

What matters in Australia today

Four perspectives

Monday 1 June, 6.00pm
Adelaide Town Hall, 128 King William Street, Adelaide

Jointly presented by the Australia Day Council of South Australia and The Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Centre at UniSA

Presentation by Matthew Cowdrey OAM, SA Young Australian of the Year 2009 and distinguished Paralympian

Good evening, I'm sorry that I can't be there tonight. In a way it is unfortunate but I am on my way to Tucson, Arizona where I am about to compete in my first international able bodied swimming meet. My flights were changed and unfortunately I had no control over this and wish that I could be there in person.

For those who don't know me, my name is Matt Cowdrey. I am a Paralympic swimmer and was born without the lower part of my left arm just below the elbow. However it has never stopped me from achieving anything. I have competed in two Paralympic Games; Athens where I won 3 Gold and Beijing where I won 5, a Commonwealth Games, World Championships and I am the current young South Australian of the Year. Outside of the pool I balance studying double degrees in Law and Media with my training commitments.

There are many things that matter to Australians today and as today's youth I have to acknowledge the things that matter so much today are going to affect tomorrow and the next generation. There are so many important things that matter - economics, the environment, education, crime and even politics: So many things that I could have talked about tonight. To decide, I left the law and media side of my life alone and thought about my experiences as a swimmer. There are many things that I have learnt from swimming over my career - dedication, commitment, attention to detail and leadership; just to name a few. There is one thing that I was never taught directly but will stay with me for the rest of my life, national pride.

As a swimmer I have represented Australia at an International level on several occasions and can easily say there is no moment that compares to standing on a medal dais singing the Australian National anthem while staring with eyes open at the Southern Cross as it is raised. There is nothing I am prouder of, than the fact that I am Australian.

I have heard many people say over the past few years that the stereotypical markers of national pride may be slowly disappearing in Australia, which leads me to these questions:

- How many schools play the national anthem at school assemblies anymore?
- How many homes display the Australian flag?
- How many people don't know who the first Australian prime minister was? and
- How many don't even know the words to the second verse of the Australian national anthem?

Is our sense of national pride being lost in today's world? Has the notion of globalisation slowly eroded our identity? In the midst of the Y generation are we simply too lazy to care about showing our pride? Or is there a deeper question; are we really not as proud to be Australians as we once were? These are all questions worth exploring, as our pride and identity should matter today and into the future to all Australians.

This question was asked in my media tutorial recently; has the media and globalisation erased Australia's image? People were arguing that the constant import and consumption of American TV shows lead to more people associating and modelling their lives on ideas and images that aren't Australian. But what does it mean to be Australian today?

Australia today has flourished into one of the only true multicultural states worldwide. We are, as a people, as diverse as the land we occupy. The tropics, outback, coastline and cities; our country's physical diversity is what makes us unique and envied worldwide. These are all true physical characteristics of what Australia is and what we possess; but my mother always said don't judge by what you see, it's what's inside that counts. For me there is nothing that says more about Australians and who we are than how we react when our fellow Australians are in need. There has never been a time so far in my life where I have been more proud to be Australian, than when I witnessed Australia's response to the recent Victorian Bushfires. I'm a sportsman and to say that this moment beat the Sydney Olympic Games really is saying something.

The manner in which Australians responded to the situation was remarkable. Millions were raised by Australia's corporate community, millions by the everyday Aussie who really didn't have the money to spare but saw the greater need and said 'yep I can lend a hand'. But it is about more than money; it was the many personalities and sportspeople that gave time to raise awareness and money. The thousands of fire fighters; of whom many travelled interstate to help out their mates. Most importantly it was about the everyday person who volunteered their house to look after a victim, the people who donated clothing, toys and time. The job is not finished yet. There will be many years of rebuilding before these people can live a normal life again. But they know that through it all we are there for them.

This is what it means to be Australian, to show a spirit, a spirit that the ANZAC's would approve of, in fact that they would be proud of. The ANZAC's gave the ultimate sacrifice, they willingly gave their lives for their fellow Australians. If we can, to some extent, impart this ideal onto the next generation of Australian's so they can truly appreciate and understand what it means to be an Australian and what we stand for, we will achieve something great. For their willingness and sacrifice the ANZAC's will forever be remembered.

Before the Paralympic Games this year the team was visited by retired defence force chief Mr Peter Cosgrove. He told us of a man, who refused to give up, who fought on through all odds. The soldier's name was 'Diver Derek'. The team was so moved by the story that I don't believe I can truly do it justice by telling you it in whole. As a team we accepted 'Diver Derek' as the spiritual leader of our team while on our campaign in Beijing. We had a framed photo of the great man and he travelled with us everywhere we went. From pre Games camp in KL till our very last day in Beijing 'Diver' stayed by our side. The team member who during that day had showed the most 'Diver' like qualities like teamwork, leadership, humility and a never say die attitude; was given the honour and privilege of looking after 'Diver' the next day.

After I have finished talking today I will be handing my panel questions over to a young man who I believe encompasses these qualities in huge amounts. Jay Dohnt lost both his legs just below the knee when he was 13 years old. He had just finished year 7 and was enjoying school holidays

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when his mother noticed he had a temperature. 24 hours later he had lost both his legs and survived meningococcal disease. Unhindered Jay started High School at Henley High and put his mind to finding a replacement for his long time passion 'footy'. He started swimming as part of his rehab and was a natural in the water. 5 years later having completed school Jay made his international debut at the 2008 Beijing Paralympic Games winning a Bronze medal in the 400f/s. The 400f/s is the longest event on the Paralympic schedule; this proves that Jay thrives on the challenge to succeed in the toughest of circumstances. Jay is an inspiration and a true Australian hero. I'm hoping that you will appreciate his humility and ask him questions about his life and achievements and that he can inspire you as much as he has inspired me. Being part of the Australian Paralympic Swim team is an honour and the stories and actions of its members inspired me to perform to my potential in Beijing.

There will always be certain days on the calendar that bring Australian's together, Australia Day, ANZAC Day and the Melbourne Cup; also events such as the AFL Grand Final, Boxing Day Test and the Olympics. These events will always unite us, after all the fathers of federation did have the idea for us to be one country. (Except for WA who didn't want a bar of it at one point but we'll forgive them I guess.)

As Australians we may not hang flags outside every house in the street or place our hand on our heart as we recite the national anthem, like our bigger is better American cousins. But we care! We care as much as we ever have about our country and who we are, and what we are becoming, it may not be evident to someone who doesn't know what they are looking for, but its there. It doesn't matter what we look like, or where we are from or what we can do; it's about what we believe in. We have Australian heroes to be inspired by, a way of life and a spirit that the next generation needs to grasp and pass on. Who we are and what we believe in matters to Australia today, tomorrow and into the future. As who we are and what we believe in will shape our decisions on the important matters of economics, education, politics and the environment, Australia should always be a sustainable land for all Australians young and free.

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