

SPEECH BY

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(Retd)**

**ON THE OCCASION OF THE
NATIONAL MARRIAGE DAY
BREAKFAST**

**PARLIAMENT HOUSE,
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Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen,

Marlena and I thank you most warmly and sincerely for the honour you have bestowed upon us as National Marriage Ambassadors.

We look forward to this responsibility and doing our best to promote the importance of marriage over the coming year.

Marlena and I were married over forty two years ago in the 'Haus Lotu' or bush church at Taurama Barracks in Papua New Guinea, and have since been blessed with four children and eight and 5/9 grandchildren.

My life with the Army and subsequently, meant we moved house 21 times with most of this burden falling on Marlena, and we were frequently separated through military necessity including overseas postings, operational service and lengthy training courses.

We also lived primarily on a single wage because Marlena elected to look after our children and the service families in the various units I commanded for much of our early married life.

We had three children under two (including twins) when I went off to Vietnam, and four under five at one stage. It was a very busy time of life and I often wonder how we did it.

So much of the credit is due to Marlena, but we always worked as a very close team, discussed every issue, shared the load where possible, budgeted carefully and very importantly, always sat down with the family at the table for our meals, particularly dinner.

Just as importantly we regularly told our kids how much we loved them.

It seems to have worked.

And I have noticed the same situation with our grandchildren who all come from caring, but sensibly disciplined home environments, where good manners are taught, where daily routines are established, where discussion is encouraged, where humour abounds, and from an early age, where each child has his own daily chores to perform. And both parents in each family share the child rearing responsibilities; more so than when I was a Dad.

And as a grandparent, isn't it one of the special joys of life when the grandchildren when going to bed on an overnight stay give you a cuddle and say spontaneously "Love you Nana, love you Poppa?"

The last time I spoke in this Hall was at the farewell dinner Prime Minister Rudd hosted on my stepping down as Governor-General of Australia.

I said then that our families and how we care for them is the basis of social cohesion and in the concept and fulfilment of 'caring', lies the secret to a happy, sustainable and cohesive nation.

I hold to this view.

A caring family – which provides love, guidance, care and discipline, and inculcates

ethical and spiritual values – is still the most nourishing of social “units”; the core building block of a cohesive society.

It is often because the family structure has broken down in a community that violence and social disorder can occur.

And we know the home environment is the most important influence on a child's social and intellectual development.

We also know that it has a most significant effect on the child's early learning, school attainment and overall well being, and in particular a child's feelings of self worth and sense of identity.

Children are too inexperienced and impulsive to direct their own lives, so they need the guidance and loving support of their parents.

Ideally, this support will be provided by Mum and Dad living happily together and offering those essential masculine and feminine perspectives which balance and complement each other.

In a happy relationship, each parent can bring their full emotional, financial and other resources to bear on the critical task of parenting.

These days there are various forms of family relationships and some of these outside marriage no doubt are successful.

Nevertheless, I think the majority of our society still holds to the view that, in the main, the best form of relationship in respect to the long-term wellbeing of parents and their future children comes through a life long commitment of a man and a woman to each other, typically through the solemn personal and spiritual commitment made in the marriage ceremony.

It is also a simple provable fact, however unpalatable to its detractors.

While every individual has the ultimate choice in how they live their lives, including the relationships they wish to enter into, it is by us supporting marriage and initiating public discussion on the importance and benefits of marriage that we can encourage more people into this personal commitment.

Sadly, there is a real need for these efforts in Australia today.

In 1986, 62% of the coupled population were married dropping to 52% by 2006.

And of the births in Australia in 2007, just 67% were to parents in a registered marriage, compared to 82% in 1987.

There are however encouraging signs in the reducing number and rate of divorces.

These have been decreasing each year since a peak in 2001, but still 48,000 divorces were granted in 2007.

Still far too high in my view and in particular when it is estimated that 17 % of children in Australia are living with only one parent.

Of the children living in a single-parent household, 87 % of these were living with their mother.

Sadly, around one in five children in a single parent household saw their other parent less than once a year or never.

And we know that many single parents struggle, particularly economically.

And the absence of a partner with whom to share problems can also be a demanding burden – no one to share the joys or talk through the normal challenges within any family group – schooling, health issues, sport; whilst the primary carer is also very likely working, running a household and with never enough time to properly deal with all these demands.

This state of affairs I believe is undesirable and for the sake of the children in our community—who are after all tomorrow's teachers, politicians, business people and above all parents—we need to more publicly and frequently encourage the institution of marriage as the best way in providing the safe, loving and balanced environment all children need.

So how do we do this?

One solution might be to prepare people more fully for relationships of all types, including marriage.

Isn't it interesting? We train people to drive cars, to build bridges and to operate computers, yet do little to formally train or prepare young people for ultimately the most important role of all; forming a stable and loving – preferably marital relationship, in which to nurture their children.

To help young people better develop their relationship skills, I have actively supported young Australians belonging to some type of well-led, well-organised youth group or program; cadets, St. John Ambulance, the Surf Life Saving Club, well managed sporting teams and so on.

There is no doubt that kids participating in these sorts of sporting, cultural, volunteer or adventure activities do improve their own sense of well-being and self esteem, whilst learning vital relationship skills and contributing to social cohesion in general.

As well, I have been a strong supporter of the School Chaplaincy Program.

Indeed, I take pride in the fact that I had something to do with its successful introduction into Western Australian schools in the 1990s and very strongly encouraged the successful national chaplaincy program introduced by the previous government.

Some 2,630 schools, or 27 per cent of schools around Australia have received funding approval for chaplaincy support.

In Western Australia 94% of school principals when answering a survey said that not only was the school chaplain important, they were in fact indispensable.

Personally, I would like to see relationship preparation more specifically applied to the educational curriculum, with the churches also taking a more pro-active role in this critical area.

To conclude.

As a society, we have a responsibility to ensure that to the best of our ability, every child is born into a caring, loving and sensibly disciplined environment.

One of the best ways we can achieve this is by encouraging and preparing people to enter loving, stable and long term relationships based preferably on the time-honoured institution of marriage.

It is for this reason that Marlena and I are delighted to accept the title of Honorary National Marriage Ambassadors and we look forward to doing all we can in promoting the wonderful institution of marriage in Australia.

Thank you.