

A HUNDRED YEARS OF OZ

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Ladies and Gentlemen

It is a great honour for me to have been invited to stand before you this evening to talk to you about our country, past and present.

I thought I might begin with you a few observations about the past one hundred years, to look at what we have learned - or should have learned! - before I look to the future.

The epoch that ended in 2000 was a truly amazing one, by any standards. It was, as someone said, the very best and the very worst of times.

It was a century that spawned *Battleship Potemkin* and the Cruise Missile (and no, I don't mean Tom!), Charlie Chaplin and concentration camps, Simone de Beauvoir and snuff movies.

It was a time of phenomenal creativity and wanton destruction, of unprecedented compassion and incomprehensible cruelty.

During the 20th century Josef Stalin, Adolf Hitler, Mao Zedong, Pol Pot, Saddam Hussein and Slobodan Milosevic each unleashed murderous forces that saw the brutal deaths of millions.

At the same time, respect for human life and human rights was exemplified by the likes of Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Mother Teresa and, post prison, Nelson Mandela.

It was a century that saw two world wars and brought forth the atomic bomb, but it was also a century which created the United Nations.

It was a century which saw much of Asia, Africa and South America purloined by European or American imperialists but also their banishment in the post-war liberation and independence struggles.

It was a century where the so-called "green revolution" in agriculture enabled most peasant economies to feed their vast populations, but when we also embarked on a mindless frenzy of deforestation which has the potential to lead to a global ecological catastrophe.

In Europe and the Americas, the century saw the visual genius of Picasso and Braque, the celluloid vision of Eisenstein and the Russian Jews who founded Hollywood, the manufacturing and marketing innovation of Henry Ford, a musical output that ranged from Puccini and Stravinsky to jazz and the Beatles, while literature was turned on its head by James Joyce.

It was a century where scientific and technical genius achieved unimaginable levels of invention while new depths of banality were plumbed in a curious new cult of celebrity.

When the century began there were no jet planes, no washing machines or microwave ovens, no computers or television, no penicillin or blood transfusions.

Now we have mass transit and mass media, and entertainment is a commodity delivered simultaneously around the globe by a handful of owners via satellites and the world wide web.

Looking back, we can see that it was a very speedy century.

Virtually everything we invented conspired to increase the pace at which we live.

Everything became faster: travel and communications, even our food. Ray Kroc - the founder of McDonald's - was a 20th century icon, according to *Time* magazine's list of the 100 most important people of the epoch.

Despite official cut-backs to hours, most working days are longer but holidays are shorter. They are now called "breaks".

At the beginning of the 20th century the term 'poverty' denoted a lack of income. One hundred years later, it often refers to a lack of time. We have become obsessed with timetables and organisers - ways to tell us what we should be doing, and whether we have achieved it.

This, then is the background against which our own story has taken place. We have been part of it, enjoyed it and suffered from it, and also made our own unique contributions.

Australians have always been known for our inventiveness, for our creativity - and for our total inability to take credit for, let alone bask in the glory of, our accomplishments.

Unless, of course, they are in sport - and then we can't stop talking about them.

As HG Nelson likes to put it, Australia is a country where too much sport is never enough.

With everything else, it is a different story.

It is one of the paradoxes of this place.

How many countries with a small population such as ours have produced seven Nobel prize winners, including one for Literature? How many have produced two singers of the calibre and renown of Dame Nellie Melba and Dame Joan Sutherland?

When it comes to popular music, there was Gladys Moncrief - who apparently no one remembers on the evidence of a question earlier this week on "Who Wants to be a Millionaire"!

Currently there is Olivia Newton-John and Kylie Minogue and, of course, groups such as AC/DC, Men at Work, INXS, Midnight Oil, silverchair and the Bee Gees.

Our film directors and movie stars shine well beyond our shores. Just think of Bruce Beresford, Baz Luhrmann, Peter Weir, Phil Noyce, Fred Schepisi, Geoffrey Rush, Cate Blanchett, Nicole Kidman, Heath Ledger and Toni Collette.

