

PHILLIP INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

GRADUATION CEREMONY, SUNDAY 1, MAY 1983

DALLAS BROOKS HALL, MELBOURNE

EDUCATION POLICY FOR HARD TIMES

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

INTRODUCTION : CONGRATULATIONS TO GRADUANDS

On occasions such as this, a speaker in my position is obliged by tradition to do certain things. 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 Institute 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 and a measure of wisdom. They are sent forth by this Institute to the community with the commendation of their degrees and diplomas. They join the international society of tested scholars. The form of this ceremony traces its origins to the Mediaeval church — and to 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 long ago that I was sitting in the very 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 Institute. It is a time when at least one period of study is over. It is therefore a time when the graduate is permitted 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 in Australia today. When nostalgia sets in, it all seems an idyllic time in one's life. But in many ways, 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 followed. 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 tonight.

In most cases, the burden has not been borne singly. The family, parents, friends, husbands and wives, children and colleagues, all have 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.

#### AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION TODAY

Having discharged my primary tasks, it is now my function to say something of general significance. The only requirement is 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 30 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 before you tonight, that I cannot call to mind a single utterance of the 30 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 my work as Chairman of the Law Reform Commission, I have constantly to confront the way in which our most venerable and important institutions adapt to the pressures of a time of change. Change is everywhere about us. When it comes to the law, it is a matter of adjusting the legal system to the impact of at least four forces:

- \* a growing Government sector, affecting so many aspects of our lives, cradle to the grave;
- \* new changing ways of doing business : a world of mass production and robotics serviced by a legal order largely developed in the days of the sailing ships;
- \* changing moral and social conditions that often leave members of the older generation baffled and hurt by a world 'turned on its head'; and
- \* above all, the impact of science and technology. Jacob Bronovski warned that we live in an age which is 'fuelled and engined by science'. The technology of the microchip, the fascinating developments of biotechnology and the dangerous developments of energy science, all challenge society and its laws.

The capacity of the Australian community to adapt intelligently and to adjust to this time of rapid change must depend in no small part upon its education system. It is no special tribute to the graduates in this hall to say that they are the cream. The privileged ones. The small minority. But if we have in this hall the cream, what about the 'curds and whey'?

It cannot be said too often that in the world league of school education and tertiary education, we in Australia are not doing well.

In 1954 only 18% of the 15-19 years age cohort in Australia were at-school : this rose to 32% by 1964 and 38.5% by 1980. This last figure puts 61.5% of Australian 15-19 year olds on the labour market — a high figure where our only competitors are Great Britain, New Zealand, both non-coping economies, Portugal, Yugoslavia and Turkey. Japan has only 24% of 15-19 year olds in the labour market, the United States has 28%, Canada 33%, Sweden 34% [I repeat Australia 61.5%]. Have they got it all wrong? Is our model the one that others should follow? Or have we got it wrong?<sup>1</sup>

Putting it bluntly, countries that we would normally look to as our intellectual equivalents, and certainly our trading competitors : the United States, Canada, Sweden and Japan, are keeping more of their young people in education longer : more than twice as many at age 17 than Australia.

In 1956 only 8.4% of our 17 year olds were still being educated full time : by 1964 this had risen to 17.9% and by 1980 to 31.7%. The participation rate has been falling since the mid 1970s. In Japan 88.1% of 17 year olds are still full time at school.<sup>2</sup>

Now, this is not a lecture : the graduates have had enough of that. Some of you may even have had a glass of champagne. Statistics and champagne never mix. So, as they say in the movies, I will give it to you straight. In the world league of school retention, Australia's record is shockingly low. We have been discharging young people from education too young. At 17 years, Japan has nearly 90% of its population still receiving education. We can barely muster 40%. It is not necessary to be a genius with figures to realise the long-term significance of these statistics for the Australian standard of living and even safety of Australia in a world of rapid social and technological changes.

I do not want to depress you, but there is worse to come. A recent report of the Committee of Inquiry into Education and Training disclosed very high levels of illiteracy and innumeracy amongst Australian school students:

Approximately 25% of 14 year olds required some instruction in reading, without which they would be unlikely to undertake independent learning or to read for recreation or to obtain information. The survey established that 4% of students aged 14 years would complete compulsory schooling unable to subtract and multiply effectively, simply because they did not know their number facts and that 8% would be unable to perform division at this level for this reason.<sup>3</sup>

The position so far as illiteracy and innumeracy are concerned is worse when you come to the children of Aborigines and specifically migrant groups.

In addition to these general problems, there is the fact that we are not attracting young people to the study of science and mathematics. Pro rata, there are three times as many young people studying science in the United States than in Australia (42 times as many in absolute figures). Twenty eight percent of United States science students go on to achieve a Doctorate of Philosophy, compared to 5% of ours.<sup>4</sup>

Even when we leave the school, the depressing fact is that the proportion of young people going on to full-time higher education has actually been declining. It has declined by 18% since 1975. In that year the number of young people going on to higher education in universities, colleges of advanced education or TAFE colleges was 15.5%. By 1981 it had dropped to 13.6%.

NOW THE GOOD NEWS

But now, the good news. Probably in response to the shocking levels of youth unemployment, the numbers of young people staying on at school in Australia has begun, once again, to rise. In particular, it seems that young women, unable to get jobs, are returning to school. Unfortunately, many of them are avoiding the subjects such as mathematics and science, which would help to make them more employable.<sup>5</sup> However, a change does seem to be occurring, particularly in school retention of women. It may be happening for the wrong reasons. But at least it is happening.

