

2962

FORT STREET HIGH SCHOOL

SPEECH DAY 2018

SYDNEY TOWN HALL, 16 FEBRUARY 2018

AVE ATQUE VALE ROSLYNNE MOXHAM

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

FORT STREET HIGH SCHOOL
SPEECH DAY 2018
SYDNEY TOWN HALL, 16 FEBRUARY 2018

AVE ATQUE VALE ROSLYNNE MOXHAM*

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG**



OF SCHOOLS AND PRINCIPALS

Fort Street High School is our school. It is not the oldest school in Australia still functioning. That honour belongs to the King's

* Address at the Sydney Town Hall, 16 February 2018, Fort Street High School Speech Day 2018.

** Justice of the High Court of Australia (1996-2009); President of the International Commission of Jurists (1995-8); Chair of the United Nations Commission of Inquiry on Human Rights Violations in DPRK (North Korea) (2013-14).

School in Sydney (established by the Anglicans in 1832) and the Hutchins School (established by the Anglicans in Hobart in 1846). These were then schools for the children of wealthier settlers. But Fort Street was established in 1849 in Sydney by Governor FitzRoy.¹ It was a public school, available equally to the children of convicts and free settlers; of all religious persuasions or none. Our school was modelled on the National Schools of Ireland, designed to bring together Catholics and Protestants. Even before the *Public Schools Act* of 1866, the school symbolised the dream of education for all in the Great South Land. Later in the century, the Colonial Parliaments established the system of public education: “free, secular and compulsory”. We who have been the beneficiaries of this noble idea in Australia must be its advocates and guardians. Next year, Fort Street (established in 1849) will celebrate its 170th anniversary.

When I arrived at the school in 1951, the centenary celebrations of 1949 had just concluded. I was encouraged to purchase the *Centenary Book*, which I still have.² It tells the history of the school. Not by accident, it does so through the stories of its great principals. The first, William Wilkins, was brought out from England, trained by the National Board of Education in Ireland. He was delivered to Adelaide and had to

¹ R.S. Horan, *Fort Street* (Honeysett Publications, Sydney, 1999), 14.

² L. Ettles Gent (ed.), *The Fort Street Centenary Book*, Government Printer (NSW), Sydney 1949, 13.

make his own way to Sydney. Possibly the officials in London had no idea of the heroic distances of the new land. The costs of that journey were deducted from his salary, evidencing a parsimonious approach to teacher remuneration that has survived.

Fortians of my era knew the great principals of the school because the four Houses into which the pupils were divided were named after them. Probably the most famous in the Boys' school was Alexander James Kilgour, himself a Fortian, whose term coincided with that of Miss Partridge, principal of the new Girls' High School at the beginning of the separation that was to last 50 years. Great have been the principals of this school. They strove of excellence. And they achieved it.

I am constantly reminded of the leading citizens of Australia who were educated in our school. Just this week, I attended an event at the Jewish Museum in Sydney. On display was photograph of H.V. Evatt (Fortian 1911). He was shown in his role as third President of the General Assembly of the United Nations in December 1948, endorsing the adoption of the *Genocide Convention* designed to punish the new international crime of genocide. This was a response to the great wrongs revealed in and after the Second World War. I knew that Evatt had brought into effect the *Universal Declaration of Human*

Rights of 1948. Later this year we will hear much about the 70th anniversary of that great instrument to which he made large contribution. I did not know his role in the *Genocide Convention*. He and many other Fortians have served the nation and the world, observing secular values learned at this school.

Fort Street is not only a place of the past. It remains one of the continuously outstanding schools of the nation. The HSC class of 2017 delivered spectacular results which we will honour at this ceremony. Measured in terms of those results, Fort Street was the twelfth most successful secondary school of the State of New South Wales. Of the twelve top schools, only two are private: Sydney Grammar and Ascham. Mark that. Ten of the top twelve schools are public schools.

The achievement of the students and staff of public schools is a proper matter for pride. Especially at a time when it reported that school fees in private and religious schools are “soaring to fresh heights”.³ Inevitably, this success of public education is producing a fight back in the market place as more and more parents begin to question the value added of private education. Parents and the school community of Fort Street must be vigilant and vocal against attacks on public education and the

³ P. Singhal, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 January 2018, 1.

attempts of the levellers to diminish the achievement of its flagships, including Fort Street.⁴

Obviously, our public school system must provide for disadvantaged pupils and those with special needs. But it must also provide for the gifted and talented. They likewise have special needs. Inevitably, they will produce disproportionate number of the leaders of the future. Streaming and opportunities for late developers deserves attention; but I insist that, although selective, Fort Street is and always has been a public school. It welcomes students of every race, gender, sexuality, religion and culture. It nurtures all in an egalitarian and democratic environment where educational opportunities are not determined by a parent's religion or wealth.

The achievements of recent years are not the work only of the principal of the School. They are a joint enterprise of pupils, parents, teachers and the academic and administrative leadership of the school. To all of you I express a sense of pride and sincere congratulations.

⁴ P. Singhal, "Open up selective schools for more inclusive education", *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 January 2018, 1. Rebecca Urban, "Rich kids rule in selective schools" *The Australian*, 12 February 2018, 7.

