

Speech – Shane L Stone – Hilton Double Tree Esplanade, Darwin –
Saturday 26 August 2017

50 Shades of Gold Anniversary Dinner

Good evening Lieutenant Governors, Board members, delegates, Kiwanians and my fellow Territorians. Welcome to the 50 Shades of Gold Anniversary Dinner marking the 50 year anniversary of Kiwanis in Australia.

I particularly want to mention Lieutenant Governor Tony Schelling who persuaded me to sponsor a table and speak to you tonight. I was not aware of his nick name – ‘Tiny’. I will dine out on that. Tony is a champion and I congratulate him and his team on a very successful conference.

To the delegates from the Philippines a very warm welcome to Darwin – “mabuhay”. The Filipino community is very important to us here in the Territory.

To your international delegates who have travelled from Taipei welcome and to the respective outgoing and incoming Governors congratulations.

It would be remiss if I didn’t congratulate our entertainment tonight The ‘Mystics’, who play my sort of music. This is their 50 year anniversary since winning Hoadley's 'Battle of the Sounds' in 1967. I was a much thinner 17 years old being measured up for khaki green at the time.

This is a very historical venue. The former Darwin Travel Lodge survived Cyclone Tracey notwithstanding a car in the pool and further up the building a washing machine lodged in the external wall facing the Esplanade. This hotel has witnessed much over the decades.

Well done on selecting Darwin as the Conference Venue. I see last year you went to South Australia – why? Let me assure you that the lights won’t go out tonight.

When I inquired what I should speak about this evening I was told that I could talk about politics. I thought that a bad idea because in the current environment I am all politicised out and I suspect you feel the same.

I can’t work out whether I am in a TV reality show somewhere positioned between Big Brother, Housewives of Melbourne, the Block or Biggest Loser although I am starting to feel that I have been watching endless episodes of the Walking Dead and I can’t wait to get to the end.

You don’t want to watch the show but can’t help yourself.

Tune in for Question time and you have it all – repetitive ad nauseating political cliques and just for good measure throw in ‘are you or aren’t you an Australian’, endless commentary for and against gay marriage and stories of Tony Abbott getting pissed and your left wondering is there anyone running the country?

No politics tonight. Instead let’s talk about something that matters – service, volunteering. I want to have a conversation with you about what kind of community we live in and make some general observations about the world we live in.

First let’s remind ourselves of who we are here tonight. Kiwanis International is a global organisation of volunteers dedicated to improving the world one child and one community at a time. In an atmosphere of fun and friendship, Kiwanians aim to make a difference.

As the 2nd oldest, 3rd largest International Service Organisation in the world Kiwanis is well positioned to make a difference. I was formerly a Lions Charter member and served in Rotary in Alice Springs and Port

Darwin. I get it but sadly many don't. Volunteers are an endangered species. We don't encourage, reward or acknowledge our volunteers enough. As a member of the Order of Australia Council I know this to be true.

As the National Chairman of the Duke of Edinburgh Award in Australia, an organisation that has fostered a sense of community and the importance of volunteering among over 750,000 young Australians since our foundation in 1959 I get it.

How then do we create a culture that is disposed to community service and volunteering?

The schooling and socialising of a child ideally happens at a number of levels – foremost at home, at school and in their respective peer groups.

My wife Josephine and I have son and a daughter. We chose schools that had as their stated objectives to "inspire young men to live justly" and in my daughters case to encourage "young women of strong minds and gentle hearts".

How many parents actually have a look at a schools objectives and goals before entrusting their education to total strangers?

Academic achievement as important as it is remains secondary to such virtues and qualities.

This might sound a heresy coming from a graduate but let me tell you that I rate a child with a strong mind, a gentle heart, a sense of nobility of endeavour, self sacrifice, courage, strength of character and a commitment to live justly in our community ahead of top academic results all day every day.

