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Q&A WITH MICHAEL KIRBY

The Canberra Times
Questions by Sally Pryor

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

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Anonymous relaxation?

Anonymity and privacy are part of self-awareness and essential to happiness. In the current age, these values are being lost. Boringly enough, my idea of bliss is a beach holiday with my partner, Johan, armed with a few good books. My problem with theatre, concerts and galleries is that my mind is always reminding me of outstanding work. But when I was in London recently, I took time to spend a day at the National Portrait Gallery, tossed in a couple of films and a few book shops in Charing Cross Road.

Reading literature?

During my Court years, I lost the habit of reading literature. The Appeal Books were a kind of literary exploration. Full of murder, mayhem, greed, pride and lust. Now I don't have them, I hope to catch up on all the books I missed. But my idea of relaxation is to dip into a good biography. At the moment I am reading a life of Joseph Banks, Cook's companion on the journey that proved a tipping point for modern Australia (Richard Holmes, *The Age of Wonder* (Harper Collins, London, 2000).

Lately discovered pleasures?

Well, there are plenty of these. I never touched alcohol until I was 28. As President of the Sydney University Union, I used to toast the Queen in milk, to the astonishment of my fellow students. It gave a good impression of my unusual incorruptibility and proved a good electoral image. But when I met Johan, I was led into an acquaintance with demon drink that I have not been able to shake off since. An occasional glass of Moet is our favourite. But shades of a teetotaller upbringing, I still cannot take much of the stuff. There were other pleasures discovered later, but we won't go there.

Travel and work?

I will have a couple of evenings free in New York to take in the theatre. Musicals are what they do best in that town. So the acclaimed revival of *South Pacific* is on my radar. When I was last there in March, I saw *Hair*, which has now transferred to London. A great production. It let the sunshine in.

Love of India?

I have had a love affair of India since childhood. It was reinforced by my first visit in 1962. Back in 1970 and again in 1974, Johan and I travelled all over India in a Kombi van. It was not part of his Netherlands culture. But he also ended up hooked. It is such a romantic land of huge variety. Only now are Australians coming to realise the many links that bind us to that amazing land of opportunity.

Cooking?

When Johan and I first met 41 years ago, I was the cook. The repertoire was extremely limited. In the end, he pensioned off my limited culinary

skills and took over. He is a great cook. A year ago I “launched” a book on animal welfare law. I learned more about the slaughter of animals than I needed to know. I have not eaten meat or fowl since. This has presented a challenge to our kitchen. Now my diet is mainly vegetables, but with a little fish. Johan says that I will get over this ‘latest fad’. But I won’t. Many young people today are vegetarians. This is an upcoming issue for human sensibilities.

Living in Canberra?

We loved living in Canberra. We may have been the only ones on the High Court for much of the time who did so. We lived in Kingston in an apartment with a magnificent view. It was a joy to arrive. Above all, to walk to and from work and to see the changing seasons and the bright stars at night. We miss the shops, restaurants and walks around Kingston and the lake. Chapters in life open and close. Decades disappear at amazing speed. Our favourite public building in Canberra (after the High Court, of course) is the new National Portrait Gallery. The portrait of me is a masterpiece – both subject and artist. I am grateful that this little part of me remains close to the High Court as a reminder that there are alternative visions of our law.

Prime Ministers in the Lodge?

I believe the Prime Minister should live in Canberra. But occasionally living in other parts of Australia makes one cherish the national capital when one returns. Those who know say that we should have a more attractive residence for the PM. I have never been to the Lodge. Judges keep their distance for politicians. That is a view that I support.
