

AUSTRALIAN FRONTIER

CONFERENCE, LA TROBE UNIVERSITY, 10 AUGUST 1980

AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY: FUTURE DIRECTIONS

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

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OF CYNICISM AND SCEPTICISM

The English-speaking people - of whom we in Australia just manage to be one - are fundamentally suspicious of the 'grand design' whether it is in politics, law, economics or otherwise. We react with embarrassment to a phrase such as 'the vision of future society'. Indeed, I often wonder that words such as 'vision' ever made it across the Channel with the Conqueror. It is surprising that they did not melt as they approached the White Cliffs. Still more remarkable is it that they survived the long journey to Botany Bay and Port Phillip.

In these circumstances there will be many - including doubtless some invited to this conference - who are sceptical about a gathering which asks its participants to try to sketch a vision of Australia's future and to identify some of the goals and impediments that have to be addressed in our making it to the year 2000.

In addition to the problem of endemic scepticism, we must acknowledge other hurdles with perfect frankness at the outset of this conference:

- * Australians have a well-known cynicism about futurology, gathered experts and talks of 'goals', 'future' and so on.
- * Conferences generally are inexact occasions. They rarely succeed in achieving new knowledge or even a significant meeting of the minds, let alone original thought. An acid Vice-Chancellor of my acquaintance once defined a conference as a place where people gathered together who individually can do nothing and who collectively can agree that nothing can be done.

* Thirdly, we who gather here have no common vocation or area of special expertise. We are a mixed bunch, whose only common talents appear to be :

** Geographical (we are all Australians)

** Chronological (we are all young or should I say youngish)

** Puissantological (someone, somewhere thinks we are important - or may become important). Even if we have nagging doubts about the former, we may fondly imagine the latter and at least be willing to give our choosers the benefit of the doubt.

Well, we are gathered together to talk of the future of Australia.

Even if we are not and never will become important, most of us have had an education that fits us to make a contribution to a conference theme such as we have here. Indeed, we are the first generation of young Australians who took advantage of the Commonwealth Scholarship devised and commenced by the Chifley Government and implemented with enthusiasm by the Menzies Government.

In our University days many of us made friendships in the affairs of student government. We met at conferences. We debated each other. And then our paths diverged. These few days will throw us together again, ten, fifteen, twenty years on. It is time that the generation, which benefited from the rapid expansion of tertiary education in Australia, began to repay its intellectual debt to Australian society, which funded that education. It should do so outside the narrow confines of particular professional disciplines. In 1955 when the oldest of us approached Universities, there were 3,000 graduates from Australian Universities each year. Today more than 30,000 graduates emanate from our Universities. 30,000 graduate from Colleges of Advanced Education. What is this group of highly talented, educated Australians thinking of the future of our country?

Long before sexism became unpopular and democracy became fashionable, Plato called for a society of 'philosopher kings'. This notion is now generally rejected in the name of democracy and the ultimate wisdom of the common man and woman. The last group of philosopher kings was probably the founding fathers of the American Republic. Certainly, those who devised our Constitution do not deserve the accolade. Though we must be grateful that they at least brought together the Australian Federal nation.

We here are no latter-day philosopher kings but we are a group of Australians with the blessing of education, brought up with many private advantages which the young before us did not enjoy and which the young after us do not always enjoy today. We exhibit every shade of political opinion. We come from many occupational and educational disciplines. It is a good thing that we gather together to meet each other and to contribute our thoughts even for a few days about the future directions of our country.

The English-speaking people were very good at games. Their sports are played in the four corners of the earth. If you motor through India or West Africa you will see the cricket pitch. If you visit South America you will find soccer. In South East Asia they revel in golf.

I sometimes think the English took this infatuation with the sporting contest too far. The court trial - which everywhere else it is an inquiry and a search for truth - in our system is a battle between contestants searching for the winner. The political process is, also, a search for the winner. Our country is often artificially polarised by political opposition forced to attack and defend.

Out of synthesis of these contests frequently emerge new ideas beneficial to human progress. Freedom implies freedom to differ. But there are some problems today that do not readily lend themselves to polarisation of this kind. To such problems there is no simple right or wrong answer.

Furthermore, the necessity for recurrent elections, held at relatively short intervals, produces in Australia a short-run approach to problems. Issues of twenty years hence are all-too-often pushed to one side under the relentless pressure of transient public opinion polls and the ephemeral crises of today's headlines.

Coinciding with these institutional problems are unprecedented pressures for change:

- * the growth of the role of government and of its attendant bureaucracy;
- * the growth of business, especially trans-national business;
- * the rapidly changing moral and social values of our society; and
- * above all, the impact of new technological advances including nuclear technology, biological technology and the new information technology.

This conference presents an opportunity to us individuals to broaden our horizons and to learn things in totally new areas. And to think boldly. The topic to be addressed is no less than the future of our society. If we have here (as the organisers have sought to collect) a microcosm of future leadership in Australia, we should also be thinking constantly about the future of our society. To do so in this company, for an intensive period of five days, is a rare privilege. But to everyone not here, to everyone else, the effort is only justified to the extent that its results are useful. We may each personally benefit greatly from an excellent and stimulating festival of talk. But if that is all that occurs, we should be using this occasion irresponsibly.

THE NEED

The extensive preparations for this conference were designed to create an opportunity for bold thinking. The assumption (with which I strongly agree) is that Australia is entering or is already in a very difficult period and is in many ways not prepared for what lies ahead. A watch-word for our time is change. Our current institutions - political, legal, economic, cultural and social - cannot keep up with either the extent or the pace of change. As change accelerates, it creates challenges to our institutions, values and beliefs. Sometimes we tend to over-react. Conflicts both necessary and unnecessary tend to increase.

