

The 2020 Henry Parkes Oration, 19 October 2020

Delivered at the Member's Dining Room, Museum of Australian Democracy, Old Parliament House, Parkes, Canberra

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Thank you to my friend Daryl Karp and to Ian Thom (great great grandson) for that generous introduction.

Let me also recognize one of the Press Gallery's finest most diligent and professional journalists, Karen Middleton, who only last week was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Canberra – congratulations Karen.

Thanks also to the many descendants of Henry Parkes, the Henry Parkes Foundation, its Board of Advisors, excellencies, ladies and gentlemen.

And my gratitude also to my academic colleagues from ANU who have come tonight or are joining us at a distance, and who have been so generous in welcoming me to that great university.

Can I begin by acknowledging the Ngunnawal people, the original custodians of the land on which we meet, and pay my respects to their elders, past, present and emerging.

I regard it as a great honour to be asked to give the 2020 Henry Parkes Oration.

And it is so lovely to be able to do so in person – a simple human interaction consistent with this building *and* with the settlement of Canberra which after all, is a derivation of a word in the Ngunnawal language essentially meaning 'meeting place'.

In the era of COVID such things as we took entirely for granted have been all the more appreciated for their denial, or "scarcity" as the dismal science would have it.

At the same time, we've seen, merely from watching the news, how something as unquantifiable as social capital – a sense of a national identity, community cohesion and of two-way trust between people and governments – has served Australia well, holding it together where other, harsher societies have splintered with destructive, and deeply discriminatory results.

Mind you, being a bit of a wordsmith, I had considered the contingent possibility of us all being forced outside for this oration in which case it might have been billed as '*On Parkes at Parkes, in park*'.

Henry Parkes of course, was a nation-builder and I like to think he would agree with me that even with the value of 120 years of federation, the job has stalled – that it's time for a refresh, a refocus, a new enlightened national bargain.

And I'm going to argue, as I heard Jimmy Barnes do in relation to his personal catharsis through writing *Working Class Boy* – his confronting memoir about poverty, endemic alcoholism and ubiquitous violence – that like Barnes had been, Australia is a nation emotionally blocked – hemmed in by the narrowness and inherent falsity of its own myth.

A nation unable to move purposefully forward for not being willing to look clearly back.

Barnes says he can feel much more now, and can live more freely, more completely, for having articulated his violent, dysfunctional origins.

Might we not also find progress in looking back honestly?

Society as a work in progress

Parkes came to the colony of New South Wales in 1838 after concluding that he simply would not make a living in England. He'd already been awakened to the world of words and the transformative power of ideas in Birmingham where he'd commenced an apprenticeship as an ivory carver at the ludicrously young age of 10.

So in that year, he reluctantly left his country of birth and indeed, left the nascent Chartist movement in which he had become active, for what he hoped would be "a better home in the wilderness of Australia".

As my friend, the esteemed historian Professor Paul Pickering has written, the editor of the Chartist newspaper depicted Parkes's emigration as damning proof that the standard of living for working class people was unconscionable.

"What must be the condition of England, and what the sins of her rulers, when men like him were compelled to seek the means of subsistence in a foreign wilderness," the editor wrote.

Of course, England's loss was Australia's gain, and the young reformist would, like so many migrants, go on to make a vast contribution to his adopted home – even if it hadn't actually been a deserted wilderness – but I'll get to that a bit later too.

Pickering writes: "Henry Parkes was one of many radical British migrants who helped to shape the political and social institutions of the Australian colonies where, as noted, many democratic reforms were implemented a generation ahead of Britain."

Parkes was elected to the NSW Parliament in a by-election in 1854 – a contest that he had skilfully turned into a referendum on "constitutional principles", albeit for men only.

"What on earth is there seditious, disloyal, or un-English," he asked in his speech at the declaration of the poll, "in extending to every man in this country the right to which every British subject is entitled."

Progressive as he was, he was inevitably a man of his time.

Yet just as we can use the current rate of change to project population growth or the rate of global heating, we might also credibly assert that were Parkes around today, he'd be a social progressive in today's terms: That is, he would have moved on from what Pickering called his "popular constitutionalism" to be an enthusiastic republican; He'd favour multiculturalism, marriage equality, gender equality, environmental protection, and reconciliation.