(I won't get into an argument about whether Russell Crowe is an Aussie, I'll just say he lives here -as do Sam Neill and Jane Campion and various other former Enzedders - and that's good enough for me!)

Our sporting prowess of course is renowned. I'd be here all night if I were to start listing names.

Let's just say it is a very long list, spanning Les Darcy to Cathy Freeman, and it's not just people. I can't think of another country that would have the heart of a race-horse in pride of place in a museum.

Nor can I imagine another country whose head of government would proclaim, after visiting Newport, Rhode Island and inspecting the boat that would eventually take the America's Cup from the US for the first time in over 130 years, "At least they can't poison a yacht!"

We also have a long history of inventions.

My favourite was invented in the 19th century and should not really be included here but I am going to mention the stump-jump plough anyway.

I like its blunt Aussie name that tells you exactly what it does - it jumps over those bloody stumps that used to wreck the ploughs designed for drawing nice smooth furrows in English fields. And I like the practical, problem-solving approach to life that motivated its invention.

I guess you could say it's a bit like the wine-cask. When we decided that a bottle just did not hold enough to do the job, someone came up with the idea of a box with a handle and spout that holds something like six bottles! Very practical.

Over the past hundred years Australians have been responsible for innovations as diverse as the surf life-saving wheel and the heart pace-maker, the rotary hoe and the Hills Hoist, the Royal Flying Doctor Service and the School of the Air.

And, of course, the redback spider anti-venom (another practical invention necessitated by the outdoor dunny!).

As well as founding one of the world's first airlines, the Queensland and Northern Territory Aerial Service - what we know today as Qantas - we also came up with the inflatable aircraft escape slide, the black box flight recorder and the Interscan landing system.

In medicine, it was the bionic ear, in-vitro fertilisation, the production of penicillin, microsurgery and the ultrasound technique that now enables every expectant couple to entertain their workmates with videos of their developing foetus.

Politically and socially we have led the world in so many ways that sadly are virtually forgotten today.

I wonder how many people in this room know that Australians invented the secret ballot which is the hallmark of democratic elections around the world. We also came up with the conciliation and arbitration system for settling industrial disputes, and the eight hour day as a fair means of regulating working hours.

It was the Premier of this State, Jack Lang, who in 1926 invented the widows pension. Previously, widows whose husbands had not provided for them were left destitute. Australia also invented child endowment, a means tested allowance payable to families with children. Most significantly, the allowance was paid to the mother. The worry was that men would drink or gamble it away.

On the sartorial front, there were permanent-crease trousers, socks that stay up, Speedo swimming gear, and I think we can claim credit for the bikini, at least the itsy-bitsy teeny-weeny ones that used to cause apoplexy among the beach inspectors at Bondi in the 1960s.

(Being a somewhat censorious and bureaucratic people, we probably also invented the beach inspector!)

Yet despite this extraordinary record of accomplishment, we are still in many ways an insecure and uncertain people.

We seem to need constant approval from "overseas". The cultural cringe is alive and well, regrettably, and we have what I find the irritating and unnecessary habit of continually assuring ourselves that what we are doing is "world class".

This is not to say that we don't believe we live in Godzone Country, the greatest country on earth, who held the "best Olympics ever" and all the rest of it.

It's just that we don't *act* as if we believe it.

Some of this might be due to the embarrassment or shame we feel because we seem to be unable to hold onto so many of our inventions.

We can't find the money or the know-how or whatever is required to turn our local inventions into global brands.

I don't know about you, but I felt angry every time I saw a swimmer wearing Speedos during the Sydney Olympics. What should have been the finest hour for our local brand instead became a showcase for a renowned and innovative American brand.

So many of our people, and our products, have gone off shore because we are unable to support them.

I learned just yesterday that Lake Technology, the inventors of surround sound headphones for computers and inflight movies, a technology they have licensed to Dolby, are about to relocate to the US because they can't get the financial and marketing support here that they need to take their product to where it belongs.

Why does this happen?

It does not have to.

Look at a country like Finland, with only 5.1 million people, and the extraordinary success they have had with Nokia. They might not have invented the mobile phone but they certainly own it now and have become the trendsetters around the world.

