

## **Address to NSW Interfaith Parliamentary Prayer Breakfast at the Westin Hotel, Sydney 6 March 2014**

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### **FAITH**

#### **Introduction**

I have gathered with others of many faiths but with a unity of purpose, many times over the last few years. Some occasions have been moments of national celebration and rejoicing. Some have been occasions of sorrow and condolence and re-affirmation. All have embodied a sense of community, just as this morning invokes a sense of community, a sense of sharing.

Many of you here today will recall some of those other occasions of recent years— in 2000 after the return of INTERFET, after 9/11, after Bali. Great public occasions when as a community representative of a Nation, we came to declare our common spirit, our resolve and our faith. On many of those occasions I have been very proud to represent the men and women of the Australian Defence Force, that special part of Australian society.

#### **Faith**

The extraordinary contract which we in the military embrace as a fundamental, which we constantly attempt, renew and exploit, and in which we often succeed and sometimes fail, is that between a leader and his or her team.

At first blush, many would think that the contract was underpinned by legal authority, conferred by the laws of the land. At first blush they would be right, but the true strength of the contract lies much deeper than that. The true strength of the contract lies in the quality of the relationship between the leader and his or her men and women.

The character of the leader is fundamental to the relationship—the integrity, courage, humility, compassion and energy of the leader are all essential ingredients. But if I had to sum up in one word what it was that made our people so successful when the chips are down and the stakes are at their highest, it would be faith.

Faith can take many different forms. In its more prosaic forms it's the outcome of loyalty. In the military it is the absolute currency of our community life.

Faith exists in our men and women on several different planes. First is the faith or trust they have in each other and in their leaders. This is fundamental to their ability to endure and to perform very difficult tasks well under great pressure. Secondly, our men and women must have faith in the value and the rightness of their mission. This goes to the core of their service. To them Australia is a land, a home and an ideal. It is a continent of great antiquity, a nation of great and admired values, a society of generosity and fairness and courage. The faith that our men and women hold hard to, is that their missions and their actions will be worthy of this ideal.

Just as they are the shrewd arbiters of the trust they place in each other and in their leaders, so they rely on the great collective wisdom of the Australian people to judge their missions and their performance. Very rarely does this judgement falter.

And finally, in that laconic, reluctant, even shy way of Australians, they would tell you of their wish for, their fervent hope in, their prayer, amounting to their faith in a higher being, in their God.

And when you consider what it is we want and need them to do on so many occasions, we should not be surprised at this conviction of a Maker who watches over them and their loved ones and their Communities and their Nation, and all of humanity—even those who wish us ill—of a Maker to whom at times of great danger and quiet contemplation they repair their souls and entrust their future.

There is an old saying with which many of you will be familiar, ‘there are no atheists in fox-holes.’ This comes from one of the great World Wars of our troubled past and continues to have great relevance to the men and women we send in harm’s way today. At times when the question of their own mortality is writ large in their minds, their thoughts will turn to that axiom of faith for us all, the conviction that there is a higher direction, purpose and safeguard to our existence. I have had nearly 40 years of service and I know that this still holds as true today as ever it did in earlier times. In the trilogy of faiths I have outlined, there is no doubt that this last, this belief and trust in, and love for, our Maker is the deepest and most profound because it goes to the fundamental worth of each man and woman as a creature of spirit.

### **Australian Values**

Of course at every moment that I speak of these men and women in uniform I am actually speaking of typical Australians whose values we all equally prize and equally share.

A fundamental aspect of Australian society is the diversity and difference of its people. Our communities are made up of individuals from a variety of backgrounds, cultures, religions and life

circumstances. To effectively and harmoniously live together we need to believe that our similarities are stronger than our differences. The challenge is to find our shared values. And I do believe that at the heart of our Australian community there is a solid core of vital, accepted values.

We have a spirit of generosity that is indicative of our compassionate nature. This generosity makes instinctive the action of extending a helping hand here or to our neighbours overseas. Springing to mind immediately are two simple, yet extremely powerful examples.

First there is the example of the people of the town and shire of Moorah in Western Australia, honoured in 2001 by all of us to mark the sheer guts those marvellous people showed in climbing back off the floor on three separate occasions when the town and district were flattened by floods. Once is remarkable—but in Australia hardly unique. Three times in short order beggars belief. What a community!

The second example is in the reaction of our people in 2002 after Bali, when a nation rolled up its sleeves, full of determination, sorrow and outrage, all tinged with pride for the actions of so many in the aftermath. In the midst of tragedy, there was then an observable greatness in being an Australian.

This was echoed in different circumstances when the greatest natural disaster of our age, the Asian tsunami which arose on 26 December 2004 engulfed the shorelines of Indian Ocean states; in Sumatra alone around 200,000 people lost their lives immediately. Under these circumstances Australians again showed a unity of purpose and a sense of regional community in their overwhelmingly generous and immediate response to the tragedy. Thousands of soldiers, sailors and air men and women were dispatched from our shores to help. Many hundreds of volunteers battle their way to places of need. Within only a few days Australians had contributed a quarter of \$1 billion from private and corporate pockets. There was a greatness in us then. It remains in us now.

Every Australian value was so clearly affirmed in these challenges, none more so than our open hearts and strong hands.

This is a generosity of spirit that makes our society inclusive yet welcoming of diversity. It is a generosity that makes us strive for unity in society—but only when dignity and equity accompany it. It is what we Australians cryptically and inevitably refer to as 'a fair go'. We believe we have a fundamental responsibility to each other, starting with our family and extending endlessly through our society. This spirit of generosity may not be uniquely Australian but to me it is the bedrock of our character. It characterises the most ancient part of our society and it is what attracts the newest members to our shore.

That military characteristic of trust that I mentioned earlier is merely of course an echo of a great Australian value. Trusting human nature and trusting people is for us an automatic choice. It is fundamental to the relationships between the members of our community and allows us to rely on and learn from each other. The smooth functioning of our society depends and thrives on this.

We also understand the need to have a determined purpose to live our lives peacefully, healthily, enjoyably and productively. This determination instils in us a sense of responsibility, of accountability, a need to protect and nurture the present. For Australians, there are some challenges and affronts which cannot be encouraged and which must be prevented or redirected—not casually or joyfully, not without risk or damage to the human spirit, but for the greater good. At the end, when I was the Chief of our Defence Force, I acknowledged that it was in recognition of this, that Australians grudgingly give up the treasure of their youth to their armed forces.

### Conclusion

I am proud to be here today to share with you the faith I hold in the values of our Australian community and to affirm our faith in God. These values overwhelm all material things in our lives and our futures. They are at the core of our society. And they will help us through all the days of our lives.

In this room of eminent Australian men and women, we gather today to affirm that living those values is the greatest service we can offer with our time on earth.

Today, I have founded my remarks on the men and women who wear Australia's military colours. They rest their lives, their safety and their sense of worth on three great faiths. The trust they have in their comrades, the belief they have in their nation, and the faith they have in their God. They wear uniform but in all respects they represent the ordinary every man of the wider community.

I ask you as we pray for all Australians and all of mankind, to turn your thoughts and prayers today also to those Australian sons and daughters currently serving overseas and to their families waiting for their safe return. I extend this thought to all Australians wherever they are, who long for the embrace of their loved ones and the sanctuary they embody. May their God watch over them and bring them safely home.