

ADDRESS BY
HIS HONOUR MR TOM PAULING AOQC
ADMINISTRATOR OF THE NORTHERN TERRITORY
ON THE OCCASION OF
**OPENING ADDRESS – AUSTRALIAN ENVIRONMENTAL
PEST MANAGERS ASSOCIATION
NATIONAL CONFERENCE**
Darwin Entertainment Centre
10 July 2008

I'd usually extend a warm welcome to Darwin but it's actually cool, haven't seen a snake in weeks. Not as cold as Ballarat but anyway it gives me great pleasure to welcome you here this morning and in doing so, I acknowledge the Larrakia people and their ancestors, traditional owners of the land on which this venue stands.

It is a particular pleasure to have Darwin and the Top End host your 20th Annual Conference and Exhibition, appropriately entitled "Rise to the Top". We like to think of ourselves as the cream on the cappuccino, the best part of the Australian continent and the Top End is certainly a flourishing, fast-developing area of Australia.

The focus of your program over the next two days is fascinating: exotic pests, rats and termites. I'm not sure why I find this fascinating having endured many termite attacks on my own home at considerable expense.

Most of us are blissfully unaware of the thousands of "critters" that co-exist with us: weevils and silverfish, bee-killers and cockroaches. A sudden scurry might alert us to a *Periplaneta Americana*, American cockroach.

This, the largest of the common peri domestic cockroaches, measures on average an unnerving four centimetres in length. It originated in Africa and is second only to its smaller German cousin in abundance. One female German Cockroach can produce up to 20,000 young annually. "Sheiss!" as they say in Germany.

Female cockroaches also have the ability to produce young without mating, "parthenogenesis" (from the Greek *parthenos* meaning virgin and genesis - beginning).

The cockroaches produce eggs which can develop into young without ever being fertilised. In fact, and here's a scary thought, female Komodo dragons (the world's largest lizard) can also produce offspring by parthenogenesis when no male is available.

Combating this technique in pests must test your extermination talents to the limit. As Professor John W Kimball of Harvard University notes: *The idea that a constantly-changing environment, especially with respect to parasites, drives evolution is often called the **Red Queen** hypothesis. The name comes from Lewis Carroll's book "Through the Looking Glass", where the Red Queen says "Now here, you see, it takes all the running you can do to keep in the same place".*

The history of Government House demonstrates this all too well as not only has the Residence, (as it was formerly known), had to survive the ravages of periodic cyclones and Japanese bombs, it has also been plagued by marauding white ants, biological cousins to the cockroach.

George Byng Scott, the third Government Resident arrived in Palmerston, as the city of Darwin was then known, in November 1873.

He found that white ants, *Mastotermes darwiniensis*, were the scourge of the settlement – the Residence had lost its piano and wine stocks to the rapacious insects and required the services of a carpenter to continually renew floors and walls. Scott's official reception would not have enthused him too greatly as it is recorded: *We did not fire a salute because the white ants have taken possession of our twelve-pounder.*

His successor, Edward William Price, on occupying the Residence, was quick to report upon its poor condition: *This unfortunate building which cost so much is the permanent residence of the white ants, and ever since the top storey of wood was put on it is worse.*

In a dispatch in 1877, Price recorded the effects of a particularly fierce storm: *The Residence is still holding together, although in the severe gale we have just been visited with I thought the second story would have gone, however, the only damage done was the falling in of the roof of the North wing; when the iron was stripped off, it was found that the rafters had been completely eaten away and the roof only hung by the rivets.*

The following year he reports: *The only public work now in hand is the Residence and it progresses fairly; I had trusted that more of the old building could be left standing, but owing to its utter destruction by white ants only the inner walls of the large room could be utilised. To give you some idea of what white ants can do here, I may mention that they have found their way up through about 18 feet high of stone wall of the new building on to the timber of the roof.*

Finally Price reported with exasperation on the endless problem: *White ants continue to commit grave ravages. Every possible piece of timber that is not cypress pine has been destroyed, no matter how well protected. The verandah of Government House, the only part of it that is not cypress, has been eaten, and to get at it the white ants had first to go through a mass of masonry and solid lead. Such things are slight difficulties for them.*

On occupying Government House, Roger Nott, the eighth Administrator, (as Government Residents are now called), was advised that an earlier incumbent had found that white ants “*had invaded his cellar, perforated the metal tops of bottles, polished off the corks*”.

Nott, however, ignored this caution. He was a keen horse rider and saw the cellar as an ideal place to store his saddlery; some time later when he went to use his saddle, he found that white ants had eaten their way up through the wooden horse and into the leather, there being nothing left in the cellar but a pile of sawdust and metal fittings.

Following Cyclone Tracy, the Darwin Reconstruction Commission was established by the Federal Government to rebuild the city. It was reported that the Commission had set aside \$40,000 for immediate protective work on a number of historical buildings damaged by the cyclone. One of the main tasks at Government House was replacing the roofing timbers which, during the course of replacing the roofing iron, were found to be infested with white ants yet again.

On checking with my Property Manager this week, I was advised that the last minor invasion of white ants we suffered was three years ago when

they attacked the timbers of the apartment verandah. Though maybe, having learnt from Google that it has been discovered these subterranean termites eat wood twice as fast if you play loud heavy metal music, the son of a previous Administrator could have had a hand here.

The reputation of white ants reaches far beyond these shores. Sir Winston Churchill once said, on a visit to the United States:

Our Communist friends should study the life and the soul of the white ant. That will show them not only a great deal about their past but will give them a fair indication of their future.

It is also interesting to note that Australia's involvement in the 1950s Malaysian Emergency saw a successful military coordinated operation east of Ipoh. It involved five RAAF Lincolns and six from a Royal Air Force squadron in an exercise that was known as Operation Termite.

Not that all termite activity is negative, however. When you visit the markets tonight you may see, and hear, the didjeridu which has its origins in the "Top End". Yolngu artists of northeast Arnhem Land use the term *yidaki* to refer to the didjeridu in general. Yidakis are made commonly made from stringybark (or mulga, bloodwood, or woollybutt) and a good yidaki is hard to come by; many trees have to be checked before the right one is found.

By tapping on the trunk, the instrument maker can tell if the white ant has eaten into the tree enough. As a result of the termites' integral role, each and every yidaki is unique in shape, tone and character.

So I can think of no better memento of your visit here for you all to buy at Mindil Beach!

I wish you all the best for your conference and enjoy your time in Top End.