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VICTORIAN ASSOCIATION FOR GIFTED AND TALENTED CHILDREN

AUSTRALIA HOTEL, MELBOURNE

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TALENTED CHILDREN - TEN MORE COMMANDMENTS

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TALENTED CHILDREN - TEN MORE COMMANDMENTS
Hon Justice M.D. Kirby, CMG
Chancellor of Macquarie University

WASTED TALENT

I want to urge a new approach to the education of gifted and talented children in Australia.

Basic social attitudes in Australia have, until now, resisted or only reluctantly admitted the special educational needs of gifted and talented children. In my opinion this resistance is misguided and denies equal educational opportunities to the talented. There is at last a chance that the sudden realisation of the seriousness of Australia's long term economic predicament might produce a change of attitude. Let us sincerely hope so.

Expert estimates have suggested that 80 per cent of the talented and gifted children in Australia do not receive an education which allows them to flourish and reach their potential. This is a tremendous personal waste; but also a tremendous economic waste, which Australia cannot afford at this critical time.

What we have to expel is the illusion or reality that special education for the talented is elitist and contrary to Australia's admirable egalitarian tradition. It need be nothing

of the sort. Just as we have special education for children with physical and mental handicaps, so equal opportunity in education requires special attention to the particular needs of the talented. If those needs are not met, the children will simply coast along, get by, become bored and lose their potential. Lumping everybody together may deprive those with special talent of their potential. That is not egalitarianism. It is the very opposite. It is denying equal opportunity to the young people who happen to have talent. Unless we in Australia are prepared to stream and tap that talent, we will continue to squander our comparative advantage as an educated English speaking country in the Pacific. If we do this, we will revert to a land dependent on mines and wool, in an age of biotechnology and microchips. We simply must not let this happen. It is time our country realised the price we will pay for squandering our most precious resource: the talents of 80 per cent of the talented young.

NEED FOR IMPROVEMENTS

The principal initiative for harnessing the gifts and talents of young Australians inevitably lies with the Federal educational authorities. In the United States, an Office of the Gifted and Talented has been established by Congress. Similar positive thinking is needed in Australia. I hope that the Senate Standing Sub-Committee on Education and the Arts investigating this topic will stimulate new Federal initiatives to rescue high talent.

I acknowledge that there are real difficulties to be overcome in establishing a national program for the gifted and talented. I list them as the ten new Commandments to be

observed in planning a national program for the gifted and talented child. They are:

- * Determining precisely how talent should be defined and selected in a just and efficient way.
- * Ensuring due recognition of the special needs of particular groups previously disadvantaged in education, including women and children from ethnic and aboriginal backgrounds.
- * Avoiding tests of talent which were biased in favour of the majority of English speaking culture.
- * Recognising that "talent" can include skills beyond mathematics and language, such as gifts in the arts, industrial design and management techniques.
- * Avoiding, by education, attitudes of anti social superiority or elitism and inculcating egalitarian values and aspirations of community service.
- * Providing for special teacher training and circulation of teachers with the talent in education of the gifted, to recognise legitimate claims of teacher job satisfaction.
- * Providing fairly for the gifted and talented in rural districts, particularly difficult in a large continental country.
- * Ensuring special attention to the precise and diverse needs of curricula for the gifted and talented.
- * Recognising late development and providing for lateral entry to gifted streams.

- * Providing proper opportunities for educational mixing of children of differing talents, whilst ensuring that bright children can progress at the pace their intellect permits and requires.

The fact that these difficulties have to be faced is not a reason for doing nothing. Least of all are the difficulties a reason for dismantling the present system of special education for the talented. It is significant that both Mr. Hawke and Mr. Howard went to selective public schools in Perth and Sydney. The educational bureaucrats dislike these schools. Teacher unions tend to oppose them. The majority of the population is indifferent to the issue. There are few champions because of the fear of being labelled as "elitist". But our competitors in the Pacific are maximising the special education of the talented. Unless we do so, we will condemn many gifted lives to mediocrity. The price we pay will be the steady decline of our relative prosperity. The Federal Government is to be congratulated on taking new initiatives to encourage the vision of Australia as a great educator for Asia and the Pacific. But our obligations begin at home. We should accompany this new vision of our educational role with new Federal and State initiatives to identify and stream the specially talented. The estimated 80 per cent wastage is just unacceptable.