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DULCIE LENTON
MEMORIAL LECTURE

SPEECH & DRAMA ASSOCIATION OF NSW,
YWCA CENTRE,
SYDNEY

13 JUNE 2010

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

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This is a transcription of a live audio recording. Michael Kirby introduced his speech by referring to the article by Elizabeth Old printed in the October 2009 issue of The Voice. He continued:

Hearing the same sound again is pleasing, is it something that reminds us of our heart beating, or the heart of our mother when we were babies – it's a mystery why we like music, why we like words, and how words from one person's tongue and voice and breath can move ideas from their brain, through those mechanisms into another person's brain and it's really amazing that we are creatures that are doing this, and that though some other members of the animal kingdom as we used to call it – it's probably an animal republic by now – can communicate by sending signals, we are the only species who have this highly developed, highly complex means of expressing our words and complex thoughts and ideas.

So I commend that little essay by Elizabeth Old in your journal – and I now wish to have a lifetime subscription to your journal because it's a very good essay.

My talk to you today is going to be divided like Caesar's Gaul into three parts.

The first will be a tribute to Dulcie Lenton and all of the other members of your association who do so much for communication and for drama and words and confidence in public speaking. It's really such an important attribute of being able to communicate well.

The second part will be about my own experience at school and in growing up and learning to babble on and talk such that I now talk under wet concrete and keep going – how much I owe to my parents and to my teachers. So I'm going to say something about that.

The third part is going to be about the challenge of communication and how I really have to face that challenge in the next few days because I have to go to New York on Tuesday for a very difficult meeting and I just want to share some of those difficulties with you as an indication of how important skills in communication can be.

So let me start by paying a tribute to Dulcie Lenton. I didn't know her, I didn't know her husband but I saw from your journal, *The Voice*, how important she was in contributing to your organisation and how many people have done so, and how quite a few of them have been named 'Dulcie'. It must have been a very popular name in years gone by. I remember when I served for a while on the Library Council of New South Wales with Dulcie Stretton. I don't know if any of you knew Dulcie Stretton, she was a very big person in books and she was another

Dulcie, and there's another Dulcie mentioned in your journal¹, so it's a good name. Dulcie Lenton was your President, and she did a lot for the causes that you believe in and that I happen to believe in. So let us reflect upon her life and upon her contributions and pay tribute to it.

My own journey in expression and communication began naturally enough with my parents and you've got to be really lucky with your parents. First of all you've got to be lucky with your genetics, because if you happen to have parents who are intelligent and focussed and organised and loving – well, you really had a wonderful start in life.

My father is still alive and indeed he is still driving, and at this very moment as we meet together, he is there at the family home in Concord cooking up a storm of vegetables because we're going there tonight – it's Sunday night and we're going out there to have dinner with him – all of his available children and some of his grandchildren turn up on Sunday nights and he lays out a huge dinner and very strong on vegies – we should all be eating vegies – so he had this gift.

My mother died ten years ago but they were wonderful parents and my father more than my mother – my mother was probably too busy in the kitchen having four children to look after, but my father was a great reader and he had – has – a very beautiful voice, which, by the way, I inherited – I have a beautiful voice. It's actually better – if only you were listening to me on Phillip Adams on the radio – or the 'wireless' as he calls it. If you listened on the wireless you would hear a deep timbre in my voice. It broadcasts well. You've just got to put with the actuality: so listen to this second class performance.

¹ Dulcie Meddows

Anyway, my father would read all the time – the Grimm’s *Fairy Tales* were the most important part of the upbringing. I didn’t get lots of Australian children’s stories but I certainly got a lot of those German stories. And those of you who had that experience will know that they were extremely didactic. They were all full of little lessons for little children and you never forget them. I remember the one about *Alice my wife, the plague of my life, who sent me to beg a boon of thee*.

They start out as fisherpersons (as we would call them now) and they move up. She wants to be the local count, the local duke, the local earl, the local prince, the local king, the local pope, and then she wants to be God. And she’s sent back to the village to be a fisherwoman again. The moral of the tale being: aspire high, but not too high or you’ll be struck down and punished for your vanity. So that was the first great lesson from my father. I wish he were here. He would have enjoyed your company, and you would have enjoyed him. He’s still driving. He’s got all his marbles at 94!