His approval of change and modernisation supports this contention deriving from his view that the Glorious Revolution of 1688 had marked a splitting of the monarchical chrysalis – a flipping of the power relationship between people and Crown and making the people substantially sovereign.

He called Parliamentary and Constitutional reform "a marvellous example of the progress of national sentiment".

The "progress" of national sentiment. Mark those words – progress and national sentiment.

"All parties are growing wiser, both 'theoretically' and 'practically' every year" he enthused.

In these comments we can see Parkes' understanding of society as a moving thing, as always a work in progress – a fundamentally different proposition from that of conservatives.

His role in the unification of Australia's six colonies is well recognised – even though he did not make it to federation himself, having died in 1896.

Still, having heard the arguments and witnessed the resistance to federation, the old Parkes would probably not be the least bit surprised to hear that in 2020 Western Australia's border remains firmly closed, that Queensland is at loggerheads with NSW, that states have been determinedly parochial.

The 21st century version of Parkes though, might be less impressed on the upside at the creation of the National Cabinet, perhaps wondering why we had stuck so long to internal rigidities which have served the nation poorly.

And he might ask why it took a health crisis – and its accompanying recession – to jolt our federalist torpor?

An opportunity squandered?

It's been well documented that voters in Australia have tended to mark up government leaders for the generally competent way they have risen to the COVID challenge.

Decades of declining trust in politicians rebounded sending some leaders' popularity into the stratosphere – Mark McGowan has been clocked at 90-plus per cent and even Daniel Andrews has only fallen marginally under the 50 per cent approval rating.

Professor Mark Evans, who works out of this very building has done much important work on political trust, and on models for modernising, revitalising our creaking democratic structures. He and I have collaborated on articles – including one self-consciously optimistic piece in May – in which we suggest the current crisis offers the opportunity for democratic renewal.

We suggested a national cabinet-led process of economic reform linked to a deliberative assembly in each state, with the twin tasks of formulating the priorities for economic recovery and addressing the cracks in our democracy. Special representation would be accorded to Indigenous nations in each assembly.

By that stage, COVID had prompted a streamlining of officious federal-state relations as the emphasis swung to problem solving instead of the usual politics and positioning.

So what's been made of this blue-sky event since?

Not much. And as Peter Hartcher observed over the weekend, "The people's pandemic-induced suspension of judgment is wearing off".

We hear a lot of about the social licence in business these days, but perhaps less about the political licence presented to governments confronted with national crises – if they have the imagination to use it.

This licence is not merely the authority to do big things, but the responsibility to make big changes, to transform the country.

While Scott Morrison has grabbed onto the national cabinet mechanism in preference to COAG, the goodwill and unified purpose that made it work in those early urgent months, has ebbed giving way to sniping, backgrounding, undermining, and straight-out public bickering.

And confirmation of the government failure to capitalise on the heightened trust in political leaders brought about by the crisis, came in the most recent federal budget.

Record debt and deficits and another \$98 billion in new spending suggested a reform canvass far more sweeping than is the case on closer inspection.

Intractable problems like low female participation in the labour market, job precariousness, the gender pay gap, galloping casualization, and inadequate urgency in the greening of the economy, were largely ducked.

So too homelessness, and the economic lynchpin of universal early-childhood education – a key to greater participation by women, and therefore to overall economic recovery.

Leading public policy economists such as ANU's Professor Bob Breunig say income tax cuts and to a lesser extent accelerated investment tax breaks for business may not be the best way to spur investment and economic growth.

He nominates – along with free or nearly free childcare – the replacement of stamp duty with land taxes, and big cuts to payroll tax.

But you can see the problem, right? These are state taxes and thus not in Canberra's purview.

Here's a case of the federation not serving our national interest and our politicians lacking the imagination to drive change.

Where's a latter-day Henry Parkes when you need him?

It's not like we're always bad at this stuff. We led the world in democratic machinery – things like the ballot paper, the secret ballot, preferential voting, compulsory attendance, and female participation.

But now, we're too inclined to see to the politics before the policy – why things can't be done instead of how they can.

The emptiness of accountability without cost

Now just moments ago, I acknowledged the traditional owners of these lands.

These are fine words, fine sentiments, but they are useless if they do not portend anything material or substantive.

Even worse, if they allow those uttering them to feel they have met and discharged any further responsibilities.

