

AUSTRALIAN EDUCATION MUST STOP "BRAIN DRAIN"

OF TALENTED AND GIFTED CHILDREN

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Australian Education Must Stop "Brain Drain" of Talented and Gifted Children, says Kirby

Melbourne, Friday

Justice Michael Kirby tonight called for Australian education to learn from the "Confucian Renaissance" in Asia. He said that one explanation of the strong economic growth of Asia was its "unembarrassed attention" paid to the education of gifted and talented children. He said that Australia was squandering many of its gifted children. If Australia was ever to be a "clever country" it would have to change its public education systems to provide special opportunities for children with higher intellectual and other capacities.

Justice Kirby was speaking at a National Conference of the Australian Association for the Education of the Gifted and Talented held at Monash University in Melbourne. He is Chancellor of Macquarie University and President of the New South Wales Court of Appeal. He is also Patron of the Association.

LESSONS FROM ASIA

Justice Kirby said that it was important that the call for Australia to be a "clever country" should go beyond election jingles devised by advertising agencies to win an election. He stated that there were few more important

issues before Australia at present:

"If we look at our country's economic predicament at the moment we see symptoms of the malaise which we simply must cure. The special needs for the education of gifted children should be seen in the context of Australia's economic predicament and geo-political position. Like it or not, we are a basically European culture left over from the decline of European empire. We find ourselves in a part of the world on the edge of Asia. To the extent that people in the advancing economies of Asia think of Australia at all, many regard us as an irrelevant historical anachronism. Others regard us as a land of mediocrity which has squandered great natural advantages. We must reverse these trends, whilst seeking to discover our own identity and to preserve our own special society and values."

REVIVAL OF CONFUCIAN ETHICS

Justice Kirby said that the advance of the economies of North Asia was no accident. He said that it was part a product of the re-emergence of the Confucian ethic in developing Asian societies. That ethic emphasises excellence and competitiveness in education and the provision of special opportunities to talented children to be trained to serve the community:

"Many Australians are puzzled by the rapid economic advance of 'the Four Dragons' (Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore). But there is really no puzzle. These countries are unabashed in their educational priorities. Their public education systems are highly competitive. They provide special opportunities to children of the youngest age to go ahead and maximise their talents. They do so because these societies acknowledge the value of this for the whole community and its economic, cultural and social advancement.

We would not want to go to the extreme of the Japanese system with high rates of student suicide. We have other values to pursue. But we can learn at least this much. Every gifted child whose talents are not maximised is a most precious resource squandered. If we are just to

hold our place in the economic pecking order - and to avoid the threat of becoming the poor whites of Asia - we must stop this new national brain-drain. In the past a "brain-drain" was a loss of educated people to another country. But our brain-drain is the loss of opportunity: especially for the clever children of poorer parents. Any government dedicated to equal opportunity must arrest that shocking wastage" Justice Kirby said.

NOT ELITIST - EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

Justice Kirby denied that the provision of special schools and special streaming of talented children was "elitist".

"Far from being elitist, this is a simple matter of equal opportunity. Children with talents have a right to make the most of them. By doing so they will contribute disproportionately to the welfare of Australia. Unless the public school system particularly offers such opportunities there will be a continuing drift to private education. Worse still, there will be a continuing loss of educational opportunity to children whose parents are poorer, who may have no educational tradition, poor study facilities or lack of vision for their children. The system itself should provide that vision. Unfortunately, educational bureaucrats and teacher unions have opposed, and even dismantled, public education systems for gifted children. People looking to the long term should ask whether, to correct Australia's economic predicament, we need to change these things rapidly. I believe we do", Justice Kirby concluded.

The above talk will be given at the National Workshop "Teaching Strategies for a Clever Country" held at the Krongold Centre, Monash University between 4 and 6 April 1991.

For further information contact the conference (03) 565 4388 (telephone) or (03) 565 5127 (fax). Justice Kirby's telephone in Sydney is (02) 230 8203. The Directors of the

ference are Marilyn Goodall and Barry Culhane. Justice
is scheduled to address the dinner of the conference at
Monash University Staff Club, Monash University, Friday 5
1991 commencing 7 p.m.