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UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY
INTERNATIONAL HOUSE
GLOBAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM
1 MAY 2016

ON BEING A TRUE LEADER

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

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I've always been a bit suspicious about the notion of leadership, because it all depends on where you're being led. Leadership itself is not necessarily a good thing. Adolf Hitler was undoubtedly a most charismatic and able leader, but where was he leading Germany? To destruction, suffering and to gross crimes against humanity and other horrible aspects of Nazi rule. So be a bit skeptical about leadership. It all depends upon where you're being led. And therefore the ideals and values of the leader are really important.

You've also got to try to be ahead of the game. You've got to be able to see the future and lead, guide and encourage people to move in the right direction. When I was in student politics, there was a guy who was much more gifted than I was and had a really good perception of the issues of the future. For example, he was a very strong supporter of women's rights, and that was not really the theme back in the 1960s.

^{*} Text derived from the extended conversation with participants in the International House Global Leadership Program held at the House on Sunday 1 May 2016.

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Peter Wilenski was his name. He had been a president of the SRC. He was a very, very bright man. The one thing I can tell you is that in all those years, of all those committees, and all the bodies I was involved in, nobody – repeat, nobody – ever talked about sexuality. Nobody talked about LGBT rights. Nobody. This was the great forbidden territory. And that really teaches us – and this is the other big lesson for leadership – to see things that no one else sees. Nowadays, people are entitled to say it to people of my generation: why were you silent about that topic for so long? Why did nobody talk about that issue? Why was it something that was swept under the carpet and substituted with anti-poofter jokes, which you had to laugh at? And therefore the real question for you is: what are the things that you don't see that, in fifty years people will say 'how could you have been so stupid?' 'How could you have been so ignorant?' I'd rather suggest that animal liberation – animal welfare – is going to be something which, in the future, we are much more attentive to. But there will be other issues. Real leadership is not just pushing people in directions which are well established. It is sometimes taking them in different directions so that they see the different direction and the irrationality of the past direction.

Audience question: It sounded like you were very active on behalf of other people. Why did you not act on behalf of people like yourself?

That's a fair question. I grew up in an age where, first of all, there were criminal laws against gay people. Those laws were enforced. I remember reading newspapers, about once a week, of some leading figure who had been arrested for a gay offence. That was just how it was. And if I'm truthful, I'd probably have to say that a lot of this energy and endeavour to wear my prefect's blazer, to get elected to the presidency of the students' society and to become President twice of the

SRC, a lot of this endeavour of so-called leadership, or pushing [myself] forward, was an attempt to tell myself 'okay, you're being told that you are really weird, and that you are really filthy and dirty and disgusting, and an abomination, and that you should be locked up and the key thrown away.' But I was trying to tell myself 'you're not all that bad.' I didn't really *feel* particularly bad. I was always loved and I always felt comfortable in myself. But they were the rules. Don't ask, don't tell! And so I played by these rules.

Lots of gay people in those days got married. This was a horrible thing to do their partners. But they then had 'working' marriages, and children whom they loved deeply, and their wives whom they loved deeply too. But it just wasn't a sexual love. So that was something I couldn't do. I never did the hypocrisy thing. But I just didn't shove it down people's throats. Well now, I'm in the mood to make people face up to it. Because isn't it a peculiar thing that, this week, yet another country embraced marriage equality? Colombia! A country which has been riven with the most terrible social problems. Yet even they have embraced the principle of equality. And that principle has been embraced by so many other countries. What are we doing in Australia? We are not permitting the Federal Parliament to have a conscience vote on this issue, which is what we've normally done on issues of this kind. Instead we are submitting the issue of human rights of gay citizens to the vote of everybody, including non-gay citizens. The majority of them, non-gay, are going to decide whether gay people can get married.

The only times we've ever had a plebiscite in Australia before legislation of the Federal Parliament have been in war times for compulsory military service. We've never submitted the rights of women, or of people of

different races or other minorities, to a plebiscite of all the people. This is a very wrong step: submitting the rights of some of our citizens to the opinion of the majority. The Federal Parliament should make its own mind up on it, in a country which is governed by a constitution, which is a representative, elected democracy. So that is really a sign, don't you think? It's a sign that, even though I was a Justice of the High Court, even though I am chairing international commissions of inquiry, and that I'm on the Secretary General's High Level panel on health care – a problem that faces the whole world, I am a second class citizen in Australia. My rights have to go through a plebiscite of other citizens to decide whether or not I should have the right to be married. It's truly a shocking thing. I hope that people here will express their views about this. It's a very wrong thing. And it's a departure from the principle of the separation of religion from the rights of ordinary citizens.