

ATHENAEUM CLUB 130th ANNIVERSARY DINNER
SPEECH BY
HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AC
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
ATHENAEUM CLUB, HOBART, SATURDAY 2 NOVEMBER 2019

Thank you Edward Boutchard, and thank you Glynn Phillips and colleagues for inviting Dick and me to join you this evening.

I begin by paying my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land— the palawa people. I acknowledge the contemporary Tasmanian Aboriginal community, who have survived invasion and dispossession, and continue to maintain their identity, culture and Indigenous rights.

Glynn had suggested that I might want to say something this evening about traditional institutions – about how they might change and adapt while not sacrificing the respect associated with tradition. This is especially relevant of course to the Athenaeum Club, given the uncertainty over your future and how that has been alleviated not least, as I understand it, through your decision to no longer have gender as a basis for club membership.

I certainly welcome the change, just as I can certainly speak about the changing of another gender tradition, namely in my being appointed as Tasmania's first female Governor, the penultimate state to do so (Victoria was the last with the appointment of Linda Dessau in 2015).

Tasmania was almost the last of the States to appoint an Australian as opposed to a British Governor, the first Australian Governor of Tasmania, being Sir Stanley Burbury in 1973. I like to think he would be pleased with my appointment. He was the first judge to appoint a female Judge's Associate, my predecessor in the position of Chief Justice's Associate, Robyn Trethewey.

Most States had begun appointing Australian-born Governors from the 1940s. Our first Australian born Governor General, Sir Isaac Isaacs, was appointed even earlier in 1931. Apparently King George V was not happy but the Prime Minister, James Scullin insisted. But governors were mostly British born and Australian appointees represented a significant alteration to tradition driven particularly by Labor Prime Ministers and Premiers. The changes were met with public enthusiasm, and Sir Isaac Isaacs (Chief Justice of the High Court) and Sir John Northcott, the first Australian-born New South Wales Governor, a war hero, were popular appointments.

Returning to the gender issue, Dame Marie Bashir was Governor of New South Wales for fourteen years, far longer than the average term of an Australian Governor. Her terms encompassed no less than six Premiers. Ironically, during her period in office, a longstanding tradition was severed when a Labor Government moved the Office of the Governor out of Government House and into offices in the CBD. Government House was handed to the National Trust to look after.

Well, the Governor is now back at Government House Sydney and the consensus of opinion is that without anyone living at Government House – and despite all the tours and activities generated by the National Trust – the building began to suffer from lack of use, and I understand that there has been considerable expense involved in restoring some of the rooms to a state worthy of such an important historic building.

Given what I have just said about Government House Sydney, you will I am sure be interested to know that in the 1920s serious consideration was given to moving the Tasmanian Governor into the city, and converting our Government House on the Domain into either a repatriation hospital for returned World War One veterans; or as a gift to the University of Tasmania.

Either would certainly have been an upending of tradition, given that Government House had been occupied by Governors since it was completed in 1858 – and of course the original Government House, dating back to 1806 and where Franklin Square is – had always and only been occupied by the island's Lieutenant-Governors.

One of the reasons for considering using Government House for other purposes was that for quite a few years in the 1920s there was no Governor here at all, because of a reluctance on the part of those Englishmen who were offered the position to actually take it up because the salary was considered too meagre. Thus there were long periods when the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Tasmania acted as Administrator. And because the Administrators tended not to live at Government House, the place fell into disrepair and that prompted the State Governments to try to do something about that.

But tradition prevailed: it was felt that Government House Tasmania should only ever be the place of the Office of the Governor, and that is why I am the 28th Governor since 1858 to live there.

I will end by making a somewhat humorous reference to the first Governor to occupy the-then brand-new Government House, Sir Henry Fox Young. One tradition he inherited was the fact that the annual Regatta, first held nearly twenty years earlier in 1838, took place off Pavilion Point, which meant that the thousands of spectators who enjoyed the day did so on the slopes of the new Government House estate leading down to where the Tasman Bridge is and to where the old ANM shed used to be.

Sir Henry tolerated a couple of these and then asked his Private Secretary B T Solly to write to the Regatta Committee stating that he, Sir Henry, was fed up with all the broken beer bottles left lying around after the festivities.

Well, the newspapers were not amused. In the words of *The Hobart Mercury*¹: “We do not find any positive malice in [Mr Solly’s] letter, we charge upon it only the infusion of an unnecessary amount of brusquerie.”

The Tasmanian Daily News wasn’t quite so polite. Its editorial, dripping with sarcasm, stated: “Sir Henry Young, careful of the morals of the people committed to his governance, is anxious to guard the sacred precincts of the Government Domain from the ‘inconvenience and risk of a profusion of empty bottles’! We cannot sufficiently admire the extraordinary versatility of genius displayed by our Governor ... Imagine for an instant that persons should presume to form merry picnics within the very shadow of New

Government House, that hungry and thirsty groups should scatter themselves over vice-regal grass ... Loud merriment and hearty laughter must of course grate harshly upon the delicate ears of so fashionable a Governor as Sir Henry Young ... There was one serious mistake, however, committed by the people of Hobart Town at the regatta. They ought to have supplied themselves with superbly cut decanters. Their [broken] elegant fragments might not have shocked His Excellency, and the delicacy of the material might have excused the serious nature of the offence. We have only one excuse to offer for them. They were not aware that Downing Street would have presented them with a Governor possessing such eminent abilities, such extreme exclusiveness, or such exquisite tact.”

End of quote! Sir Henry did try to restore that particular tradition by inviting the Committee to continue to use Pavilion Point, but they were having none of it. They moved the regatta south to the Regatta Ground, where of course it continues to be held every year – thereby upholding a noble tradition that grew out of a bitter standoff.

The role of Governor is one that is evolving. Governors of today do try to make Government House an institution that is accessible to a broad cross-section of society and to engage more with social issues than has been done in the past.

One example. It is not been the tradition or practice, at least in Tasmania, for Governors to give an acknowledgement of country in speeches. But it is something that I have embraced, along with flying the Aboriginal Flag permanently at Government House, rather than only in NAIDOC week. Dick and I have made an effort to engage with the Aboriginal community, by accepting patronage of and attendance at Mannalargenna Day, participating in the ceremony at Risdon Cove in NAIDOC week and attending other events. Lamentably, Governors (and I use that term to include Lieutenant Governors of Van Diemen’s Land) were heavily implicated in the frontier war and incarceration at Wybalenna and at putalina/ Oyster Cove. It is time to move beyond the apology and for the Governor of Tasmania to take a lead in doing so.

But that's quite enough from me. Thank you again for the invitation to address you on the occasion of the 130th Anniversary of the Athenaeum Club. And congratulations on your willingness to evolve and change.

Thank you.

¹ Wednesday 10 January 1855.