



RI PRESIDENT'S WELCOME ADDRESS TO THE ROTARY INTERNATIONAL CONVENTION

Ian H.S. Riseley
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As they say here in Canada, welcome and *bienvenue!*

And as they say in Australia, g'day!

It's great to see all of you here at the 109th Rotary International Convention in beautiful Toronto — or as they say around here, Trono!

Some of you may already know that this is the fifth Rotary convention to be hosted in this city. Toronto is now second only to Chicago in number of conventions hosted, and just between us, Chicago had quite a big head start.

One has only to spend a few hours strolling about the city to see why Rotarians have returned to Toronto again and again. Not only is it clean, beautiful, welcoming, and amazingly diverse, it is full of some of the nicest people you'll find anywhere. Canadian niceness is legendary, and the reputation is well-deserved.

Equally well-deserved is the Canadian reputation for ferocity on the ice hockey rink, and boundless love and optimism for the local team. So much so, that when we came knocking on the doors here at the Air Canada Centre some years ago, asking whether we might reserve the arena for our annual convention, the answer was, "We'd love to have you — after the Stanley Cup playoffs. You never know — that might be the year the Maple Leafs go all the way."

Since I myself support an Australian rules football club that hasn't won a premiership since 1964, this made complete sense. "No problem. We'll have it the last week in June. Go, Leafs, go!"

And that is how we came to be here in Toronto, not at the beginning of June, when we usually hold our convention, but virtually at the end of this Rotary year. Once this convention ends, so too will the year in Rotary.

And what a year it has been.

When I was nominated to be your president in the 2017-18 Rotary year, one of my first tasks was, of course, choosing a theme.

It was obvious to me right from the start that our theme in this Rotary year should be *Rotary: Making a Difference*.

As you've just heard, I am an accountant, a vocation not normally associated with poetry or philosophy, and one which tends to frown upon creativity. But we accountants love a good balance sheet, and we find few things more satisfying than a ledger that finishes its year, as they say, in the black. You see what you had at the beginning, you see what you have at the end, and there before you is the difference.

In Rotary, we certainly make it a priority to keep our books in a manner that would satisfy even the most exacting accountants. But we are not here to see the kind of difference that can be measured on a balance sheet.

At the end of the year, we want to see not an account balance, but a world, that it is better than it was at the beginning — that is healthier and happier and, perhaps, a bit more peaceful as well, thanks to Rotary.

That's what we're about, here in *Rotary: Making a Difference*. It's not only our theme — it's what we do.

And as this year of Rotary service, and my year as your president, come to a close — I want to say thank you, to all of you, for doing just that.

Some people think that the short career of a Rotary president is spent mostly in Evanston, perched high up in a corner office gazing down upon the Rotary world. Not so. The presidential office is lovely, the view of Lake Michigan impressive, but the number of days I got to look at it were very few indeed. Most of this year Juliet and I spent not looking down upon the Rotary world, but looking it in the eye, in a way that very few are fortunate to do. We saw the difference that is being made by Rotarians right around the world, every day — a difference that is multiplied, and magnified, by the 1.2 million members, serving in over 35,000 clubs, in every country where Rotary serves.

As I hope you all know, I started the year by asking every Rotary club to plant one tree for each member, with the goal of 1.2 million new trees planted. Rotarians being what they are, I suspected that we would end up with many more. I did not realize how many of them I myself would plant, but it is always a pleasure to do so. Yes, that's me, doing the dirty work.

When it comes to planting trees, you're never too young to get your hands dirty. The man in that picture might not get to enjoy the shade that tree will one day produce, but the future Rotarian on the right will.

Our Rotary staff also got in on the action this year, arranging a tree planting by the Evanston lakeshore in a project that won a local environmental award. But when it came time to actually dig the holes, guess who got handed the shovel? That's right. Juliet and I planted over 200 trees this year, which is just a tiny fraction of the number of trees that were planted this year by, and with, and because of Rotary.

