

## THE QUEEN'S BATON OR THE LONELINESS OF THE SHORT DISTANCE RUNNER

Michael Kirby<sup>\*</sup>



The last time I ran in a relay was 1948, almost sixty years ago. The teachers at the North Strathfield Public School were always trying to prize me away from my books, to get me to exercise on the asphalt-covered playground near where the bottles of milk stood in the sunshine, doubtless so that the cream would rise to the top.

Rising to the top in relays was not to be my strong suit at school. But I did my best and frantically covered the assigned distance. It seemed an eternity. The schoolchildren screamed our team on. My main concern was not to drop the baton as I passed it on to the next runner. In my mind's eye, I can see young Rob Yeomans grasping the

---

<sup>\*</sup> Justice of the High Court of Australia. Photographs copyright Rockdale City Council.

## 2.

piece of wood as I thrust it into his hands. Then off he ran on the next leg. I cannot remember whether we won the competition, or lost. For almost sixty years I forgot this childish pursuit. It was tucked away in my memory, awaiting events of January 2006 to summon it back.

The summons to carry the Queen's Baton arrived when I was overseas. My long suffering secretary, Janet Saleh, told me to sit down to receive the news. I had been asked to take part in the relay for the XVIII Commonwealth Games to be opened in Melbourne on 15 March 2006 by Queen Elizabeth II. My selection as a finalist for Australian of the Year in 2006 had assured me of a place in the relay. But did I want it? Could I run the 500 metres? Would my recent bypass operation forbid a return to the exertions of schooldays? In short, should I just say no and spurn the chance of carrying this symbol of the Commonwealth of Nations?

The memories of the school day relay came flooding back. "I'll do it", I said. The promise of a smart outfit of white shorts and a logo covered t-shirt (made in China) clinched my decision. Perhaps I could run – or at least like John Howard walk very briskly – along Lake Burley Griffin, bedecked in the Commonwealth Games outfit. That sight could encourage a new image. I supported the Commonwealth of Nations as a free association of nations that had shared a history of British rule and now uphold the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. So I agreed. Immediately, I began training for the big event.

### 3.

On a far away beach, observed in disbelief by my partner, Johan, I practised running again. Walking is a pleasurable exercise. But running, for the out-of-puff, is something altogether different. I set a goal of a distant boat, dragged onto the sand. With what seemed heroic effort, I reached my goal and looked back at Johan walking languidly towards me. "How far was that?", I asked, full of hope. "Fifty metres", he replied, returning to his icecream. "Are you sure? It seemed much further". "Sure, positive".

Each succeeding day I tried to run further. The trouble was I could hear the huffing and puffing and I could feel the heavy weather that my ageing body was making of this unexpected effort. But by now I had the bit between my teeth. I was going to carry the Queen's Baton in an international relay. Nothing now would stop me.

Australia Day 2006 dawned in Sydney, a glorious blue and sunny summer festival. From my office, I could look down Sydney Harbour and see where Governor Phillip and his band of outlaws and soldiers had come through the Heads and edged their way to the little inlet at Sydney Cove where later a great city would rise. Sydney was to be the legacy of the settlement they established on 26 January 1788. Thoughts of Phillip and his troops raising the Union flag near Circular Quay and doffing their hats to invoke God's grace on his Britannic Majesty, King George III, reminded me that this day I would play my part for that King's descendant and for the Commonwealth that accepted her as its Head.

As the hour of the relay approached I quit the city for the meeting point. I was a trifle disappointed that it had not fallen to me to carry the baton through the crowded city streets, to the thunderous applause of people marvelling at my new-found athleticism. Perhaps those prized routes were the preserve of politicians or genuine athletes: young and vigorous souls who presented no risk of collapse or failure before the television cameras that would beam their efforts to audiences at home and abroad.

My assigned run was to be beyond the Sydney airport in what was described to me as the City of Rockdale, near Brighton-le-Sands. I would just have to make do with my lot in life. Perhaps it was as well. Out there in Rockdale, the sight of me collapsing could probably be kept a secret, shared only by me and the good citizens of suburban Sydney.

We gathered at a little park where I first saw my fellow runners. Some were young-ish and much more vigorous than I. Most had been selected for this honour for their community work. One, even older than myself, told us that she had been a war widow since 1945. Another had collected funds for children's health research. Another was recovering from a cerebral event. She still suffered from discoordination of her limbs. But she was determined to run her leg of the relay. An older man had once been a champion long-distance runner. In recent years he had given it away. He wanted to recapture his past glories. I told him that the entry of experienced runners like him, still without an ounce of fat on his bones, was unfair to the genuine amateurs like me.



The first leg in our segment in Southern Sydney was to be run by a young Japanese Australian who was supported by a group of friends from her country of birth. Another, more overweight even than myself, was a Lebanese Australian from Brighton-le-Sands. Perhaps that is now a city too, I thought. His friends were to turn out in strength to welcome his arrival and to urge him on. Did these Australians know of Captain Phillip, and the British experience, the Queen and King George? I was not sure. But we were all there together to do our run. We were all prepared to join in the Australian spirit and to give-it-a-go.

In the bus that took us to our starting points we were briefed on the relay. It was, we were told, the longest and most inclusive relay in history. The same Queen's Baton that we would carry was travelling more than 180,000 kilometres. It was visiting all 53 nations of the Commonwealth and 18 territories. It was doing so in the space of a year and a day. It was even visiting the Antarctic territories. We were shown photographs of those who had run before us. Some were famous sports

## 6.

people, renowned throughout the world. But most were ordinary citizens of Commonwealth countries holding the Baton high with its symbol of internationalism and multiculturalism.

