



THE HON RICHARD MARLES MP

MEMBER FOR CORIO

OPINION PIECE

2014 – THE YEAR THAT WAS

A century after the year which defined modern history and ushered in the Great War, 2014 seemed to provide the world with its own turmoil and more than its share of tragedy.

It was a year of airline calamities including the outrage of a defenceless Malaysian Airlines plane, carrying among others 38 Australians, shot from the sky as collateral damage of the conflict in Ukraine. It ranks as Australia's worst Post-War air disaster because of a senseless act on the other side of the planet.

ISIS became the new brand of terrorism committing acts which were defined by their publicity and their medieval brutality. It was a threat that needed to be met and accordingly 2014 saw Australians engaged in a new theatre of conflict.

Terror reached our own shores with the tragic siege in Sydney which saw the astounding courage of Tori Johnson and Katrina Dawson along with an outpouring of national unity that made you proud to be an Australian.

And in the most difficult of times shines the brightness of humanity. While the Ebola virus has claimed the lives of more than 350 health workers, thousands have continued to volunteer from around the world, including Australia, risking their lives to stop this global threat on the front line. This is a decision of immeasurable bravery that reminds us that humanity is capable of transcending the selfish to become selfless.

In Geelong we have faced our own hardship. 2014 was the year of Alcoa.

In February Alcoa announced the closure of Point Henry. Along with Ford it meant that the two biggest pillars of Geelong's private sector economy would be no more. In the case of Alcoa the effect of the decision came quickly.

Alcoa has been wonderful for Geelong over more than half a century. In addition to the millions of dollars annually that enter the local economy through a thousand wages, Alcoa has been at the forefront of supporting community projects.

In August I visited point Henry on the last day of its smelting operations. It was a deeply sad moment that will stay with me for a long time. Men and women walked out the door of a place of security into a world of challenge and uncertainty. They were anxious but stoic.

Governments at all levels failed those at Alcoa. A fundamentalist economic philosophy from Tony Abbott's Government has systematically cut a swathe through Australia's manufacturing. Rather than fight for much needed transition funds for Geelong which could have provided hundreds of jobs, Tony Abbott's local representatives instead sought to blame Alcoa itself. To make matters worse Tony Abbott backed this up with an unfair budget which has taken an axe to the very social safety net that many of these workers will need.

The election of Daniel Andrews in Victoria which has seen Geelong be represented by two members in cabinet offers hope. But our city ends the year with big challenges ahead.

Yet as occurred on the global stage, in Geelong we've seen great bravery in 2014. In 2007 in the wake of announced job losses at Ford, John Eren and I founded Northern Futures to help people in Norlane and Corio connect to the economic opportunities that still existed in Geelong. Attending graduations of Northern Futures in 2014 I've witnessed young and old alike put themselves on the line, take the challenge of learning something new, and risk failure in order to seek a better life for themselves and their families. In their faces is distilled courage.

And it is a courage and an ingenuity shown by former Alcoa worker Damian Young and his wife Bethany. Having spent his working life on the hot floors of an aluminium smelter, faced with the challenge of change, Damian and Bethany established Ryder Loves Miller, a boutique children's clothes store now doing business in East Geelong.

It is an inspiration for the thousands of others facing similar circumstances, and a beacon of hope that no matter what 2014 has thrown at us, Geelong will triumph in 2015 and beyond.

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