



Australian Government

AUSTRALIA'S CHIEF SCIENTIST

7TH ANNIVERSARY CLUB MELBOURNE AMBASSADORS DINNER

8 MINUTE SPEECH

MELBOURNE CONVENTION AND EXHIBITION CENTRE, MELBOURNE

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Acknowledgements

**The Honourable Alex Chernov AC QC, Governor of
Victoria
Mrs Elizabeth Chernov**

Good evening, and thank you for the invitation to speak here tonight. Tonight, I want to talk about goals.

I always enjoy returning to Melbourne: the city where I was born and the city where you are often measured by that most complex of instruments - the football team you follow.

For the record, my team moved to Sydney. I found that hard to swallow at the time; especially since, from not long after I could walk, I learnt how to kick further than my dog. I represented South Melbourne in every match he and I played in the backyard. He lost every one.

But when you think about it, the only point in winning a football match against your dog was that I knew I had beaten my dog at football. Were he the best footballer going around, it would have had some meaning – but just between us, he couldn't kick at all. So he couldn't win, ever; and I guess that I knew even then that it wasn't a really useful way to assess my prowess as a footballer.

Of course, life could be like that; we could always set a low bar when we think about how we do things. We could do that as an individual – beating my dog at football and presuming that it meant I was good at football, for example; or we could do that as a nation – selecting a group of comparator countries whose average performance is low enough for us to be above it.

Or we can try to be up there amongst the best. To compare what we do, and how, with countries that we would like to be like – socially, culturally, economically; or compare ourselves with individuals who set high standards in whatever they choose to do, as indeed our Olympians do.

Australian science needs to be up there with the best. No ifs and no buts. We need science – and we have no room for second rate science.

We have our own problems to solve: Australian problems confronting Australians. And science will be at the heart of many of the solutions. On top of that, we are a member of the global community, and we have a responsibility as a developed country to make a contribution to the resolution of the problems that confront human-kind.

So our science, our talents and our skills will make a difference to our own well-being as well as to improving the lot of human-kind.

Let me take food security to illustrate the point. At the present time, the world cannot provide adequate nutrition for 1 billion of its human inhabitants. Australia cannot feed them, but we can contribute to the solution.

We are a country of some 22 million people, but it is estimated that we contribute food to the diets of 60 million people; and through the use of Australian know-how, we improve food production elsewhere and contribute to the diets of some 400 million people.

We are good at science. But we need to stay good at it. (High in a long list) that means attracting more people into science. And that will take concerted effort.

We must make the need clear, and we don't do that well.

When you think about our recent Olympians, they are athletes, and obviously have natural ability, but they are so

disciplined and train so hard to be the best in their field, or to be the best they can be.

Even though it takes less than 10 seconds for Usain Bolt to blow us away and win gold, sporting achievement, like scientific achievement is not something that develops overnight. Scientists also must train hard, and study for years to excel.

And like many athletes, scientists start early. Recently, Australia selected 13 secondary students from around the country to compete in the International Science Olympiads, selected after a gruelling regime of testing and training. They competed in Chemistry, Biology and Physics against 1000 students from around the world. They sat a five hour theory exam and undertook five hours of practical laboratory tests.

And there was no guaranteed medal at the end of the road – although the odds were a bit better than the other Olympics since there were more than three medals per category.

In the event, our 13 students won 4 Silver medals, 8 Bronze and one received an Honorable mention. A 92% return rate on medals.

I should add that 5 of the 13 were from Victorian Schools: winning 2 Silver, 2 Bronze and the Honorable mention.

But I wonder how many of you knew about this. It didn't get much of a run in the mainstream media – if any run at all – and I haven't seen politicians waiting to be photographed with this group of world-class competitors.

However, I live in hope that one day we'll see Australia's scientific achievements greeted with something approaching the euphoria that sport manages to generate.

I live in hope that the Swannies will win a premiership or two in the coming small number of years.

And I thank my dog for helping me understand that it is important not to draw grand conclusions from easy wins.