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PENLEIGH AND
ESSENDON
GRAMMAR SCHOOL
PRINCIPAL'S
ASSEMBLY
OPENING OF THE
INFINITY CENTRE,
MELBOURNE 2012

Melbourne
20 March 2012

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

**PENLEIGH AND ESSENDON GRAMMAR SCHOOL
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THINKING ON INFINITY*

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IN THE SHADOW OF INFINITY

We meet in the shadow of the new Infinity Centre of this fine school.

It is a privilege to address the 2,300 students, joined together from the three campuses of the school in Melbourne in this Principal's Assembly. Only once before has there been such an event. I am here to speak for the Thinkers, after whom the school has named the several parts of the Centre.

* Text for a speech at the opening of the Infinity Centre.

** One time Justice of the High Court of Australia. Gruber Justice Prize 2010. PEGS Infinity Centre Thinker

Let us honour the School Council, the Principal, Tony Larkin, and the Deputy Principal, Nina Bielewicz. Let us celebrate the beautiful design and harmonious colours of the Infinity Centre. And pay our respects to all the creative minds that have produced this unusual building.

Whilst paying our tributes to them, let us also reflect on the debt we owe to our parents and families: ever keen to ensure that we have good opportunities in education. And our teachers who respond to the challenge of opening new minds to the wonders of the world: symbolised appropriately by infinity. It is a concept almost beyond human imagination and understanding. So it is a challenge to our thinking.

In the Infinity Centre, pupils of this school will acquire the gifts to be informed human beings and good citizens. They will be inspired by their environment which we join together to declare open today.

THE NAMING OF NAMES

Most schools name wings, and buildings, and portions of buildings and parts of the school after worthy people:

- * Some after illustrious head masters or principals of the past. These were the names of the houses of my old school, Fort Street High School in Sydney;
- * Some choose the names of famous *alumni*, who have earlier graced the portals of the school; and
- * Some others elect to grant naming rights to wealthy donors, immortalising them for their praiseworthy contributions to the hard pressed budgets of today's schools.

This school did something different. Very different. It commissioned an unusual building. It gave it a distinctive physical shape and name. And it opted to call its parts after people whom it described as Thinkers. People, like me, who might have

had no previous connection with the school. But who loved education, and honoured their own schools. And who challenged their fellow citizens to think freshly about life and its wonder and meaning.

It has fallen to me to speak for these Thinkers; and to do so on this auspicious day.

THE CHANGING TIMES

I remember the assemblies at my own school, so many years ago. They were nowhere near as large as this one. My days at school were so different from those of the students of PEGS, who will learn and study and think for themselves, including in the Infinity Centre.

- * There was no television in those days;
- * It was before decimal currency;
- * The four minute mile had not yet been run;
- * There were no jumbo jets;
- * The internet had not been invented and computers were huge and very primitive;
- * There were no mobile phones;
- * There were no emails (although that might have been a blessing);
- * Bypass surgery had not been invented; and
- * HIV/AIDS was still unknown.

The one thing that each of these developments since my day have in common is that they were invented or discovered by thinkers. It is thinkers who change the world and our lives in it. They change the way we perceive our lives and experience the marvellous world around us. Often we need to take our minds to infinity in an exploration of new ideas and new expressions of those ideas.

THE CHOSEN THINKERS

It is a special privilege for me to speak for the Thinkers who will be honoured in this school:

- * *Elizabeth Blackburn*, who won the Nobel Prize for Medicine in 2009. Born in Tasmania and educated there and in Melbourne, she shows today that nothing is beyond the talent of women, including in science. Her research will help humanity in its mighty struggle with cancer;
- * *Peter Carey*, the famous writer, named an Australian Legend of the Written Word, winner of Miles Franklin Award, the twice winner of the Booker Prize and of other prizes and awards. He is a great communicator through the written word in marvellous books and has gifts of imagination abounding;
- * *Fred Hollows* was a hero of surgical procedures who brought the gift of sight to the blind in Australia and around the world. His work lives on, as does his example and his compassion. He teaches us our duty to humanity and not just to people like ourselves living in Australia;
- * *Emily Kame Kngwarreye* is a great spirit and an example of the indigenous people of our country. Through her paintings and other works of art, she interprets the deep thinking and spirituality of the indigenous people of this land, who were here millennia before the settlers and their descendants came;
- * *Peter Sculthorpe*, the great Australian musical composer, has mastered the skills of composition and has brought together, in his work, the great classical traditions of Europe, in which he was trained, and the eerie rhythms and sounds unique to the great south land;
- * *Peter Singer*, the international scholar and interpreter of philosophy and ethics. He is probably the most translated author in this entire nation. Reflections of his mind are read on every continent. Little wonder that he was named one of *Time* magazine's 100 Most Influential People of the 20th Century.; and
- * *Terrence Tao*, raised in Adelaide and now a professor in the United States is one of the world's great mathematicians and still he is but 37. Winner of the

Fields Medal for mathematical brilliance, he truly conceives of infinity and beckons us down the path where his great intellect leads him, and therefore leads us.

My own place in this list is dubious. But I am glad that a searcher after justice has been chosen to keep company with these paragons on intellect and creativity. My life has been concerned with law and justice – the two combined. Without the rule of law, original thinking cannot often occur in quiet and safe and rational ways. Even in my lifetime I have seen advances in the thinking of Australian lawyers, and of those who make our laws, about justice and equality for all:

- * Aboriginal land rights have been recognised;
- * Women's equality has been advanced;
- * White Australia has been abolished;
- * People of different races and religions have joined us on this continent and live in peace under the law;
- * Homosexual equality and justice is on our nation's agenda and will be achieved;
- * Disabled Australians are finding new legal rights; and
- * Always fresh and different facets of the diamond of justice are being revealed: For the young. For the old. And for animals which share our sentient existence and feel pain, and fear and also need the protection of law.

CONGRATULATIONS AND A CHALLENGE

And so on this day we open the Infinity Centre of this School for all the Thinkers who leave their minds and thoughts with the students and teachers in this place, I congratulate those who have created such a school. I honour Bert Stevens, past Principal, on what he and his colleagues have accomplished over time. I honour the students for their achievements in scholarships in music, in art, in poetry, and in sport. Excellent schools are the nursery for excellent citizens of Australia and of the world.

By lifting high the banner of original thinking, this school proclaims its faith in human rationality. It calls on all of us to take Infinity as our inspiration. It calls us to respect and honour the thinking human mind. It alone can conceive of the universe; can foresee a time when disease is conquered; can express great thoughts in our wonderful language; can reach out to others with the gift of sight and of insight; can portray the beauties of the world in painting and in music; can beckon us all to the meaning of life and the justice of its laws. Thinking can sharpen our capacity to puzzle about the very meaning of infinity. Thinking can constantly question the injustices and inequalities of the world around us.

In such a school anything is possible. Fortunate indeed are the pupils who enter the Infinity Centre. For the Thinkers past and present, absent and here with us, I am proud to join this assembly and to participate in its celebration.
