

Occasional Speech at Graduation

University of New England

Armidale, NSW

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'The Way it was in the Land of Oz'

by Don Aitkin

Graduation Days are days of congratulation and goodwill, and I therefore congratulate all of you who have graduated today, and I do so with great goodwill — the more so because I have graduated myself. And if you will allow me to say so, this is the third time I have graduated here. I did so first in 1959, as a Bachelor of Arts with honours in History, and then again in 1961, as a Master of Arts with honours in History. This third time, however, is the best of all. And I would like to tell you why.

Let me start with some context. The first graduation ceremony I attended was also here, and that was in May 1954, just over fifty years ago. It too was held in the open air, but around on the forecourt of the building, not here on the lawn and what used to be the Rose Garden, which was where one went for deep and meaningful talks with a special other person – or indeed, with anyone who would have a deep and meaningful talk with you. I went to that ceremony because in those days each year's new students, the 'matriculants', were formally admitted to the University. And in my first year, 1954, what had been the New England University College of The University of Sydney became truly independent, as The University of New England. Because my name began with A, and there was no other surname closer to the beginning of the alphabet, I became the first student ever admitted to the new University. An official voice commanded: 'The matriculants will stand!' and we did. The Vice-Chancellor addressed us briefly. I don't remember any of his speech save one unforgettable moment. 'Look at the person on your right!' he instructed. 'Look at the person on your left. One of you will fail.' He was right, too. About a third of first year failed, because university was not like high school at all, and too many of us didn't know how to study by ourselves when we got to university. You'll be pleased to know that I was not one of them. I failed second year.

Oh yes, we had a Vice-Chancellor then, too. He was Dr Madgwick, and he wore a black gown over his suit when moving about the campus. I got to know Dr Madgwick in my time here and afterwards, when he was Sir Robert Madgwick and Chairman of the ABC, and I liked him. He was an excellent Vice-Chancellor, and I can say that with some judgment, because in later life I became a vice-chancellor myself. In those days there was no television, radio reception was terrible except for 2AD, which was not known either for its good music or for its news and current events programs. So we largely made our own entertainment,

and we did a lot of singing on the buses that took us in and out. Not all of those songs could be sung on such an occasion as this, but I can tell you that our Vice-Chancellor was immortalised in our version of a famous song of the 1930s: 'That old black Madgwick, he has me in his spell, that old black Madgwick that I know so well...' You have an excellent Vice-Chancellor today, too, and I can say that with even better judgment, because she used to work for me. I'm sure that if the custom of singing is alive and well here, there'll be a song or two about Ingrid. I'd be fascinated to hear one.

I got to know the Vice-Chancellor of my day in part because of the small scale of the University. There were only a couple of hundred students here then, and virtually everybody was in residence. Our lecturers all knew us by name, and addressed us politely as 'Mr Aitkin' or 'Miss Smith'. If we missed a class they knew it. If we missed a tutorial, whose numbers were very small, five or six at the most, our absence was embarrassingly obvious. We were also, of course, very young, and the University stood in the place of our parents — *in loco parentis* is the Latin, and we heard that phrase more than once. We did not become adults in those days until we turned 21. I was only 16 and a half when I enrolled, and that was because secondary school only went to Fifth Year. The other thing that was distinctive about us, in the context of the day, was that when we went to university we almost completely disappeared from life. University was a world apart, and its life was unconnected with that of the town.

So much has changed since then. Universities today are part of mainstream Australian life, and you don't disappear when you enrol in them. This University is still quite recognisable, especially here in its centre, but its scale is so much larger. Today there are 17,000 students at UNE, and the 4,500 who live and work here in Armidale make just the residential component of the University larger than Australia's largest university in 1954, the University of Sydney, which then had only 4,000 students. When I began as an undergraduate there were no Colleges, though I lived in Wright College in its first year, 1958. We lived either in the Huts on the campus or in town residences. We ate together and worked together. A lot of us got married, too, when we were old enough. It was very cold here in winter.

