

Walk a Mile in Their Shoes

Ladies and Gentlemen, please put down your knives and forks. And your glasses... Yes, all of you.

As you know, we are all here to raise money as we ponder the parlous state of the world's starving millions. I know you have each paid \$550 to attend this prestigious event. Some of you have come because your hearts and minds are in the right place. Most of you, however, are here to be seen to be here. None of you have paid such a large sum of money because you thought the dinner would be worth it – it rarely is. And if you are tempted to leave at any time during my presentation, please remember the television cameras.

I will make your experience of the dinner worth it. I have asked the venue staff to remove all the food and drink from the tables. It is not going to waste, however, as in the next room there are some four hundred homeless people who will enjoy what you are going to be deprived of. You should feel virtuous – some of your money is already going to a good cause.

I promise you that you will go home tonight no hungrier than millions of people around the world. The first course you will be served in lieu of the entrées you were beginning to tuck into, is a small plate of varied roots, accompanied by a selection of roasted locusts. Please do not be alarmed by the muddy appearance of the water – it is not infested with anything harmful, and is thus markedly safer than that drunk by people throughout Asia and Africa.

In this country we have a sophisticated agricultural industry which produces for us an overabundance of mostly good food and exports a lot of it to countries which can afford it. In many countries we would consider the locals unsophisticated and primitive. But you try and survive off the land where drought makes it impossible for you to grow anything, and finding enough food in the wild will take you most of your day and a lot of ingenuity. Is it unsophisticated to be able to feed yourself and your family on what to us would appear to be nothing?

Madam, you treat them like prawns: break them in half and then extract the flesh with the small pointed sticks provided for that purpose. And you can use the other end of the stick, which is flat, to scrape most of the skin off the little roots.

The bowls with the hot liquid now being served is a mixture of leaves gathered from a variety of shrubs and herbaceous plants and soaked in hot water drawn from the same muddy stream which supplied your drinking water. It will help to give you some of the minerals and vitamins you may need.

I mentioned that drought may be the cause of your inability to provide more than a meagre existence. However, in some places in Africa the country of which you are a citizen may produce more food than its entire population could consume, yet you go hungry every day. Because of world trade, farmers in the north can sell their produce at higher prices overseas than you and the other poor people can afford. And even if there were enough transport to move it south to you, there is not enough fuel and the roads are mostly impassable.

Sir, you can fish the leaves out with the stick and then drink the liquid straight from the bowl.

Let me continue. I ask you: how unsophisticated or primitive is the knowledge which allows forest dwellers and plains dwellers in many parts of the world to identify edible plants and know which parts are edible and how to prepare them? Most of the 'sophisticated' pharmaceuticals we use in this sophisticated country, come from or are based on plants identified for ages by local people as having special properties.

You will find detailed knowledge of edible and medicinal plants on every continent where populations have been allowed to follow their traditional ways. But we, the industrialised, 'civilised' countries, are removing these people from their territories, their environment, their livelihoods and their wellbeing. We do this through our transnational companies, through our banks and through our

international treaties. We do it in the name of progress and tell ourselves and others the lie that this is all for the benefit of the yet-to-be-sophisticated primitives. Our attitudes are epitomised by a recent comment from a member of the USA Government that he was looking forward to the day that China joins the civilised world. I am also reminded by Ghandi's response to, I think it was Earl Mountbatten, when asked, "Mr Ghandi, what do you think of English civilisation?" The reply came spontaneously: "I think it would be a very good idea."

Ah! The next course. Very simple: a small bowl of rice each with some sprouted seeds, a small portion of very thin pieces of dried meat and some small-leaved cultivated vegetables. And something better than plain water to wash it down – coconut milk. No, you won't need utensils; simply use your fingers as many Asians do, for whom this would be the main meal of the day.

Now, where was I? Yes, the genocide by stealth, as we remove people from the land they have looked after for generations, so that we may exploit it. Just as bad is the way we encourage people to chop down or burn their forests so that they may eke out a living growing crops which they cannot use.

We have the lunacy and hypocrisy of the European Union legislating to reduce their carbon load on the environment by increasing the use of bio-fuel, resulting in more Brazilian rain forest being destroyed so that more soy can be grown to meet this new demand for bio-fuel on the other side of the ocean. So European policy makes the Europeans look good at the cost of the Amazon rain forest and the South American environment.

We squander our precious resources in the belief that there will always be more. If we add up all the water which we in this room collectively waste, it would amount to more than an equivalent number of people in many parts of the world have available to use. In fact, the water dripping out of some of your leaking taps is more than many people have available to them and they may need to walk for hours to fetch it.

I am not saying to you that we are to blame for all the woes in the world. We are not. In many struggling countries, local greed, corruption and despotism play major roles in keeping the people poor, hungry and sick. But we live in a country with only minimal corruption and despotism, though greed is rife. What sets us apart and gives us a unique opportunity and a responsibility, is that we, as individuals and collectively, are able to tell our governments what to do.

Especially in Australia, we have a duty to reverse our Federal Government's attitude to its international responsibilities. Australia and the USA are the only countries still refusing to ratify the Kyoto Protocol. And we do so in the name of protecting our industries and thus our wealth. But we have it all wrong.

Australian and USA industry is in many cases floundering. The American car industry cannot export even to China, because they do not meet the increasingly stringent environmental regulations in that country – China has joined the civilised world and maybe Australia and the USA will follow.

Australia used to be a world leader in many areas of the use of renewable energies, but now lags behind many Asian and European countries, because the will is no longer there – it no longer seems important. 'Clean' coal is now subsidised by the Government in the name of responsibility for the environment. A clearer example of an oxymoron I have yet to find.

Your deserts will be served soon. You will be able to enjoy fermented goat's cheese, topped with some of our own Australian wild fruits: lillypilly, kangaroo apple, wild strawberries and native plums. On the side you will find small biscuits baked from ground wattle seeds. I trust that those who picked the kangaroo apples still possess the traditional knowledge, because if it is picked before it is fully ripe it can be very poisonous.

If you still feel hungry after this feast, and most of you will, just remember that this is the state in which almost half of the world's inhabitants go to bed every night, having eaten less than you have tonight. And on the way home, you can stop at a café or fast food outlet and do something about it. When you get home you can go to sleep in a comfortable bed in a dwelling which can be heated or

cooled at your will. One room in your house may be bigger than the whole structure which houses a family in Africa.

Tomorrow, when you sit down to a cup of coffee in your favourite café, the money you hand over could feed a person for a day somewhere else in the world. And the people who grew and picked the beans which went into your late, may have received less than one cent for their trouble.

Good night.

This speech won second prize in the Fellowship of Australian Writers (Qld) Soapbox Competition - November 2006