Not only did he read a lot to us, but he also did a wonderful thing which parents should be encouraged to do if they don’t do it. At the age of about 11 or 12 he gave me recordings of speaking, and particularly of Shakespeare. The speaking was of historical recordings. I mean, nowadays, you can turn on the History Channel and you get the history of the Second World War over and over again and it has lost its unique fascination, but he gave me a set of recordings with the voices of the heroes and the villains of World War II, so when I tired of the voices of R G Menzies and Bert Evatt on the parliamentary broadcast, I would simply put on *The Sounds of Time* and *The Sounds of Time* had the

voices of Churchill, of Atlee, of Roosevelt and all the other war leaders, but also of Hitler and Goebbels and as I was learning German at school, at Fort Street High School at the time, I was listening very closely to these very considerable communicators. I mean you can't give them big ticks (all of them) for what they said, but they were great communicators. So I learned from listening to Churchill about how important the pause is in communicating. Churchill was an absolute master of the pause.

I speak to you tonight / for the first time / as Prime Minister / in a solemn hour / in the life of our country / of our Empire / of our allies / but above all / of the cause of freedom.²

It still sends shivers to remember that perilous moment in human civilisation how fortunate we were to find somebody who could communicate the importance of what we were up to. I mean, I can understand pacifism, and certainly a lot of the wars humanity has fought, and maybe some of the wars we are presently fighting, are not noble causes, but the Second World War was a cause that had to be fought, and Churchill gave of voice to it.

Nowadays we don't seem to get pauses amongst our politicians. It's babble, babble, babble. Maybe because they are afraid that if they pause we will think that it is over. But anyway, the great skill of Churchill in those days of wireless included this capacity to emphasise things by just stopping for a moment. That causes puzzlement and you wonder what is going to come next – but he had this great skill of communicating.

² Delivered in full Churchillian voice

Then on the other side there were certainly great communicators on the Nazi side too. I mean, they didn't whip up one of the most civilised nation on earth – the land of Beethoven and Goethe – without great skills of persuasion and communication, and I remember on this recording was the voice of Josef Goebbels, the Propaganda Minister. This was a speech made just weeks before Hitler killed himself in the bunker:

*If then the world still lives to what do we owe that other than to the Fuehrer? He will remain for us what he is for us, and has always been for us – our Fuehrer, Adolph Hitler.*³

So that teaches the lesson that we who place so much importance on communication haven't to be so mesmerised by the skill that we forget we have to retain our judgement of the message because some people who are very skilful at communicating have got a rotten message, and some people who are pretty incompetent at communicating may have a good message. So it isn't a necessary consequence that the skill in communication carries with it the value of the message.

But then my father gave me a wonderful series of recordings of Shakespeare that coincided with the time at Fort Street when I was one of the stars of Play Day. Many of Her Majesty's judges who went on to become great advocates first got their skills upon that little stage in the school Memorial Hall at Fort Street High School, and no doubt also at your⁴ Sydney High School. Sydney High School, by the way, is much better equipped – money, like treacle, has been poured into the 'Building Education Revolution'. The oldest public school in the nation is starved of funds – well, we won't go down that path lest it be divisive!

³ This was delivered first in rolling German and then translated. The Editor apologises for not having been able to locate a German text of the Hitler Birthday Speech of 1945!

⁴ Adrian Roden's

He gave me these wonderful recordings of Shakespeare which inflamed me with the passion for Speech Day and Play Day and getting on the stage and getting up there. For some reason that is still a puzzle to me, the teachers always gave me the part of the villain. Why would they have done that? It's a wonder I didn't become a bit psycho. But anyway, my father gave me recordings.

You may remember that at that time there were some great films – there was, for instance the film of *Julius Caesar* with Marlon Brando, Ralph Richardson and John Gielgud were marvellous actors. There was also the *Richard III*, the film with Laurence Olivier, Gielgud, Richardson. Just marvellous plays! I believe that children should get Shakespeare as oral performance – because it is useful to analyse and actually it's very interesting to analyse it because you see the absolute genius of this man – every word is so pregnant with several possibilities but to hear it as a drama makes you realise how wonderful it is, and how it speaks to successive ages. I can still spout off reams and reams of Shakespeare⁵.

So it's a marvellous thing that's in my brain and it's always there. In fact, I'm a sort of walking *Rumpole of the Bailey* because it's in my brain. Do they teach children to learn these things off by heart anymore? I'm not sure that they do. (*Background sounds indicate that the members of the audience DO teach children to learn things off by heart!*). It's so important to have that as part of your intellectual capital all your life, and when my father and I drove overland through the wilds of Afghanistan when it was safe to do that, in 1972, I was never alone, I always had the poetry and Shakespeare as part of my capital, so this was the way I was

⁵ Quotes in full Cassius' speech from *Julius Caesar*: For once upon a raw and gusty day...

introduced to the English language, the skills of communication and the beauty of our tongue.

But I want to tell you now why I am going to New York, because this is going to be a very big challenge, and it's the type of challenge that Elizabeth Old in her essay was talking of. How do we communicate to people who don't want to hear a message?

