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PARLIAMENT OF NEW SOUTH WALES

DINNER TO CELEBRATE THE 80TH BIRTHDAY

OF THE HONOURABLE SIR ASHER JOEL KBE AO HON D LITT

FOR ASHER - DEAR FRIEND

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The Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG*

FIRST GET THE FACTS

It is terribly important, in approaching the happy task of seconding the birthday toast proposed by the Premier, to get the facts right.

The last time I had occasion to celebrate the life and achievements of a member of this Parliament, indeed of the Legislative Council, was one rather different to tonight. It arose at the Council of Macquarie University. The distinguished past-Member of this Parliament had served for many years at the table of the Council. The eagle eye of the Registrar fell upon the supplement to the *Australian Who's Who*. It noted the sad death of this distinguished Parliamentarian in October 1991. Solemnly, as is our custom, the death was noted. The members of the Macquarie University Council paused in their busy lives to reflect upon their past colleague's contribution both to the public life of the State and to the affairs of the University.

Shortly thereafter I penned what I thought was a proper note of condolence to the widow. You can imagine my surprise when, a few

days later, I received a response which went something like this:

"Dear Mr Chancellor,

Thank you for your letter.

My husband and I have received many similar letters.

Somehow a rumour has spread about my husband's untimely death.

We have been flooded with messages - some of which contained praise that we rather considered inadequate to the occasion.

I am pleased to tell you that my husband is very much alive. In fact, he is sitting here with me, still opening letters of condolence.

We will put your letter aside and accept it contingently - to be brought out a future date: hopefully far away.

Please believe me that we both appreciated the generosity of your sentiments - though not as much as their prematurity!"

This is a true story. It underlines the importance of getting one's facts right about fellow citizens: especially if they are public figures. Indeed, except that it would be vulgar to say so in present circumstances and in the Premier's company, it provides a powerful reason for recording every possible fact in a daily diary. Not content with the assiduous research of the Registrar of the University on this occasion, I have done some of my own. In the case of Sir Asher Joel, it reveals a life which is truly remarkable and happily still unfolding.

A FORTUNATE LIFE

Asher Joel was born in May 1912. It was a famous month in which there was also born another distinguished Australian of the spirit: Dame Joan Hammond. In a few days she too will celebrate her 80th birthday.

The young Asher went to the Cleveland Street Public School.

Little could he have imagined, as he ran around the schoolyard and repaired daily to his parents' home in Enmore, the great variety of his life and the achievements and honours that were before him.

In 1927 he became a copy boy with the *Daily Telegraph*. In 1928, already showing his catholic political tendencies, he was appointed political roundsman for the *Labor Daily*. He worked for a time as the private secretary to the formidable J T Lang. Many are the tales he can tell of the Big Fella.

In 1937, Asher Joel took on the first of many public celebrations and directed it with finesse. This was the occasion of the Australian celebration of the Coronation of King George VI and Queen Elizabeth, also still happily alive and continuing her noble service.

In 1938 another celebration came under his sway. This was the sesquicentenary of the establishment of the colony by Governor Phillip. We can still see at the Sydney Showground the great Exhibition Building in which the achievements of 150 years were displayed, under Asher Joel's sure direction.

This exemplary public service was interrupted by the Second World War. The young Asher Joel joined the Royal Australian Navy. He saw service in the Admiralty Islands. He became the liaison officer to General MacArthur's headquarters. He was the first RAN officer to be awarded the United States Bronze Star.

When the war was won, Asher Joel returned to Australia. He organised the celebrations of victory in the Pacific in Melbourne in August 1945. It seems that whenever a celebration was to be had, governments of all political persuasions turned to him. In 1953 he was appointed to the executive of the body which was to establish the Opera House at Sydney Cove. In 1963 he chaired the celebration of 175 years of European settlement in Australia. At about this time he

acquired a small motel in the country which, it seems, gave him a sufficient political allegiance to country interests to persuade him to join the Country Party, as it then was. He had been elected to the Legislative Council as an independent. But now, from the extensive country connection of his motel, he was aligned with the Country Party.

In 1963 he also played the leading part in the organisation of the visit of the Queen to Australia. In 1966 President Johnson's tour, at a critical time in the life of this country, fell to be organised by him. In 1970 he not only played a leading part in the Bicentenary of Captain Cook's landing at Botany Bay. He was placed in charge of the visit of Pope Paul VI. Cardinal Marcincus, when asked about the visit, declared that it was a great success:

"What would you expect? The Premier was a Protestant and the tour was organised by a Jew?"

For his many services to the Australian community Asher Joel was knighted in 1970, an honour which was later enlarged when he was appointed a Knight of the Order of the British Empire. Later still he was appointed to the high rank of Officer of the Order of Australia.

Yet it is his support of universities which first brought him into contact with me. In 1976 he decided to offer a seeding grant to the three Sydney metropolitan universities. His children had attended the University of Sydney and the University of New South Wales. But it was his sense of perfect fairness that required him also to offer the same support to the fledgling Macquarie University. So he did. The other universities spent their funds wisely on a visiting lecturer and on the purchase of microfiche. But at Macquarie, true to the Biblical injunction, we were wisest of all. We invested in the establishment of the Asher Joel Foundation.

