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THE MILPERRA COLLEGE OF ADVANCED EDUCATION

1982 GRADUATION CEREMONY

BANKSTOWN CIVIC CENTRE, SYDNEY, 15 DECEMBER 1982

ADVANCING ADVANCED EDUCATION

The Hon. Mr. Justice M.D. Kirby
Chairman of the Australian Law Reform Commission
Deputy Chancellor of the University of Newcastle*

December 1982

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INTRODUCTION: CONGRATULATIONS TO GRADUATES

On an occasion such as this a speaker in my position is obliged by tradition to do certain things. You will understand, that as a Judge, following tradition is doing what comes naturally.

The first thing I have to do is to express a proper sense of the honour which it is to be invited by the Council of this College to take part in such a happy occasion. There are few obligations of public life more pleasurable than to stand with new graduates at the threshold of their careers.

The second thing to be done is to remind ourselves of the significance of this occasion tonight. We gather here in a ceremony at least as old as the Christian era to place before the international community of scholars in a solemn way, new recruits. They have earned their laurels by a period of dedicated application to the study of knowledge. Inescapably in that study the new graduates have acquired self-discipline, knowledge and a measure of wisdom. They are sent forth by this College to the community with the commendation of their degrees. They join the international society of tested scholars. The form of the ceremony traces its origins to the medieval church and the laying on of hands: by which authority was transmitted from one generation to the next. On an occasion such as this, it is important to pause and reflect upon the seamless continuity of education.

Thirdly, it falls to me to congratulate the new graduates. It does not seem so very long ago that I was sitting in the same position, listening to an occasional address and wondering what the future held in store for me. This is a watershed in the life of the new members of the College. It is a time when at least one period of study is over. It is therefore a time when the graduate is permitting a fleeting moment of self-congratulation.

I am not so far removed from your position and upbringing to have forgotten the rigours that are imposed on those who pursue higher education today. When nostalgia sets in it all seems an idyllic time of one's life. But in many ways, as I hope to develop life has become more difficult today not least in tertiary education. There are rules against failure to be circumvented. There are special burdens on those who study part-time. There is competition to be faced. There is uncertainty in the market place. There are the challenges of entirely new courses where the well worn paths of precedent are not being trod. The Associate Diploma of Social Welfare given at this ceremony is the only course of its type in the higher education institutions of Sydney. The graduate course in multicultural education signals the changing fabric of Australian society: so far little reflected in our institutions, governments and laws. All of these challenges have doubtless taken their toll in one way or another, upon the young men and women who sit in this hall today

In most cases the burden has not been borne singly. The family, parents, friends, husbands and wives, children and colleagues all played their part. They have helped to share the burden. The reward is here tonight. It is an occasion of proper, shared pride. That is why we involve the families and friends of the graduates in this ceremony. It is a recognition of the contribution they have made to the achievement that is signalled by this occasion.

On behalf of the community and on my own behalf I extend congratulations to the graduates. I also express thanks to those who helped them on the path to this culmination of their study. The formal, structured education which began at the local kindergarten ends, for most of the graduates, here tonight. The education in the school of hard knocks lies ahead. The Australian community is proud of the graduates. It anticipates their service.

ADVANCED EDUCATION

Having discharged my primary tasks, it is now my function so say something of general significance. The only requirement that I must be brief in doing so. For five years

I sat on the platform of the Great Hall of Sydney University as a Fellow of the Senate of that University. In that time, I attended at least thirty ceremonies such as this. Thirty times an occasional speaker rose in his place to address the assembled throng. It is a sobering thought, as I stand here before you tonight, that I cannot call to mind a single utterance of the thirty distinguished speakers: not one item of distilled wisdom, no aphorisms, not a single jest or pearl. People in my position do well to bear in mind the transiency of occasional addresses.

In the general community, I suppose that the consideration that is on everyone's mind - every sensitive, concerned, thinking citizen - is the current economic plight of our country. The despair of unemployment especially youth unemployment is widespread and hits families in traditionally affluent suburbs. But, I imagine it is even more acute, on average, in the south-west of Sydney, served by this College. In fact, there is a very depressing phenomenon beginning to emerge. It is illustrated by a recent report of the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission, Learning and Earning, released about 3 weeks ago. That report is drawn against the background of a country which by the standards of its international competitors, is simply failing to attract and keep young people in post-secondary education. There is no other word for our national failure here than shocking - unless the word be 'perilous'. OECD figures show that Australia is a country which ranks with Turkey and Greece in education retention. Whereas our competitors, Japan and the United States, have more than 80% of the population still receiving education at the age of 17 years, we in Australia can barely muster 40%. It is no use saying that an evaluation of this discrepancy must take into account varying definitions of 'full time' education and of differences in training arrangements in different countries.¹ Make every proper allowance for different definitions and different systems of education and the lamentable conclusion will still be reached that, as a country, we are just not keeping pace in the education league.

Pundits of doom and gloom are in their element just now and I do not wish to join them. But we must face squarely our country's failure to keep young people in education. Moreover, we must face the still more depressing fact that the proportion of young people in full-time higher education is actually declining. It has declined by 18% since 1975. According to the same report Learning and Earning present participation in higher education peaks at age 19. In 1975, the percentage of young people in higher education at that age was 15.5%. By 1981 it had dropped to 13.6%.² Why should this be so? Why, when all the nations with whom we compete are increasing both the quantity and quality of the education of their people is this country falling behind? Where will this lead? You can see the answer in the relative decline on the Australian standard of

living in the course of this century, from being one of the top four at the beginning to barely making the top twenty chart now. We have ridden on the sheep's back. We have tried to clamber on the band waggon of the mineral boom that never was. We have imported technology and manpower. And we have gone to the beach and taken it easy. We have deprived advanced education and begrudged investment in it. We have lampooned 'intellectuals' and 'academics'. We have mocked excellence. Our theme song and our national obsession are 'Come on Aussie' and 'I feel like a Toohey's'.