The world needs good people; you don't have to be a genius to be a decent person. Sir Reg Ansett was remarked "The world is full of educated idiots". Harsh but true.

So what kind of a world do we live in? In answering that question you start to understand the imperative of getting our fellow citizens committed to community service and volunteering.

There's a recurring theme around the Western world at present – 'broken society' – sounds dramatic and it is. Turn on your TV news each night and you are confronted by mayhem.

On the economic front we have fared better. Our political leaders tell us we live in a two speed economy – code for boom and bust - that brings its own challenges of disadvantage, marginalised unemployed Australians and financial stress. Let's be frank wages growth in this great country has stagnated, home ownership is beyond many and the gulf between the rich and the poor has become a yawning chasm. Such breeds envy politics and a sense of entitlement.

Before the Global Financial Crisis 10 years ago it would have been hard to get any focus on such a claim that society was broken; after all the world economy was booming, money was easy to borrow, the next deal paid for the last one and conspicuous consumption was on display everywhere. Every night was Friday night.

What was broken we may have asked? Life was good, in fact too good. To pick up that old saying "If it's too good to be true it usually is" and so it was as many self funded retirees will tell you in retrospect.

Pope Benedict, Francis's predecessor, on ascending the Papacy started to speak out on secularism in modern society; he was a lone voice.

In the modern world secularism includes disavowing – putting aside - those fundamental Judaic Christian principles that comprise the glue that hold our community together. Regardless of religious belief and practice as a community we are grounded in historical religious principles that guide our conduct. Islamic, Hindu, Buddhist, Sikh – have likewise added to our moral framework.

Whether you live in Adelaide, Sydney, Perth or Darwin stealing is wrong; you have responsibilities to your family; you believe in a better society. The common threads that unite us help define the type of community we live in.

Not too many people were listening to Pope Benedict at the time; after all if you accepted what he was saying you might have to have a long hard look at yourself.

You had just received yet another unsolicited letter from your bank offering to increase your credit card limit no questions asked and Harvey Norman was advertising yet another special flat screen deal notwithstanding you already have a TV in every room.

Life was good.

Sir Guy Green the former Chief Justice and Governor of Tasmania delivered an outstanding speech in Hobart in 2011. The theme ***We are Australian – Unity and Australian Values*** touched on the very essence of the conversation I am having with you tonight.

Sir Guy posed the question: ‘What are the essential values which characterise and define Australian society and which we should be united in defending and promoting?’ Great question but for many of us an awkward answer because if we are true to the ideals of community

engagement we are going to question how we live, our beliefs and priorities.

If we are fair dinkum about our community then many of us have to change.

Writing a cheque for your favourite charity as necessary and commendable as that is needs to be balanced by action. No better recent example than the Brisbane ‘mud army’ organised by former Lord Mayor and later QLD Premier Campbell Newman. The importance of people coming together as a community to help others has often been on display around the country; the QLD floods, the devastating bushfires in WA - on each occasion brought out the best in us but no from all of us.

There are too many spectators and worse an occasional air of indifference and a shrug of the shoulders.

As a Nation we run the risk of losing our way in aspiring to and defending those essential values Sir Guy spoke of – respect, not just tolerance; concern for and commitment to promoting the welfare of others in our community; recognition of the essential dignity and intrinsic value of every individual.

How committed are we to preserving and promoting those essential values?

It is true that Australians have a long history of helping each other; from time to time there is an attempt by our leaders to capture the sentiment and mood.

John Howard called it ‘mutual obligation’; the British Prime Minister David Cameron called it the ‘Big Society’. It turns out the Pope had an unexpected supporter in his commentary and well before the English

riots; responding to Pope Benedict's farewell speech after his State visit to Britain Cameron said: “(the) challenge to us all (is) to follow our conscience, to ask not what are my entitlements, but what are my responsibilities? To ask not what we can do for ourselves, but what we can do for others.....we all have a social obligation to each other, to our families and our communities...”

