

# **YHA AUSTRALIA 80<sup>TH</sup> anniversary speeches**

## **Saturday, 7 September 2019:**

### **1. Euan Prentice, YHA Ltd Chair**

Welcome everybody, thank you all for being here tonight. My name is Euan Prentice and I have the honour of being the Chair of YHA in Australia. I would firstly like to acknowledge the traditional owners and custodians of the land, the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation, and pay respects to their elders both past and present.

I acknowledge fellow Directors who are here tonight, both past and present, as well as volunteers, members of YHA Bushwalking Victoria (including their President Kris Peach, who you will hear from in a moment), and staff past and present - including Julian Ledger, CEO, who we congratulate on his 40<sup>th</sup> year of service with YHA.

We are fortunate to be here in this wonderful Immigration Museum, which reminds us of the many cultures that make up Australia as we know it today. We pay tribute to all the migrants who have helped shape our nation; many of those attending tonight are themselves migrants.

We are here tonight to celebrate the 80<sup>th</sup> anniversary of YHA Australia, and the YHA Bushwalking Victoria Club. And migration is a theme close to YHA's roots, as it was two migrants - educators named Dr Fritz Duras (from Germany) and Dr Alex Scholes (from New Zealand) - who set up the youth hostel movement in Australia in 1939.

The very day after Prime Minister Robert Gordon Menzies declared that Australia was at war with Nazi Germany, these audacious optimists forged ahead with setting up a youth hostel movement here. The inaugural public meeting of YHA took place on 4 September at Melbourne Town Hall. These two visionaries brought together a group of 150 representatives of various organisations to the first meeting of YHA, including the National Fitness Council, The YMCA, YWCA, Boy Scouts and Girl Guides.

Soon afterwards, a site was secured for the very first Australian youth hostel, at Warrandyte, on the outskirts of Melbourne. Many of us will re-trace their steps tomorrow and pay homage at a plaque marking the site of that first hostel. From the very beginning, YHA's guests were intrepid, and indeed international - the first visitor was a 'Mr E Whelan' from Liverpool, UK, who was reported to be walking his way round the world! Soon after, a group of students from Fintona Girls' School in Melbourne were the first group to stay. You can learn more about these trail-blazers on the place-cards on your tables, which are your personal souvenir to take away.

From that humble first hostel, and determined first guest, grew what is currently a network of 70 unique places to stay across Australia. Some of these are large city hostels, such as Melbourne Central YHA (where I'm sleeping tonight), Sydney Harbour YHA & Brisbane City YHA – all of which are celebrating 10 years this year since opening. Others are small, regional hostels, many in idyllic locations. YHA even has a 'Small Hostels Development Fund' to assist with these hidden treasures that many members, and some of YHA's activities clubs have generously donated to in recent years.

YHA is now a sizeable operation, with \$50M turnover annually and 300,000 members, however we proudly remain a not-for-profit organisation, and true to our mission statement: "To provide opportunity for all, but especially young people, for education by personal development, fostering friendship and bringing about a better understanding of others and the world around them".

---

Today, more than ever, we need to continue this idealism, backed up by quality hostels with welcoming staff and efficient systems, to strive to make the world a better place.

These sentiments are echoed by YHA's President, James Tomkins OAM – you may know him as one of the 'Oarsome Foursome' having represented Australia on several occasions at the Olympic Games. He is unfortunately unable to be with us tonight, however he has provided this message to pass on to you all:

- The world is becoming more separate and closed, with most countries becoming more protective;
- Geo politics are becoming increasingly tense;
- And now more than ever, YHA has a role to play in bring the youth of the world together -and it is something we should endeavour to facilitate and promote;
- Domestically, too, YHA can continue to encourage families to get out and explore in a clean and cost effective way;
- Finally, life is for living and shared experiences are what it's all about!

So thank you for being here tonight, to create new shared experiences together. I would now like to invite to say a few words, my fellow Director, who is also President of Hostelling International, Rob McGuirk – who we congratulate on being elected to that role, as well as thanking his for his service over the past 30 years as a Director of YHA in Australia.

---