

**REMARKS BY THE HONOURABLE PETER UNDERWOOD AC,
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA,
TO OPEN THE GOLDEN KEY ASIA PACIFIC LEADERSHIP
CONFERENCE, HOBART
THURSDAY 13TH FEBRUARY 2014**

Thank you for inviting me to open the 2014 Asia Pacific Golden Key Conference. I am told that we have visitors here from some 40 universities across the Asia Pacific region and who have come from all parts of Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia and Vietnam. To each of you I extend a very warm welcome to our beautiful island state. I am sure that you will enjoy your time here for not only is the island very beautiful but its population is very friendly and welcoming to visitors.

Being with you today reminds me of another time when I had to give an address to students. It was before I was the Governor and when I was the Chief Justice of Tasmania. The students were a newly formed group of law students. Actually, I thought my talk went down quite well. People laughed at the right places and nodded wisely at the serious message that I wanted to convey and clapped enthusiastically at the end. On the way out the President who was escorting me to the door asked me how much my fee was. I asked him what he meant and he said the fee for the talk. I was taken aback and looked horrified. I drew myself up to my pompous best and lectured him that Judges don't ask for fees to deliver speeches, especially to law students as it is part of a judicial officer's duty

to do that sort of thing etc. etc. and he said "Oh that's good because we don't have much money and we're saving up to get someone really good to speak next year."

Your conference theme is "Think Global and Act Local". Your web site says: "Step up. Stand out. Make a difference. Make the world a better place. Serve your country. Give of yourself. Stand up for what you believe in. Inspire others. Make an impact. Golden Key members come together to make a difference in their communities all over the world."

Did you know that 49% of Tasmanians aged between 15 and 74 years are functionally illiterate? The Australian Bureau of Statistics tells us that [quote] "approximately 174,000 people in this State do not have the basic skills needed to understand and use information from newspapers, magazines, books and brochures and that overall, Tasmania has the lowest level of adult literacy skills in the nation."¹ Worse, the same data tells us there has been no improvement in adult literacy levels since they were last measured in 2006. The same source tells us in a report released on 15th February this year² that 47% of all Australians aged between 15 and 74 years are functionally illiterate and that there has been little improvement over the last few years. What is not so widely known is that, compared to other developed nations, Australia is on a par with other countries such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom and Canada. At a conference

¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics 2008. Adult Literacy and Life Skills Programme, Summary Results 2006. Cat No. 4228.0

² Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies, Australia, 2011-2012. <http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4228.0main+features992011-2012> accessed 16th September 2013.

convened in Poland by UNESCO, the World Bank and others in 2000 this was said:³

“Nearly a quarter of the population of [the world’s developed countries] is incapable of understanding and using the information contained in brochures, information bulletins, train schedules, road maps and simple instructions for household appliances or pharmaceuticals. This major handicap bears the technical name: functional illiteracy. No country is immune.”

That is why I am talking to you about this problem. While illiteracy refers to a total inability to read or write, functional illiteracy is much more difficult to define, as functionally illiterate adults can generally read and write to a limited degree.

The ABS utilised four domains for the measures of literacy in their Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey, Australia, 2006:

- Prose literacy: the ability to understand and use information from various kinds of narrative texts, including texts from newspapers, magazines and brochures.
- Document literacy: the knowledge and skills required to locate and use information contained in various formats including job applications, payroll forms, transportation schedules, maps, tables and charts.

³ International Consultative Forum on Education for All. 6th – 8th February, Warsaw.

- Numeracy: the knowledge and skills required to effectively manage and respond to the mathematical demands of diverse situations.
- Problem solving: goal-directed thinking and action for which no routine solution is available.⁴

Functional illiteracy therefore focuses on the ability to comprehend and utilise the information that can be conveyed through reading and writing. A functionally illiterate person can read and possibly write simple sentences with a limited vocabulary, but is unable to read or write well enough to deal with the everyday requirements of life in their own society, i.e. he/she may have difficulty reading instruction manuals for appliances, using e-mail and internet websites, reading the newspaper, reading or writing letters sent via mail, comprehending job advertisements, past-due notices, banking paperwork, complex signs and posters, or operating in a business or office environment.

In 2002, the United Nations declared the period from 2003 to 2012 the United Nations Literacy Decade, and Resolution 56/116 [quote] “acknowledged the place of literacy at the heart of lifelong learning, affirming that: ‘literacy is crucial to the acquisition, by every child, youth and adult, of essential life skills that enable them to address the challenges they can face in life, and represents an essential step in basic education, which is an indispensable means for effective

⁴ ABS, *Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey*, Australia, 2006, <
[http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/4228.0Main%20Features22006%20\(Reissue\)?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4228.0&issue=2006%20\(Reissue\)&num=&view=](http://www.abs.gov.au/AUSSTATS/abs@.nsf/Previousproducts/4228.0Main%20Features22006%20(Reissue)?opendocument&tabname=Summary&prodno=4228.0&issue=2006%20(Reissue)&num=&view=) >

participation in the societies and economies of the twenty-first century.”⁵

So, here we are at the end of the United Nation’s literacy decade and what’s the report card for Australia? Not good, according to Dr Stewart Riddle, lecturer at the School of Teacher Education and Early Childhood at the University of Southern Queensland who, in May last year, asked what were the options for the 1,200 workers at the Ford Plants at Geelong and Broadmeadows who were facing retrenchment by 2016, and answered his own question saying:

“... as these workers consider their futures, we need to understand that nearly half of Australian adults are considered functionally illiterate. And manufacturing workers in Victoria, which includes those in the firing line at Ford, were found to have even lower literacy skills, with 54% scoring at the lowest levels.”

