

# The Chancellor's Occasional Address

**PROFESSOR MARK R COMPTON AM GCStJ**

Order of St John  
Priory Chapter meeting  
Melbourne, 5 May 2019



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Confreres, consœurs, distinguished guests, friends all.

May I commence by thanking the Priory Chapter for providing me with the opportunity to deliver this occasional address on my retirement as Chancellor of the Priory in Australia, and my forthcoming appointment as Lord Prior of the Order. It is a great honour and privilege to be able to address you in this manner, just as it has been a great honour and privilege to serve the Priory and its members as Chancellor. May I add, that I regard my appointment as Lord Prior as incredibly humbling as well as being a huge honour, and I will my best for the Order worldwide in all that I do as your Lord Prior, but I especially hope that I do the Priory of Australia and its members proud.

It is not my intention to make this address some type of autologous valedictory—I will leave it to others to rake over those coals at some future point (after carefully considering the laws of defamation!). However, it might be useful to spend a little time on reflection; a little time on the challenges we face as an Order, and some time to look to the future.

**Reflection**

The Commonwealth of Australia is a proud Federation with a rich history and a fine list of achievements since its inception in 1901. No less is the federation that makes up St John Ambulance Australia.

As I reflect on the past six years, I feel that the federation of St John has come closer together, is more focused on the greater good for the greater number and has advanced the cause of the Order in Australia better than for many years. I congratulate and thank all those in leadership positions within the federation, be they volunteer or employed, for the effort each and all have given to achieve this.

However, this does not paper over the ongoing issue for us, which I will turn to again later in this Address; the often-conflicting needs, wants and duties between the State and Territory establishments and the National organisation. There is little doubt that this issue has held us back at times on making the major steps needed to have a much greater impact on the Australian community than we are having at present. That said, let it not overshadow the *great strides* and *significant outcomes* that we have achieved. I do hope that the most recent structural change we have achieved for the Priory will provide increased opportunity to extend and deepen our impact.

One outcome that I am especially proud of is our successful First Aid in Schools program. Born out of a trial program in Western Australia; prosecuted and promoted by the national Board and Office; embraced by all jurisdictions, has seen us train, over a period of about three years, almost 2 million school children (*over 50% of the school-aged population*) at no cost to them, their parents or their school. And we are well on the way of covering the entire school-aged population (about 3.8 million) in the next year or so, after which we will seek to engage with these children each two years if possible. What a remarkable contribution we have made to Australia and our collective goal of making communities stronger, safer and more resilient!

## Challenges

I would like to turn now to what I see as some challenges facing our Order, not just in Australia, but worldwide. They are not insurmountable, but will, I believe, need our focused and committed attention to ensure that they do not rise to a level that begins to materially interfere with who we are, what we do and how we do it.

I have categorised the Challenges into four groups:

- 1 Christian
- 2 Chivalric
- 3 Charitable
- 4 Cooperative Federalism.

### 1 Christian

The Christian faith is the bedrock upon which our Order is built, and Christian principles remain the core of all that we do.

- However, we are facing the challenges of increasingly secular and multicultural societies, along with the challenges of working in and with countries with a predominance of other mainstream faiths.
- The leadership and membership of our Order must continue to prosecute the importance of the principles of Christian faith that drive and support us as we strive to achieve our central purpose of caring for 'Our lords, the sick and the poor'. We welcome people of all faiths or none; we dedicate ourselves to the care of others irrespective of their beliefs. However, our Christian foundations make us who we are and how we act towards each other and to those who we serve. This is to be celebrated and promoted and, rather than subjugated, included as a normal part of what we do.
- In terms of interrelating with those of other faiths or of no faith, our central purpose of caring for those in need is the common link to join us all. Focusing on our Christian principles and purpose, while always remaining inclusive of others, will help us move forward.

### 2 Chivalric

- We are a Crown Order of Chivalry— the only one that still has a working arm!
- Notwithstanding the wonderful history and tradition of our Order, it is important that we achieve a balance between preserving our customs, traditions and ceremonies, with

a willingness to embrace change and be seen as a dynamic, modern organisation. The Sovereign and our Grand Prior are deeply interested in our progress and how we act in a contemporary manner; just as much as they are interested in our preservation of the formalities of our Order. They are all important.