Within each of the general areas that this conference will address (international relations, resource utilisation, minority rights, industrial relations, multiculturalism and so on) there are strong potential conflicts. Many commentators are predicting increased tension in Australia. There are also signs of different social groups reinforcing their current privileges, as they sense that their assets, status and position are threatened, or are being eroded by change.

There is now no clear consensus about the principles by which our society should operate. The traditional binding influences such as religion, the family and even residential stability are no longer accepted without question by large numbers of our fellow Australians. The credibility of traditional authorities appears to be declining. Few new accepted authorities are emerging to take their place.

At the same time education and sophisticated communications have increased the awareness of the complexity of the issues and problems facing Australia. We are more aware of the problems. But our problem-solving techniques and institutions have not kept pace. This disturbing gap between recognition of problems and problem-solving machinery is exacerbated by the way in which decisions are sometimes made in Australia. Ad hoc and piecemeal tinkering in response to various fundamental problems do not encourage social planning. Long-term planning is poor. Planning in which there is broad community participation is almost non-existent. As social stresses increase, the need for long-term planning in which the community takes part increases too.

This conference is a small step in the right direction. It may lead on to more.

GOALS

There are four objectives for this conference. The first is to identify the major problems and challenges our society must face during the next 15 to 20 years. Each of you has been asked to prepare a 500 word statement setting out your views, as we begin this conference. These brief statements will contribute considerably towards the first goal, as will the presentations by participants over the next two days. In today's world it is impossible to address the future without identifying major problems and challenges. The achievement of this objective will be a natural and inevitable by-product of our discussions together.

A second objective is to identify the available options for the future directions of our society. Amongst such a diverse group, we cannot really expect consensus on a single future direction. Any such consensus would be likely to be couched in language of such meaningless generality as to be worthless. What we can expect is agreement on the nature of the conflicts and a picture of some of the general options or realistic choices which will be available to Australian society. We may even be able to go beyond that. The advantage of seeking a 15 to 20 year perspective is that it may enable us to conceive of possible futures which are not necessarily subject to current constraints. Our view of the future must be realistic concerning the constraints that are likely to inhibit progress in Australia. But it would be remiss of us if we did not take the opportunity of such a collection of people as are here to adopt a bold objective of attempting to picture the type of society we, for our part, would want to have in Australia in the year 2000. With a goal, we can doubtless compromise about the options and directions available to achieve the goal. Without a goal, our options are identified in a vacuum. We just muddle along, stumbling from one short-term crisis to another letting time take us where it will. The discussion groups over the next two days will be a major opportunity to identify the goals which Australian society might realistically seek in the next two decades.

Thirdly, there is the practical step of identifying the ways in which we can proceed from here. What institutions need to change to facilitate conflict resolution? What steps should be taken to respond to the challenges facing our society? One of the inevitable products of this conference (perhaps one of the best) will be the creation of personal contacts between Australians of differing backgrounds and positions. Links of this kind may also identify and strengthen our capacities for addressing future issues in our several tasks. The working groups later in the week are designed to meet this objective. It exemplifies what is different about this conference. It is not a splashy event to be enjoyed, and then forgotten or ignored. The intention is to produce serious proposals on how to promote a better future for Australia and how to implement those proposals. The proposals will be available to our leaders and to public opinion. Both need help in long term perceptions.

RESULTS

The conference is designed to produce results at three levels at least. At the individual level, you will be asked during the conference to revisit the short statement you prepared on the problems and challenges facing our society. The collected final revised statements will be an important part of the conference record. They will constitute one of the products, available to those interested in our labours.

At the group level (the most important aspect of the conference design) there will be statements and proposals emerging throughout the next five days. Each group will be engaged to produce statements of agreement from each of its meetings. This will be so even if the agreement is only to define the areas of disagreement amongst participants. Plenary sessions of the conference will receive these group reports. And working groups can produce and distribute proposals for action or change at any time. All of these products of the group discussion process will become part of the final conference record.

At the plenary level there will also be an opportunity for action. The conference may (or may not) choose to adopt a position, to advocate particular changes or to continue the process of dialogue. The conference may (or may not) choose to adopt statements, proposals or a plan of action. Whatever is decided in the plenary sessions becomes part of the conference record.

There will be other, less tangible consequences. Yet they may be even more important in the long run. The presence of the representatives of the media suggests the wider audience than is gathered here. I am told that educational materials for our schools will be developed from the conference record. Each of us will share with others our reflections on the conference. Radio and television coverage will add to the dissemination of what is said in the open sessions. There will be plenty of opportunity for frank exchanges away from the media spotlight. The linking of the conference to A.B.C. and other radio programmes, within a continuing project of Australian Frontier, should certainly expand the impact of the conference. And I know that Australian Frontier is committed to widespread dissemination and promotion of the conference findings and recommendations.

COMMITMENT

We are all collectively responsible for whatever emerges in the next few days. There is no denying that the goals of those who organised this conference are very ambitious. They will be difficult to achieve. Perhaps some of them are impossible of success. Conflicts amongst us are inevitable. They will test our tolerance. But they should surely not be avoided in the name of that special enemy of progress : bland double-speech. The intensive and relatively long period in which the conference will proceed should test your perseverance of patience as well as your intellect.

You have been chosen from positions of leadership and in some cases represent power. This conference asks each participant to go beyond the environment in which he or she is successful. You are to venture into territory into which you are as yet generally untested. It will probably be tempting to stay within the safe confines of your familiar area of expertise and to avoid the challenges which the conference presents. Easiest of all will be retreat into apathy, cynicism and indifference. I hope we can all resist these temptations and approach the conference with the open-mindedness it deserves and which our training and preparation in this country require of us.

Here is a unique, fascinating and highly significant conference. Few subjects could be more important than the future of our society. I hope we are equal to the challenge.