

## **St Patrick's Day Address**

**16 March 2007**

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon. It is good to see such a lively gathering of wit, grace and poise; plus members of the legislative assembly.

I have been asked to elucidate how life as an Irish Australian impacted upon who I am, but to cast such assertions seems to place finality on my development and the influence of my Irish heritage. I will therefore do what so many Irish do well, I will tell a story or two.

In the working class suburb of Yarraville in Melbourne, I grew up surrounded by men, women and children who were either fresh off the boat from Ireland or whose ancestors had been sent here on a boat. In tough Irish boroughs of inner Melbourne I learnt the facts of life, men work hard, women harder and everyone who is worthy of note votes Labor.

My father's side of the family had long been in Victoria. Seven generations in fact. A widower (seven children deceased) who emigrated from Ireland. He built a new home for himself, married again and started a family again! On the other side, my Mother's grandfather's grandfather, was transported at the ripe old age of 25, from County Westmeath for stealing a hundred weight of grain. He was sent to Tasmania's Huon Valley as a timber worker where he started a respectable family. I am sure both were fine men who like so many others

found themselves in strange and foreign circumstances and did all they could to secure a better future for their families.

As was dictated by my background I went to Catholic schools. It was in fact, the good Sisters of St Joseph who provided my formal education in Melbourne. Undoubtedly my intelligence, piety and humility should in some way be attributed to those devout women. I am sure I would not have utilised my genius and fulfilled my potential if it were not for the Good Sisters' teachings. I then progressed to Blessed Edmund Rice's men, the Christian Brothers of Ireland, both at St Augustine's Yarraville and at St Edmund's Canberra.

Indeed, as with most stories involving the Irish, religion, in particular the Catholic religion has been a continuous thread in my life. In Yarraville the man who led the local congregation was Father O'Farrell. A proud Irishman who staunchly defended Ireland's reputation, Father O'Farrell was not one to be trifled with, especially when he had his shillaly\* close at hand.

You see Father O'Farrell had once been prosecuted for assault. Some ill-informed and uneducated man made a snide comment about the Irish, which provoked Father O'Farrell to take up his shillaly and strike some sense into the fellow. Thereby teaching me at an early age the Irish virtue of tolerance. The arrest of course did nothing to diminish the admiration and esteem in which his flock held Father O'Farrell in fact services were always well

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\* Also spelt shillely

attended. It was no surprise in Canberra that the first priests at St Peter Chanel's included Morgan O'Connor and Bernie Lynch followed by John O'Brien. Hence I can do a passable Irish brogue.

Perhaps, it was Father O'Farrell's arrest or the discrimination faced by the Irish community as the working class of Australia that inspired me to enter the law. In any event, I have always been proud of my heritage and so I was happy to join the National Australian Irish Business Association and continue to serve on its board.

In 2001, I ventured to Ireland and met Mr John O'Donoghue then Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform. We discussed the new approach Ireland had taken to the separation of the executive and judicial arms of government. In 1995, the Irish undertook a cathartic review of the court system which ultimately proposed the establishment of an independent and permanent body to manage a unified courts system. The Government, in a somewhat novel approach, actually implemented the recommendations. The *Courts Service Act 1998*, established a body corporate which not only centrally manages the administration and finances of the courts but is also mandated to provide an annual report to each House of the Parliament, thereby leaving courts independent of ministerial or legislative control.

It was, as we have come to expect from the Irish, a bold and strengthening move which enhanced the process of justice. In searching for a better way, the Irish have increased protection for human rights and upheld the values of

their Constitution. This is yet another example where we in Australia can learn from the overseas experience. In Ireland it has been demonstrated that if a reform process is entered into in the right spirit and recommendations enacted, justice and society will have been well served.

We as a nation have learnt much from the Irish. The ability to laugh when faced with tragedy, the determination to fight when faced with injustice. Tolerance and perseverance are all lessons conveyed to our young country through numerous Irish immigrants and indeed others who have come to our shores. From our first peoples, the indigenous inhabitants of this land to our newest citizens, who have to jump through the hoops of the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (which now has the interesting, if not apt, acronym D.I.C.) to become Australian, we have a rich wealth of diversity from which to find ways forward to create a better future.

Of course being Irish means one is not only a point of interest but also has an instant community. We are *now* a beloved people. The Irish appear to have travelled, married and settled across all nations and so the legend of the Irish spreads. The vivid imagery of the rugged green hills of Éire is painted across many a mind through the great Irish poets and journeymen.

There are however, many in our societies who do not feel connected to anything or anyone. Far too often it is disconnected people who appear before me in my role as Chief Justice. Lost, without guidance and opportunity. It is to

these people that we should turn to as we celebrate St Patrick. For as one of the finest individuals to come from Ireland, Mary Robinson, said:

“The fifth province is not anywhere here or there, north or south, east or west. It is a place within each of us. It is that place that is open to the other, that swinging door which allows us to venture out and others to venture in.”

Happy St Patrick’s Day to each and all.