Reconciliation is a project that in my submission, remains doomed until we accept a mutual starting point of violent dispossession, official subjugation, and systematised discrimination.

Words are important but they are rarely an end in themselves.

There was golden rule among the men who wielded power here – advice usually muttered *sotto voce*: *never explain, never apologise and never, ever resign*.

I was told this jewel of practitioner's wisdom by someone who worked in this very house – and it was conveyed only half tongue-in-cheek.

In the old patrician days when national parliamentary membership was demonstrably exclusive, and customs still relatively new, advice like this said much about the mentality of our elected class, and even more about their narrow backgrounds.

There were almost no women, few if any MPs with English-as-a-second-language, and of course no Indigenous legislators – at least not until Neville Bonner's elevation

to a casual Senate vacancy in 1971. Bonner was the only Indigenous person to sit in this Parliament House BTW.

Gough Whitlam once told me during an interview just down the road at the Hyatt Hotel, how proud he was to have shared an office here as an opposition MP, with Tony Luchetti – whom he described as the federal parliament’s first Italian-Australian.

Nonetheless, Luchetti’s exoticness underscored the uniformity of our elected class.

Yet the rule “*never apologise never resign*” also showed that whatever their claims to be “of-the-people”, MPs and senators saw themselves apart, a privileged stratum existing in a degree of competitive tension with the people they represented.

One hundred and ten years ago, the German sociologist Robert Michels published what became known as his “iron law of oligarchy” in which he stated that no matter how democratic an organisation’s rules and intentions, eventually the interests of the representatives and those being represented will diverge.

It’s an argument for term limits in federal politics – an argument might I say that politicians themselves never make.

In recent years, the advice which is now provided by professional spinners, crisis management consultants, and legions of ministerial advisers, goes in precisely the opposite direction.

At a certain point in the trajectory of an unfolding ministerial fiasco, saying sorry has become a tool of survival – a release valve aimed at taking the pressure out of a given furore.

Some politicians have even become adept at it, recognising at an early stage of an PR crisis, that you might as well ‘get out in front’ of it, admit ‘accountability’, and say the words that were once considered anathema: “I’m sorry, I accept full responsibility, the buck stops with me,” before doing nothing more.

The recent Ruby Princess disaster in New South Wales, and the calamitous hotel quarantine stuff up in Victoria are cases in point.

But there are so many. Sportsorts for example: a hundred-million-dollar grants program shamelessly skewed for political purposes.

Combine this vote-buying with the \$83 million up-chuck by Clive Palmer at the last poll and money may have decided the election.

Then there’s the Angus Taylor / Sydney City Council affair in which a federal cabinet minister provided a forged document to a client newspaper in order to deflate the Sydney Lord Mayor’s climate change bona fides. Taylor claimed Clover Moore’s council racked up exorbitant international travel costs when it hadn’t.

The recent Leppington Triangle land purchase where a parcel of land was purchased for almost \$30 million for future expansion of the Western Sydney Airport – the actual value of the land was less than a tenth of the price – and the beneficiary, a past generous political donor.

Nobody is to blame – and where they are found to be in error, it brings no sanction.

Words go to a point but they are not *the* point.

Daniel Andrews declaring that his government was responsible for mistakes in the hotel quarantine system means little if nobody is accountable.

Now it's true that Health minister Jenny Mikakos resigned, eventually.

But the Premier did not relieve her of the post and she left after he told the inquiry that he believed the use of private security – basically hotel bouncers – fell within her field of responsibility.

She claimed not to even know about the use of private firms until many weeks after the program was up and running.

We've since learned the original decision was closer to the Premier than the health minister which is why his chief bureaucrat Chris Eccles has now fallen on his sword

This is no small matter. Nine Hundred or so Australians have died of from COVID-19 and more than 800 of them have been in that one state of Victoria – nearly all traced to the hotel quarantine outbreak.

Mikakos continues to insist that she did nothing wrong.

Former federal sports minister Bridget McKenzie lost her cabinet post during the Sportsorts imbroglio not for politically interfering with the disbursal of public funds but over the minor technicality of having not declared a gun-club membership.

This was frankly, laughable.

Gladys Berejiklian did “nothing wrong” either, she insisted over and over.

