

SYDNEY BOYS' HIGH SCHOOL

SCHOOL ASSEMBLY ON IDAHOT DAY

SYDNEY 17 MAY 2016

LGBTIQ – DOWN WITH STEREOTYPES!

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

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Today is the international day when people around the world remember the need to overcome homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. The day was chosen because it was on this day, in 1990, when the World Health Organisation of the United Nations removed homosexuality as a mental disorder from the list of recognised diseases. Homosexuality, bisexuality and other variations in nature, like transgender identification, are all part of the normality of the human family.

In his book *Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin wrote an important message in Chapter IV where he described the “Rule of Variation”. The

* Former Justice of the High Court of Australia (1996-2009). Photo by Sasha Hadden.

reason for evolution and development in the human and other species, he declared, was not our sameness but our differences. The little variations that allow us to change and develop in a changing world. Of one thing we can be sure. If variations exist in nature, they have a purpose. Hating variation (whether it is in skin colour, facial appearance, left handedness, sexuality or anything else) is not only 'against the order of nature'. It is ridiculous and futile.

But why am I here? I am not an *alumnus* of Sydney Boys' High. I attended Fort Street Boys' High School in the 1950s. I sat in assemblies like this. Back in those days, I could not have imagined that I would be standing up before a school assembly speaking about my sexual orientation. Back in the 1950s – and still today in many places (including many schools in Australia) - this would be unthinkable. So I am here to repay my debt to the silences that I observed in my school days and afterwards. The pretences and the falsehoods. In this assembly, even today, there are participants for whom their feelings and identities are still sources of embarrassment and shame. Just as it was in my case so long ago.

I am here to tell them, and to tell all of you, that this is bound to change. Things are getting better. A leadership school like Sydney Boys' High must contribute to the change. It is one of the great schools of public education in Australia. An outstanding example of the educational system, begun in the 1880s across our continental country: free, compulsory, secular and egalitarian. We who have had the privilege of this education must be leaders in the national and worldwide movement against the unscientific and ignorant prejudices of the past.

Sadly, Australia, our country, has had a long history in prejudice and discrimination:

- * Against Aboriginal Australians: We denied them land rights. We considered them uncivilised. We adopted out their children; but only if they had pale skins, like most of us;
- * Against Asian Australians: I grew up in 'White Australia'. At Fort Street in my time there were only nine Asian Australian boys in the whole school. How this has changed. And the progress we have made has come about by truth: by getting to know people of different races, religions and cultures as they really are;
- * Against women: We imposed many patriarchal rules of inequality. We created glass ceilings against women's advancement and equality. This too is changing;
- * And against gays and other sexual minorities. We punished them with criminal laws. We airbrushed them out of discourse and acknowledgement. Although I never felt physically bullied at my public schools, this was probably because I pretended to be straight. There were no words to speak about my reality. It did not then exist for myself, my family, my school, my country.

Well, I am here to say that all of that is changing: here and now. I want you to challenge all such stereotypes. Gay people are everywhere. I have performed important functions on the High Court of Australia, and now, increasingly for the United Nations. They are still going on. I have

had a full and happy life, with love from my family and from my partner Johan, over 47 years! I refuse to be confined by other people's ignorance and prejudice. All of us must contribute to turning this around. Quickly.

One person who is doing so is Raymond Roca. He has come with me today to speak to this assembly because a decade ago he was sitting where you are. He finished his school days at Sydney Boys' High with great distinction. His name is on the honour board for a school award. He went on to university to achieve top honours at UNSW. He has turned his sexual orientation from a suggested disadvantage to a stimulus to work on human rights. Not just for gays. For all people. When I was appointed to chair a United Nations Commission of Inquiry into North Korea he applied to undertake research for me and I appointed him. I did not know he was gay. I appointed him on his merits. His work was brilliant and outstanding. He is a successful young lawyer in Sydney. But he is also now working on international human rights. Amongst other things, he is a Director of the Kaleidoscope Foundation. It works to improve human rights of LGBTIQ people globally. He does this in his own time. He has accepted the challenge. A true product of Sydney Boys' High and of public education. A good citizen of Australia.

To everyone at this assembly, I extend good wishes for success and happiness. Those here who are gay, I would only say again: Things are getting better. It is not cool to be homophobic or transphobic, whether in words or deeds. It is the duty of us all to overcome such prejudice and ignorance. But especially so if we have enjoyed the blessings of

education at a great school like Sydney Boys' High. Down with stereotypes! Equality and dignity for all!