



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
VICTORIA

EULOGY FOR THE HONOURABLE SIR JAMES GOBBO AC CVO QC
Tuesday 16 November 2021

**Archbishop,
Premier,
Former Governor-General, Governor and Premiers,
Members of State and Federal Parliament
Members of the Judiciary,
Distinguished Guests**
And above all, **Lady Gobbo and the Gobbo Family**

I'd like to start by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which we are gathering, and by paying my respects to their Elders, past and present, and to Elders of other communities who may be with us today.

I am honoured to have been asked to speak of the Honourable Sir James Gobbo AC, CVO, QC, former Governor of Victoria and, even amongst the great catalogue of Victorian statespersons throughout history, a towering figure.

When it began in 1997, the Gobbo governorship was in many respects a watershed for our State.

As Sir James was the first Catholic Governor of Victoria, and the first from a non-English speaking background, it was the first time that Victoria's dynamic multicultural community had been able to see themselves reflected in Government House. The first time that the children of migrants could have a sense of shared identity with their Governor.

Like Jim, they were the children of parents who had undertaken the long voyage to Australia and toiled hard to give their children the education and the opportunities that had eluded them.

Through an exquisite combination of talent, hard work and perseverance, Jim certainly did make the most of the opportunities afforded to him, and went on to achieve much success in Australia's professional and civic spheres. At the same time, however, at no stage did he ever lose touch with his more humble beginnings or his Italian heritage.

There are many happy memories at Government House that speak directly to that.

I understand that Jim delighted in going to the market before daylight, to choose for himself the Christmas tree for Government House – but most particularly to sit with and drink espresso with the market workers.

It wasn't unusual for him to slip out of Government House, incognito, to head over to 'The G' to catch the final quarter when his beloved Blues were playing – especially if they were playing well!

And in his memoir, *Something to Declare*, Jim described how on a number of occasions he'd wandered alone to the Shrine of Remembrance on a mission to find the initials that he believed his father had carved into the mortar when working on its construction. He said that he only gave up trying, when he realised that the curiosity of the Shrine Guards was unduly piqued by the repeated and unexplained sightings of the Governor of Victoria on the steps of the Shrine on his hands and knees!

No account of Jim's time as Governor would be complete without telling how, shortly after moving into Government House, he and Shirley walked up Toorak Road to rent a video from their closest video store.

Anyway, Jim used to delight in recounting how, in order to open an account for them in the store, the young woman behind the counter was helping to complete the relevant application form.

It all went easily enough until she had to ask him about their residential situation. At that point, it became quite laborious. Jim's answers about his new digs could not quite fit with the young woman's proforma questions. When he finally disclosed his address as Government House,

quite unmoved, the young woman casually asked the last question on her checklist: *'Well, do you own it or are you renting?'*

Across the last six and a half years, Tony and I have always loved it when we've seen Sir James and Lady Gobbo in the crowd at an event, welcomed them back at the House, or grasped the precious opportunity to sit and chat.

I particularly liked to draw Jim on the art of speech making. He understood better than most the power of a well-crafted speech – of an anecdote that invites the audience in, of a theme explored deeply but gently, of something that makes the listener feel not only understood, but special.

There are many amongst us here today, I'm certain, who heard Jim give speeches in many different contexts. I know he laboured over them – every word. This labour was an expression not only of his technical appreciation of the power of well-chosen language, but also of the thoughtful and generous way he approached the task.

That thoughtfulness, combined with a deep generosity of spirit, informed so much of his governorship, in which Shirley was such a vital and supportive companion.

They were the perfect Vice-Regal partnership – he conducted his official duties with dignity, integrity and humour, and Shirley, whilst supporting him faithfully in all those official capacities, also ensured that Government House, a priceless community asset, was cared for to the benefit of future generations.

To this day, visitors delight in the improvements Shirley made to the Government House gardens – just another way that their shared legacy endures.

There is so much that could be said of the Gobbo governorship, how so many people benefited from it, and the indelible marks it left.

One such indelible mark – indeed a theme that threaded through Jim’s life before, during and after his time at Government House – was his tireless commitment to volunteering, and his eloquent advocacy for it.

He never missed an opportunity to celebrate it, to encourage it and to reward it, and to emphasise its contribution to the health and strength of our community.

In the speech that he delivered as the Governor of Victoria on ANZAC Day in the year 2000, he deftly linked Australia’s culture of volunteering with the spirit of the diggers: *‘This great tradition of voluntary service so important to our history in time of war,’* he said, *‘is a value which is needed more than ever now in peace.’*

It is an insight that has only become even more compelling with the passing of the years.

Speaking personally, I had the pleasure and the good fortune of being acquainted with Jim over many years.

When we were both at the Victorian Bar, he was a renowned, somewhat iconic figure. A polished advocate, a great contributor to the profession. A gentleman.

As a judge of the Supreme Court of Victoria, he was rightly regarded as an excellent jurist and a luminous intellect – as well as a steady hand.

But it has been as Governor that I have come to know, in a very personal way, Jim’s grace and kindness: always a hallmark of the way he discharged his innumerable civic and community roles – but also very much the essence of Jim in his private interactions.

In his memoir, Jim spoke of his parents’ quality of *‘gentilezza’*. (I hope Jim would forgive my poor Italian pronunciation!) He said it was difficult to translate, but that it conveys *‘a sense of natural dignity, above all of courtesy in [dealing] with others.’* I think it perfectly encapsulates Jim himself.

It is often said that what matters most is how someone makes you feel, rather than what they say. Sir James, with his elegantly chosen words and the warmth of his manner, managed to achieve a rare and perfect harmony between words and feelings.

As the 25th Governor of Victoria, he always made me, the 29th, feel supported with those words and feelings.

I was, for example, frequently the fortunate beneficiary of the beautiful hand-written notes he would send after even the briefest interaction. His unmistakable handwriting on an envelope arriving on my desk would always make me smile, and it saddens me now to know there will be no more of them.

I should add that my husband Tony has also particularly enjoyed his interactions with Jim.

It wasn't too long ago that he was having lunch, (at Caffé e Cucina: Jim's choice), with Jim and John Walker QC. They were laughing that, as the young John Walker had read with Jim at the Bar, and the young Tony Howard had in turn read with John, that really made Jim Tony's barristerial grandfather. I was thrilled to learn that evening that I could possibly claim to be Jim's granddaughter in law!

To Lady Gobbo and to their large and much-loved family, on behalf of all Victorians, Tony and I extend our heartfelt condolences. Whilst much the poorer for his passing, Victoria will always be the richer for the endeavour, the compassion and the gentle and wise presence of the Honourable Sir James Gobbo.

May he rest in peace.