And when we arrived here at UNE we had come from a very different Australia, an Australia that was, in very many respects, much less interesting and enjoyable than the country we have today. It was then conscious of its British origins, but unsure of what it meant to be 'Australian'. Most people left school when they were 15, most women went into paid employment only until they married, Australian music, art, literature, film, theatre and craft hardly existed, our politics was all about the threat of 'communism', external and internal, and over us hung the threat of a Third World War that would be waged with nuclear weapons. In our second year the men all had to do compulsory military service, and that obligation continued through the next two or three years for those in the Army.

Today at least the shadow of global nuclear conflict has receded, even if we are now confronted with unpredictable terrorism. Australia has grown from 8

million to 20 million people, and its GDP has risen from \$5.3 billion to \$800 billion. We are a much wealthier people, and you can see the wealth around us. In the North of NSW there was one tarred highway in 1954, and that was the New England Highway; it was tarred only about as far as Glen Innes. Driving to the coast was a real expedition. Armidale had a most unreliable water supply, and the city had no street trees.

What brought about all the change? Three things, and they are all here today. The first was education, the second was wealth and the third was immigration. I'll treat them quickly, and in reverse order. When I began as a student at Armidale High School Australia had 7.5 million people, and virtually all of them could trace their ancestry back to the British Isles. In 2002 Australia welcomed our six millionth immigrant, a woman IT specialist from the Philippines. Our immigrants have come from every country in the world, they have transformed our culture and helped to create our wealth. We could simply not be the country we are today without them. Your Vice-Chancellor is one of them. The migrants broadened our musical, artistic, culinary and creative life, and taught us how to be tolerant, to accept difference and to open our minds to other ways of doing things. The fact that Australia accepted 6 million immigrants in less than sixty years and created the world's model multi-cultural society is one of its great post-war achievements.

The immigrants were crucial, and it helped that we were wealthy when the past half-century began. The late Duchess of Windsor once said that a woman could never be too thin or too rich, and while countries don't have to worry about their waistline, they do benefit from having money. Wealth allowed our post-war governments to build better roads and new airports and establish universities and schools and hospitals. Wealth allowed us to develop a health system that, despite its present imperfections, is available in some form for everybody. Wealth allowed us to have discretionary income so that we could travel, learn music, undertake further training, and so on. It helped provide the underpinning of Australian architecture, design and theatre. It is fashionable in some quarters to complain about wealth. I'm not one of the critics. I think it is important. It is also very important that we all benefit from the country's wealth.

But it has been education that has been the catalyst. We have learned over the past half-century that everyone is intelligent enough to go to university provided that they have the necessary encouragement, motivation and preparation. The same essentials would equip us all to be excellent surgeons, or tennis players, or musicians, again provided we were encouraged, motivated and prepared. Our systems still work on the assumption that there are only a few really clever people and that the rest of us are also-rans, but increasingly we are realising that the truth is entirely the other way. And it was the growth of the secondary school and university systems that provided the evidence. When I started here at UNE in 1954, there were only 30,000 university students in the whole of Australia. Today there are 850,000. About one person in every thirty in Australia is a university student. When I graduated with my PhD in 1964 I was one of a couple of hundred who did so across the nation. Today 5000 or so will graduate with that degree. You will hear people criticise this increase as

'credential creep', or say that the students of their day were better. Well, I've been in the system for fifty years, and I think that today's students know more, work harder and are better-rounded people.

A better-educated Australia is a more confident, a more responsive and a more tolerant Australia. Its citizens have learned how to make a better country. When you leave here you will quickly see how important it is that every one is well-educated. Where you can, assist others to become well educated too. We will all benefit from it.

Above all, develop a vision for the kind of country you want your children to inherit. I thought I could speak on election day without a single reference to the election, but if I may say so, I have found the campaign singularly lacking in broad vision. Don't blame the politicians, because we elect them, but press them to drop the short-sighted stuff and imagine a better Australia and a better world, with signposts as to how we might get there. This University exists only because people now long dead had such a vision. Take your own vision into life and help build an even better country. I congratulate you all again, and know that you are up to the task.