

WE ARE ONE

PDG John McLaren drives the case for establishing an Australian Rotary region to give us a united national voice and fortify Rotary in Australia as the nationally significant organisation it should be.

Proclaiming Australia

On July 9, 1900, the Queen (Victoria) signed an Act to enable the Governor-General Lord Hopetoun on January 1, 1901, to proclaim that the people: *"of New South Wales, Victoria, South Australia, Queensland, and Tasmania, and, as Her Majesty was satisfied that the people of Western Australia had also agreed thereto, of Western Australia,*

shall be united in a Federal Commonwealth under the name of the Commonwealth of Australia."

It had taken a long time for our founding fathers to decide that we are one. Today, 118 years on, we sing with one voice – *"I am, you are, we are Australian"*.

Rotary arrived

In 1921, Rotary arrived in Australia with the charter of the Rotary Club of Melbourne, Vic. Since then, Rotary has spread, and Australia now has 1100



PDG John McLaren
Immediate past chairman, Rotary Australia World Community Service Limited

Rotary clubs and 30,000 members – you would think we were a great national organisation and a force to be reckoned with.

Well, we're not...

By the middle of 2018 – almost 100 years on – Rotary in Australia was, and still is, at a crossroad.

The Board of Rotary International (RI) had announced that by 2021, Australian Rotary districts

were going to be reduced in number and contain significantly more clubs – even after this, no one will know why we have districts, or where one starts and the other finishes.

The Board of RI was also signalling a move towards regionalisation of the Rotary world, to group similar cultural groupings or zones together. This was confirmed in Hobart, Tas, in September 2018, by the immediate past RI president and an immediate past RI director at the Australian Rotary Conference (which was only

the second ever national conference – Darwin, in 2017, being the first).

An Australian Rotary company had, at this same time, partnered and provided logistic support to a national media outlet and a national lobby organisation in the biggest fundraising appeal Rotary in Australia had ever embarked upon – the Drought Relief Appeal program. We raised over \$10 million.

So why aren't we a force to be reckoned with?

The redistricting is occurring in a piecemeal manner, with no centrally coordinated approach or strategy to engage clubs and Rotarians that find themselves being merged into a new structure for no apparent good reason.

The long-held view that Rotary in Australia should have a national presence and voice is only now starting to emerge through the vehicle of the regionalisation of Rotary worldwide. The district governors have combined to request the Board of RI sanction a pilot Australian Rotary region.



An important outcome of such a development would be that Rotary would, for the first time, have a Regional point of contact and a regional authoritative voice for comment, advocacy, project promotion and interface with the corporate and philanthropic sectors.

Rotary Australia has emerged through the phenomenally successful Drought Relief Appeal, which provided unprecedented public exposure for Australian Rotary (whatever that might mean). This single focus illustrated the strength of Rotary in Australia – the rapidity and extent of the mobilisation of Rotary clubs across the country, as Rotary sought to distribute the appeal funds by providing humanitarian assistance to people in their own communities – a true illustration of *Rotary at Work*.

The Drought Appeal experience was built on previous successes in managing the Rotary Australia Compassionate Grants (RACG) program, which provided the careful distribution of philanthropist Dick Smith's \$1 million donation, turning it into \$2.5 million. This demonstrated

Australian Rotary's ability to partner with and facilitate national-scale donations from philanthropists and other large-scale funding partners. Today, the same Rotary company is partnering with the Commonwealth Government to distribute \$6.6 million of Commonwealth Government funds through Rotary clubs under the Drought Community Support Initiative to support drought-affected people.

We are one – and we need to work together

No-one, least of all the government, the corporate sector or philanthropists, are interested in the fragmented and uncoordinated way Australia's various Rotary activities compete among themselves. We need to provide direction and develop services that contribute to strengthening and supporting Rotary clubs. In short, we need to work together.

Rotary in Australia must have appropriate governance. We are the Australian part of Rotary International under whose charter we operate, however, we must comply with Australian law.

We must have a single national corporate structure – a charitable company limited by guarantee (we currently have four, largely single-purpose companies, with meaningless names and highly forgettable acronyms – Rotary Down Under; Australian Rotary Health; Rotary Oceania Medical Aid for Children; and Rotary Australia World Community Service).

What is required, as part of the international Rotary brand, is a single entity under the charter of Rotary International. Its members should be the Australian district governors of the day. This company can manage the Australian Rotary Relief Fund, which can provide tax deductibility to all Rotary's charitable activities in Australia.

Much of this vision already exists. If we are going to be a nationally significant organisation, we need to operate like one. We need to speak with one voice.

As we approach 100 years of Rotary in Australia, let's start to be Rotary Australia – a force for doing good in our world; a force to be reckoned with. •