

**ROYAL HOBART SHOW 2016 RURAL ALIVE AND WELL (RAW) LUNCHEON
SPEECH BY
HER EXCELLENCY PROFESSOR THE HONOURABLE KATE WARNER AM
GOVERNOR OF TASMANIA
ROYAL AGRICULTURAL SOCIETY OF TASMANIA SHOWGROUND
FRIDAY 21 OCTOBER 2016**

Good afternoon.

I begin by paying my respects to the traditional and original owners of this land – to pay respect to those that have passed before us and to acknowledge today’s Tasmanian Aboriginal community who are the custodians of this land.

May I also acknowledge among the many guests today, Ian and Tam McMichael, Speaker Elise Archer, Minister Matthew Groom, Julie Collins MP, Rebecca White MP, MLC Rob Valentine and Lord Mayor Sue Hickey.

Ladies and gentlemen, as some of you will know, over a 40-year academic career I concentrated on a number of specialised areas of the law. This application of my time has effectively been reversed in my role as Governor. Thus it can be said that whereas I once knew quite a lot about a little, I now know a little about a lot. A very little in fact because my memory is not what was it once was!

But as amusing as that may sound, it does have relevance to some of what I want to say to you today. And that is that Dick and I – coming up now for two years in the role – have already met many thousands of Tasmanians, right across the island, in a great variety of circumstances.

This is a substantial part of the Vice-Regal role, namely, community engagement. And it means therefore that we have met many Tasmanians who can be fairly described as being the constituency of Rural Alive and Well – RAW Tasmania, that is to say the rural communities whom you assist, and of which this fundraising luncheon is a small part.

Dick and I greatly enjoy this aspect of role. It’s a huge privilege. And I can tell you without hesitation that people really do like to have the opportunity to say something directly to “the Governor” about their work or their community – just as we like engaging with them and finding out what’s working well, and what’s not working so well. I’m then in a position to communicate some of this where it might be of some relevance to an individual or an organisation, such as yours.

Having said that, as a Governor you'd be taking a chance if you acted otherwise. I'll give you an illustration of what I mean. Between 1893 and 1900 the Governor of Tasmania was a man called Jenico Preston, formally and universally known as Lord Gormanston – and after whom the West Coast township is named.

He attracted attention for the wrong reasons, namely that he was seldom seen. And the newspapers laid into him. Listen to this:

“We feel very strongly on the action of Lord Gormanston in holding himself aloof from the people of the colony where he is provided with his daily bread ... Here is a real live lord, who traces his lineage back to 1478, honoring the Tasmanians by acting as their figurehead for the paltry sum of £3,500 per year, with a few extras, such as wood, water, gas, and house rent, thrown in, and he is expected to show himself in the Domain, rush away to Launceston, and curvet around the country generally like a showman. The thing is ridiculous. He will be expected to visit the West Coast next as a crowning act of condescension. Take no notice of them Preston, old boy. Sit in your easy chair and pat your delicate waist ... Poor old Gormanston ... the only spot where you would be thoroughly appreciated as a Governor would be on the Mewstone Rock.” (An outcrop south-east of Maatsuyker Island).

Charles Wooley's recent quip about the Governorship being all about canapes and red wine is mild by comparison!

So as Governor, an important part of the role is to engage with the community. Three weeks ago Dick and I toured some of the northern areas that have been devastated by the June floods. We learnt first-hand some of the issues and difficulties with which residents in the Latrobe, Kentish and Meander Valley areas were, and still are, facing. Around 150 houses were flooded, hundreds of livestock lost and many bridges and roads were destroyed by the flood waters. Many of these people are still without a home.

We spoke to residents from Twiss Street in Latrobe and most were still struggling with their insurance claims despite being fully insured against flood. In Kentish, beside the remains of the Merseylea Bridge, we spoke with a group of farmers who were struggling to recover from the damage to their farms, to clear the piles of river stones and debris from their paddocks. We spoke to residents whose road access to flooded homes was washed away so they could not even begin the repair work on their houses.

And last week we had a three day visit to Flinders Island, which was badly affected by drought last summer, forcing many farmers to sell their stock at give-away prices. What was most striking about the Flinders Island farmers was the fact that they all seemed to have off-farm work to keep their farms financially viable. So as well as farmers, they were carriers, builders, tradesmen or fishermen. The mayor, for example, Carol Cox, who has a degree in chemistry, had worked as a cook, cleaner and fish factory worker and then manager to provide an income stream to help support the farm, and her husband also worked as a fisherman. The acting General Manager of the Flinders Island Council, Sophie Pitchford, an accountant, lives on a farm and her husband who is now the primary carer of their three children as well as being a sheep farmer and stock carrier. Sophie is also President of the Flinders Island Show Society. This need for women to earn off-farm income is not unusual. In Australia today, over 50% of farms run by families are now reliant on off-farm income to stay in farming and 80% of this work is done by women.¹

These last few weeks have been enough to remind me of the stresses that rural people face, how it is an occupation that is so heavily dependent on things that are largely out of your control: weather, drought, fire and flood as well as government policy and world prices.

Perhaps it's not surprising then that overall suicide rates in Australia are higher in rural areas, when compared to urban areas. Suicide rates among farmers increased in the 1990s and in rural areas have continued to increase – with youth, males and indigenous people most at risk.²

Male vulnerability to suicide in rural areas appears to be linked to the traditional stereotype of what it is to be a rural male. Men in the country are expected to be physically and emotionally tough and strong, able to solve any problem and confront any obstacle. It has been argued that the need for men to rely on a woman to bring in off-farm income to keep farming can have negative impacts on the male sense of self – they are no longer the breadwinner, even if in other respects they are continuing to conform to all of the ideals of the rural masculine paradigm. So rural men can become locked into a fairly rigid role, typified by a

¹ Kairi Kolves et al, *Suicide in Rural and Remote Areas of Australia*, Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention, 2012, 11 citing Alston, 2010.

² Kolves et al, n 1, 9.

stoic resistance to adversity and a rugged individualism that prevents help-seeking behaviour.³

In addition to the vulnerabilities attached to the ideal of rural masculinity, there are suicide risk factors which research has found are more uniquely linked to farmers. Running a farm can be an unrelenting workload; stress is only further exacerbated when financial and living situations do not improve despite all of these continual efforts. And a farmer's perceived lack of control over factors so intrinsically linked to his success or failure, such as the weather, can make him feel powerless during times of rural crisis such as drought or flood.⁴

This of course is where Rural Alive and Well come into the picture. They help rural families with mental health issues when times are tough. Outreach workers provide information, support and strategies to help and links with relevant services to assist such as referrals for financial counselling. Their workers seek to get under that stoic individualism and help-seeking reluctance to encourage rural people to talk about their problems and seek help to address them.

Liz and Ian, you and your colleagues are doing excellent work. Thank you for it and to everyone for coming along to support Rural Alive and Well.

³ Kolves et al, n 1, 11.

⁴ Kolves et al, n 1, 12.