENTIA RISK REDUCTION PROGRAM, ALZHEIMER'S AUSTRALIA'S *YOUR BRAIN MATTERS*.

FUNDED BY THE FEDERAL DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND AGEING, *YOUR BRAIN MATTERS* ADVOCATES 5 SIMPLE STEPS FOR MAXIMISING BRAIN HEALTH:

- LOOK AFTER YOUR HEART
- BE PHYSICALLY ACTIVE
- MENTALLY CHALLENGE YOUR BRAIN
- FOLLOW A HEALTHY DIET
- ENJOY A SOCIAL ACTIVITY

NONE OF THE STEPS ARE ALL THAT DIFFICULT TO DO AND IF WE ARE SERIOUS ABOUT CHANGING THE HEALTH BEHAVIOUR OF AUSTRALIANS, THESE TYPES OF MESSAGES NEED TO BE INCORPORATED IN EVERY ASPECT OF OUR COMMUNITY INCLUDING THE WORKPLACE.

AS I STAND HERE TODAY MY PARTING ADDRESS AS 2013 AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR IS UNAPOLOGETICALLY TAKING FULL ADVANTAGE OF THE PLATFORM AND AUTHORITY THAT BEING AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR GIVES THE HOLDER TO TALK ABOUT ISSUES THAT NEED TO BE TALKED ABOUT...THINGS THAT WILL IMPACT ON YOU OR AT THE VERY LEAST SOMEONE CLOSE TO YOU.

I HAVE DONE MY BEST TO CONVEY HONESTLY AND WITH CONVICTION THE ESSENCE OF STORIES I HAVE BEEN TOLD DURING THE PAST YEAR AND IN THE PROCESS HELP RAISE PUBLIC AWARENESS ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF PROVIDING ACCESS TO GOOD QUALITY SERVICES FOR OLDER PEOPLE AND PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA, AND THE NEED FOR EVERYONE TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR HEALTH.

THE PAST 12 MONTHS HAS FILLED ME WITH HOPE AND OPTIMISM FOR CHANGE IN SOCIAL POLICIES THAT DIRECTLY IMPACT ON OLDER AUSTRALIANS WHEREVER THEY LIVE AND WHATEVER THEIR CIRCUMSTANCES.

I HOPE THAT GOVERNMENT, INDUSTRY AND CONSUMERS WILL WORK TOGETHER IN 2014, TO IMPROVE CARE OUTCOMES FOR OLDER AUSTRALIANS AND PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA OF ALL AGES.

ACHIEVING SOCIAL REFORM IS A MARATHON AND NOT A SPRINT. 2014 WILL SEE A CONCERTED AND SUSTAINED EFFORT TO MAKE POSITIVE CHANGE TO BENEFIT SOME OF OUR MOST VULNERABLE CITIZENS.

ALZHEIMER'S AUSTRALIA AND OTHER CONSUMER ORGANISATIONS ARE PROUD OF THE FACT THAT CONSUMER EMPOWERMENT HAS COME OF AGE. WE ARE FINALLY WITHIN REACH OF DEVELOPING FLEXIBLE SERVICES THAT WILL RESPOND BETTER TO THE GOALS AND NEEDS OF INDIVIDUALS.

IT SEEMS SO OBVIOUS THAT TO ACHIEVE GOOD CARE WE NEED AN APPROACH WHICH RESPECTS THE FACT THAT OLDER PEOPLE AND PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES OR DEMENTIA ARE INDIVIDUALS FIRST AND FOREMOST...BUT IT'S TAKEN A LONG WHILE TO GET HERE.

THERE CAN BE NO MORE EXCITING PROSPECT THAN INDIVIDUALS RECEIVING THE CARE AND SUPPORT THAT WILL HELP THEM TO REMAIN ENGAGED AND RESPECTED PARTICIPANTS OF OUR COMMUNITY RATHER THAN BEING FORCED INTO PROGRAMS THAT MAY OR MAY NOT BE OF BENEFIT TO THEM.

ALTHOUGH I FINISH MY TIME AS AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR TODAY, I CAN PROMISE YOU AS PRESIDENT OF ALZHEIMER'S AUSTRALIA THAT MY PASSION FOR THESE ISSUES WILL NOT END. WE WILL BUILD ON WHAT WE HAVE ACHIEVED AND CONTINUE WORKING FOR BETTER SERVICES AND SUPPORT FOR PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA.

RIGHT NOW, WE'RE WORKING HARD ON A THREE YEAR VISION TO OUTLINE FOR THE GOVERNMENT WHAT NEEDS TO BE ACHIEVED TO CREATE A DEMENTIA- FRIENDLY AUSTRALIA...A MAJOR 2014 GOAL FOR US.

THE QUESTION WE NEED TO ASK OURSELVES IS: HOW WOULD WE WISH TO BE TREATED IF WE HAD DEMENTIA?

WE ALL KNOW THE ANSWER... WITH RESPECT AND DIGNITY.

IT'S OUR BIRTHRIGHT TO BE TREATED AS VALUED MEMBERS OF THE COMMUNITY AND TO HAVE ACCESS TO THE SUPPORT AND SERVICES WE NEED, AND THIS DOESN'T END WHEN WE ARE OLDER.

THE AUSTRALIAN SPIRIT – THAT 'NEVER GIVE UP' ATTITUDE – GIVES ME CONFIDENCE THAT IN TIME WE WILL ADOPT A MORE POSITIVE VIEW OF AGEING, THAT WE WILL BE MORE INCLUSIVE OF PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA AND DISABILITIES, AND ADOPT SOCIAL POLICIES THAT ENSURE THEY GET THE SERVICES THEY NEED.

I AM INCREDIBLY GRATEFUL FOR THE OPPORTUNITY THAT BEING AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR HAS GIVEN ME TO RAISE AWARENESS ABOUT ALZHEIMER'S DISEASE AND OTHER DEMENTIAS AND THE NEEDS OF PEOPLE WITH DEMENTIA AND THEIR FAMILY CARERS – THOSE UNSUNG HEROES WHO PLAY SUCH A VITAL ROLE IN THE FIGHT AGAINST DEMENTIA.

AND I WILL BE FOREVER GRATEFUL TO THE AUSTRALIANS I HAVE MET DURING 2013 FOR THEIR SUPPORT, ENCOURAGEMENT AND FRANKNESS.

IF I HAVE PLAYED EVEN A SMALL PART IN CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARDS DEMENTIA AND AGEING, I FEEL I HAVE FULFILLED THE PLEDGE I MADE TO MYSELF WHEN I WAS GRANTED THE HONOUR OF BEING NAMED AUSTRALIAN OF THE YEAR.

AND AS MY TIME IN THIS ROLE DRAWS TO A CLOSE I PROMISE MY COMMITMENT TO THESE CAUSES THAT ARE SO CLOSE TO MY HEART, AND WHICH I HAVE CHAMPIONED THIS YEAR, WILL REMAIN STEADFAST.. .YOU WILL CONTINUE TO HEAR ME SPRUICKING THEM WHENEVER I GET THE OPPORTUNITY TO DO SO, NONE OF WHICH, OF COURSE, WILL EQUAL THE ESTEEMED AND ELEVATED PLATFORM THAT I HAVE HAD THE ENORMOUS PRIVILEGE TO STEP ON TO THIS YEAR.

I WISH YOU ALL A WONDERFUL AUSTRALIA DAY 2014.

THANK YOU