President John F Kennedy posed the question: “Ask not what your country can do for you...ask what you can do for your country”. The British Prime Minister captured that sentiment and put it in context.

In the aftermath of the riots David Cameron concluded: “There are deep problems in our society that have been growing for a long time: a decline in responsibility, a rise in selfishness, a growing sense that individual rights come before anything else.”

Where do we In Australia figure in this?

For my part I know I live in a selfish society and I know my generation of ‘baby boomers’ have contributed to that state of affairs but we are not alone.

It might be said we have set a bad example for future generations who have been indulged and spoiled by our economic prosperity. We who are materially rich but spiritually poor should take time to reflect on what we have become.

We live in a community where we buck pass responsibility to the State at every turn and we all do it.

We have allowed ourselves to be captured by consumerism and have lapped it up in our new high tech world where writing a personal letter or reading a news paper is no longer ‘cool’.

We talk and text in hieroglyphics and have by and large lost the art of conversation, debate and public speaking.

We check out at the supermarket without interacting with an individual; we check in at the airport by machine as we likewise withdraw money from the bank through a hole in the wall.

We book, buy and sell on line.

People figure less in this new paradigm as we blithely go along with the new way of transacting business. We are captives to this new world which has brought so many constructive new benefits and advances but which tears away at our sense of humanity and self worth. Our children and grandchildren largely accept that a people free zone is normal – it's not.

Socialization of the human species is being displaced by technology.

Slogans and one liners substitute for well crafted policy. Our political leaders, captains of industry and union leaders talk in cliques.

When it comes to important and compelling challenges in the community people talk, they don't do.

Some Australians think because they walked over the Sydney Harbour Bridge and supported the Apology they fulfilled their obligation to indigenous Australians – box ticked. Some of our citizens believe they discharge their responsibilities to the poor by putting \$5 in the Salvo's collection tin or buying the Big Issue.

Let me assure you I have not become a grumpy old man railing against the new order uncomfortable in the technological age. I have a smartphone and can do almost anything I need on my computer.

I refuse however to accept the unbridled depersonalisation of human relations that is being foisted on us.

A community turns on its human interaction; not emails and text messages. We humans are social animals with an instinctive need to communicate, socialise and interact with others.

Sense of community is driven by people who share, support, respect and value each other. Families bond by sitting down and having a meal together; spending time on family holidays; turning up to school functions; getting to know the neighbours and welcoming newcomers into your street regardless of their ethnicity, colour or creed.

I still use cheques, refuse to self check my groceries and insist on being boarded at the airport by a person and not a machine.

I want to greet, know and interact with people in my community. When I read of a plan by Universities to engage their students completely on line with graduation an optional extra I know we have taken a wrong turn.

There are certain rites of passage that remain intrinsic to our human development. You may think I am swimming against the tide; perhaps so but I intend to persist. Our problems are manmade and as such can be fixed by man.

The way back to a more cohesive and caring community is to instil a respect and appreciation for values that once mattered - respect, not just tolerance; concern for and commitment to promoting the welfare of others in our community; recognition of the essential dignity and intrinsic value of every individual. To achieve those lofty ideals we must communicate, interact and socialise as human beings.

We have so much to do to help reshape the framework of our community. For example we will never eliminate crime but with the right

strategies in place we can regrow the right values and beliefs and start to reduce the incidents of assault, vandalism, theft, deception and fraud.

Getting to know the neighbours would be a good first step.

As a political leader I confess I used on more than one occasion the borrowed clique ‘It’s the economy stupid’.

That was only part of the answer. As important as the economy is we must not overlook the social framework that can determine what kind of society we are.

The social framework defines our humanity.

Change won’t occur over night; it will be incremental and intergenerational but we need to start somewhere. Families and schools are first on my list. We all muse about what it was like when we could go out and leave our homes unlocked; leave the car in the drive way with the keys overnight; trust the kids to play in the local park and not fear the stranger who came to the door. Walk safely down the street without fear of a bomb or being run down by van used as a weapon.

