

Speech given in the Bell Shire Hall as Australia Day Ambassador for the Wambo Shire Council:

Australia Day 2008

Justice Roslyn Atkinson

1. Acknowledgements: Mr Ray Hopper MLA and Mrs Jo Hopper
Mayor Councillor Mick Cosgrove and Mrs Cheryl Cosgrove
2. Acknowledge traditional custodians of the land on which we meet
3. Thank the community for inviting me to Wambo Shire to share celebrations
4. This is a particularly important Australia Day as this year marks the 200th anniversary of the Rum Rebellion where Governor Bligh's autocratic rule was overthrown by the New South Wales Corps, commonly known as the Rum Corp. It was almost two years before their illegal regime was replaced by Governor Lachlan Macquarie and the rule of law was re-established.
5. Since then our country has enjoyed the enviable record of 188 uninterrupted years of the rule of law which we celebrate in our free and democratic society.
6. What does the rule of law mean to us: the legislators, federal, State and local government make the laws; the executive administers the laws; and the judiciary applies the law to determine disputes between individuals, corporations and governments and by presiding over criminal trials of those accused of crimes and sentencing those who are convicted.
7. It is a responsibility which we exercise with a full knowledge and appreciation of Australian values.
8. My values were forged in my childhood which I was extremely fortunate to spend in a country town in South East Queensland. In my case that was Kingaroy, a mere hamlet compared to Dalby and

then a service car ride away. But the values I learnt and the experiences I had I'm sure apply equally in any country town.

9. The first value I think I learnt was a great gift and that was the gift of freedom. In a country town we were free to ride our bikes all over town and into the country. We were free to play and learn and explore. Some of our freedoms we knew were not shared by our city cousins. I remember hearing, although scarcely believing, that in Brisbane children had to wear shoes to school.
10. The second value readily imbued in the country was diversity. We were agog when a family arrived in our street from Miles. That was certainly exotic for me when I was 6, although I knew the mother in the family next door had come from as far away as Moore near Blackbutt. But they were soon followed by a family from Malta and then a girl from Holland who didn't speak English turned up in my class at school and I learnt that the names we gave to objects were just invented by people and varied around the world. Only later did I appreciate the family across the road were half Chinese. Many people in the city think that country towns are mono-cultural but that is far from true. And our experience of one another led to understanding and acceptance.
11. Because I lived in the country I also lived in a society that was multi-racial and grew early on to appreciate the contributions and hardships faced by indigenous people. I well remember when the Aboriginal boy in my class at school was accused of stealing our teacher's watch. He was a very gentle, honest boy but the matter appeared concluded when his older brother agreed when questioned that it was his younger brother that had taken it. However, one of the fathers found the watch amongst his son's belongings and it turned out to be him, a nice kid in need of

correction but not indigenous and never suspected. I learnt a lot about the complexities of criminal justice from that incident.

12. What was most wonderful about a country town upbringing was the interconnectedness of everybody. You knew everybody from the wealthiest to the poorest, from the best educated to the least educated and as a result you were very aware of the need for social responsibility and that one person's actions or inactions always impact on others.
13. But what I remember most was the sense of possibility. Neither my mother nor my father had completed secondary schooling. Yet when I was about 7 my father took me aside in the kitchen in the warmth of the wood stove and told me that when I grew up I would be going to University. I had no idea quite what that was but I could tell from the solemn way in which he told me that it was a good thing and that it involved a large building. The biggest building in town was the peanut silos but I thought the university was unlikely to resemble them so I thought of the next biggest – the Kingaroy Hospital. I can't tell how surprised I was 10 years later when I arrived at the University of Queensland and found how little it resembled the Kingaroy Hospital. However when I was in Kingaroy a couple of weeks ago I bought a jar of jam sold by the hospital auxiliary because it was my desire to go somewhere as imposing as that hospital that sparked my educational ambitions.
14. So when we talk about what a wonderful country we live in and celebrate Australian values on Australia Day, it is the values forged in my country childhood that I come back to: liberty, tolerance and a sense of social responsibility that we can and rightly do celebrate. A Happy Australia Day to you all!