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TRIBUTE TO THE CHANCELLOR
THE HON JUSTICE MICHAEL KIRBY, AC, CMG
COUNCIL DINNER
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When I first met Michael in 1974, he had just been appointed to the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission as a Deputy President, but he soon took up the position of Foundation Chairman of the Australian Law Reform Commission, a post he made a household name with his unparalleled flair for bringing legal issues to the attention of the public, and getting people to talk about them.

From there he became a Judge of the Federal Court in 1983, and shortly afterwards in 1984, he was appointed Chancellor of Macquarie University. It was also in 1984 that he moved on from his Federal judicial post to accept the appointment he still holds as President of the Court of Appeals of New South Wales.

Normal human beings like you and me might find it sufficiently daunting to be both the busy President of the Court of Appeals and, at the same time, Chancellor of a very dynamic University during an era in higher education which few would describe as uneventful or boring.

However, Michael is far from being an ordinary mortal, and during the decade in which he has served Macquarie University as Chancellor he has also at various times, and on the international stage, managed to be:

- * Governor of the International Council for Computer Communications
- * A member of the UNESCO Committee of Counsellors on Peoples' Rights

- * A member of the World Health Organisation Global Commission on AIDS
- * Chairman of the OECD Expert Group on Security of Information Systems
- * A participant year after year in the Colloquia of Judges of the Commonwealth Nations on Domestic Application of International Human Rights Norms
- * A member of the ILO Fact-Finding and Conciliation Commission on Freedom of Association
- * Chairman of the Executive Committee of the International Commission of Jurists
- * A member of the Permanent Tribunal of Peoples
- * And a member of the International Advisory Council of the International Human Rights Law Group

And only this week it was announced that he had been appointed as Special Representative on Human Rights in Cambodia of the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

All this international work has been in addition to a killing schedule at the national level not only as President of the Court but in numerous other activities, especially those to do with human rights.

As for his speeches, he has become a legend in his own time, not only for the sheer number he manages to fit in, on an amazingly wide range of topics, but also for their quality and aptness. Surprisingly often, he finds a way of bringing his various national and international interests together in such speeches.

How often have we heard him start a mesmerising speech with such words as "Only two days ago, I was standing on the ancient bridge in Budapest....." and we would wonder how on earth he was going to relate this experience to a meeting of the Friends of the Library, or whatever function he was at. But he always did so, gracefully and with great style.

He has shown enormous dedication to a demanding round of public and ceremonial duties at Macquarie, presiding over and speaking at far more functions than any University can rightfully expect its Chancellor to attend.

He also spared time, too, however busy he was, to discuss university business with me, often at the crack of dawn.

There are some personal memories of Michael as Chancellor which I hold especially dear.

One particular celebration I'll remember fondly is the fiftieth birthday party we held for him, his old friend Brian Spencer, and John Clark.

Not only did Michael and Brian bravely front up together to the legendary Miss Pontifex in their schooldays, and sang lustily (or, in Brian's case, daintily, I imagine, since he took a role in skirts) in the school production of *The Mikado*, but they were also born within a couple of days of each other.

Another lovely celebration was when Michael was made a Companion of the Order of Australia in 1991. And yet another was the presentation to him, in the same year, of the Human Rights Medal. I remember that his nephews and nieces not only attended the Human Rights presentation but also loudly disrupted it as they played noisily in the aisles.

Those of you who've seen Michael's solicitous treatment of some of our students who turn up in T-shirts and thongs at Graduation Ceremonies (to use the Deputy Chancellor's example) won't be in the least surprised to learn that he generously stood up for his nephews' human rights to make as much noise as they liked, even though they interrupted his own presentation.

Michael, many of us suspect, has never quite reconciled himself to giving up those positions in student politics and student leadership which he once held at the University of Sydney, and he often remembers those days with real nostalgia.

He's a university man through and through, and his deep interest in both educational excellence and access, his pride in the University's achievements, and his dedication to the values our universities hold as communities of scholars, have been incalculable assets to Macquarie.

So how does one organise a tribute to a man who's made such a contribution?

When I talked to him about the proposal to hold a Council dinner in his honour tonight, he was unashamedly delighted at the prospect. Indeed he said hopefully that he expected the "full works", including dancing girls and boys prancing down the tables in scanty costumes.

At this thought, I had what I considered to be a brilliant idea, and I proposed it to him: I would bake a huge cake and he would leap out of it wearing a bikini. Spoilsport that he proved to be, he drew the line at this - not because he thought it too undignified, he assured me, but simply because he hasn't had enough time to work out at the gym lately. Ah, vanity, Michael!

Well, we have no meetings involving the Chancellor scheduled before the University reception in your honour on December 14, Michael, so I warn you that you have plenty of time to get into shape, and we're expecting you to create a great impression when I wheel on that cake.