ROSLYNNE MOXHAM: MODEL TEACHER

Inevitably, much praise belongs to Ros Moxham the retiring principal. The story of her career is a story repeated in countless lives of teachers in schools of every kind who have served the noble ideals of education.

Ros Moxham is herself a proud product of public education. She attended Hunter Girls' High School in Newcastle, graduating in 1968. At school, the records of the Education Department show that, in a choral performance of the *Mikado*, she sang the part of Pitti Sing. Picturing her as the quiet, timid, tiny, frightened Pitti Sing constitutes a challenge to the imagination. But she always rose to challenges. Wishing to be a teacher of music, she entered the Conservatorium of Music in Newcastle and undertook the Diploma of Music Education, a four year course. In 1973 her first posting was as music teacher at Leeton High School. She combined her teaching with raising her two daughters, Yvonne and Amanda, as a single parent. She won the Bachelor of Education Degree from Sydney University and the Master of Arts Degree from Macquarie.

In the 1970s and 80s she served in a succession of schools teaching music: Marsden High, Cheltenham Girls' High, Fort

Street High where she served as music teacher 1985-6; Fairfield High, Parramatta High and Matella Road Public School in Wentworthville.

Then, in 1990 she began her move into administration. She was appointed an examiner for the HSC in music. In 1992 she became principal of Davidson High School. This was followed by her appointments to Asquith Girls' High and Fort Street. Having recently presided in a state-wide mooting competition in which Asquith High were outstanding finalists, I can report that they remain an outstanding school.

But Fort Street High was Ros Moxham's dream. She began her service in our school in 2000. She lays down her responsibilities after 17 years and following her appointment as Director of Educational Leadership for the NSW Department of Education. In recent years she has been Director of Inner City Strategy for the Department in Sydney. She has participated in teacher leadership exchange programs with Canada, Singapore and Finland. Her name was included in a book celebrating the top 100 Australian women. She was a mentor and example of excellence for women and also for men. She has not been well in recent months. But I am glad to see her here today, with her daughters, full of energy and dedication. As one who has regularly accompanied her in music and song

at school functions, I can affirm that she sings with a robust voice and always in key.

Ros Moxham's career as a teacher in public schools has been outstanding. Parents, citizens and community must repeatedly express their thanks for such outstanding teachers. The impact on the lives of future generations is incomparable. More gratitude and more rewards for these moulders of the values of our nation are definitely in order.⁵ For someone who has been a great teacher and also a great leader and principal, special praise is due.

ACHIEVEMENTS AND EXPLANATION

So what have been the main achievements of Ros Moxham that are in our mind today as she concludes her service as Fort Street's principal today?

- * *Academic:* She has led the school to the very strong focus on outstanding academic achievements. In recent years Fort Street has quite literally been restored to one of the highest achieving secondary schools of the State and of the nation. In 2014 we celebrated the achievements of Janek Drevikovsky who led the results in coming first in

⁵ V. Cruickshank and A. MacDonald (Uni of Tasmania), "Teachers who feel appreciated are less likely to leave the profession", 15 January 2018, *The Conversation*.

the State in five subjects. In 2016 Dominic Dwyer led the result with first in French and also Modern History – the subject in which I came first in 1955. In 2017, Fort Street emerged as “the star performer when it comes to the number of courses it topped, with four students taking first place in six subjects.”⁶ Whilst examination results are certainly not the only mark of a school, they do reflect, to some extent, its priorities. High achievement has been a steady goal of the Fort Street staff under Ros Moxham’s leadership.

She has also developed mightily the music program of the school, with marvellous orchestral, string, jazz and choral performances. It is difficult to get through a school that has Ros Moxham at the helm without tasting the special musical experience. She has also insisted on the needs for training in the teaching of gifted and talented pupils. This training involves courses at UNSW and is now a standard requirement at Fort Street.

She reintroduced head teacher appointments because she felt they were justified in pedagogical not just traditional terms. She was strengthened in her work by outstanding deputy principals. I pay a tribute to Karen di

⁶ Alexandra Smith and Conal Hanna, “HSC Results”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 December 2017, 4.

Stefano who has been an outstanding deputy and now relieving principal. I honour them all but especially, this year, Andrea Connell. A number of Ros Moxham's deputies have moved on to be principals in other great public high schools. Andrea Connell is now the principal at Sydney Girls' High School. This year, that school returned to the top 10 schools of the State in HSC ranking. It came in as number four. Clearly, Ms Connell was well prepared at Fort Street. Two years ago I had the privilege to lead a delegation of students from Fort Street to SGHS. It was a great success and should be repeated.

- * *Infrastructure:* A school is more than its buildings and facilities. But they are the environment in which achievements can be pursued. On Ros Moxham's watch, the Fanny Cohen and Evelyn Rowe Buildings were completed to enhance the facilities of the school.

Every teacher was provided with a computer on their desk. Although a basic requirement of modern teaching, this was something new when it happened. I do not doubt that Ros Moxham fought many a battle with officials to secure this rudimentary upgrade.