- We are honoured and privileged to have an honours system, headed by the Queen, conducted within our own organisation, and highly respected by the general community. The Order's Honours and Awards Committee, and Priory Honours and Awards Committee, are charged with ensuring the integrity and independence of the honours system. However, it is also down to each of us to ensure our system stands up to external scrutiny and is seen as strong, high quality, contemporary and of scrupulous integrity. We do this through how we act; who we nominate for consideration; who we recommend; how we deal with people who don't act in the best interests of the Order; valuing the Grades and paying careful attention to the Grade Standards to ensure we don't admit or promote inappropriately. This is a significant burden on the leaders, but one which is borne willingly and with the gravitas that needs to be brought to the system to ensure its independent longevity and remains an honour system held in high esteem.
- However, we have a pressing need to increase diversity (especially gender, but in all its forms) of membership of the Order.
  - I speak in this context especially about our leadership in the Order, where women are significantly under-represented, especially at senior levels. For example, there are no female Great Officers of the Order (and never have been); there are no women who are members of our Grand Council; we have only recently appointed one woman to the St John International Executive Committee; and we have worked hard to have three female State Chairs and one woman as a Priory Officer on our National Board. When the new Board comes into being on 1 July 2019, we will have two women in a group of six with the opportunity to appoint two more independent directors. And so, it goes on. And we haven't yet covered diversity of age, ethnicity, geography (city versus country, for example) and so on.
  - I would not like this point to be characterised as 'box ticking' or being slave to 'political correctness'—I am not a 'PC' fan! However, it is clear to me (and supported by data) that organisations, especially boards, achieve better results for their stakeholders if they have diversity in the leadership group. In big handfuls, our membership should be representative of the communities we serve, and our leadership should be representative of our membership—this way we also ensure that we capture the entire talent pool available to us. I suspect we are closer to meeting the first criterion than the second ... in fact, we are a long way off meeting the second. And we won't meet it unless we acknowledge that this is an issue, and that we all assume responsibility to take action to remedy the situation. One sobering piece of data from the *nominations* received by the Priory Honours and Awards Committee for admission and promotion in the Order this year—for Grades 2, 3 and 4, the ratio of male to female nominations is 2:1 in each category.
  - Kylie Seidel has kindly provided me with the raw data showing membership of the Order in Australia, broken down by gender and by State and Territory. At the top level,

I can report that the ratio of men to women across all Grades and all jurisdictions is 60%:40%. It gets worse when I look at Grades 1, 2 and 3 only: in the senior grades the ratio is 70%:30%. If I leave out Grade 1 (as that Grade is not in our hands as much as the others) that only makes 0.2% difference. The message from these data is clearly that we have to work harder to identify women of merit, and ensure they are nominated and considered in our honours system. There is really no reason or excuse for a ratio of two men to one woman in recognition of exemplary contribution and service. There so many fantastic women in our organisation that deserve such recognition, and our job as leaders is to identify them and nominate them.

