

**Address by Dr Stepan Kerkyasharian AM,  
Australia Day Ambassador  
at 2009 Australia Day Celebration  
held in Yass, 26/01/09**

Councillor Nick Carmody, Major of Yass Shire;  
The Hon Katrina Hodgkinson;  
Mr Ian Wearing, President of Rotary;  
Mr Eric Bell;  
Ms Consuela Hardy;  
Distinguished Guests;  
Ladies and Gentlemen;  
Boys and Girls.....

I acknowledge the Walabalooa Tribe, the traditional owners of the land on which we are gathered today and I pay my respects to their elders, past and present.

Indeed it is most appropriate that we do acknowledge them on this Australia Day, when, 211 years ago, 11 ships carrying 1,350 people sailed into Botany Bay to start a new settlement.

We must never forget, they came to build a new society on a continent which had been cared for and was home to people of many tribes and clans; the Indigenous people of Australia who had a commitment to this land.

Today Australia is a proud modern democracy, whose rich history is not just two centuries old, but is a continuum of the history of people going back tens of thousands of years.

That is what we acknowledge and respect, and express our gratitude and appreciation to the indigenous people of this land for the legacy and the heritage they have nurtured for tens of thousands of years, and which now , we, Australians all so proudly share.

We, Australians are a proud people.

We are unique amongst all the nations in the world, and today, on Australia Day, it is well justified to reflect on it.

We acknowledge and pay respect also to the first settlers, the First Fleeters, who battled, first, the long sea trip, then the harsh climate, “toiling with hearts and hands” to lay the foundations upon which modern Australia stands proud.

Australia is a shining example of democracy. We know how to settle our differences peacefully.

Australia’s sons and daughters have traversed the oceans and continents to fight for, and to uphold basic human right. Many have paid the ultimate price in defence of those rights in battlefields from, Africa, to the Dardenelles, the Middle East, Korea, Vietnam, Afghanistan and Iraq.

These are rights which are embedded into the psyche of our Nation, the simple notions of “Mateship” and “A Fair Go”.

As a migrant of Armenian heritage, I feel great pride to have been accepted into this Nation. And I am not alone. Since 1788 millions have come here to start a new life.

From, England, Ireland, Wales, Scotland, Italy, Greece, Malta, Egypt, Lebanon, Syria, China, India, Africa, The Philippines, Korea, Chile, Peru and so on. People of all races, all language backgrounds, all religions and creeds have come here to start a new life.

I am sure every one of you knows someone in your family or a close friend who is a descendent of a migrant. And you know that they have come here to start a new life.

Today we also celebrate their success: because the success of every migrant is another valuable building block for the continuing success of Australia.

You know! It is a real pleasure and privilege for me to be celebrating Australia Day in this historic place; in Yass. A place with direct and solid links to the early days of development of modern Australian.

Naturally I do enjoy the major functions for Australia Day in Sydney, but so much of the image of how we, Australians see ourselves is not in the big city, but right here in country towns and in the bush that surrounds them.

For me this fact is particularly true because my work involves dealing with the new larger communities of immigrants who have settled in Sydney's suburbs. A large part of the role of our Commission is to guide newer communities into an understanding of the Australian culture and character.

It is very beneficial for me to come here and be refreshed in the REAL Australian environment and be reminded of the history of European settlement in which the town of Yass played a key role sitting as it has, on the main route between the two great cities of Australia – Sydney and Melbourne and later becoming the important country cousin of the National Capital, not too far away.

It is very much my belief that Australia Day is only successful if it is a day for ALL Australians.

Many of the Australia Day Ambassadors who are attending functions like this all over the State are migrants or children of migrants. Australia Day is a day of pride, but we must also make it a day of inclusion.

A day of acceptance and respect.

Acceptance of differences, in terms of our individual beliefs and respect for the basic rights of the individual within our democratic framework, our Westminster system of Government.

Respect for the rule of the law.

Undoubtedly, we are facing challenges, the drought, economic, social as well as international terrorism, which have and will continue to test our resolve.

Our pride in standing up for justice as testified by our history, must not waver.

As President Obama said in his inauguration address:

“As for our common defence, we reject the choice between our safety and our ideals. Our Founding Fathers, faced with perils that we can scarcely imagine, drafted a charter to assure the rule of law and the rights of man .....

Those ideals still light the world, and we will not give them up for expedience sake.”

Today, as we reflect on these matters, we draw strength from our past. The resilience of the Indigenous people of this land and how they lived in complete harmony with the environment.

We draw strength from the First Fleeters who came to a strange land with nothing but an unwavering determination to succeed and to never look back.

We draw strength from our pioneers who opened up this vast continent against all odds setting it on its path to a modern Nation.

We draw strength from our farmers who brave the harsh climate and are world leaders.

We draw strength from our miners, and workers.

We draw strength from our diversity because we believe in our ability to succeed.

Everyone of us has a role to play. Everyone of us is an ambassador for Australia, in our homes with our family, in our neighbourhoods and communities, in our towns and cities.

We lead and change by example not by recrimination.

Our National Anthem says it all; succinct and lucid.

*“Beneath our radiant Southern Cross we’ll toil with hearts and hands, to make this Commonwealth of ours renowned of all the lands. For those who’ve come across the seas we’ve boundless plains to share.”*

Let us extend that helping hand and share the vision.

Today right across Australia in every town and city, individuals are being honoured, as we have done here today.

I extend my congratulations to you as well. You have done your best in Advancing Australia, in extending your hand and sharing the vision.

I thank the organisers of this event, in bringing us all together and sharing the Spirit of Australia Day.

I thank Woolworths for their ongoing commitment to Australia Day and the Ambassador Program.

My thanks to the Mayor, Nic Carmody and the Councillors, and the tireless workers; the members of the Country Women's Association and Rotary.

Thank you all for allowing me to be part of this celebration.

Thank you, to you, the people of Yass.

HAPPY AUSTRALIA DAY 2009.