THE ROYAL SOCIETIES OF AUSTRALIA
RECEPTION FOR DELEGATES ATTENDING THE
2026 ANNUAL NATIONAL MEETING
REMARKS BY
HER EXCELLENCY THE HONOURABLE CAROLINE WELLS AC
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
GOVERNMENT HOUSE, WEDNESDAY 18 NOVEMBER 2026

VICE-REGAL SALUTE

Good evening, and welcome to Government House.

To those of you who have travelled from across Australia for the annual meeting of the Royal Societies of Australia, welcome to Tasmania and to Hobart, and to our Tasmanian guests, welcome back.

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Palawa people as the First Peoples of lutruwita/Tasmania and the Traditional Custodians of the land we're gathered on today.

For countless generations, they have cared for this island, its landscapes, its waterways and its communities, and I'm grateful to be able to live here.

I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and to any Aboriginal people with us today. Your continuing contribution to the cultural, social and spiritual life of our State is deeply valued.

For many of you, this House will be familiar, and that familiarity has a long history. The Royal Society of Tasmania was founded in 1843 and is one of the oldest Royal Societies outside the United Kingdom. I am privileged to be the most recent in a long line of Vice-Regal Patrons of the Society, and many of its gatherings have been held here at Government House.

It is a pleasure to continue that association this evening, and to see the Society welcoming its counterparts from across Australia.

There is something powerful in that continuity. For more than 180 years, the Royal Society of Tasmania has encouraged inquiry and promoted historical, scientific, technological and cultural knowledge. But the significance of that history lies not simply in the Society's longevity. Institutions such as yours endure because they evolve, and because successive generations remain willing to question, discover and contribute before handing their knowledge on.

We sometimes speak of knowledge as though it were something we possess: accumulated and preserved in books, journals and collections, and increasingly in vast digital repositories. But knowledge is also an inheritance. And like any inheritance of real value, it cannot simply be placed on a shelf and left untouched. Each generation must encounter it afresh, test it, challenge it and build upon it, before deciding what it will contribute to those who follow.

An important part of that inheritance is what we learn from the past. As Winston Churchill observed in a speech to the British House of Commons in 1948: *"Those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat it."* His words remind us that knowledge is not simply about understanding what we know today, but also about reflecting on what has gone before, learning from experience and applying those lessons to the challenges of tomorrow.

That tradition of inquiry, reflection and ongoing learning is one shared by the Royal Societies represented here tonight. Together, our six State-based Societies bring together more than 2,500 people across knowledge-intensive disciplines, united by a commitment to advancing knowledge, challenging ideas and ensuring that the intellectual inheritance we have received continues to grow and benefit future generations.

Through research, public lectures, journals, conferences and advocacy, you advance knowledge and, importantly, share it with the wider community. Here in Tasmania, that work reaches across institutions including the University of Tasmania, the Institute for Marine and Antarctic Studies and the Australian Antarctic Division.

That work matters because, while information has perhaps never been more abundant or accessible, information and knowledge are not quite the same thing.

Only three weeks into my term I attended a public lecture on Artificial Intelligence hosted by the Society's Northern Branch. It was both insightful and timely, particularly given the extraordinary pace of change in this field and its growing influence on our lives.

Knowledge asks more of us. It asks us to be curious, but also rigorous; to test ideas against evidence; to distinguish assertion from fact; to remain open to different perspectives; and to have the intellectual honesty to change our minds when the evidence requires it. These qualities have always mattered, but their importance today is difficult to overstate.

Against that background, the theme you have chosen for this year's meeting seems particularly apt*: how to engage young people in knowledge-intensive professions*. It is the right question for societies with such long histories because it asks not only what these institutions have achieved, but who will carry their work forward.

Perhaps part of the answer begins with something very simple: curiosity. Every scientific discovery, historical insight or technological innovation begins, in some form, with a question. Why? How? What if? These are also the questions children ask instinctively.

Perhaps our challenge, then, is not simply to persuade young people to become scientists, researchers, historians or innovators, but to ensure that their natural curiosity is encouraged, challenged and given somewhere meaningful to go.

In Tasmania, those opportunities are close to home. Young Tasmanians can build careers through institutions doing work of national and international significance. But before young people can pursue those opportunities, they must first be able to see them. They must be able to imagine those careers as possible, and importantly, as theirs.

It is encouraging, therefore, that your discussions will draw on perspectives from the National Youth Science Forum, the Australian Academy of Science, the University of Tasmania and the Beaker Street Festival. I am also particularly pleased that several young people are here with us this evening.

To those younger guests, I would say this: do not imagine that you are merely the future audience for the knowledge being discussed by the people in this room. You are part of its future authorship. Ask questions, offer your views and be willing to challenge established thinking. Seek out people whose knowledge exceeds your own but, seriously never underestimate the value of the questions and perspectives you bring.

There is a corresponding challenge for those whose established careers have already been devoted to research, inquiry, education and discovery. It is not enough simply to open the door for the next generation. We must invite them into the conversation, listen seriously to what they contribute and allow their questions to challenge our own assumptions. I would also encourage those

that are not so young but new to research. I saw this firsthand when my late husband challenged well established research when he was completing his PhD.

Discovery and knowledge for the future, after all, is rarely the work of one person, one discipline or indeed, one generation.

This strikes me as an optimistic thought with which to begin your meeting. The questions facing the next generation will undoubtedly be formidable, but so too are the curiosity, ingenuity and intellectual courage of the young Australians, and the not so young who will be called upon to answer them. Our responsibility is to give them every opportunity to do so.

I congratulate the Royal Society of Tasmania on hosting this year's national meeting and thank all of you for the contribution you make through your respective Societies to knowledge, education and public life across Australia. I hope your discussions are productive, perhaps occasionally provocative, and above all optimistic.

To our interstate visitors, I also hope you have an opportunity to enjoy something of Hobart during your stay.

For tonight, however, it is simply my pleasure to welcome you to Government House and to Tasmania.

I wish the Royal Societies of Australia every success with the meeting and hope you enjoy the conversations that begin here this evening.

Thank you, and please enjoy the evening.