In this audience you see the minority. These are the young and mature-aged people who pressed on with education. In the age of the microchip of test tube babies, of nuclear fission of satellites, of man on the moon robotics, genetic engineering and so on, can we really suppose that life on the beach will go on - 'business as usual' - in the decades ahead? Unless the message can be got through to politicians, education administrators, curriculum designers and the community at large (especially the young) that we must attract and hold more people inflexible or relevant disciplines of higher education, Australians will surely become the poor whites of the Asian region. We will become the new Asian helots. At a time of structural change and youth unemployment we should be keeping more, not less, in higher education. Not just in flexible vocational education that could be overtaken by new technology. Education that readies the mind of our people to survive and even flourish in a time whose watch-word is change.

UNIVERSALISM AND INTER DISCIPLINARY STUDIES

Accompanying greater investment in education and research, should be greater consciousness of the heightened need for interdisciplinary studies. Another publication of recent date, is the discussion paper 'Future Perspectives of Advanced Education' issued by the Advanced Education Council. This document seeks to chart the way ahead for the Colleges of Advanced Education in Australia. It seeks to explain the almost unexplainable: where CAE's end and where universities begin. It says that advanced education degree courses should be comparable in standard to those offered in universities.³ But it says their courses should have an applied rather than a theoretical emphasis.⁴ Yet it then goes on to say that such courses should not be confined to meeting narrow industrial objectives.⁵ We in Australia are used to wasteful demarcation disputes. In the field of tertiary education, there is every prospect of one of the biggest demarcation battles of them all.

It is often said that what marks universities out as special is their devotion to higher research. But I am increasingly concerned about the decline, within the universities of interdisciplinary research. After all, the original concept of a university was a place of universal knowledge: where people of all disciplines could mix and exchange thoughts and ideas: each specialist discipline illuminating our total perception of existence and knowledge. But the reality today, in universities and CAE's, indeed in the professions and in life generally, is that we all go into our neat intellectual pigeon holes. Lawyers go off into their law schools, medicos retreat to their hospital enclaves, computer scientists speak their special language to each other. The old notion of a universe of knowledge and of interdisciplinary communication is being lost, certainly neglected. Careers, whether in universities or CAE's are built on brilliance in a narrow discipline. But the world is not like this. The discovery of test tube fertilization poses a problem upon which scholars in moral philosophy, theology and the law should be brought together. The invention of the computer presents mankind with issues, complex and challenging affecting sociology, legal rights, human liberties, industrial relations and medical science to name but a few.

Where is the Institute of Law and Computing Science to bring those two disciplines together? It does not exist in Australia. Where is the Institute of Bioethics to bring together, in permanent dialogue, doctors, genetic engineers, moral philosophers and theologians? No tertiary educational institution in Australia has built such a place of dialogue. We all go off, to the melody of the 1960's theme to our 'little boxes'. It is left to small and overworked bodies such as the Law Reform Commission, occasionally and on particular topics, to bring the disciplines together.

If Colleges of Advanced Education complain, as they may do with justice, that the recent discussion paper on Future Perspectives of Advanced Education is too negative in tone, let them take the lead. If the universities have failed to bring together the universe of disciplines, let that not be the reproach of the Colleges of Advanced Education in Australia within their spheres.

One thing is sure. We need a new and more adventurous approach to higher education in Australia. The orthodoxy and conservatism of some of the universities may make it difficult for them to respond to this challenge. I hope that the Colleges of Advanced Education will do so and thereby assure themselves of a permanent legitimacy in Australia's educational firmament.

A NATIONAL TREASURE

I am a son of the western suburbs of Sydney. I was educated here in the public schools. I am concerned about education because I can see, in my own life, how important it is to harness the gifts of nature and not to squander them. I am specially concerned about what our country is doing, or failing to do, in education of the poor, the disadvantaged, the children of the ethnic minorities, Aborigines and others who start with many disadvantages and look to education as the means by which they will flourish.

Because of my own origins, I am specially concerned with the urgent needs of reform of our educational system. Reform so that, amongst other things, the bright child of disadvantaged parents can be identified early, helped and encouraged in education. Failure to do this squanders shamefully an irreplaceable national treasure. Yet that is what is happening all too often today. The figures show it. We all know it. It is up to the universities, the CAE's and the community to reverse the trend. This is not elitism. What is at stake is nothing less than the future prosperity, well-being and perhaps even the safety of our country.

I hope that the new graduates, the lucky minority in the lucky country will reflect on their less fortunate fellow citizens, even tonight, even at a moment of pride and satisfaction

FOOTNOTES

- * The views expressed are personal views only.
- 1. See report "Higher education losing its appeal for young students" Sydney Morning Herald, 19 November 1982, 1.
- 2. Australia. Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission, Learning and Earning, AGPS, 1982, Vol I 67.
- 3. Australia, Advanced Education Council, Future Perspectives in Advanced Education, 1982 (Discussion Paper) 8.
- 4. *ibid.*
- 5. *id.* 10.