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AUSTRALIAN ROSTRUM

ROSTRUM CLUBS OF NEW SOUTH WALES

SPEAKER OF THE YEAR AWARD 1983

INARTICULATE AUSTRALIA

ANTI-OCKERS OF AUSTRALIA, UNITE!

October 1983

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The Hon Justice M D Kirby CMG
Chairman of the Australian Law Reform Commission

AWARDS

You will forgive me if I read this speech. As Speaker of the Year, I am between speaking engagements. Unless I read this, I am likely to get mixed up between my earlier speech, on sovereign state immunity and the address I have to give tomorrow on teenagers' rights to contraception. I am sure none of you would have the slightest interest in either of those pearls of wisdom.

People are getting bored with awards : Oscars, Emmys and so on. Dame Joan Sutherland's career was launched after she won the Sun Aria Award. I do not expect a similar triumph to follow this effort of mine.

When he received an award from Yale University, the recipient made a lengthy speech. He built it around the letters Y-A-L-E. 'Y' stood for Youth. He proceeded to talk half an hour about that. 'A' stood for Ability and so it went on for an hour and a half. A perspiring Vice Chancellor had had enough. When he rose to thank the speaker, he expressed the hope that he would soon receive an award from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

In the remaining hour or so that I have available to me for this address, I do not propose to build my acceptance speech around 'The Rostrum Club Speaker of the Year'.

INARTICULATE YOUTH

But I do want to say something about inarticulate youth in Australia. It is, after all, New South Wales Childrens' Week. The question I ask is : why our young people are so tongue-tied, when compared to young people of similar age and background from the United States? We have all seen it on the television : the 'errs' and 'ums'. That Australian religious incantation 'you know'. The mumble, the fumble and the bumble of public speaking. We may win the sporting contests but, with rare exceptions, we rarely win the talking contests. Even 'superbrat McEnroe' can string his sentences together. Our heroes seem to find it more difficult. Why should this be so?

- . Some people say it is the 'tall poppy' syndrome. Australians do not care for the articulate, because they stand out.
- . Others say it is a failure to educate young people long enough. At the age of 17, Japan has 87% of its young people still in education. The United States has 84%. We in Australia have barely 39%.
- . Still others claim it is our methods of education — children are still told to sit there, be quiet, pay attention and hold their tongue. In American they are required to stand up, express themselves and justify their views before the class.
- . One colleague said : 'Who cares? If they were articulate they would all want good jobs. We need a few Helots, you know!'

We should ban 'err', 'um', 'you know' and other Ocker terms. We should lift our sights from the 'How do you feel?' perception of Australians. We are not all Ockers. Anti-ockers of Australia unite! You have nothing to lose but the mumbles.

I congratulate Rostrum on the work it is doing in this struggle. I am honoured to receive this award.