We could not even hang onto Vegemite!

Years ago, in 1964, Donald Horne published a book about Australia that he called *The Lucky Country* and in doing so coined the phrase that, more than any other, Australians love to use about themselves.

Horne meant the title to be ironic.

Yet it has acquired, he wrote subsequently, "meanings not intended by its inventor". Other writers have come up with other phrases to describe us, as have politicians. We have been told we are - or need to be - "the clever country", or "the knowledge nation", but none of these have stuck. We like to think of ourselves as "the lucky country".

Why?

The reason, I believe, lies in the fact that it gave a name to the sentimental view we held of ourselves. It was a consolation, to think of ourselves as lucky, when we could quite easily have concluded the opposite.

That we were unlucky for being so far from Europe, for never having gone through the nation-building exercise of a war of independence, for not having the invigorating challenges of a smaller territory or a larger population.

We needed to believe we were lucky. Perhaps because we secretly harboured fears that Australia Felix was a self-reinforcing myth and because we needed a cloak for our insecurity we seized upon its title as if we were a life-raft.

It became our legend, our way of describing ourselves.

We placed our faith in a gambling term. We decided, in effect, to take a flutter on the future.

It was so seductive, to think of ourselves as graced, as godzone country. It justified complacency, and gave legitimacy to a whole sub-set of phrases we believed epitomised our carefree, fortunate way of life: "no worries, mate!" And "she'll be right!" And "near enough is good enough".

And for a while it seemed to work. Except that the mining boom of the 1960s was not the result of luck. It came from the vision and the labours of a generation of businessmen who happened to be miners.

Even when we "rode the sheep's back", we were really riding on the backs of the station owners and the station hands and the shearers and the wharfies and all the others who put in the back-breaking work to bring the clip to the world's markets.

And that has been the curious thing about us. We have not really been a nation of shirkers but we chose to represent ourselves as such. Perhaps because the initial work of taming the continent was so hard, we chose to cloak the toil with a romance. We wanted to believe that our wealth was acquired effortlessly.

We wanted the world to see us as an antipodean paradise. It was our way of advertising ourselves. It was another sign of our insecurity.

Unlike the American Dream, which promised - and delivered - to generations of immigrants a good life in return for hard work, the Lucky Country offered instant gratification. Just to be here was sufficient. It was like winning the lottery.

The allure was so strong that generations of our immigrants believed it. They too eventually succumbed to the "she'll be right" myth and adapted to our lackadaisical ways, thereby depriving us of the infusion of energy and drive that transformed the United States in the 20th century.

We might be one of the world's most successful multi-cultural countries, and we are extremely fortunate not to have to endure the sectarian, ethnic or other strife that tears so many other nations apart. But we also lack something - that edge that comes from competitiveness and striving.

We sometimes sneer at Americans for the way they worship success, for their culture of individualism. Yet look at what that country has achieved. We prefer to take refuge in the culture of mateship. We don't like people who are "up themselves" - as we deride individual achievers outside the sporting arena.

In this sense, the term "the lucky country" was a curse. It was dangerous for us to gratify our gambling proclivities in this way. It led us to believe we could spend the money before we earned it, something we have done time and again.

Our state and federal governments did it in anticipation of a 1980s resources boom that never delivered the expected goods. Our corporate buccaneers did it in the 80s, with their profligate acquisitions and prodigal borrowings.

So intoxicated were we with this self-congratulatory way of describing ourselves that we quickly forgot what the book The Lucky Country had argued: that we needed to adapt and change if we were to maintain our standard of living and become a better country.

Today, as we mark the Centenary of our federation, this is a lesson we need to learn again.

We are a much better country than we were but our journey is not yet complete.

We *have* made many of the tough economic adjustments, reduced our reliance on manufacturing, become more rational in the way we work.

Many in fact argue that we have gone too far in that direction, that we have abandoned our basic humanity and our concern for people in a relentless and ruthless search for bottom-line efficiencies.

We are no longer as narrow-minded or racist as we once were.