Yet if she were a company director – a position of far less individual power – one who had concealed a conflict of interest such as a long-term personal allegiance with a nefarious individual creating the risk of undetected influence or reputational damage – resignation would not be a matter of debate.

Besides, concealing the relationship, especially given its implications, was an ongoing decision particularly during the two years since Daryl Maguire had been forced out of parliament, and declared politically *persona non grata*.

Consider these questions: would the relationship with a compromised former MP have changed some voters' view of the premier's integrity had it been declared up front?

Yes. Could the allegiance give rise to fears of undue influence? Yes. Is this really why

it was concealed and would its earlier exposure have minimised these risks to the public interest? Very likely.

Saying sorry, (or I stuffed up) while incurring no actual cost has become a tactic. Part of the standard armoury of defence, to be deployed at the moment of maximum efficacy.

Words matter but a principle one is not prepared to pay for is not actually a principle at all.

Connecting with the personal

I mentioned this wonderful building – which has gone from Provisional Parliament House to simply Parliament House when it was in use, and now of course, Old Parliament House.

It is a favourite place of mine and many others in the capital and the broader nation.

It is where I first met a sitting prime minister, Bob Hawke, and more importantly, it is where Virginia Haussegger and I held our wedding reception – having tied the knot exactly 15 years ago, just a short stroll away on the shore of Lake Burley Griffin.

It was opened on May 9, 1927 just 6 weeks after my father, Edward ‘Ted’ Kenny was born and for me, that year has always been special – formative, part of *my* story.

Hawke, Labor’s longest-serving prime minister, came to this place directly from the ACTU – another formative Australian institution which coincidentally was also created in 1927.

Ted Kenny died on this very day last year at the age of 92 and my family is probably as I speak, holding an anniversary tribute in Adelaide.

I dedicate this address to Ted’s memory and to the place he holds in the hearts of my mother Ann and my five brothers and sisters.

Our stories are important to us.

Some of you might be reflecting on this as I mention these aspects of my own story.

We connect with the personal.

And, the obverse regrettably is also true - we tend to disconnect from the impersonal.

When Donald Trump was diagnosed with Coronavirus, this tendency was immediately apparent.

Even though Trump is a widely disliked figure in this country, a vituperative adolescent vulgarian, the reluctance to even countenance his death, let alone admit it publicly, was palpable.

Like him or loathe him, we actually know Trump – we've watched his extraordinary rise, seen his weakness. But we don't wish him dead so much as just simply gone.

We are better than him.

Take another example: A month back, the 20th anniversary of the Sydney Olympics occurred.

This was also the Freeman Olympic Games. Cathy lit the cauldron, and days later, Cathy lit up the stadium with the most electrifying run any of us will see in our lifetimes.

Her Australianness was our Australianness. In success, her Indigeneity became a kind of Australian quintessentialism.

She'd overcome the best in the world that night.

But to get there, she'd first had to overcome us... she'd overcome Australia itself in the 70s, 80s, and 90s and in all the decades since the First Fleet.

In ways big and small, she'd been ignored, vilified, second-classed.

She'd been disrespected in words and deeds that most of us will never hear let alone feel.

On that glorious night though, and frankly, again just a few weeks back when we all relived it with her, there was our absolution.

Through her stunning success, Cathy Freeman had proved that none of it was that harmful, none of it amounted to much – here she was our Cathy on the top step.

In proving she was the best, she had also absolved us of the earlier sin of not even treating her as an equal.

Indigenous Cathy Freeman was a person – a winner, but what about the anonymous others?

What do we want for them?

The truth at the heart of our story

We love our country but not enough to be honest about its brutal origins. Not enough to want to square up to the damage that was done in colonising this vast sprawling continent, not enough to tap all the potential that is here.

If you step out of this wonderful building, situated on this historic alignment, out onto the most famous steps in Australia, you can see straight across the Lake to the bottom of Anzac Parade and up to its other end, the beloved, the revered, the sacred Australian War Memorial.

Step out the back of this building and on precisely the same axis, you gaze up at the new Parliament House – the geometry of all this, so precise, so utterly deliberate and constructed that I’m told if you could walk that line, you’d pass through the Great Hall and under the giant flag and into the Cabinet Room itself, the nation’s inner-most sanctum of executive power.