We will never recapture that era but with a change of emphasis in society on a kaleidoscope of issues and helpful Government policies we can gradually recapture our sense of community. It will all turn on communication and interpersonal relationships. Our children and grandchildren need to learn what is important. The human intellect is society’s greatest asset so let’s make the most of it.

We must remind ourselves what is important and share that with our children and grandchildren.

How many of you can name the most recent Nobel Peace Laureate? Compare that memory lapse with how many of you recall the name of the teacher who had the greatest impact on your life? Can you name the

five wealthiest people in the world? You can't but I bet you can name the five people who have taught you something worthwhile and made you feel appreciated and special in your life time.

The people who have made a difference in your life are not the ones with the most credentials, the most money or the most awards. They are the ones who cared the most about you; those who took time to share their experiences, knowledge and wisdom.

People learn by example and unless they interact with other people they will grow up in vacuum. How can we expect our fellow Australians to respect, to show commitment to promoting the welfare of others and to recognize the essential dignity and intrinsic value of every individual in such an environment? This is a challenge of our times.

As a Nation in more recent times we have been having an argument with ourselves about whether we celebrate achievement, reward excellence and grade people according to their performance. Some schools refuse to grade students for fear of them being traumatized and feeling devalued.

Call me old fashioned I have always believed that we must acknowledge success and those who make a difference whether they welcome the attention or not. Anonymity does not set an example.

Currently we have a crisis of trust – it extends to our public institutions; the economy; our financial institutions; our work place. Some have a crisis of trust at home. We live in uncertain and challenging times.

Every society lives by certain principles. We aim high but do we remain true to what matters? For example do we reward virtue, do we rate partisan interests over community interests.

If you leave your ethics at the door as you enter your place of business before long you will be doing the same with your friends, your family and your marriage. Your conduct in business or your profession will morph into every other aspect of your life.

The Global Financial Crisis was driven by conduct, behaviour and sentiment.

Growth, prosperity and wealth are good; money is good. What is not good is how you get it and what you do with it.

Instead we should strive for what's in the common good. As I said money is good; currency manipulation that benefits private individuals at the expense of the community is wrong. Similarly wealth is great but not when it is used to oppress others. Market share is something all business people should aim for but not market manipulation that damages the community by pushing up prices and leveraging down quality.

It about balance and it's about the ethics and moral codes that we live by.

Australia is one of the most egalitarian countries in the world. We are aspirational – we want to get on. We want what's best for our families, for our kids. We pride ourselves on a fair go for all. We shouldn't get caught up in 'class wars'- we support the common good.

What we need is a new paradigm where we reward the virtue of a good corporate citizen; business that builds sustainable growth; creates employment; cares about its employees; builds community trust and aligns commercial success with the common good.

We should support business that recognises that capital is not just the \$'s but equally the people who work in the business. Social capital is as

important as working capital. Such business will not succeed where the executives and workers leave their morals at the front door as they clock on believing that ‘anything goes’.

Young people learn by example and they need to see and understand what makes a good Australian; how can one be aspirational if you don’t witness the bench marks of being a good contributing citizen?

Notwithstanding the challenges ahead of us we are a lucky country in more ways than one. We change Government without a shot being fired. Not too many countries can make that claim. We celebrate our cultural diversity, we are a compassionate people; notwithstanding our short European history we punch above our weight in regional and world affairs.

Our engagement with our indigenous population has improved but we still have a way to go. We can always do better but by and large we have made a decent fist of it in just over 200 years. However we need to learn the lessons of elsewhere to ensure we remain a country that keeps true to those Australian values I have spoken of.

Among those activities that best give expression to Australian values – volunteering and community service. The Kiwanis are at the forefront of this enterprise and I thank and applaud you for what you have done for Australia – one child and one community at a time,

My friends thank you for inviting me to speak to you this evening.