

# Building a Commonwealth of Freedom

[Extract from a speech delivered by Commissioner Mick Keelty to the Commonwealth Day Council of NSW at NSW Parliament House in March]

*The demands of modern society mean that our focus can often narrow to events directly affecting our own lives and families.*

But in today's global world, it is vital that we come together to consider issues directly affecting our nation and beyond. If we are to preserve our own way of life then to achieve this, we need to work toward a stable and more prosperous future for everybody.

The theme for this year's Commonwealth Day—"Building a Commonwealth of Freedom"—is particularly pertinent at this point in our history. Events over recent decades—particularly globalisation, technological advancement and the spread of modern terrorism—have all challenged traditional notions of freedom.

We now live in a world where social relations have become complex, borders are increasingly meaningless, and capitalism and free market economies reign supreme.

Globalisation is a process that has produced big winners in society, but it has also proved enormously costly for others who don't have strong governance systems. Many states that have failed to benefit from the process have spiralled into economic, social or political decline.

Before we can consider how to build and secure freedoms for the people of the Commonwealth, we need to understand what freedom means in today's world.

Freedom is a concept for which there is no single definition. It means different things to different people, depending on their own sets of values, beliefs and personal circumstances.

If we think about the Commonwealth—is freedom about the women and children of the Solomon Islands now being able to safely walk the streets and access the playing fields and schools in their own villages?

In Africa, is freedom about access to democracy, the right to vote or own land, or about eliminating discrimination, poverty and violence from everyday life?

In Australia, is freedom about attaining a certain standard of living, being able to freely express an opinion, practise what religion we like, or travel safely without fear or threat?

Or perhaps freedom is about having access to basic education, health and criminal justice systems—protecting the world's children from the lifelong trauma suffered as a consequence of the despicable actions of paedophiles.

Or—as we celebrate International Women's Day today—about achieving equality for women all around the world and eliminating the use of women in sexual servitude.

Like many, I seriously began contemplating the meaning of freedom in the modern world, following September 11 and the Bali bombings.



I remember going to Bali shortly after the tragedy and standing among the wreckage, wondering what sense we could make of it. It is an understatement to say that it was a scene of utter devastation.

There I met with families and relatives of the victims, ordinary Australians who were "struck by the suddenness, bewildered by the motive."

Looking into their eyes, listening to their stories of the last time they saw their sister, their football mate or loved one—it was hard to resist being overcome by the emotion of it all.

But what really surprised me was that many of these people were not looking for retribution. What they really wanted was to find out why it had happened and how to avoid it happening again.

Many questioned whether it was an isolated attack or perhaps the beginning of a new era for Australia.

An era where our enemy are people on a mission to destroy the values and freedoms that we have made great sacrifices over time to protect. A war in which the "diggers" are the "punters"—everyday people going about their everyday lives. A war where their uniform is not the fatigues or the jungle greens—it's their democracy and commitment to a "fair go for all".

If anything good came from the Bali tragedy, I think it forced us as a nation to think about what we must do to survive in the globalised world.

It made us reflect upon our basic freedoms and what we need to do to protect them.

It caused us to think about our values and beliefs and how to live harmoniously and peacefully alongside those with different values and beliefs.

I recently read a book called *The Clock of the Long Now: Time and Responsibility*. In it, mathematician and physicist Freeman Dyson describes how to take a



Photo by Brian Hartigan

more strategic view of our world in order to better understand it, and care for it.

Dyson's passage reads:

"The destiny of our species is shaped by the imperatives of survival on six different time scales. To survive means to compete successfully on all six time scales. But the unit of survival is different on all six time scales.

On a time scale of years, the unit is the individual.

On a time scale of decades, the unit is the family.

On a time scale of centuries, the unit is the tribe or the nation.

On a time scale of millennia, the unit is the culture.

On a time scale of tens of millennia, the unit is the species.

On a time scale of eons, the unit is the whole web of life on our planet.

Every human being is the product of adaptation to the demands of all six time scales. This is why conflicting loyalties are deep in our nature. In order to survive, we have needed to be loyal to ourselves, to our families, to our tribes, to our cultures, to our species and to our planet. If our psychological impulses are complicated, it is because they were shaped by complicated and conflicting demands."

The point I am making is that we are at a place in our history where we must understand the long-term nature of the problems

we face. We must resist the urge to develop solutions that may only have a short-term effect.

In this process, it is important we don't abandon our values and that we be creative and inclusive in developing policy responses. For me personally, I would never want to see member states abandon aspects of our criminal justice systems, in favour of alternatives that have not been properly thought through.

When we think about terrorism, it is vital that we understand the preconditions and the drivers behind it, so we can address the root causes as opposed to just treating the symptoms.

Factors such as levels of democracy; civil liberties and the rule of law; the presence of failed or weak states; corrupt or illegitimate governments; the alienation of groups in society and the presence of charismatic ideological leaders have all been cited as drivers of terrorism.