From either end of this magnificent axis – atop Mount Ainslie, behind the War Memorial or up on Red Hill behind the parliament – can be seen the whole institutional story of Australia.

But let’s go back out on those steps. Cast your eyes down and closer.

What you see is also, in its own way, perfect.

For amid all this precision planning, the manicured landscaping and permanent sharp-edged monumentalism, right there, smack-bang on this nation-defining axis, sits the Aboriginal Tent Embassy – its improvised disorder acting as its own monument to marginalisation, denial, grudging tolerance, and legal ambiguity.

Here, in deliberate contradistinction, is an anti-monument – asymmetric, informal, and ephemeral.

Like its legal status, it speaks of what the British-Polish social theorist Zygmunt Bauman called “permanent temporariness”.

Where the other institutions sit stoic and motionless in a fast-moving world so as to remind us of our enduring values, this evokes movement.

It reminds us it is our stone hearts that have stopped, that it is we that are closed and motionless.

The Tent Embassy – one of the world’s enduring continuous protest sites – will have been there for 50 years in little more than a year from now.

It is a credit to the simple perseverance of a people who in so many other ways, from their racist treatment in the Constitution, to their discrimination, incarceration, and denunciation since white settlement, have just clung on.

As my friend Stan Grant observed in his poetic and painful book, *Australia Day*, when he was born, he was counted among the flora and fauna of this country, not its citizens – and remember, he’s younger than me.

Grant’s generous writings on Australia Day and identity eschew the usual traps of simplicity and the accumulation of useless anger describing this frame of history as the “narrative of loss and inheritance robbed” – “history told from the losing end”.

“This is an age of grievance, and grievance is a demoralising basis for identity,” he writes, telling us that, in the contest for wounds, “there can be no winner”.

Yet even after mounting a persuasive case for keeping January 26, Grant can't avoid the pain of continued denial, the deep emotional scars and the visceral yearning for a bilateral healing.

He concludes that our constitution, "our founding document, must respect what came before: it must acknowledge the place of First Peoples" because it "still carries the illegitimacy and stain of race".

"The First Peoples do not have special rights," he insists, "but inherent rights. It diminishes no one to acknowledge and protect that unique status in keeping with the spirit and limits of our constitutional democracy."

Two decades into the 21st century, I feel confident that progressives from the dawn of our federation would be appalled at the lack of any big restorative gesture – the absence of a treaty, the refusal to brook Constitutional recognition including a voice to Parliament, the glacial pace of practical, meaningful reconciliation, the non-representation on the national flag, the failure to make financial restitution for past wrongs including wages robbed, children ripped from families, the disrespect of Indigenous soldiers good enough to fight and die for their country but not to be recognised as citizens, much less heroes; and of course the shocking cycle of poverty, violence, social dysfunction, conviction, incarceration and deaths in custody.

Completing the symbolic axis of Australian nationhood

Tonight, I'd like to propose, by way of an offer to First Peoples, that Australia's national axis be completed but this time properly and from the ground up.

At water's edge – unsurprisingly, the name of a restaurant located in that exact location – sits Reconciliation Place. It is fine as far as it goes, which is not far at all.

I propose, in full consultation and genuine partnership with Tent Embassy residents, community elders and First Nations peoples, that the institutional axle point of modern Australia's great story, be marked with a truly monumental structure dedicated to and run by Australia's First Peoples.

While the final design could be selected from an architectural competition – in the spirit of great projects such as Canberra itself and the Sydney Opera House – I'd envisage a vast and largely lateral structure, rising from beneath the shoreline of Lake Burley Griffin.

It could feature exhibits of Indigenous art (including that held by the NGA) Indigenous history, an interpretive centre, conference space, and perhaps even a wharf for receiving international tourists, Australian visitors, and world scholars, ferried across the Lake.

The building would render in permanent architecture, the foundational contribution of Indigenous nations to the modern Australian nation, while telling of the original violent dispossession and its long tail of disadvantage.

I've previously called for the placement of statues along the Lake's foreshore to augment those of prime ministers Robert Menzies and nearby, the John Curtin / Ben Chifley sculpture.

Along this section could be situated sculptures of Truganini, Faith Bandler, Vincent Lingiari, Eddie Mabo, and further along Dorothy Tangney, Edith Lyons, and now, the great Susan Ryan, taken just weeks ago, a trailblazing former senator from this very city.