- Of course, when it comes to honours and awards or board positions or any other leadership role, the absolute foundation to any appointment is merit: based on skills, experience, cultural alignment etc. But I can't believe that there are not plenty of suitable women—especially young women—who have merit in bucket loads and just need to be identified, mentored, coached, and encouraged to put themselves forward for leadership roles. Men play a particularly important role in this. It is us who have a large part of the responsibility for empowering women in the ways I describe above. It is not something to be left to the women to fix! So, gentlemen, your time starts now!
- There is nothing about the concept of merit which means that men are more likely to possess it than women!
- It is also worth mentioning in this part of my address regarding diversity, that Grand Council and its Executive Committee are focused on this issue. Specific sessions at the upcoming Grand Council meetings in Singapore are dealing with this diversity (with a specific reference to youth), and diversity and inclusion are now regular items on the Executive Committee agenda. Australia can be a significant leader in this area, as we are in several others on the global stage.
- Another important challenge is how to increase and improve relevance to and engagement with younger members. What does being part of an Order of Chivalry mean to a younger person, and how can young members add and receive value. How do we best explore a concept of 'Active Chivalry' for younger members to provide a link to the Order? To some extent this is a similar discussion to the one on gender diversity. Over the years we have tried various ways of achieving better youth engagement and participation. There have been some hits and some misses. There's more to be done. AYAN—our youth advisory network—is doing much to engage with our younger members and to provide data to the National Board to assist it in its deliberations. I suggest that this AYAN work be mirrored in states and territories in parallel with the national effort. I congratulate and thank AYAN, its membership and leadership for their substantial efforts.
- Our youth membership is, at best, stable but appears not to be growing. First Aid in Schools gives us some hope that we might be able to convert those who attend the program, to some type of youth membership. It is a bit too early to tell, but early data are not encouraging. I firmly believe we should renew our commitment to a formal youth development program, such as Cadets, to better engage with younger people and offer them something of substance, a greater sense of belonging and to help them develop as community-minded citizens. I note that Cadet programs for St John elsewhere in the

world are thriving: New Zealand, Singapore, Malaysia, England, Wales, Canada and so on. I also note the strong membership of Cadet programs in the NSW Rural Fire Service, for example. The positive public profile is significant as is the benefit to community. I know we can do it; with commitment and focused attention of boards and management, properly led and funded, we can reinvigorate a Cadet/Youth development program that will be the envy of other organisations. I very freely admit that I supported jurisdictions trying new and different ways of engaging with youth, such as the Schools First Aid clubs tried in Western Australia. This was not an error. Cadet numbers Australia-wide had not changed in about 10 years and new approaches are worth encouraging. However, I have seen other jurisdictions close Cadet programs due to matters of perceived risk in running programs with young people, finances, leadership etc. I think this is giving in rather than standing up for what we believe in.

- Grand Council in Singapore this year has 'youth' as a major theme of its meetings and conferring. Sally Hasler and Sarah Manley (from the Priory of New Zealand) are keynote presenters. The international organisation is very focused on further developing our youth programs, and I believe our Priory should be a leader in this. I also note that the Alliance of Johannine Orders now has a youth network. Let Australia again be a leader in this field as it once was.

### 3 Charitable

- St John as an international humanitarian organisation, and as such *strategic questions arise* for the Grand Council and for Priors.
  - What does that mean?
  - What will it take?
  - Should we improve the Order's 'visibility' as an international humanitarian organisation?
  - What should our scope of activities be? Access to health services; injury prevention; sanitation; mass casualty incidents; disaster preparedness; building community resilience?

These are questions to be considered over time.

- One aspect of this is that this Priory also has a role in supporting communities and St John Establishments in our region. We have been doing great job in supporting Timor Leste, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Zambia, Fiji and Sri Lanka (as a recipient of Oblations over some years). I encourage the Priory to continue and where possible expand this support.
- In this same vein, I mention the support of St John International. Our 'home office' as it were. It has the same struggles as our own national office here—largely funded by contributions from Establishments, it has to 'pass the hat around' each year in order to ensure it has funding to do the work for us, to ensure a vibrant, strong, and properly recognised Order of chivalry, with high integrity and one which our Sovereign Head and Grand Prior are justly proud. I would strongly encourage the Priory (whilst acknowledging my inherent personal conflict ☺) to continue to provide significant support to St John International, to allow it to be able to do the important work it does in maintaining our Order at the highest level of standards and integrity.

- St John International also has a role in supporting growing Associations in several ways and, of course, supervising the delivery of our Mother and Baby Program in four countries in Africa. I should clarify that none of the financial contributions from Pories to St John International directly fund the Mother and Baby Program. It is funded by long-term grants that are *managed* by St John International.
  - St John International, just like our National Office, relies on funding from jurisdictions to do the work of the Order. A bit like advertising campaigns, if the fund flows stopped tomorrow one won't immediately notice much change in activity or standards or integrity of systems. But after a relatively short time things would begin to slip, and the slip turns into a slide, and the slide then proves difficult to reverse. Along with that goes our standards and reputation. I encourage members of Chapter to also encourage and empower boards in your own jurisdictions to *strongly support the National Office* in Australia with the funding it needs to ensure a strong and vibrant Order in Australia. Also, the new Priory Board has the task of identifying and pursuing independent revenue streams for St John Australia. I think that this is an exciting opportunity for St John nationally, and I'm sure that the National Board will have the support of the Priory Chapter in its endeavours in this regard.

