

Occasional Speech at Graduation

University of Canberra

Great Hall, Parliament House

18 December 2002

It is a great thing to be honoured in public. I appreciate it immensely, and I thank all of those who thought about it, proposed it, and made sure that it happened. I loved my time at the University of Canberra, and continue to think that, in the galaxy of Australian universities, it has found, more accurately than any of its fellows, the hugely important matter of balance: the balance between teaching and research, the balance between the needs of its students and the needs of its staff, the balance between the needs of the future and the needs of the present, the balance between education and training, and so on. A well-balanced university is a great place to go to, whatever your reason for going. To be honoured by that University is simply a wonderful thing.

I hope that all you who have graduated today feel the same way. I have been to about a hundred UC graduation ceremonies, and all of them were splendid. The ceremony, the place itself, the gathering of family and friends, the dressing up, the music, the procession in which we will all participate in a little while — there is no other time quite like one's own graduation. There is also the Occasional Address. It must be between ten and twelve minutes long, it must be decently entertaining, and people afterwards must say that they enjoyed it. I know that these are the rules, because for ten years or so I insisted on them.

Mine is going to be about 'communication'. I chose the theme not just because you are Communication graduates, but because I think 'communication' is just about the most important aspect of our contemporary life. I said on a number of occasions that there were three rules that every chief executive officer had to follow: 'Communicate, communicate, communicate!' By this I did not mean that one had to talk all the time. It was rather that 21st century life, for the great majority in Australia, involves living and working in organisations, and organisations work best of all when there is a free flowing communication between everyone who lives or works in the organisation.

Good communication means, among other things, being prepared to listen, being prepared to say that you don't know when indeed you do not know, being prepared to say what is the truth, as you see it, not what you think the other person might prefer to hear or what might gain you an advantage, being prepared to change your mind when you recognise superior argument or evidence, being prepared to ask questions when you don't understand rather than to remain silent lest people think you are ignorant or silly. I think it also involves being prepared to act in accordance with one's judgment, having had good communication, rather than remaining silent and quiescent. Without these

elements 'good communication' is hardly more than fluency or persuasion. Any huckster has abundant reserves of that.

When I was an undergraduate there were no courses in 'communication' whatever in higher education. I doubt that the word would have appeared in the index of any book in our University library. And, truth to tell, good communication was not an obvious characteristic of Australian life. Do you think that good communication, as I have defined it, is more obvious today? I have my doubts. There seem to me to be, thanks to television and the mass media generally, absolutely greater quantities of hyperbole, mis-statement verging on and sometimes surpassing deceit, and many more straight-out appeals to avarice, lust and all the other deadly sins. Although our politicians are much better educated than were their counterparts in the 1950s I cannot detect any obvious improvement in their possession of fundamental decency or honesty. I need to say at once that I am not singling politicians out for particular attack: they occupy their seats, after all, only because we elected them. The cause is in ourselves.

Why didn't the great advances in education in the 20th century lead to a higher standard of public life, greater levels of public honesty, and responsible advertising? I am reminded of the widespread belief, throughout the 19th century, that if only every man (and for a few, every man and woman) had the vote, then governments would act in the interest of the common man (or, for a few, the common man and woman). In the 20th century, in democracies like ours, every man, and soon every man and every woman, did gain the vote, but governments found it hard to act exclusively in their interest. Indeed, as common people we turned out to have many interests, and we differed on what were the important ones. Once again, governments are not wholly to blame.

If there is an answer it lies, I think, in the fact that as individuals we want it all, and our wishes are ultimately incompatible or contradictory. We all want, for example, a safe, responsible, nurturing community in which to live, but we also want a community that allows us to live and behave as we please. Such an acquiescent community will find that, besides our good selves, it has no real option but to allow drug-dealers, wife-beaters, child-abusers and the like also to live and behave as they please. So then we get cries for 'zero tolerance', or more police on the beat, or mandatory gaol sentences. And that is fine until the zero tolerance or the heavy hand of the law or the mandatory gaol sentence applies to one of us, when it is of course intolerable, an example of the police state or punitiveness run mad. I talked about 'balance' before. It seems to me that modern Western society has not learned how to manage a good balance between the demands of the individual for autonomy and the demands of the community for individual self-discipline so that the people who inhabit the community can live in harmony. That is a very hard asked, of course, and I cannot think immediately of any society which managed such a balance very well over a long period of time.

What can you new graduates in Communication do about it? I think there are four things, and they come to you because of your particular professional

standing. The first is honesty. You, more than anyone else, know how the truth can be manipulated to achieve other ends. Professionals must live by the rules of truth and altruism. Do not go along with, let alone take part in, work, however well paid, which involves dishonesty, deceit or misrepresentation. You will not long live happily with yourself if you do.

The second is open-ness. It sometimes seems to me that much of the trouble in our society would disappear if we were open about important matters and prepared to discuss them – to communicate, as I said earlier. I am not thinking simply of organisations. It seems to be the case that marriages which break up, and I guess I should speak of relationships' (since there are fewer marriages than there used to be), because those involved would not discuss openly what their problems were. I am sure that none of this will happen to you, especially if you form a union with another Communication graduate. For you this is simply theoretical stuff. But I thought it was worth mentioning just the same.

The third is clarity. Our language is a beautiful thing. Use it well. Strive always to find the right words for your thoughts and arguments. Do not be content with the sloppy, the half-baked, the cliché. Do not accept the view, a common one in the university world, that a difficult idea must be put across in difficult language. Good writing, as you know very well, requires lots of work. As Mr Border can be heard to say about the game of cricket, to be good at it you need 'practice, practice, practice'. Imagine an Australia in which we were open with one another, and did our best to speak clearly and honestly. If anyone has the responsibility of creating such a society, I guess that a major part of it falls on you.

The fourth, finally, is the ability to listen. In a talkative society that can often be the hardest skill of all to acquire. You will sometimes encounter people who say 'I hear you! I hear you!' as though they have done their bit of silence before they talk again. That's not what I mean. There is a great difference between hearing people and listening to people, just as there is between hearing music and listening to music. Really listening to people is the first step in understanding them. I don't think we practice it enough, and you as professionals can show the rest of us the way.

Chancellor, I am finished. The sad thing about graduation speeches is that next day most people can't remember what the speaker said, and next week most can't even remember who the speaker was. Perhaps that is a blessing. But if a few of the ideas remain in your head, to be put to use later in your lives, I shall be well content.

My congratulations to you all. You deserve it!