

THE HON JUSTICE MICHAEL KIRBY AC CMG
JUSTICE OF THE HIGH COURT OF AUSTRALIA
COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

Who do you consider to be the three great leaders of our time? And why?

- * Mary Robinson: Former President of Ireland and, until recently, High Commissioner for Human Rights at the United Nations. A strong, principled woman who has devoted her life to upholding human rights in her own country and then in the world.
- * Nelson Mandela: For his living example of leadership and forgiveness. Amidst all the tawdry politics of the world, he is a shining example of what politics can be.
- * The Most Reverend Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury: He brings a message of love and kindness into the modern age. He seeks to repair the fault line between religions of all varieties and the knowledge we now have of science and human nature.

What are the three attributes you would consider to be essential to a leader: And why?

Leadership is something you cannot be taught. It is something that comes from within a person. Our personalities are so deeply ingrained by the time we get a chance of leadership that it is

impossible to pick out three qualities and think that, by concentrating on them, we can turn ourselves into leaders, when we do not have the magic "it".

But if three elements must be singled out from all the others that are important to leadership I would mention:

- * Courage
- * Empathy for others
- * Intelligence and clear sightedness.

What are the three greatest barriers to new leaders emerging in Australia?

Australia has so many blessings that it should produce countless leaders. As in every society, there are barriers. They include, in Australia:

- * The last relics of our xenophobia and racism. Never forget that modern Australia was built on the White Australia policy. It denigrated people on the basis of their ethnicity and skin colour. It is not so long since we abandoned White Australia. But we still have residual elements of indifference to Aboriginal people, hostility to people who are different from the majority and fear of some of the newcomers. Just the same, we have made big progress and will continue to do so with proper leadership.
 - * Women comprise more than half the population. But they do not share equally in the blessings of Australia. There is still a
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glass ceiling. This phenomenon should cause no surprise. Modern Australia was established as a patriarch. Not a single woman took part in the debates that led to the Australian Constitution. Only recently have women begun to take a fuller part in public life. To exclude or reduce the participation of more than half the population involves a tremendous loss to national thinking and the wealth of ideas and experience that women bring. But again, we are making progress and with proper leadership we will make more. It requires setting goals and making sure that we achieve them.

There are other minorities who continue to suffer discrimination in Australia. One of them, with which I am familiar, is the minority defined by sexuality. People do not choose their sexuality. It is wicked to discriminate against people on that basis. Yet, at this time, some who should be leaders continue to diminish fellow Australians on the footing of their sexuality. Laws continue to discriminate unjustly. Attitudes run even deeper. Education and knowing people who are gay will make things easier in the future. We have made progress and, with enlightened leadership, we will make more. The quest is not "tolerance", a condescending idea. It is acceptance of diversity.

What advice would you give to a potential leader to take them to the next stage?

To maximise the qualities of goodness and to seek our service to everyone, without discrimination. To do one's best in one's own occupation. To keep the mind open to new ideas. Especially to be alert to the enormous impacts of science and technology on human understanding. To keep a proper perspective of the petty ambition for leadership itself. To serve others. And not to forget to have some fun in life. It is not dress rehearsal.

Nature/nurture - are leaders born or bred?

I suspect that there is some genetic combination that makes a small number of people willing to put their heads above the parapet. Especially in Australia, this can be a dangerous thing, as I have found. There is a streak of nastiness in Australian public life. Let's face it, we do not treat our political leaders very kindly, whoever they are. The Tall Poppy Syndrome still reigns, as it has from convict days.

It is impossible to wish to have more intelligence, more energy, more and better concentration, new and brave ideas. But all of us can look at leaders whom we admire, identify the qualities that we think important which they exhibit and seek to emulate them in our lives. Nelson Mandela's example of forgiveness is a great lesson. For the most part, it is not a feature of public life in Australia.

What do you consider to be the three top leadership issues facing the nation?

- True reconciliation on the basis of equality with the indigenous people of our nation.
- The furtherance of the ideal of multicultural Australia, in the richness of its diversity.
- The assurance of equal justice under law for all people in our country - not just those who can afford lawyers.

What insights have you gained personally on our leadership journey?

It is for others to say whether my journey has been one of leadership. For me, it has simply been my life. I have learned that there are wonderful people and civic organisations throughout Australia keen to play a part in a wider world. Mobilising the decent feelings of fellow Australians and working, in proper ways, for a better and kinder society - one of true equal opportunity - is often frustrating. But striving to see the best in others is a way of encouraging others to maximise their potential. There are, of course, a few bad eggs in the world. But most people are good. Most are decent and kind. Most lose their prejudices when the blinkers of ignorance are removed. This is a challenge for leaders everywhere. To interpret the future to the present. Increasingly, nowadays, this means interpreting the vast changes of science and technology to a world that is sometimes resistant. There is a fault line in our world just now. It does not lie between Western liberal democracy and the rest. It lies between inclusive societies and exclusive ones that put down people on the basis that they are different - because they are women, a different race, a different religion or a different sexuality.

The Human Genome Project laughs at the importance we attach to trivial differences. We should all remember the warning of Justice Richard Goldstone of South Africa. He said that one of the saddest features of the contemporary world was the tendency of each group who were the subject of discrimination to try to pass it on to another group. We should rejoice in human diversity.

Who have been your own leadership mentors and how did they assist in developing your own leadership style?

Martin Luther. Dr Herbert Vere Evatt. Eleanor Roosevelt. Martin Luther King Jr. And contemporary leaders too numerous to mention. People who stood against the tide. People who embraced new ideas and were not afraid. Even when efforts at leadership fail, a leader is not released from the obligation to try to promote ideas known to be good and true.

Name: The Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG

Title: Justice of the High Court of Australia