#### 4 Cooperative federalism

One of our biggest challenges here is how do we get *synergistic*, rather than just additive, value?

- It could be argued that the First Aid in Schools program has brought the States and Territories closer together on a project than previously. Also, the work that Len Fiori and the CEO group is doing on an exciting AED program in Australia is harnessing energy and talent around the jurisdictions. But these come with a price of hard work, time lag and sometimes compromises in how quickly and extensively programs are developed and delivered.
- Our Commonwealth of States and Territories is wonderful thing. Rich in diversity and passion; each jurisdiction strong in its sense of self, independence and future. However, as we can see at the level of government, it does not always result in the best possible outcomes. Witness each year various funding discussions between states and territories through the COAG and other forums. Compromises, time lags, and so many resources used in the negotiations that could be applied to the purposes that they seek to support.
- In St John we have similar issues. This issue is not new, and as you know, it's not the first time I have touched on the matter of potential merging together of States and Territories. I won't dwell on this again for fear of the rotten tomatoes being distributed amongst the Chapter members! Suffice to say a couple of things.
  - First, we have had a few jurisdictions represented in this room that have made significant moves in discussions with the National entity and with other jurisdictions about the possibility of merger. Indeed, even to the point of MOUs being drafted. Sadly, in my view, those transactions have not come to fruition. However, I do thank the leaders in this who did try to move such things along, and I hope these discussions might be rekindled at some future point.

- Second, there are other jurisdictions that have talked about their preparedness to move down such a path, and have expressed their understanding as to how much sense it would make in increasing the ability to further the causes of the Order in Australia in a much more powerful way. Whilst they have not taken firm steps at this point, I thank them for their words of encouragement and for their foresight to at least consider such a move.
- Finally, I simply want to say to all jurisdictions and members of Chapter: 'keep at it!' I do believe that it is in the community's and the Order's best interests for a 'more formally unified' St John, acting as one; being agile, nimble; a powerful voice speaking to government and business; able to grasp and run with opportunities as they arise for the benefit of those we serve. St John New Zealand is a great case study in what can be achieved. As is St John USA—a land of passionate states' rights but by acting as one they have achieved enormously in their support of the Eye Hospital, and their growing work in their volunteer corps and work with veterans.
- On this matter, I now take a vow of silence!

## Future

- As we look to the future, at the level of the Priory and indeed globally, we need to continuously challenge our organisation. We must be prepared to regularly challenge ourselves.
  - Do we meet changing community need?
  - Are we diverse across our membership and governing bodies?
  - How do we remain relevant and vibrant?
  - Are we flexible in how we offer our services?
  - Do we innovate? Are we a 'thinking' organisation?
  - Do we set targets/goals/expectations for ourselves in order to drive our growth and prosperity?
  - Why would young people wish to be members?
  - Are we the organisation of choice for all the services we offer and for prospective volunteers and staff?
- These are but a few of the challenges we must pose to ourselves—in addition to those the external environment will regularly throw up at us. We must be strong, resilient and self-examining if we are going to be best positioned to meet all challenges put to test us.

As I draw to a close, I'd like to offer some words of thanks and congratulations.

First, to our next Chancellor, Cam Oxley. Cam is an exceptional person, outstanding leader and will be a most wonderful Chancellor for our Priory. He has been a fantastic contributor at the national level, during his time as Chair of St John Victoria and in more recent times as a Priory Officer. He has a deep empathy and understanding of the work and purpose of the Order, both in Australia and internationally. I've much enjoyed working with Cam on the

Board and have learned much from him. Our Priory, our members, and most importantly those who we serve, are in good hands with Cam as our leader in Australia.