I've just been appointed by Helen Clarke – you may remember Helen Clarke the Prime Minister of New Zealand, a very tough cookie, a very intelligent person, a very modern person, and she's now what they call the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme, the UNDP, one of the biggest agencies in the United Nations. Now she's set up a new body called the Global Commission on HIV and Law, and I am going to be one of the Co-chairs of it, and I have to go to New York for its first meeting which begins on Wednesday. I'm to leave on Tuesday morning and to get in on Tuesday night after travelling forever. After the journey, you're there, you have a sleep, and then you're ready to perform the next day – I hope.

But the purpose of the meeting is to try to tackle a really difficult problem, and the difficulty of the problem was revealed about two weeks, or three weeks ago, in Malawi. You may remember the case of the two young men who wanted to get married or to have a relationship and the result of that was they were both arrested, they were thrown in the slammer, they were sentenced to 14 years imprisonment, they were excoriated by the judge who said this is monstrous and outrageous, and they were punished under a law which is a relic of British rule. We used to have it here when I was young. It was available to punish people in

Australia. It gave people who had any sexual contact notwithstanding that they were adults, they were in private, that it was consensual – that didn't matter. You were guilty as charged if that happened and you were punished very severely.

In the end, as you know, it became a bit complicated, the Secretary-General of the United Nations Ban Ki Moon went there, he addressed the Parliament of Malawi, and told them you've got to release these people, this is not only wrong for Human Rights – it is very bad for the struggle against AIDS which is very acute in Malawi; that the only way you will reach out to people to try to get them to change and be protected in their sexual activity is by removing stigma – you've got to get the message to them. Ultimately the President pardoned these young men, but said he didn't really approve of what they did, and they had to go and live in separate villages and now one of them says he's going to go straight and he's going to marry a woman – one doesn't know how that will work out.

Now this is the source of the problem. The AIDS epidemic is rampant in Africa – it wasn't helped by the former president of South Africa – Thabo Mbeki –because he had a view that it wasn't caused by a virus. This was just something that he got in his brilliant mind. The net result was that millions of people became infected, and all through Africa there is a most acute epidemic. The fundamental problem that we now face is that with the Global Financial Crisis there is not enough money to give the anti-retro-viral drugs that are quite expensive to the 7.6 million people additionally who are getting infected every year. And therefore the only way we can be effective in tackling this epidemic is to concentrate on prevention of further infections, and the only way you can do that is by

promoting strategies (such as we did in Australia in the 1980s) of condoms, education, sterile needles for needle users, education in primary and secondary schools and decriminalising commercial sex work, taking a lot of quite difficult decisions especially on conservative societies. But we did it and as a result we helped to prevent the spread of the virus in Australia. What we have to do through this new Commission is to try to sell that message to Africa.

Now the difficulty of doing that is I can put my golden tonsils around the necessary words. I can give the experience of a country like Australia and explain the steps we have taken and how that led to our graph plateauing, and I can tell them what has succeeded in Spain, England, New Zealand and other countries, but how can I get that message over to people who first of all think that God is speaking to them and forbidding them from doing all these wicked things, and second that they have this law that reflects African values? It does not reflect African values. There is a lot of anthropological evidence that before the British came to Africa there was nothing like this in their society, but now it's been elevated to an importance and an antiquity that it doesn't deserve.

And so that is going to be the challenge of this new Commission, and in seeking to promote its objectives, we will need an awful lot of luck; we will need a lot of persuasion; and we will need to find ways whereby one is respectful to different cultures, and different religions but one finds a way as we did in Australia to say all right we accept all that but we have got to take very urgent, very, very urgent steps, or people are simply going to die like flies – as they are. So this is what is pre-occupying me, and you can honour your wonderful teachers and Speech Days and all the occasions; you can be blessed with your parents and with their gifts

to you including gifts of communication and words and poetry; but when you get to the real world, communicating in ways that will be effective and successful between different cultures, different religions, different outlooks, different world experience, different levels of poverty – it's a big challenge and it will be a very difficult task. There's no guarantee at all that it will succeed.

But this is the task we have been given, and it's the task that is going to take me to New York on Tuesday, and that I'm going to do my level best to succeed in. So insofar as you are engaged in good expression, clear expression, rational communication – you are definitely on the right track.

It's very very important to our country, for the world, for human fulfilment, but the only points I came to say are points you would well know – skills in communication don't necessarily mean that the message is good. And skills in communication don't necessarily mean that you are successful in your objective however you deserve to be successful, because sometimes there just are these barriers, there are walls that prevent the words, however magical, from getting into the brains of those to whom they are targeted. I am sure that if Dulcie Lenton were here today, she would agree to what I have said, and I honour her, and I respect you and I am thankful that you asked me asked me to come along.