Beach inspectors are a thing of the past, and although the high levels of support for One Nation might suggest we are still in many respects a racist country, I tend to believe that One Nation's appeal is primarily economic rather than racial. In Western Australia, the party received a startlingly high vote amongst Aborigines.

I think Pauline Hanson has tapped into an angry vein of economic deprivation and its consequences that the major parties have ignored - at their peril as it has turned out.

They have to learn from this. Just as we all have to learn from the past if we are to enjoy a better future.

This Centenary year is the perfect time to do this, since what we are celebrating is the birth of our nation, the six colonies agreeing to join together in a commonwealth with a unified system of government.

That much, at least, we could agree upon.

We were not able to agree on the width of our railway tracks - that took almost 100 years! - and interstate travel for years involved changing trains to ride the different gauges.

We fought for years on tariffs.

I grew up in Adelaide and learned from my father to prefer Sydneysiders because they were free-traders, to Victorians whom he cursed for being a "bunch of bloody protectionists". (Some things still have not changed!)

But despite such disagreements, we were able to reach consensus on the fundamental principles of government and to come up with a system that for the most part has been fair and has served us well.

Shamefully, we did not originally allow the indigenous inhabitants any rights of citizenship - that did not occur until after the 1967 referendum - but right from the start, we agreed that women should be able both to vote and to run for office.

This was at a time when the only other country in the world to provide for this was New Zealand, and when the states of New South Wales, Queensland, Victoria and Tasmania had not yet enfranchised women in state elections.

As I have tried to point out, in the hundred years since we federated so much has changed in this country, and in the world, that it scarcely makes much sense to go in for "now and then" comparisons.

Therefore, I for one am not a fan of re-enactments. I can't see the point of dressing up in century-old garments to perform meaningless rituals that do nothing to equip us for the very real challenges we face as a country today.

I visited Berry on the South Coast at the weekend and learned that the town is planning next week to re-enact a picnic that had occurred one hundred years ago.

Then, apparently, citizens came from all over New South Wales to celebrate the new federation. They came of course by train.

Next week they will descend on Berry in their petrol-guzzling four-wheel drives. If the point of such an event was to encourage people to use public transport, I would applaud it, but today there is no train to Berry.

There are many things about a century ago that we are only too happy to leave behind.

For instance, the average life expectancy of a male in 1901 was 55 years and 2 months. For women who did not die in childbirth, it was 58 years and 10 months. Many of us in this room would not still be live today.

Certainly, we would not be as tall, as healthy and as protected from disease as our ancestors. We probably all eat and drink too much these days, but at least it is almost unheard of for people to die from malnutrition.

We in Sydney panicked two years ago when it seemed our water supply was infected by cryptosporidian and giardia. It turned out to be an over-zealous interpretation of the constant testing that keeps our water clean and disease free that led to the crisis.

Yet a hundred years ago there was a real public health crisis when Bubonic plague was detected in Sydney. Within six months more than one hundred people had died from it; the epidemic lasted ten years and affected every state except Tasmania.

On hot nights back then if you opened your window for some cool air, your senses were assaulted by the smell of open sewers, or the night-cart man doing his rounds.

Needless to say, we are not re-enacting any of *this*!

Similarly, I do not see the point of federal parliamentarians assembling in Melbourne next Thursday to sit for a few minutes in the Victorian parliamentary chambers where their forebears sat.

It is not the money I object to - we have so many truly creative ways of wasting money in this country that this one scarcely registers on the Superfluous Spending Richter Scale. No, what I find objectionable is that our politicians seem more interested in re-enacting the past than they do in grappling with the intractable problems of the future.

Of course, I am not saying that we cannot - or should not - learn from the past.

As someone who has studied and written history, I believe we can gain great understanding about ourselves from studying where we came from and how we became who we are today. Indeed, it is one of our current national scandals that the teaching of history in schools, and even in universities, is on the decline.

It is bad enough that spelling and grammar have deteriorated to the point that we are no longer shocked, or even surprised, by extraordinary mistakes in our major newspapers.