The policy of the new Federal Government on school retention includes a promise to increase retention by 10,000 students a year over the next three years at years 11 and 12. The 1984 target now looks like being exceeded significantly, without effort, by the new Government. In New South Wales alone this year, about 5,000 additional students have stayed on in years 11 and 12. Presumably they are staying on because of the increasing realisation that year 10 qualifications are no longer strong enough to gain school leavers employment in the present dismal labour market.

Given that employment prospects for young people straight out of school continue to look gloomy for the foreseeable future, it seems reasonable to expect that school retention rates in Australia will continue to rise, even beyond the targets set by the new Federal Government. And with this rise, there will come pressure on the universities, colleges of advanced education and TAFE colleges to increase their intake. There has been a significant increase this year in applications for entry into the Colleges of Advanced Education. I do not have the figures for this Institute. But in the Canberra College of Advanced Education the acceptance of offer rate rose by 15% this year. Obviously such a rise in intake puts great pressure on such institutions, most of them already hard pressed. Their resources remain exactly the same as in 1982, indeed less because of the erosive effect of inflation. The response to our economic plight that is leading young men and women to stay at school and to look to higher education to fit them for a more complex and demanding world, is thoroughly desirable. It may continue the trend for longer and higher education in Australia which gathered pace during the Chifley and Menzies years and received a boost during the Whitlam Government but has lately slowed down and even reversed.

It is rumoured that Mr Bjelke-Petersen's prayers brought Mr Hawke the drought-relieving rains. I am not sure whose prayers have brought about the sudden reversal of our national drift from education and the happy increase in our educational

retention. Perhaps it is no prayer but just a realisation of the bleak long-term prospects of the unskilled in the Age of the Microchip. Whatever the reason, we must welcome the signs and prepare for the consequences. Unless the country can find increased resources, it is inevitable that an Australia-wide trend for more students to seek higher education will lead to nothing more than higher cut-off levels for admission as the easiest means of excluding students and containing enrolment numbers.

One of the new Federal Government's policy supplements on education proposed an increase of 25,000 higher education students by 1990.<sup>6</sup> This statement is open to various interpretations. But if it contemplates an increase of about 3,000 additional places each year over the next eight years, it would seem unlikely that such a figure will be able to cope with the pressures from increased school retention rates projected over the same period. If increased school retention leads to a higher proportion of school leavers seeking places in higher education (as seems reasonable to assume) and if school leavers continue to find direct entry to employment difficult (as also seems reasonable) the pressures on our institutions of higher education are likely to become unacceptable. The solutions are two. We must either impose higher barriers against higher education. Or we must increase the national expenditure on education. When we compare our school retention, our levels of science and language instruction and our proportions in higher education, with Japan, the United States, Canada and most countries of Western Europe, the way ahead is plain. If we are not to become the poor whites of Asia, we must equip the next generation with appropriate, flexible education, adapted to a time of rapid technological change. This does not necessarily mean more of the same kind of education as we have today. Nor does it assume that education is a panacea for all our ills:

We constantly hear complaints that we have far too many graduates who cannot find appropriate work. This is true. We have many over-qualified people because this is a significantly under-qualified society.<sup>7</sup>

#### OUR FLAGGING FORTUNES

To ready Australian society for the challenges of the 21st century, we must ask ourselves about the likely nature of that century and Australia's place in the world and in its region. Perhaps it will be possible, wide combs permitting, to continue to live off the sheep's back. Perhaps the great resources boom will eventuate after all. Perhaps the rains will come everywhere in answer to our prayers. Perhaps our laws and institutions will adapt quickly enough. Perhaps we will continue to be the lucky,

but under-educated, country. But a look at cold statistics and patent facts will surely cast a spell of doubt. We are entering the century of high technology. By the standards of our competitors, we are an under-educating society. The relative decline in the Australian standard of living in the course of this century is the result. From being one of the top four at the beginning, we are now barely in the top 20 chart. Reform of education will require radical measures. The painful message, borne by market forces, is now being learned in the homes of the nation. Young people and their parents survey the prospect of employment without specialist education and technical skills. To haul a sluggish system and a somewhat sceptical people into the cold reality of the 21st century will not be easy. Nor will it be inexpensive. But to revive Australia's flagging fortunes we must build a society responsive to the age of science and technology. And that is a formula for more education, more higher education and different education, in which an Institute of Technology will have a special place.

It is imperative that we halt the squandering of an irreplaceable national treasure : the untrained abilities of large numbers of fellow Australians. The graduates in this hall show the way. Let us hope, for our country's sake, that more and more will follow.

#### FOOTNOTES

- \* The views expressed are personal views only.
- 1. B O Jones, 'Towards the Year 2000 : Unemployment and Alternatives', 1982 John Curtin Memorial Lecture, mimeo, 24.
- 2. ibid.
- 3. Education Training and Employment, Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Education and Training, 1979, Vol 1, 92.
- 4. Jones, 25.
- 5. A Casey, 'When Girls Can't Get a Job, They Stay at School', Sydney Morning Herald, 9 March 1983, 3.
- 6. C Hurford, Australian Labor Party Policy Speech Supplement, Education, mimeo, 16 February 1983, 2.
- 7. Jones, 25.