

Justice Michael Kirby speaking to Jan Muir

Interview Series

Studying economics in Australia

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TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW

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Can I ask you, first of all, whereabouts in this sequence of tertiary qualifications you hold economics appeared?

I came up to Sydney University in 1956. I started to do economics in the very first week ...

So it was your first choice?

No, it wasn't. I started to do the subject economics within an Arts course. And for some reason I lost interest in it. I had done it in the Leaving Certificate. I had secured first class honours at the Leaving Certificate in economics. But for some reason I couldn't get myself worked up into an interest in it. Therefore, within a week I left the economics course and did psychology instead. Which was possibly a good thing, because it meant that later, when I decided to do an economics degree, I hadn't excluded myself by having done the core subject. So what I did was to complete the Arts-Law course in the usual way. Then, after I had finished that, which took six years, by that time I was a student politician. I was looking around for some academic legitimacy to hang in there. I'm afraid my eyes scanned medicine - and the thought of cutting up the little frogs was too horrible - my eyes then passed over to engineering - and my mathematics was never all that strong - science was excluded for the same reason. And so it was by a process of elimination, and in the sheer pursuit of power, that I fell upon economics. As it happened, I then began the course. I enjoyed it greatly. I believe it's been of tremendous benefit to me. But I have to admit my base motivations that led me back into the university. I was President of the Students' Representative Council. I had come to student politics late in my Law course. In order to keep in there, having found the fascination of the subject and bumping weekly into people such as Gareth Evans, Gordon Bilney, Nick Greiner and many others who are now figures on the scene, I thought, well, I'll do economics. So I did. I finished as a very ancient student politician.

When I did economics I had a number of very interesting lecturers with whom I've had a long association ever since. They included Professor Harry Edwards, who went off to become the foundation dean at Macquarie University, and to whom I was later to give an honorary degree as one of the foundation professors of Macquarie when I was Chancellor there. I sat in the Stephen Roberts Theatre at Sydney University, rushing there at the end of a busy day as a solicitor to sit on the steps to take my notes in Economics I ...

Oh, you were actually working ... ?

Yes, I wasn't a full time student. I studied at night. And at the end of a busy day as a solicitor, working under great pressure, I would rush down to Sydney University on a bus - invariably late. The lectures were at 5.30, I think, or maybe 5 o'clock - anyway, I would get there late. The hall would be packed. I would sit down on the

steps - I still remember, they were not comfortable! I would take the notes from Harry Edwards and the other lecturers.

My term at Sydney University coincided with the shift of the economics faculty from the Mills Building, which is just near the old centre of the university, the quadrangle, to Darlington. We moved to the buildings which used to house what was then called the Deaf, Dumb and Blind Institute. And so we moved over there during my term, into some new annexes to that rather old palace. And that's where I took my lectures in economics - from people such as Professor King, and Professor Edwards, later on from Professor Henry Mayer, who lectured in Government. It was a very good discipline. I've never regretted doing it - although, alas, my motives were base when I set out!

What particularly interested you? Was there a particular component of the course you did that quite excited you in its ideas?

Well, I was always very interested in industrial law. In fact my practice as a barrister was later to develop in that area. Of course, industrial law and industrial tribunals are very closely concerned with the state of the economy - macroeconomics in particular. So it was really macroeconomics and an understanding of it that interested me - reviving the interest which I'd had at school, when I did economics honours for the Leaving Certificate. I think it's a good thing for citizens to know about - macroeconomics - to understand the basic economic and political problems which confront the community. Certainly my grounding in that subject was very thorough and very interesting. I remember at the time Harry Edwards used to constantly rail against the Arbitration Commission, which was at that time making the annual National Wage decisions which had a tremendous economic impact. He would sound off endlessly - perhaps not knowing that I, a lawyer, was sitting in the audience - about lawyers. How they would always get things wrong. Why were they let loose in the economic sphere without a basic knowledge of economics? But he would concede one merit to lawyers, and that was that lawyers would make up their mind. You know the old joke about all the economists - well, he would concede that one good point about lawyers and the Arbitration Commission was, right or wrong - he often thought wrong. But they would make up their mind, and that, I used to find, was a merit in the system when I became a practitioner in it, and later a judge in it. In the end, the debating and the speculation must stop in a decision.

