

**OPENING OF THE 2012 ROTARY DISTRICT 9830
CONFERENCE
BY
THE HONOURABLE PETER UNDERWOOD AC
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
HOBART - FRIDAY 25TH MAY 2012**

Thank you for once again inviting me to open the annual conference of the Rotary District 9830. This is the third time that I have been asked to perform this pleasant duty and I must say that I am quite flattered to have been asked to do it again.

There are a few other organisations that hold annual events to which I have been asked to appear more than once and it is always a pleasure to do so. However, not so long ago there was one - it was a dinner - that didn't work out quite as I had planned. As had happened in the past I was asked to make the after dinner address. This dinner was held at one of those up market, rather posh hotels. It was a black tie event and the hotel one of those places with a lot of different glasses and a bewildering array of cutlery set out at each place. The main course was roast beef, vegetables and an Idaho potato. Now I don't know about you but I am rather partial to Idaho potatoes especially when they are covered in melting butter. So after the very tall, distinguished and aloof waiter put a pat of butter on my Idaho potato I asked - very politely, "Please may I have another pat of butter on my potato"? The waiter looked into the distance and said "I am sorry sir but I have orders from the kitchen to put only one pat of butter on each Idaho potato." "Please, Please" I said, "I would really like two pats of butter on my Idaho potato." Implacably the

waiter intoned, “I am sorry sir, but my orders are only one pat of butter on each Idaho potato. Suddenly, my customary good manners and humility deserted me and I shouted at him, “Look my good man, do you know who I am?” “No I do not know who you are” he said without batting an eyelid. So I retorted, “I am the Governor of the State of Tasmania. I am the guest speaker at this dinner and I want another pat of butter on my Idaho potato.” “Are you sir” said the immovable waiter. “And do you know who I am?” “No” I snapped. “Well”, he said, staring at a far distant point over my left shoulder, “I am the man who puts the pat of butter on the Idaho potato.”

I was absolutely captivated by this year’s conference theme, “Ideas, Initiative, Innovation – dotting the ‘I’s”, but for some time puzzled by its latent ambiguity. However, your conference committee member Tony Reidy came to my aid by advising that the theme “is designed to open up a dialogue between Rotarians and their Clubs on the emerging issues in the world, including technology and communications advances: how do Rotarians keep pace with change and harness its potential for their Club, their community and beyond?”¹

Now I was captivated by this theme because only a few weeks ago I was fortunate enough to meet Professor Daniel Sarewitz, the Professor of Science and Society and Co-Director of the Consortium

¹ Tony Reidy email attachment dated 3 May 2012 to the Deputy Official Secretary at Government House, David Owen

for Science, Policy and Outcomes at the Arizona State University. Professor Sarewitz was in Tasmania as a visiting scholar at the University of Tasmania. The flyer promoting his public lecture stated that Professor Sarewitz “will discuss the sorts of science and technology policies that might help the needs of Tasmania in the broader complex of a globalizing technological society.” Now I don’t know about you but expressions like “the sorts of science and technology policies that might help the needs of Tasmania in the broader complex of a globalizing technological society” slip right over my head, but over a cup of tea at Government House I quizzed the Professor about what he meant and about his work at the Arizona Institute and he explained his thesis and his work in Arizona. I was so impressed with what he told me that I said that I was willing to become a disciple of his work here in Tasmania.

His first proposition with which I am sure you will all agree, and which is inherent in the words of your conference theme, is that we cannot control or insulate ourselves against the pervasive impacts of technological change.² His second proposition is that if we go about things in the right manner we *can* organise ourselves to benefit from technological and scientific development.

With respect to what is the right manner Sarewitz said that ordinary sensible people like Rotarians – he didn’t actually mention

² The flyer for the Public lecture.

Rotarians but I am sure that he would have had he thought about it – tend to defer to the experts who are responsible for the development of the technological and scientific changes. They are sometimes seen as the gurus. However, he postulates that the decisions that need to be made about society adopting, or harnessing or modifying these developments give rise to sociological, utilitarian, humanitarian and emotional issues that will affect each of us as individuals and affect all of us as a community. These are not issues for experts to resolve. These are issues for all of us to resolve, usually by means of our elected representatives in the Parliament. It is only after we have resolved the sociological, utilitarian, humanitarian and emotional issues for the good of the individual and for the good of the community that we can turn to the question what do we do with this new technology or emerging science.

When talking about keeping pace with, and harnessing change we need to decide whether any given development or change is good or bad. But if you think about that it is not helpful simply to ask if this development or that development will be good or bad. “Good” and “bad” are relative terms and are not stand alone measurable values. Every new development or change might be good in some respects and bad in others. New telephone technology might be good for person to person communication but bad for the maintenance of our privacy. Genetic modification of our wheat crop

might be good for increasing production of wheat but bad for biodiversity and so on.

Thus you will see that keeping pace with and harnessing technological changes and scientific developments is not an issue that can be left to the experts because it raises sociological, utilitarian, humanitarian and emotional issues that must be settled by the whole community. The community has to decide in what kind of community it wants to live. The community has first to decide what are its aspirations are and what are its priorities. For example, if the community is hungry - as you Rotarians know well is the case in too many countries of the world - then that community might decide that genetic modification of its wheat is good and should be embraced because more food is its priority, even if it is achieved at the cost of an adverse impact on biodiversity. Another community might decide that its priority is the maintenance of its pristine forests and clean air and reject technology that might bring an economic improvement to its manufacturing sector. Before considering what should be done about new technology and scientific development these issues must first be addressed and cannot be addressed by anyone other than the whole community. The question to be asked first is what are our community's societal aspirations and then, and only then, comes the secondary question; will this technological advance be good for us or not?

A current issue in Tasmania is the plan to irrigate the Midlands by pumping water from the Central Highlands. The engineers say they have developed the technology to do it and they can tell you the cost of doing it. The biologists and the agricultural experts say that we can grow a lot of vegetables in the Midlands if there is the water. But does that mean we should embrace this technology? We do not have to, as your theme might suggest, harness or keep up with this development. There are societal questions that must be asked first and these are not asked of the experts. For example will it meet local needs? Will the farmers be able to adjust to vegetable farming? Will it alter the long established local demographics? Will the land become so valuable that it will attract big business buyers from China who will buy up the land from families that have lived there for generations? Do we want huge vegetable processing plants operating in historic towns like Oatlands and Ross? What sort of labour force will be required? If the required labour force is required to be skilled where will they get the skills and will that be a cost to Tasmanians? And so on.

As Professor Sarewitz would summarise it, “Will this innovation meet local and regional needs, and contribute to the range of non-public values that underpin societal aspirations”?

I hasten add I am not expressing any view about the Midlands irrigation plan itself but use it merely as an illustration of the process

of understanding and harnessing innovations. Until the community decides what are its needs and aspirations the issue cannot be addressed of whether new technology should be adopted nor if adopted, in what manner it should be controlled. However, I suggest that once the societal aspirations are clearly identified and articulated answers to questions about understanding and harnessing new technology and scientific developments will fall into place.

I think that the developments that are emerging from stem cell research will soon demonstrate how important it is that the whole community, not just the experts, makes the decisions about keeping up with and harnessing these developments and how it is equally important that those decisions are only made after the community has identified and articulated its societal beliefs and aspirations, and perhaps in this instance its spiritual beliefs and needs as well.

I now have much pleasure in declaring open the 9830 Rotary District conference for 2012 open and I wish you all a satisfying, successful and stimulating weekend.