He continued, “The data are alarming and there are now serious concerns about these levels of literacy and the impact they have on the employment, health and education opportunities for workers.”.⁶

In a free market economy such as we enjoy in Australia, it is often claimed that it is the job of governments to provide the infrastructure to enable private enterprise to flourish and create jobs. When that is said, people often have in mind ports, railways, shipping and the like, but I want to

⁵ Supra at page 155.

⁶ <https://theconversation.com/the-future-for-ford-workers-literacy-will-be-key-14548>. Accessed 12th September 2013.

suggest to you that the most important infrastructure for any nation is an educated and functionally literate population. For as Riddle writes “Given the strong links between increasing literacy and better employment opportunities, economic independence and social conditions including health and education, this is a serious issue not only for manufacturing workers, but for the rest of the Australian community.”⁷

With respect to the Australian workforce, the Australian Industry Group wrote in a February 2012 report⁸ that the ABS Australian Adult Literacy and Life Skills Survey 2006 means that *over 4 million employees are functionally illiterate and 300,000 unemployed people are at a **lower level** of illiteracy than the 4 million workers who are in employment.* [repeat sentence] The group conducted a survey in which 75% of respondents reported that their business was affected by low levels of literacy and numeracy, BUT – and listen to this – [quote] “only 8% of respondents reported that they had adequate capacity to assist the improvement of literacy and numeracy skills”⁹!!

I venture to suggest that widespread functional illiteracy is a cultural and community problem that calls for a community response rather than buckets of government money. I commend to you an excellent initiative that was launched by the Tasmanian Premier and the Minister for Education just over a year ago called 26TEN – 26 for the letters of the alphabet

⁷ Supra. See also “Australia’s Skills and Workforce Development Needs” Discussion Paper July 2012. Australian Workforce and Productivity Agency, especially at page 48.

⁸ “When Words Fail” National Workforce Literacy Project February 2012. Australian Industry Group.

⁹ Supra at page 15.

and TEN for the first numbers. Through a network of coordinators, this initiative is an adult literacy programme delivered by volunteers who are willing to help a mate. These volunteers take a short course delivered by one of our educational institutions and then one of the coordinators will link the volunteer to a suitable learner and the process of learning to read and write, how to use technology, how to solve problems, fill in forms and so on begins. If half the population is functionally illiterate and the other half acknowledged that it had an obligation to teach literacy to the illiterate, the improvement would be dramatic.

Why am I talking to members of the Golden Key International Honour Society about this? Because of the pledge on your web site: "Step up. Stand out. Make a difference. Make the world a better place. Serve your country. Give of yourself ... Inspire others. Make an impact come together to make a difference in their communities all over the world."

This is something that each of you can do no matter where you come from. Start up a 26TEN programme. Talk to your local service clubs; Rotary, Apex and the like. Look up the 26TEN web site to see how it works. Talk to your University and your government about taking a lead. Talk to sporting organisations, local councils, unions and community groups and get them to say "we will help". Helping a mate in this way should become part of every culture; it should become just something that you do to give a hand up to someone who

is illiterate. It won't take up a lot of time but it will do a lot of good, not only for social inclusion, but also to reduce the percentage of people who are living below the poverty line. At the same time, improving literacy across a country will increase the capacity of the human resource of a country to be creative and energized and thus contribute to the arts and business, making the country more prosperous and a better place in which to live. You are the leaders. You are the educated. You, better than anyone else, understand the importance and value of being functionally literate. Everybody who is illiterate should understand that that is nothing to be ashamed of, and everybody who is literate should be prepared to take part in a 26TEN programme.

A couple of months ago the local newspaper ran a story on the 26TEN programme and said that since it was launched last year, more than 100 organisations have signed on to help. The report says that through the libraries or Learning and Information Network Centres as they are now called - LINC is the acronym - hundreds of volunteer tutors offer their time. There was a photo in the newspaper of 54-year-old Mark Enright. He said that he would like to be a motor mechanic, but his poor reading ability held him back. [quote]"In the old days you just did your job. Now there's a lot of reading and writing required, job sheets to fill in". He took the plunge and thanks his tutor, Anne, for the turnaround in his education. "I've got my first diesel car. I used to get the kids or my wife to look up how to change a diesel filter. Now I do it myself."

So, I unashamedly seized this window of opportunity to talk to you about functional illiteracy and the 26TEN programme. I do this because I think that you are the functionally literate people who are well positioned to help to change the widespread culture of functional illiteracy through programmes like the 26TEN and, because this is such a fundamentally important and widespread problem, I respectfully urge you all to get to work on it. Make a difference.

Meanwhile it is with pleasure that I declare the conference open and wish you all an interesting and stimulating time.