

Australia Day Message 2015



Ambassador John Williams and H.E. Mr Lytou Bouapao, Vice Minister for Ministry of Education and Sports, opening new pilot water, sanitation and hygiene facilities at a school in Vientiane.



Foreign Minister Julie Bishop MP meets with H.E. Mr Thongsing Thammavong, Prime Minister for Lao PDR at the Government Office in Vientiane in July 2014.

I am delighted to speak to you on the occasion of Australia's National Day.

Australians celebrate our country's strong values and outstanding achievements on 26 January each year - the date of the arrival in what is now Sydney of the first fleet of European convict settlers back in 1788.

Australia has changed markedly over the last few decades, yet alone over the past 230 years.

Australia today is a dynamic, creative, multicultural country, built around core values of egalitarianism and individual freedoms.

Contemporary Australia also benefits from the extensive and close relations we enjoy with our neighbours across the Asia-Pacific region, including the Lao PDR.

We are a unique, distinctively Australian voice in this region.

The perspective of a young, robust democracy, and an open, competitive economy, benefiting from our location in a region fast becoming the centre of global economic activity.

And we are a country that values highly our partnerships with our neighbours, and our connections with the myriad of peoples and cultures across Asia and the Pacific.

We celebrated these regional links in 2014, when we staged events across South-East Asia to mark the 40th anniversary of Australia's relations with ASEAN.

As part of those celebrations, I was delighted to join an international crew in the national boat racing festival here in Vientiane last October.

We were not the fastest boat on the Mekong, but we were honoured and thrilled to participate in a distinctively Lao national celebration.

And last April, we celebrated the 20th birthday of the first Friendship Bridge, the first bridge across the Mekong connecting Thailand and Laos, built by Australia.

As an ASEAN official told me last year, the bridge showed Australia was supporting regional connectivity well before the term became popular.

Our support for regional economic integration, and for Laos' ability to benefit from this, has grown markedly over the last two decades.

Australia continues to manage an extensive portfolio of aid programs in the Lao PDR in education, human resource development, rural development, trade reform, agriculture, UXO clearance, human rights and natural resource management.

2014 was another active and positive year for Australia in the Lao PDR.

We were delighted to host visits to the Lao PDR by Australia's Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, and our Education Minister, Christopher Pyne, as well as three separate delegations of Australian parliamentarians.



Education Minister and Leader of the House Christopher Pyne MP, participated in the second East Asia Summit Education Ministers Meeting in Vientiane in September 2014.

And we launched our major new aid program – a four-year basic education program to help ensure all Lao children are able to enjoy a quality primary schooling.

2014 was also marked by sadness – with the passing in September of Australian academic and author, Dr Grant Evans, after a short battle with cancer.

As a founding father of Lao studies, his death was a terrible loss for both Australia and the Lao PDR.

We will remember Grant and try our best to honour his outstanding legacy.

2015 promises to be another busy year for Lao-Australia relations.

We are looking forward, in particular, to hosting an official visit this year by H.E. Prime Minister Thongsing Thammavong as a guest of Australia's Prime Minister, Tony Abbott.

This will be the first visit to Australia by a sitting Lao Prime Minister, and will help strengthen the excellent cooperation both countries enjoy in regional and international affairs.

This year we will also welcome the first young Australian students to the Lao PDR under the Australian Government's New Colombo Plan.

This new initiative is a reverse of Australia's long-standing scholarships programs, including here in Laos – where over 1,100 alumni have graduated from Australian universities on Australian Government scholarships.



Education Minister Christopher Pyne (centre) and Vice Minister for Education and Sports, H.E. Mrs Sengdeuane Lachantaboun, presented 50 Lao students with Australia Awards Scholarships in Vientiane in September 2014.



The Hon Bronwyn Bishop MP, Speaker of the House of Representatives, opened a new Australian funded showroom at the Lao Disabled Women's Development Centre in Vientiane in September 2014.

The New Colombo Plan aims to strengthen both Australia's understanding of our region, and the institutional links between our businesses, universities and other organisations.

Around 50 Australian students from Griffith, James Cook and Sydney Universities will this year complete short-term study, research or work placements in Laos.

They will work in fields such as livelihoods and food security, nursing and midwifery, archaeology and tertiary education development.

This ground-breaking program leads me to the theme of our 2015 Australia Day celebrations here in the Lao PDR - innovation.

Australia is a continent of inspiration and creativity.

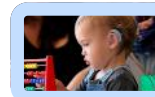
We have a population of only 23 million people.

Yet every day millions across the world utilise leading Australian inventions in areas like medical science, aviation, mining, agriculture and astronomy.

For example, the nanopatch, providing pain-free vaccinations. A ground-breaking vaccine for cervical cancer. The bionic ear. Spray-on skin for burns victims. Google maps. Hi-speed WiFi. And the black box flight recorder.



Nanopatch



Cochlear



HPV vaccine



Black box flight recorder

All Australian inventions - prolonging life, making it safer, easier, more enjoyable.

And there are the Australian discoveries we don't hear about.

Like blue smart farms – an award winning, world-first horticulture system in western Sydney, producing herbs and barramundi, simultaneously and effluent free.

The state-of-the-art glasshouse farm is forecast to produce 10 times more organically-certifiable food than traditional horticulture systems.

Australians have earned more Nobel Prizes per capita than any country.

14 Australians are Nobel Laureates for their achievements in physics, chemistry, physiology, medicine and literature.

Australia is fortunate to have historically been an early adopter of innovations and new technologies.

In business, we are a global leader in five sectors - agribusiness, education, tourism, mining and wealth management.

This focus on innovation reflects an enterprising spirit that pervades in Australia - the resilience, creativity and unquenchable desire to succeed.

We have also benefited from our open immigration policy over many years.

The growing diversity of our population - as up to 150,000 new migrants come to our shores each year - brings new perspectives, new skills and new ideas.

This is helping produce a contemporary Australian economy able to succeed in an era of globalisation.

And it has helped produce world-leading Australian companies – like ANZ bank and Phu Bia Mining – that are setting industry standards here in the Lao PDR.

I am delighted to be celebrating my second Australia Day as our Ambassador to the Lao PDR.

And I remain committed to strengthening further Australia's partnership with the Lao PDR in many fields.

John Williams

Australian Ambassador to the Lao PDR