Did you ever engage in debate with people with views like that, at that stage? Would you have taken him on?

Not really. Sydney University at that time was very much the 'sit there, pay attention, take notes, go away'. The classes in economics were huge, they were hundreds of people packing a huge auditorium, they were not places for debate. My recollection is that in the economics core of the course you didn't have any time for discussion. In Government - I did as well a parallel three years of Government - you could engage in debate because the classes were smaller, especially in the later years of Government. There we had an eminently debatable lecturer in Henry Mayer. He was an extremely engaging and fascinating and provocative and often outrageous lecturer with points of view, particularly about the media and about our society and its failings. I became a close friend of Henry Mayer and I admired him greatly.

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And you maintain friendships like that today?

Well, I maintain friendships with Harry Edwards and Henry Mayer - until Henry's death - and with other members of the faculty - Professor King, Professor Chambers. But at the time (or soon after) I commenced in economics, I was elected to be the student senator - it was called (the Fellow of the Senate of the University elected to represent the Undergraduates). So I got to know the people who were running the university, from the Chancellor and the Vice-Chancellor down. And I would sit in the Senate and in the committees of the university with those who were at other times giving me lectures. By this stage I was the grand old age, I suppose, of 24 or 25, which was pretty ancient in terms of the class, most of whom were new undergraduates - and therefore my relationship with the lecturers was perhaps slightly different from that of the ordinary member of the class, both because of my Senate position, which I held for six years.

And also your part-time status,, perhaps, which meant you were probably on campus a lot less than some of the others ...

My full-time student years were really confined to three years. Two at the campus, in Arts, and then one at the Law School in the City for one year. After that my entire career was part-time. Gareth Evans rather unkindly said to me that in my BA, LL.M, BEc at Sydney University I concentrated on quantity, not quality. He was, of course, boasting of his first class honours Oxford degree, as well as his Melbourne degrees. He was never a person, shall we say, for the kindly remark! Notwithstanding that, this fitted in with my plans. I've never regretted my study of economics. To this day, I'm glad I did it.

Could I ask you just briefly before we finish what exactly this education in economics gave you, or do you think would give a student not expecting to become a professional economist?

First, an understanding of some of the most important issues that every nation addresses, and that are crucial to our own country. The economic issues have in my lifetime gradually replaced all, or virtually all, other issues at the centre of political debate. This is doubtless because it is realised that, unless you can get the economy right, very large numbers of people will lack the economic opportunities which are extremely important for the definition of what a person is, what their life is about. They will lack the means to have a rich and fulfilling life. So it's important to a person as a citizen to understand the key economic and political debates.

Secondly, it is a very good discipline of the mind. Like law - even if you don't intend to be a lawyer - economics, even if you don't intend to be an economist, is a good means of focussing the mind about issues and principles and exploring the way broad principles apply in practice. It is a way of training the student to approach issues in a conceptual and disciplined fashion. That is extremely important in life if you are to succeed in your endeavours. Nothing is worse than a person who is full of good heart but has an undisciplined mind. It's important to have the discipline of reading, of understanding, of learning, and of applying that learning to a chosen area of discourse. That, economics provides - like law. I, not content with law, did both.

Thirdly, you can make some very good friends. Contrary to popular belief, I never found economists to be particularly pessimistic or tedious. I found them to be extremely mentally alert. Some of them, particularly those who were interested in business and enterprise, were intensely intelligent and creative. I'm thinking of Professor Jeremy Davis, who was my companion in student politics, a medallist in economics at Sydney University, who has gone on to be the Professor and Head of the Australian Graduate School of Management at the University of New South Wales. He, like me, was a student politician. So I saw a lot of him. He is one of the most intelligent people I've ever known in my life. Extremely creative in his thinking and willing to challenge accepted verities. That is the badge of university training - to challenge, to question, to doubt.

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