This, in turn, has provided funds for the continuation of a steady stream of archeological field work in Israel. It has brought Macquarie University into an established association with the Tel Aviv University and with a major excavation of Ancient Jewish and Roman ruins outside Tel Aviv. From the diggings there, sponsored by the Asher Joel Foundation, a marvellous collection of items of great beauty and importance have been brought to Macquarie University. They are part of our teaching collection used by the Department of Archeology and the Department of Ancient History. The fund of the Foundation has grown to a significant capital. In that capital, Asher Joel has continued to take the keenest interest. It is typical of his generosity that he and his family have decided that contributions for attendance at this dinner should be made to the Foundation. They will be well husbanded. They will be used to extend the important work of opening up the past and - through the past - discovering the present and perceiving the future.

In honour of his contributions to the University, in 1988, on his birthday, I had the privilege of conferring on Sir Asher Joel the Honorary Degree of Doctor of Letters. In her presentation to this distinguished citizen, the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Di Yerbury, talked of his far sightedness as a benefactor. She reviewed his community leadership and lifetime of service to journalism, public relations, politics, the arts, medicine and education. She paid tribute to his experience, wisdom and dedication which "has for two generations now fostered the best qualities in our community life". This was Asher's first University degree. But it was one richly deserved for his contributions to education at Macquarie University and beyond.

In his book *A Jew in Australian Public Life* Asher Joel wrote that a Jew can do everything but fail. To fail to carry out

one's obligations to the community distances the Jew from his God. Asher Joel has not failed. One gets the feeling, from this review of his lifetime of service, that Asher and his God are perfectly comfortable together.

ASHER THE FRIEND

It has been said that a diplomat is a person who often has to tell you to go to hell but does so in such a graceful way that you are actually looking forward to the journey. Asher Joel's grace is well known. Every one of us in this room has felt it in some way, large or small. Otherwise we would not be here. Each of us could tell our personal tale. I will tell mine.

At an official function at the Great Synagogue, out of the blue, Asher Joel asked of my parents. I told him that my mother had then recently undergone open heart surgery and a major bypass operation. "So have I", he declared. I told him of the feeling of anxiety that she was then suffering. "So did I", he said.

Then, patiently and carefully, Asher explained from the deep recesses of his own experience the frightful anticipation and trauma of such an operation. The heart which has beaten so faithfully throughout life is opened and set aside. The body is maintained by a mere machine. The ribs are broken as the surgical team pores over the patient. The patient is on the brink of life and death. A deep reflection on the temporary nature of life is inevitable in such a major assault upon the body and the heart.

I conveyed these thoughts that night to my mother. But Asher Joel did not leave it there. Within days he had sent his own handwritten letter and some flowers. Since then he has written on a number of occasions to this unknown woman. Words of kindness, consideration and encouragement. My mother now is over this

anxiety. She may have been helped by Asher's words of insight. Her worried family certainly was.

My brother David was the next beneficiary of Asher's grace. His wife was Jewish. Therefore, by the Jewish tradition, his son and daughter are Jewish. At the age of 34, Marie Line was struck down by cancer of the liver. Within a year of its discovery, she was dead. Asher Joel and his family - particularly Michael Joel - were a tower of strength to my brother and his children through their grief. My brother has brought up those children as Jewish children. This is not an easy thing for a Christian man to do. But he has persevered. And he has had every encouragement from Asher and Michael and other members of the Jewish community. Kindness and gentleness were there at a grievous moment. It is these qualities of Asher Joel which shine forth. They are more precious even than public honours, for they disclose the beauty of the inner man.

REMEMBRANCE OF THINGS PAST

And so we, the friends of Asher and Sybil, are here tonight to celebrate Asher Joel's 80th birthday. Inevitably our minds pass back through the years to the playground at Cleveland Street; to the office of J T Lang; to the countless celebrations in which the sparkle and verve of a master performer were felt. The spirit of the community was lifted. Happiness was promoted by this extraordinary conductor of public celebrations.

But we also think on the private Asher. The man of kindness and gentle words of encouragement and help at critical moments. And so, dear friend, you can look back on 80 years of achievement and especially to the warmth of friendship that surrounds you on this occasion. We say in a loud voice, "Happy Birthday".

As usual, the Bard puts it better than we can:

"When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summon up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes now wail my dear times' waste:
Then can I drown an eye unus'd to flow,
For precious friends hid in death's dateless night,
And weep afresh love's long-since cancell'd woe,
And moan the expense of many a vanish'd sight.
Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,
Which I new pay as if not paid before.
But if the while I think on thee, dear friend,
All losses are restor'd, and sorrows end."

When we think on thee, dear Asher, and on your life, and on your personal qualities and on your family - rich indeed are our thoughts. And full of thanks.

* President of the Court of Appeal of New South Wales.
Chancellor of Macquarie University.