She also fought valiantly, with the aid of the School Council, P & C Committee and local politicians to arrange the proper insulation of the school against increasing aircraft noise. This was finally achieved. In my day the burden of Taverners Hill was the smells from the brewery next door. Today it is the flight path. I have an image in my mind of Ros Moxham waving a fist at low flying jets. They still come. But now the silencers are in place.

- * *Diversity:* The most important achievement, however, has been even more pervasive. I refer to Ros Moxham's dedication to diversity and true equality in every activity of Fort Street High School. She has been a strong supporter of sporting engagement and there is no doubt that this can help with participation and friendships that last a lifetime. She has confronted problems of mental health and disability amongst students. She has addressed many challenges that immigration policies can sometimes produce in such a multicultural school. She has been dedicated to the wellbeing of her students; but also of her staff.

It was natural that, from the start, she should support the music program, which has always been strong at the school, but never stronger than now. She also had an

“open door” policy and would always make herself available to staff, parents and students as well. She invited *alumni* to contribute to the many programs of the school, in sport, debating, Latin (after it was reintroduced) and mooting.

Following an initial struggle and some resistance, she restored the wearing of a basic school uniform. She did this not to look backwards to ‘boaters’. But to ensure that all students were identifiably associated with the school. They carried the school’s history and reputation with them. None were better dressed simply because their parents had more money. Identity, community and association were important watchwords for Ros Moxham.

She was a friend to any minority in the school whose members might feel threatened or vulnerable. I know this, having discussed the matter with past and present Fortians who identify as LGBTIQ or as allies. This was not always true at Fort Street. Sadly, it is not always true at religious and even some public schools. But in this school, there is no alienation. This is an abiding aspect of leadership that I marked well. For the last couple of years I have returned to the school with an outstanding former student, Owen Nanlohy (Fortian 2005). He is now working

in a senior advisory role at Parliament House in Canberra. He is open about his sexual orientation. We have spoken directly on that subject to the school assemblies, so that no Fortian can pass through the school gates and feel alienated, isolated or disrespected. All are equal and upheld.

A measure of Ros Moxham's attitude in these things occurred a few years back when a senior student, previously identifying as male, turned up one day wearing a dress. Some people rushed in horror to the Principal's office. "But he is wearing a dress", they exclaimed. As reported to me, Ros Moxham looked at them with her wise eyes and calmly asked: "Yes. Yes, I know. But is it the school uniform dress?" On being told that it was, she urged everybody to concentrate on more important things. And she checked that all was well with the student. One wonders how many school principals would have responded with such insight and wisdom.

- * *Originality*: So what has been the secret of Ros Moxham's success as principal of Fort Street High School? In my life, because of my engagement with the response to the AIDS epidemic, I have had the privilege to work closely with many Nobel Laureates in medicine and science.

There is a feature of these people that is quickly evident when one meets them. They are not simply linear thinkers. Their minds work in a slightly different fashion. They challenge old assumptions. They think outside the square. One of these Nobel Laureates was David Baltimore. He later became President of Caltech, a famous United States University. Back in the 1970s Baltimore was intrigued by a rare retrovirus in chimpanzees. He began to study it closely and to analyse it. When HIV came along soon after he placed humanity a decade in advance from where it would have been, had he not done his research. When asked to explain why he had chosen such a subject to study, he said: "I did it because I was interested. It was a puzzle. I wanted to unravel the puzzle."

This is the kind of mind that Ros Moxham has encouraged at Fort Street. The school has always been, to some degree, different. Proud of its *alumni*. But not overproud. Constantly questioning. Not living in the past. Regularly criticising. In my day, a student was not obliged to be brilliant in sport or cadets. Drama and debating would do just as well. Fort Street has always been a bit zany. This tradition Ros Moxham has maintained and enhanced by her endorsement of diversity in the school.

In recent years, with Ros Moxham's encouragement, John Singleton AM (Fortian 1958) and I agreed to offer two scholarships to encourage originality and to challenge status quo thinking. We hope and expect that those who win this prize will continue the strong Fortian tradition of pushing the envelope and expanding human aspirations. My brother David Kirby QC (Fortian 1960) presented the first prizes last year. I will do so for John Singleton and me at this ceremony.

What is the inner reason behind Ros Moxham's endorsement of diversity? And her encouragement of excellence and originality? I think it is connected with her training in, and love of, music. There is something eternal, mysterious and spiritual about music. It speaks directly to our minds, but also to our hearts and feelings. It binds us together as human beings. And this is vital in a time of nuclear weapons, global climate change and human rights abuses.

Ros Moxham took Fort Street beyond the conjugation of French verbs; the justification of Boyle's law; the proof that the Earth circles around the sun; and rote learning of Wordsworth's poems, important though they all are. She

built on the School's high traditions. She added new creativity. And she never forgot the precious object of teaching at a school like Fort Street: the individual student, with distinctive needs, inherent human dignity and breathtaking potential.

As we farewell Ros Moxham and wish her success and good health in the future, we say with Catullus:⁷ *“Atque in perpetuum soror ave atque vale – Forever, dear sister, hail and farewell”*.

⁷ Gaius Valerius Catullus, Elegy 101, “Maltas per gentes...”