Planting trees is a long-established Rotary tradition, one that goes right back to the days of Paul Harris. This year, we planted trees not only for friendship, but for a different reason: to draw attention to the very urgent need for Rotary to consider the environment in its service. Protecting our planet, and ensuring its sustainable future, is something I have long felt we should be paying more attention to in Rotary.

As Juliet and I planted tree after tree — after tree, after tree, after tree — it became abundantly clear that many, many Rotarians felt the same way. We were immensely heartened by the enthusiasm we saw in Rotary for protecting this one planet we all share, and on which we all depend.

Everywhere we went, Juliet and I received warm Rotary welcomes in all shapes and sizes, from the extremely tall, to the ones that made me feel shorter than I usually do. (That's me down there in the corner.) Some welcomes put me right in my place, like this one on the staff whiteboard of a Rotary-supported project we were visiting in Outback Australia. If you can't read that, it says, "Welcome Ian Riseley, Rotary poobah."

Juliet suggested adding "Rotary Poobah" to my business cards, but it's a bit late now.

All over the world, we met with Rotarians, Rotaractors, Youth Exchange students, and even the odd inflatable kangaroo.

We learned just how much respect is accorded to our organization by the governments of the world and had the chance to meet some illustrious dignitaries, including the president of Fiji and president of the French Senate.

And we learned not to take ourselves too seriously.

I also learned that sometimes it's better not to ask too many questions. Among the questions I decided not to ask as I was being piled into this billy cart in Johannesburg was "Has it got any brakes?" The answer would have been a resounding no. But the crowd, with great good sense, parted before us like the sea, no one wound up in hospital, and it was great fun once it was over.

And everywhere we went, every time we stepped out of a plane, a train, a car, or a billy cart, we learned just how much, and in how many ways, Rotarians are making a difference.

In Montserrat, we saw the incredible difference that even a very small Rotary club can make, in this case both by supporting a new Interact club and equipping the science room of a local high school. I asked the young lady in this picture whether she enjoyed learning science, and she responded, "Thanks to the help we have from Rotary, I'm interested in everything."

In the words of W.B. Yeats, education is not the filling of a bucket — but the lighting of a fire.

In Sri Lanka, we went to the opening of the first human heart valve and tissue bank, a

state-of-the-art facility that was organized by local Rotarians, and partially funded by The Rotary Foundation. Thanks to this facility, children undergoing lifesaving heart surgery can have the best outcomes — and live longer, healthier lives.

In Summerside, Prince Edward Island, Rotary built the local library decades ago. When the need for a new library became clear, Rotary stepped up again — with a beautiful new library, its walls painted Rotary blue, and the Rotary wheel right out front. This former librarian was most impressed, as was I.

We had the opportunity to spend time with some of our Rotary heroes, who are always an inspiration.

There may also be reasons why our leadership is seen as being just part of the group, willing to join in the work and have fun at the same time.

Rotary is a team sport, and Rotary leadership no less so. I asked your Board of Directors to concentrate this year on issues that were strategic in nature, with the potential to improve our great organization. They approached this task with gusto and creativity, and I thank them for it. My vice president, Canada's own Dean Rohrs, deserves special thanks.

As many of you know, the average age of our membership is much higher than we would like it to be, and bringing in younger members is an organizational priority. To this end, I instituted an eight-person committee of younger experienced Rotarians, and asked them to give the Board their perspective on a variety of important matters. Their contribution was outstanding, and greatly appreciated.

Rotary is best known for the great programs we do with younger people, and it is a great pleasure to be able to celebrate the 50th anniversary of Rotaract here at this convention. Yes, they do enjoy themselves while doing good service work.

You may have heard it said that the world is run by those who show up. Rotarians don't just show up. They show up, and get to work.

Many of you know that I love the great country of New Zealand. There's a Maori proverb from that country that I'd like to share with you, that asks: What is the most important thing in the world? The answer is: *He tangata, he tangata, he tangata.*

It is the people, it is the people, it is the people.

In Rotary, it is the people who are making a difference.

Thank you for all that you do. And please enjoy a wonderful convention.