Now I assure those of you who find it hard to imagine our normally serious and dignified Chancellor dancing his way around the tables that you would have had new insights into his talents if you'd seen him at Curzon Hall at the Convocation Dinner, after the graduation ceremony in which he conferred an Honorary Doctorate on Oodgeroo of the Tribe Noonuccal.

There he was, on the dance floor with Oodgeroo, delighting the graduates (as well as the Vice-Chancellor) with a virtuoso demonstration of the jitterbug. (I happen to know that they wanted him to play the lead in "Strictly Ballroom", but they had to make do with Paul Mercurio, because Michael was in Geneva at the time.)

But back to Oodgeroo. That was indeed an unforgettable graduation ceremony at which Michael once again displayed his unmatched talent for appropriate ritual in a way that added both dignity and grandeur, accompanied by personal warmth, to important occasions.

He informed Buckingham Palace about Oodgeroo's doctorate - we all know he has a hotline to the Palace - and he quietly arranged for both a telegram of congratulations from the Queen, which he kept secret until he read it out at the ceremony; and a fanfare for a brass quintet in Oodgeroo's honour, the Oodgeroo Fanfare, composed by Malcolm Williamson, the Master of the Queen's Music. It was merely one of many magnificent ceremonies at which he presided.

The only time I saw him upstaged was when a blind graduate, Trish James, gave a terrific address on behalf of the graduates, and her elderly, "seeing-eye" dog, realising that she was about to make a speech, gave a huge, audible sigh and settled down on the podium for a good sleep. The audience loved it - we all did.

And Michael, you'll remember, got Trish to lead the procession with him out of what he doubtless thinks of, having been trained at Sydney University, as Macquarie's Great Courtyard; and a very moving moment that was.

But there was one occasion recently when I thought Michael's display of aplomb and cool, unruffled dignity was really above and beyond the call of duty.

As you'll all be aware, Michael is extremely close to his family, and this led to this incident which, for a while, I have to confess, I found deeply disturbing. We were having a delightful dinner at the Lincolns, and Michael was talking about his family. The subject got around to his sister and her husband.

Suddenly, I heard Michael telling us about the husband's extraordinary attack on the poor woman's life, in the middle of the night, while she was asleep. He had actually made an attempt, Michael told us, to cut her tongue out.

I sat there transfixed and horrified, but I didn't say anything because Michael himself didn't turn a hair while he recounted this frightful assault on his sister's life. I thought: "Isn't he just amazing! What self-control!"

It was a couple of minutes before I realised, thankfully, that my admiration of Michael's sangfroid, was on this occasion, quite misplaced. What had happened was that the topic of conversation had totally changed while I was focusing on the glass of wine which John Lincoln was pouring for me; and what Michael was actually outlining was a criminal case, and nothing to do with his own family at all. I was greatly relieved - just as he is, no doubt, to find that this misunderstanding was finally cleared up.

Brian Spencer, was there on that occasion too, as he has been on so many important occasions throughout Michael's life, and as he is tonight, as master of ceremonies. He's given me strict instructions on how long I'm allowed to speak and, as we all know, and Michael often reminds us, Brian is the Keeper of the Rules - he who must be obeyed!

Without further ado, therefore, colleagues, in the final toast of the evening, will you please take your glasses, and stand with me for a toast to our distinguished Chancellor, Justice Michael Kirby. To Michael!

PRESENTATION

The University's gift to Michael will be presented at the reception on 14 December.

I should keep it a secret, really, I suppose, but Councillors won't be surprised to learn that it's actually that superb abstract painting at the entrance of the third floor of the Council Building which Michael has always admired so much. I know he pretends to think unkind thoughts about it, but we know that's just a mask for the deep-down covetousness with which he's always regarded it.

Well, you'll have to wait until the 14th, Michael, to be presented with that. But, tonight, if not in congratulations for ten years hard labour, at least with deep appreciation and thanks for your decade of outstanding service to the University Council, and with our affectionate good wishes for the future, we'd like to present you with this memento of the Council Dinner held in your honour.

And before I explain what it is, could I please ask you, Michael, first, to pull off the cover.

I'm sure you're wondering, and in any case not everyone can see it clearly from where they're sitting, so let me explain what it is. The memento is a small, framed abstract painting of the campus by Tan, the Manager of our Design and Visual Production Unit. He's called it, "Passing Through". The University Workshop, using Tan's design, has made this into a double frame, backed in wood and hinged with brass, and engraved with a tribute to Michael.

The other side of this diptych provides a frame for a parchment which all attending at tonight's dinner will be invited to sign at the end of the evening, so that Michael will have a lasting memento of the occasion. It can stand alone, as a diptych - and, indeed, as such, we're reliably informed by Edwin Judge, it is in the form of the very first books, which were diptych bound in wood and hinged in this way. The Workshop has also made a lovely stand for it.

Michael, thank you for "passing through" Macquarie for a whole decade, and we hope it will bring back some happy memories of your time with us when you look at it over the many years to come.