Even so, I was a little taken aback to read last weekend in the real estate section of a national newspaper that the former footballer Mal Meninga was selling his house - in the Canberra suburb of "Deacon".

The suburb of "Deakin" is of course named after our second Prime Minister, Alfred Deakin. It is where the Prime Minister's lodge is located and, for those who don't know their history, it is the name of a pretty well-known lower price range of wine.

I don't know what the real estate journalist could have been thinking as he tapped out those letters. Maybe he was a bit carried away by the appointment earlier in the week of an Anglican Archbishop to be our next governor-general!

I AM FIRMLY of the view that the best way to celebrate the accomplishments of the part is to prepare for a better future. I would rather our federal parliamentarians held an emergency summit-meeting on teenage suicide, or drug use, or how to actually achieve Aboriginal reconciliation.

Perhaps they should be doing some tough talking about the economic future of a country that is so dependent on the export of carbon-containing fossil fuels, the continued burning of which threatens the very existence of our planet.

Climate change is very much in the news these days.

It is a subject that the insurance industry naturally has a very deep interest in as over the past decade it has had to pay out billions of dollars on property destroyed by extreme floods and storms.

Rising seas and increased hurricane activities in some parts of the world have seen certain countries unable to insure. If these trends continue, as they are predicted to do, your industry will become an even more important player in the climate debate than the oil and coal and automobile companies.

It is already happening in Europe.

Much of our future is going to be taken up with working to solve these and other problems of similar enormity. Some of these battles will be global. Others will be national or local.

When it comes to something as basic as health, we have enormous challenges. I heard a shameful statistic recently: within a few

years more people in the world will have mobile phones than will have access to safe drinking water. Where are our priorities?

More and more, organisations that once concentrated on the fall-out from health or so-called natural disasters now feel the need to work to try to prevent such disasters.

The Red Cross, for instance, is working on strategies for reducing climate change and hence reducing, if not preventing the cataclysmic floods in places such as Bangladesh and Mozambique.

Oxfam is fighting the pharmaceutical companies on the price of drugs, especially those for treating AIDS and TB, in developing countries - and not just doing its traditional work of fighting illness and poverty by raising money in the developed world.

When it comes to solving some of the world's major health problems, I expect your industry will find itself becoming involved in ways that are new for you.

In the 20th century, the world managed to eradicate smallpox. In the 21st, we have to do the same with AIDS and with cancer. Within Australia, we have to solve - once and for all - the tragic problems associated with Aboriginal health.

Your industry can play a vital role in these battles, as you have in the reduction of cigarette smoking and in safer driving on our roads.

We in Australia also face challenges relating to equity and social justice that are in many ways quite new to us.

We are experiencing unprecedented and growing gaps between haves and have-nots that go against everything we like to believe we stand for. For a country whose original wealth came from the land, and much of whose mythology is based on the romance of the bush, the current divide between city and country is totally unsustainable.

These are just a few of things we have to address and as we mark the first century of our country's political birth, we should mix the serious with the celebrations. We all know how much Sydney likes to party - remember the Olympics! - but we also know we have work to do and I think we are up for it.

We want the next hundred years to be marked by the same innovation and creativity that was the hallmark of our first century. We want to continue the social innovation and tolerance that have characterised Australia.

At the same time, we don't want to lose that larrikin streak and the irreverent sense of humour that so distinguishes us from the rest of world - and which so puzzles visitors to this country.

What other country, after all, has a national song about a suicidal sheep-stealing swaggie? Or a mother whose last words to her murderous offspring as he was led to the gallows were "Die like a Kelly, son"? And whose son said calmly as they placed the noose around his neck, "Such is life".

Indeed. We have always liked to inject a bit of fun into our work and lives.

Only in Australia would some wag redirect the blue Olympic marathon line into the front bar of a pub on Anzac Parade, just as only would thousands of young Australians increasingly each year make the decision to travel half way around the world to be at Gallipoli at dawn on April 25 to search for the meaning of what it is to be Australian.

We are still very young as a country, still learning, but honest and big-hearted. I think we'll make it. Don't you?