

Australia Day Reception 2020

**Speech by HE Mr Bruce Lendon
Australian High Commissioner to Trinidad and Tobago
23 January 2020, High Commissioner's Residence**

The Honourable Chief Justice, Mr Justice Ivor Archie;

The Honourable Brig Gen (Rtd) Edmund Dillon, Minister of Housing and Urban Development

Senator the Honourable Dennis Moses, Minister of Foreign and CARICOM Affairs;

Senator the Honourable Paula Gopee-Scoon, Minister of Trade and Industry;

Senator the Honourable Allyson West, Minister of Public Administration;

Senator the Honourable Donna Cox, Minister of Communications;

Senator the Honourable Robert Le Hunte, Minister of Public Utilities;

Members of the diplomatic corps;

Parliamentary Secretaries;

Senator the Honourable Nigel De Freitas, Vice President of the Senate;

Permanent secretaries and members of the public service;

Colonel Darnley Wyke, Acting Chief of Defence Staff;

Commissioner of Police, Mr Gary Griffith;

Representatives of local government;

Members of the business community;

Fellow Aussies;

Friends.

Good evening and welcome to our Australia Day celebration in the Caribbean.

This is the first official event I am hosting as Australia's High Commissioner to Trinidad and Tobago and representative in the Caribbean.

I am delighted you have all been able to join us on this special occasion.

Australia Day – the 26th of January – is a time for all Australians, no matter where our personal stories began, to reflect on being Australian, celebrate contemporary Australia and recognise our history.

It's a day on which we acknowledge and celebrate how Australians of different cultures and traditions have come together to build a vibrant and dynamic nation.

These cultures and traditions are diverse, to say the least. They include Australia's Indigenous peoples, who have lived in and cared for the country for over 65,000 years; the mostly European migrants who came over the past two centuries; and increasingly over the past 50 years, people from every continent who now call Australia home.

As Australia has changed, so has the way we celebrate Australia Day.

From a rough and ready commemoration in the early 1800s of the arrival of Governor Phillip's fleet in 1788 – which the historians tell us was conducted with much drinking and merriment – the day has become a celebration of our shared values, and of our diversity (although probably still with some drinking and merriment).

The diversity we celebrate is reflected in the vast range of foods, tastes and smells you will find in Australia.

We are sharing with you tonight a selection of these, including some foods drawing on the traditions of Australia's Indigenous peoples.

We also have a small gift of eucalyptus oil, a typically Australian scent, for you to take home and enjoy.

This year as we celebrate Australia Day, we do so with mixed emotions.

Since August 2019, our country has experienced bushfires on an unprecedented scale.

Recent rain has provided some relief, but we have lost much over the past six months, including lives, homes and countless animals, and the crisis is not yet past.

We have been deeply touched by the outpouring of sympathy and support from around the globe, including from people across the Caribbean.

We thank you for that, and assure you we'll recover, adapt, and rebuild.

The response to the bushfires has reminded us that, although geographically distant, Australians and the people of the Caribbean understand each other.

We came to know each other first through generations of fierce competition on the cricket field.

But we have deepened those links through migration, education and business.

We share common values, which enable us to work together successfully to achieve our goals.

In 2019 Australia and the Caribbean had a very good year in business, sport, and international diplomacy.

In business, Trinidad and Tobago agreed to buy Australian-built Cape Class Patrol Boats for its Coast Guard, and fast ferries to service the sea bridge between the two islands.

Members of the Coast Guard are now working in Perth with the patrol boat builders, making sure the vessels meet their needs.

BHP, Australia's largest company in the region, announced a significant investment to develop the offshore Ruby oil and gas field, as well as an exciting new gas find in Trinidad and Tobago's northern waters.

In sport, the Australian Women's Cricket Team visited Barbados, Antigua and Barbuda to play One Day Internationals and T20 matches against the West Indies Women's Cricket Team.

The Australians ran a clinic for kids in Barbuda, donating equipment to help their cricketing careers.

I may rue these words, but we hope this will help continue that tradition of fierce contests between Australian and West Indies teams – both men and women – into the future.

In that spirit, we also look forward to welcoming the West Indies Men’s Cricket Team to Australia later this year for the ICC T20 World Cup.

Australia is proud of the development assistance, both bilateral and through multilateral agencies, with which we support countries across the Caribbean.

Our Direct Aid Program, a small grants fund, continues to support community groups and NGOs to undertake development projects across the region.

In Guyana, for instance, we are working with the International Organization for Migration to help remote Indigenous communities increase agricultural production and food security as they deal with the arrival of migrants from Venezuela.

We are committed to supporting more projects like these throughout the region.

Australia also help young diplomats from the Caribbean to develop their skills through participate in our International Graduate Program.

Last year, we welcomed participants from Jamaica and St Vincent and the Grenadines.

They joined young Australian diplomats in learning about international law, trade policy, and negotiation skills. So, if you detect an Aussie twang as diplomats argue about international sea boundaries or tariff lines, it may not be an Australian.

2019 was also a big year for our cooperation in multilateral forums.

Australia was delighted to support the election of St Vincent and the Grenadines to the United Nations Security Council.

It may be the smallest country ever to serve on the Council, but we know it will punch above its weight and bring global attention to issues important to us all.

With the Caribbean’s support, Australia was re-elected to the Councils of organisations responsible for setting international rules for air and sea transport, the International Civil Aviation Organization and the International Maritime Organization.

Australia is the world's largest island nation, and like the islands of the Caribbean, is dependent on safe and secure air and sea links to connect our people to the rest of the world.

We will continue to work with Caribbean countries in these organisations to ensure their policies, standards and rules benefit us all.

In the Commonwealth, we are working with Caribbean countries, including Trinidad and Tobago, Belize, The Bahamas, Barbados and Jamaica to protect and restore Coral Reefs.

We share knowledge on how we can best protect our coral reefs, and preserve the health of the oceans.

So, 2019 was a busy year.

We are looking forward to an equally exciting 2020 in which Australia and the Caribbean continue to build their partnership.

We especially look forward to the arrival in Trinidad and Tobago of Australian-built patrol boats and ferry vessels later this year.

Before I hand you back to our MC, I would like to take a moment to say a few thank yous.

Thank you to the Trinidad and Tobago Defence Force Steel Orchestra for entertaining us – the best is yet to come.

Thank you to Carib for donating the beer and cider. If you know anything about Aussies – you know we love our beer.

Thank you to the High Commission staff and all of our service providers who have organised this evening.

And thank you all for being here tonight to help us celebrate.