This was no ordinary baton. Inside the metal cone, we were assured, was a message recorded at Buckingham Palace by the Queen herself. A hundred thousand spectators would see it delivered safely so that the Melbourne games could begin. We, the runners, were part of the relay that symbolised the links between people in the four corners of the world. No longer were those links dependant on gunships and red-coats. Now, we are diverse nations that join together voluntarily and share common experiences. In a world of so many divisions and dangers, the Commonwealth of Nations is a precious community of people with shared interests and institutions. So this was worth doing.

We were urged to carry the baton comfortably. We were reminded that its high-tech composition included a facility, similar to that used in medical imaging. It could transmit video footage of key moments in our run. We were given a covering pad for our thumbs. When the sensitive baton was passed from one person to the next the new thumb-print would confirm that the change had been accomplished. In the most serious tones, the organisers warned that we were expected to return the thumb-guards as they were few and precious. One had recently gone astray and all hell had broken loose. Perhaps heads would roll.

Eventually, I was deposited at the corner of a quiet suburban street, not far from the sea-front that borders the South Pacific ocean that abuts Sydney. The sun was shining and a small group of neighbours came over as I limbered up for the big event. "Have we missed the relay?", they asked. I felt put out. Could they not see from my get-out that I was *part* of the relay? I put them right.

We fell into conversation about the disturbances that had broken out in this and nearby suburbs in the south of Sydney a few weeks earlier. The relay was running directly through the suburbs that had hit the headlines throughout the world. The angry crowds were replaced by the torpor of summer days. In fact, the street we were standing on was virtually empty. We exchanged thoughts about the solution for people of different races, religions, cultures and outlooks to live together peacefully. It was a suitable dialogue for an occasion celebrating the Commonwealth of Nations. If we in Australia, with all of our advantages, cannot live together in peace, what hope is there for the rest of the world? My new friends were optimistic but also realistic, in their laconic Australian way. They wished me well for my run and stood back when suddenly the bandwagon arrived.

Here, in quiet Rockdale, was the biggest collection of motor-cycle outriders I had ever seen. More even than in 1954 when the Queen first came to Australia. There were media trucks, police cars and other vehicles, accompanying police runners and motorbikes with flashing signals. In the background, an ambulance idled along, just in case an

old-timer unexpectedly made the supreme sacrifice for Queen and country.

I had no intention of doing this. As the shining baton was thrust into my hand, its seventy-one lights, symbolising the nations and territories of the Commonwealth, lit up. And so did I. I began my run down the quiet street. People began coming out of houses, waving from their balconies, calling out and smiling as my run began.

On the last corner of the street stood a woman in swimwear with a can of beer in her hand. I turned to wave at her. I even panned the Queen's Baton upon her. Perhaps she would be seen by audiences of millions on prime-time television in Ghana, or maybe Fiji, or perhaps Guyana or snowy Canada.

Instead of words of greeting, this fellow citizen grimaced and looked at me as if in amazement. "What kind of community leader are YOU?"

The tall-poppy syndrome was alive and well in the city of Rockdale. She had heard that only "community leaders" could enjoy this honour. She was distinctly sceptical about my credentials. And more than doubtful about my sporting prowess.



Feeling puffed and just a little downcast I smiled, gritting my teeth. Thankfully, I then emerged from suburbia into one of those green parks that hugs the coastline of Sydney's beaches.

Suddenly there was a large and happy crowd. Before I saw them, I was asking myself if this was all there was. But when the happy faces appeared, my new-trained energies revived. I strode out magnificently. There were 50 metres still to go. The crowd made a corridor for me to run through, towards a stage that marked the end of my run.

The crowd were holding Australian flags. The children were calling out, encouraging me on. There were Tongan Australians, Arab Australians, Asian Australians. People of every race, religion and background. People of all ages. Men, women and children. Many were in their swimwear, for just beyond the park was the beach. It was a hot afternoon and the water was beckoning.

I climbed the stairs onto the stage. Waiting for me in his mayoral gown, bedecked with a chain of office copied from some medieval English mayor of far away, the Mayor of the City of Rockdale stood ready to receive me and the baton of Her Majesty the Queen.



The crowd was hushed as the mayor made a formal speech. He paid tribute to the Commonwealth idea and so did I. I told the audience of how moving it was to see Australia displayed on its national day, in all of its diversity. This was not a happening that would capture world headlines. Still it was the ordinary harmony of our great multicultural experiment.

I told the sea of smiling faces of the last time I had run in a relay race - at the public school sixty years earlier. I told them of the schoolchildren who ran with me on that day, one of whom was my old friend Rob Yeomans. He had accompanied me to high school and, like so many such school day friendships, we had preserved the link throughout our lives. A little more than a week earlier, Rob had been killed in a car accident. His wife and grand-daughter were seriously injured. I dedicated my run with the Queen's Baton to Rob and to the memory of our school days, when the world was young and Australia was a less welcoming, inclusive place.

Life is mainly froth and bubble. But each moment is precious. We must experience life to the full, appreciating especially our families, loved ones and old friends. It was a long time between relay runs for me. Yet none of us should forget where we come from, where we are and where we hope we are running to.

The speeches were over. The cheers and happy faces were restored. I had discharged my summer's duty. The Queen's Baton was safely handed to the next runner. She took off, leaving the mayor, his gold chains and me standing and cheering with the rest.

In the days that followed I saw on television, images of other Australians carrying the Queen's Baton as it made its way to the great moment in Melbourne. The baton symbolises the links that bind us together in the Commonwealth of Nations. Never has it been more important to work at those links: preserving and strengthening them. Ties that bind, not causes that divide us. Respect for one another and for human dignity and diversity everywhere is what this run was about. I was part of it.

**THE QUEEN'S BATON**

**Michael Kirby**