Others have pointed to globalisation; a lack of economic opportunity and demographic characteristics as well as a combination of the above.

So, to free ourselves from the grip of terrorism, we must not only track down the perpetrators and bring them to justice, but deal with the social and economic conditions that drive people to commit such horrific acts in the first place.

In building a Commonwealth of freedom I think similar rules apply, in the sense that we have to create the preconditions necessary for our freedoms to exist and to thrive.

As part of this process, it is important for nations to develop a greater appreciation of the power and importance of partnerships and collaboration in the modern world. True partnerships are about looking after your partner's interests as well as your own—protecting them, understanding their environment, and assisting them to grow.

In law enforcement, one of the great lessons learnt in recent years has been that it is no longer possible to solve many crimes in isolation. Substantial growth in transnational criminal activity has meant we have had to harness the resources and expertise of partner agencies, both here and abroad, to have any hope of bringing offenders to justice.

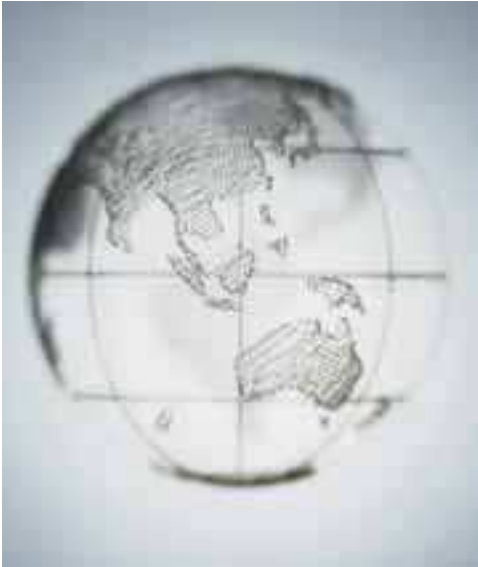
I believe Commonwealth member countries could better capitalise on the potential of partnerships, by pledging even greater support to world governing bodies such as the United Nations and, to their own Commonwealth of nations.

These provide a unifying and stabilising force in an increasingly complex and uncertain world. They represent the interests of all the people—regardless of status or nationality—and provide a form of global or regional governance that promotes fairness and equality. Importantly, they also provide a much needed voice for nations left behind in globalisation's wake.

*Photos by Brian Hartigan*







Throughout history we've seen many examples of dominant nations imposing certain powers as a policy response to threats. Ironically, this has often curtailed the freedoms of innocent people. It is important therefore, to pause and consider the collateral impact before supporting such policies. For example, from my own experience, I see little value in imposing sanctions on countries involved in the drug trade. These only serve to harm those outside the ruling elite and they encourage the drug trade to flourish by denying access to legitimate economic growth.

Equally, when we act or intervene to assist other nations—such as the current proposal to go to Papua New Guinea—it's not just the business that we do, but how we do the business that is important. We have already seen reports of resistance to the PNG Assistance Mission, bringing into sharp focus the political reality that even genuine assistance can be seen as a negative by some.

Building freedom, therefore, is about developing greater understanding and tolerance of other societies and cultures, and learning not to impose your will on others, but to work together to achieve outcomes of mutual benefit.

It is about working in cooperation to advance democracy and human rights;

and to achieve sustainable economic and social development, particularly among weaker nations struggling to compete on a global scale or who lack a commitment to good governance.

History has shown a clear nexus between law and order and economic prosperity. If we fail to act, then fragile states will become havens for criminal activity, and will ultimately pose a threat to our own stability and freedoms.

I am pleased to say that in the Commonwealth, some important progress is being made in this area. At the recent Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting in Abuja, Nigeria, the Solomon Islands was removed from the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group agenda, after law and order was restored in the once-troubled South Pacific archipelago.

The good work done by the Regional Assistance Mission to the Solomon Islands—which has involved personnel from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, the Australian Defence Force, a number of South Pacific countries and the AFP—has made the Solomons a safer and better place. So far, the Assistance Mission has removed more than 3700 weapons and over 300,000 rounds of ammunition from the community—a tremendous achievement, given initial targets were in the order of 1000 weapons.

Furthermore, the commitment by Commonwealth leaders to work collectively to curb the trade in small arms and light weapons and to step up efforts to eradicate corruption and terrorism, are also important steps in securing freedom for member nations in the future. It is a fine balance to know when and how to intervene. We can be like the three wise monkeys who see, hear and do no evil, or we can recognise our social responsibilities. There's a sign on the Southern Pylon of the Sydney Harbour Bridge. It says future generations will judge us by our work. I hope what we are doing today will be a testament to our future generations.

For all of us in positions of power and influence, our focus should always be on creating a better world for the generations that follow. As former South African President, Nelson Mandela, once said:

"A good head and a good heart are always a formidable combination."

So, as we think about Building a Commonwealth of Freedom, we should not ask ourselves, freedom at what price, we should say freedom at any price—freedom for all.

Thank you.