In short, this museum would proclaim a new era of partnership via a grand symbolic gesture in the form of a permanent water's edge museum of Indigenous history, language, art, and political struggle.

But it would also be a celebration of the oldest continuing cultures in the world.

Its placement would mark a national recognition that this continent's human story did not begin in Turkey in WWI or in Canberra in 1927 or in 1988 – nor for that matter in Botany Bay in 1788.

It began perhaps sixty or seventy thousand years before and it grew, as this new building would, from the very country itself, and from a people living in perfect harmony and profound connection with that land.

A First Nations memorial – a building at the centre of the nation's sweeping concave arc.

From this point, the eye rises up from the nadir at lake's edge to this glorious Old Parliament and then on to the new, the shining house on the hill.

Aboriginal Australia has waited long enough for this material recognition.

Its permanence had been established tens of thousands of years before the rest of us arrived.

Yet its centrality in law, in culture, in the received history, remains fraught and needlessly contingent.

Contingent on our feelings, not theirs.

The result is bad for everyone. Australia is a nation emotionally blocked. Unable to square up to its past.

As Grant says, "It is time to narrow our differences and strengthen our bonds – in this way we are all set free."

I can already hear the argument from naysayers that spending money on a symbolic building misses the point and would be better directed to improving the health and education of disadvantaged Indigenous communities.

Yet these same people are happy to be spending an obscene amount of expanding the Australian War Memorial.

Here's an idea, stop that hotly contested extravagance and put *that* half-a-billion dollars into addressing Indigenous disadvantage.

Or perhaps just accept that you *do* value symbolism (such as the War Memorial) and then consider which is the more justified – a proper, permanent recognition of Indigenous Australia's long-denied history, or an even grander War museum.

And while we're critiquing symbolism, ask yourself this. What does it say about a nation that will spend five or six hundred million dollars expanding the AWM when the kind of project I'm suggesting here, is not even discussed?

I'll tell you what it says. It says that this is a piece of history that is not valued, not legitimate, does not conform to our sense of ourselves.

Like many here no doubt, I've been to The Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe also known as The Holocaust Memorial, in central Berlin, just as I've visited Yad Vashem, The World Holocaust Remembrance Centre in Jerusalem.

These are not easy places. There were many in Germany's political and broader community who struggled with an open permanent representation of past atrocities by the German state and by its people.

But they eventually worked out that the only way forward from such colossal harm was to look back clearly, to settle the debt through acceptance, acknowledgment, and the new beginning this can facilitate.

Germany and Germans are unquestionably the better for it.

By the same token, Australia is a lesser nation, a weaker society, for the denial of proper recognition and meaningful reconciliation with this land's first peoples – the oldest continuing civilisation on Earth.

The chance to “make a place of peace in the space between us”

Henry Parkes earned the mantle of Father of the Nation.

But Britain is not our true “mother country” for **SHE** was already here.

The ANU's Australian Studies Institute was privileged to host Pat Turner AM recently delivering the 2020 ‘Australia and the World’ Lecture.

She titled her lecture ‘The Long Cry of Indigenous Peoples to be Heard – A defining moment in Australia’.

“Australia,” she said, “knows that there is unfinished business in relation to our First Nations peoples”, referring to the Uluru call for a Voice to Parliament.

“It was a mechanism to facilitate engagement, dialogue, and discussion between those so far excluded and those who are elected to make laws for the people of Australia. The response from government was, once again, not to hear our cry. This treatment merely serves to reinforce and confirm the torment of our powerlessness, to borrow a phrase from the Uluru Statement. We were not and have not been heard. But we persist. We always do.”

Grant finished his book with these words.

“If you are not Indigenous, it is impossible to really know what it is to carry this history in our bones – to live with the memory of wounds … this was never empty, *terra nullius* was the lie that haunts us still … If we are smart enough and generous enough and forgiving enough, we can write our laws and our stories and we can make a place of peace there in the space between us”.

In the year of Black Lives Matter and the explosion of racial violence in America, let me conclude with this observation.

You don’t take advantage of the comparatively lower temperature of Australian race relations by denial, by doing nothing.

Rather you seize on that goodwill, that social capital, that national unity, to build a better, stronger, truer Australia.

Thank you so much for listening.