

**REMARKS BY THE HONOURABLE PETER UNDERWOOD AC,
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA,**

**AT A DINNER TO MARK THE 90TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE
FOUNDING OF THE ROTARY IN TASMANIA**

THURSDAY 27TH FEBRUARY 2014

Thank you for inviting me to be here this evening and to share with you the 90th birthday celebrations of the Rotary in Tasmania.

Every time I am called upon to give an address in Launceston I am reminded to the time I was here to give an address to a group of 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."

An address on the occasion of the ninetieth anniversary often revisits the past and emphasises all the good things that the organisation has done over its long history, and I was

tempted to do just that when I read the histories of the Launceston and Hobart clubs. Chartered in 1924, the Rotary Clubs of Launceston and Hobart were the foundation stones of Rotary in Tasmania and in the course of their lifetimes they have sponsored the formation of a further 50 Rotary Clubs in District 9830. The impressive historical account of the Rotary Club of Launceston published on the web site concludes with these words:

“To serve with the Rotary Club of Launceston is an experience of personal development unable to be found elsewhere. The Club’s good works have multiplied as today’s Rotarians continue to write their own pages into the Launceston history.”

But tonight I want to look to the future; not the past. I want the celebration of the District's 90th anniversary to mark the beginning of a new and important project for the Rotary Clubs in Tasmania that will have a widespread beneficial impact on present and future generations of Tasmanians. If my suggestion is embraced there is no doubt that “today’s Rotarians will indeed write their own pages into history.”

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.” Worse, the same

data tells us there has been no improvement in adult literacy levels since they were last measured in 2006. The Australian Bureau of Statistics also tells us in a report released on 15th February last year¹ that some 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 convened in Poland by UNESCO, the World Bank and others in 2000 this was said.

“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.”

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:

¹ 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.

- 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.
- 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.²

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.

² 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=)

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 participation in the societies and economies of the twenty-first century.’”³

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

³ Supra at page 155.

impact they have on the employment, health and education opportunities for workers.”⁴

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 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.

With respect to the Australian workforce, the Australian Industry Group wrote in a February 2012 report 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

⁴ <https://theconversation.com/the-future-for-ford-workers-literacy-will-be-key-14548>. Accessed 12th September 2013.

adequate capacity to assist the improvement of literacy and numeracy skills”⁵!!

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 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.

What a great 90th birthday present for all the Tasmanian Rotary Clubs to give the people of Tasmania: functional literacy. All you have to do is embrace the concept and give 26TEN a small amount of your time. It won't cost you any money. Look up 26TEN on the Internet. In Launceston the programme is coordinated at the Launceston LINC by John Richardson and Jess Panday on 6777 2447. The State-wide

⁵ Supra at page 15.

manager is Robin Black at Hobart LINC. Give them a call, tell them you are from Rotary and you would like to register to tutor someone to improve their literacy, and/or to sign up your business to become a member of 26TEN Network - there are already about 100 members from all kinds of businesses and government and non-government organisations across the State.

That's all you have to do and you could make a huge difference to someone's life. Better than that, you would also make a big difference that that person's children and even his or her grandchildren. In addition, by persuading others to join 26TEN as you did you could double or triple your valuable contribution to the community of which we are all members. By joining the 26TEN programme you will do a lot to improve social inclusion and to reduce the percentage of people who are living below the poverty line. In addition, improving literacy you will increase the capacity of the human resource of the State and the country to be creative and energized and thus contribute to the arts and business, making communities more prosperous and a better place in which to live.

Launceston Rotary history records that:

"The Club started with 25 members, men accustomed to lead, not follow, to make their own decisions, to raise their own banner. For them their Rotary emblem must be unique, different and memorable."

This anniversary is an occasion for you to renew that strength.

A few 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 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, tonight I congratulate the Rotary Clubs in Tasmania on their 90 years of success, serving the community and those in need, and tonight I urge you to take up the 26TEN challenge as you go through the next decade towards your centenary.