

Australia Day

Port Fairy, 26th January 2014

Thank you, President Peter and Keith. And thanks to Port Fairy Lions for the invitation to take part in your Australia Day celebration. I want to acknowledge the traditional owners of this land, the Gunditjamarra people, and pay respect to their elders, past and present.

When Keith asked me to speak here today, he asked me how he should introduce me. I was tempted to give him the advice that I follow myself, namely, just Google the name, Philip Hunt. I can tell you, that if you do google my name, you will find out that Google seems a bit confused about me.

To begin with Philip Hunt, that's me right, is an American footballer who played with the Philadelphia Eagles. Philip Hunt is a very large African-American bloke. Very large. Very African-American.

Philip Hunt, according to Google, is an animator. He draws cartoons for films and television.

And, if you ask Google, it'll tell you that Philip Hunt is Australia's number one spare parts dealer for earthmoving machinery. Apparently I have a big shop in Tamworth.

But, best of all, Google has informed me that Philip Hunt is a member of the British House of Lords. Lord Philip of Snothead or something. How cool is that?

By the way, Google also tells me that there's also a couple of boats named Philip Hunt, and more disturbingly, a dog.

So what is the truth? Well, as Keith mentioned, this particular Philip Hunt is a 7th generation Aussie now living very happily down the road in the 'bool. My forebears came to Australia a bit over 200 years ago. They were selected for the journey by the best judges in England.

There is a family myth that one of the First Fleet soldiers was somehow related to us, but the extensive research of a few dozen family genealogists have never been able to prove the connection to the 1788 fleet. So I am not one of those aristocratic First Fleeters.

Instead we know that one Richard Hunt from Winchester in England was one day caught red-handed with some bottles of wine and some silver spoons that belonged to his employer. And he paid for his light fingers with the heavy sentence of transportation to Port Jackson for seven years.

I was once in a hotel in Nazareth, travelling with the World Vision director of our work in Palestine and he introduced me to the hotel manager with this story of my ancestor who

stole silver spoons. When I checked out the next morning, the hotel manager winked at me and said, "We have checked. We have counted our spoons."

I am glad, even proud, to say that this convict, Richard Hunt, served his sentence, married and had kids (obviously, or someone else would have to be making this speech). But then he made one fatal mistake.

Richard Hunt had a reasonable business as a saddler in Parramatta, west of Sydney in the 1830s, but his first wife had died and he married again. He left the children of his first marriage in Parramatta and took his new brood to live in Gundagai.

In Gundagai he set up again as the town saddler. In the Visitors' Centre in Gundagai you can see a model of the old town. You can see Richard Hunt's Saddlery down there among the buildings of the old town by the Murrumbidgee River. He lived there, on the river flat with his second wife and his second family of four children.

Until 1852.

Gundagai was first settled by whitefellas in the 1830s. You know, when you come to live in a new town, you really want to get to know the locals. Ask their advice about the town. Like where are the best places to live. You don't want to live by the rubbish dump. You don't want to live with bad neighbours. You especially don't want to build on a flood plain.

Well, you know, when my ancestor, Richard Hunt and the other whitefellas started to build their houses in Gundagai, there were some other Aussies sitting up on the hills watching them. These Aussies had been around the area for quite a while. Their family name was Wiradjuri, and they sat up on the hills mystified by these odd people, building their odd houses, in, what they considered, a very odd place. Right in the middle of a flood plain.

Tragically, the new settlers did not ask the Wiradjuri for real estate advice.

Here is how things unfolded, according to a report in the Gundagai newspaper:

By 1852 Gundagai had a population of about 250 people. The month of June had been incredibly wet, with almost three weeks of heavy rain. By the morning of Thursday, June 24 the township was isolated, and later in the afternoon the river flats were also under water. On Thursday night and during Friday the floods continued to rise as the waters from the upper catchment areas began to hit the township.

During Friday night (June 25) people were forced to clamber onto the roofs of the buildings to avoid being swept away. Others braved the raging waters and tried to swim to find the safety of a tree. The floods were flowing through the houses and buildings at a height of two metres.

Richard Hunt and his wife and 4 children, aged 10, 8, 4 and 3 were last seen on the roof of their house. One report said they heard them singing hymns. They were swept away as their house collapsed. At least 89 people died. About one-third of the population of the town. But, remarkably, more survived. Many were rescued.

Despite never being consulted on matters of real estate, the Wiradjuri family joined with the newcomers to rescue people. They set out in their home-made canoes. One Wiradjuri man alone rescued 49 people. Later, three Wiradjuri men were honoured by the town for their bravery.

This is my Australian story. If there is any moral to the story it is that we can be a nation if we celebrate our differences, rather than being afraid of them. It's not about ignoring our differences. It's not even about tolerating our differences. It's about celebrating them.

When I was in Primary School I had a best mate. His name was Clarence Ng. We were both born in Australia. We both grew up in the same suburb. We attended the same school and got similar marks in our exams. The only difference between us was the way we looked. Somewhere back in previous generations, Clarence's forebears had come from China. Mine had come from England. So we looked different.

Lots of kids would ask Clarence where he was FROM. They never asked me where I was from.

Even in the 1950s, before the great wave of immigration became really obvious, even then, I knew there was something wrong about that question. We were both FROM Australia. We were both Australian.

You know, Clarence went on to become an Industrial Chemist. He worked for Arnott's. He invented a very important biscuit. A high energy, high nutrition biscuit that organisations like World Vision could use in famine zones. Clarence saved people from starving to death. And in my work with World Vision, I helped to deliver his life-saving invention. There was nothing un-Australian about Clarence Ng.

When I look at my family today I see that it is so typically Australian. My ancestors were boat people from England. One of my sisters married the son of Italian migrants. My daughter married the son of Maltese arrivals. The partner of one of my sons hails from Germany. My wife's family has Scottish and Orcadian roots. Some of them came from the Orkney Islands, way up in the windswept north of Scotland. Which is why she feels so much at home here. One of her brothers married a French woman.

We're a mixed bunch, aren't we? I reckon it is worth celebrating.

As our national song goes, "For those who've come across the seas we've boundless plains to share." And not just plains, but life, friendship, culture, stories, blessings.

I guess I am saying something about what I think it means to be Australian, as opposed to being something else. Maybe un-Australian.

We had German guests in our house at Christmas. They were struggling with the whole upside-down nature of Christmas Down Under. It was hot when it should have been cold. The days were long when they should have been short. And we ate hamburgers on

Christmas Eve. The Christmas Eve hamburger has become a family tradition for us. We go to the Christmas Eve church service and then repair to Kermond's and order hamburgers WITH beetroot, of course. Then if the weather is fair, we go down to the Breakwater and enjoy our Aussie burgers.

According to our German guests, this was a truly Australian experience.

Happy Australia Day!