I would also like to express my thanks to all colleagues with whom I have worked on the National Board and various committees for many years. Your support, your collegiate approach to our work, your good humour, patience and great company have all made my life not only easier, but much richer.

To our CEO and Priory Secretary Len Fiori, our Deputy-Priory Secretary Peter LeCornu, Executive Manager Kylie Seidel, and the whole National Office team—‘thank you’ seems inadequate but is meant in its sincerest terms. The job of Chancellor and Chairman has been much richer experience due to the leadership and enormous support that Len and Peter have provided when they have both been our CEO at various times during my tenure. We are blessed to have such a fine leadership team to guide us and execute the policies and direction determined by the Board. As our current CEO, Len is doing extraordinary things to grow and develop St John in Australia. Taking on the role at a very difficult and turbulent time, he has brought order, calm, direction, energy and enthusiasm to the role. We are indeed fortunate to have Len as our CEO and Priory Secretary. Also, a special mention of Kylie’s work—an exceptional person who has the blood of the Order surging through her veins! Kylie, thank you for all you have done to help me; amazing!

The National Office team is a group that deserves our fulsome support, encouragement and heartfelt thanks. In times of shrinking funding contributions, but growing expectations, they all knuckle down to do what’s best for St John. Sometimes its very tough and without the proper recognition from colleagues for what is achieved. But let me say on behalf of the Chapter, how much we value each and all of you and what you do to help St John be the best it can be.

In each Annual Report I make a point of thanking our members; volunteer or employed, for the work they do for our Order. It seems appropriate that in this address I do the same. Each person who wears the badge and name of St John in offering themselves to serve the community, does so in the best traditions of the 10th century monks in Jerusalem; the courageous knights who defended Malta whilst operating large, complex, wonderful healthcare facilities on the island nation; those St John volunteers in Wales who joined the Army together at the time of World War 1 to form the 130th Field Ambulance who went unarmed onto the battlefields of the Western Front, delivering care and comfort, wearing the cross of St John on their uniforms (many were injured, a number died); the forebears and contemporary workers in our eye hospital in Jerusalem and its outreach clinics; the wonderful volunteers in Africa who deliver care and education to women to give a better chance of a trouble-free pregnancy and a healthy baby. No matter where our Order does its work, each and all of us who wear this badge do so as part of a worldwide family of people dedicated to the relief of distress and suffering; serving our lords, the sick and the poor; For the Faith and in the Service of Humanity.

To all members, as your Chancellor and as your next Lord Prior, I offer my boundless gratitude and appreciation. Through your work you make the world a better place, each and every day.

Finally, and certainly not least, to quote John Milton from his sonnet *When I Consider How My Light is Spent*, ‘They also serve who only stand and wait’, I wish to acknowledge family and other loved ones. To support a loved one, who commits fully and selflessly to community work such as with St John, is a major work that we must never take for granted and always give thanks for. In this context, I express my deepest thanks to my wife, Elizabeth, and my sons, Daniel and Michael. Each of them has had to put up with me being absent either in body or mind or both as I have given time to St John over many years. They have always been supporting, encouraging and never begrudging of the time and mind-space needed. Indeed, when I was the subject of encouraging calls and emails about considering being nominated by others for the position of Lord Prior, they proved they are gluttons for punishment! Elizabeth and the boys were enthusiastically cheering me on. Their commitment, and especially that of Elizabeth, has been enormous in that regard and I can’t say thank you enough for how much it has meant and continues to mean—and this is on top of their own deep and busy commitments to St John as volunteers in their own right! Amazing and inspiring!

I know that the love and support I have received is reflected in the stories of all our volunteers and staff. So, to all families and other loved ones, thank you for supporting your loved one to do the things she or he has committed to do for St John.

If you’ll excuse the pun ... as this Chapter (meeting) closes, another chapter opens for us all. Cam as our Chancellor and me as your next Lord Prior. I hope this next chapter is exciting, invigorating and outstanding for St John and for those we serve. I hope not to be a stranger in these parts, and please be assured of my support to the Priory in any reasonable way that I can during my tenure as Lord Prior.

Thank you.

**MRC**

Sunday 5 May 2019  
Melbourne