

**Occasional Address
at the Graduation Ceremony
Australian Catholic University**

**by Professor Don Aitkin
Vice-Chancellor, University of Canberra**

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I begin with congratulations to all of you who are graduating today. It is no small thing to graduate from an Australian university: behind the testamur lie a mountain of essays and assignments, days of examinations, nights of study, and several years in which all kinds of pleasures and pastimes have had to be put on hold. In the hall today are hundreds of people who have helped you reach this milestone in life, and their pleasure in your accomplishment will be as great as your own. I should add a special reference to the staff of the Australian Catholic University. Many of them have watched you grow in insight and wisdom, and mature as people. For this reason, graduation is one of the most pleasurable times for all universities, for it is at these ceremonies that we see some of the outcomes of all of our own hard work.

Indeed, what we see today is a wonderful social process at work. Our country needs highly skilled people; the need has never been so great. Such needs produced our schools, TAFE institutes and universities, that so characterise the Australian urban landscape. You can see education as a great social achievement. But at the same time for each of you the story is an individual one: what I want to be, where I want to go, what I want to do — the answer varies from person to person. Both the individual and the society are important. Countries without a comprehensive and accessible university system have very many people whose desire to be, to go and to do is as great as yours is, but they are frustrated in the accomplishment of their desires, to the cost of their society as well as of themselves.

It is common for governments to claim the credit for our higher education system, but in truth the credit has to be widely shared. Everyone knows that a modern society needs roads, airports and telecommunications if it is to have a vibrant economy, and so we are used to public expenditure on that kind of infrastructure. But governments neither designed the economy nor worked out the infrastructure. Indeed, much of what we see simply followed where people chose to live in the 19th century, and the demands they placed on colonial governments.

In our time there is a similar need for infrastructure, but of the mind — of people and their knowledge, rather than things. And the universities and the professions form the basis of that infrastructure. But once again, governments have not designed what the professions do or what universities teach.

Government responses simply follow the demands our society generates: that is what our system of representative democracy is designed to accomplish.

And of course the universities of today are very different to those fifty years ago, when I was preparing to go to university. To start with, there are more of them, and they offer an extraordinary variety of courses. There are now 700,000 students in the system, compared to about 30,000 when I was an undergraduate. A considerable re-adjustment of institutional names has occurred. And we now talk about the 'export' of Australian higher education — both literally, in that we now teach in a score of other countries, and metaphorically, in that scores of thousands of overseas students have chosen to come here to study.

It is perhaps not surprising that one accompaniment to these changes is that governments no longer seem to care so much about higher education. Of course, they say they do, but the evidence points the other way. State governments really got out of the scene in the 1970s, when the Whitlam Government offered to provide the financing of all universities. But the contemporary Commonwealth, now that it seems to be downsizing all the time as it tries to reduce its commitments, has only a handful of people to monitor what goes on in universities. Public funding of university students is lower, on a per-head basis, than the public funding of students in private schools. It is hard to escape the feeling that the Commonwealth now sees universities as somehow 'established', like a big bridge or building that now only needs to be maintained, and cheaply at that.

Paradoxically, in some respects the universities are thriving. I can speak most knowledgably about my own University of Canberra, but I do know something about the system as well. We have learned how to find more revenue to replace the diminishing amounts from public funds. I don't have to tell this audience that Australian students now contribute on average about 25 per cent of the cost of their tuition, or that the 70,000 or so overseas students are crucially important as sources of income. We now teach people in a huge variety of places, for an extraordinary range of degrees and diplomas, and at any hour of the day or night. Australians have now become hooked on higher education, and more and more of them are doing more and more of it: we are beginning to call that phenomenon 'lifelong learning'. A lot of other organisations are clambering on what they see as the lifelong learning gravy train. Some of them seem most intent on quick profits and very little on long-term quality.

'What of that,' I can hear someone saying. 'The market will sort out the shonks pretty quickly.' And he or she might go on to ask why I was less than enthusiastic about the changes, especially since I seemed to be saying that my own University, and several others

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'Reconciliation'

There has been something of a to-do about reconciliation in the local press in the last couple of weeks, and I thought it would be a good idea to set out, as clearly as I can, where I stand on this issue. The Council of the University has already issued its own statement, and given an apology. What follows is my own approach to the issue, which is probably the most important social question on the Australian agenda. We all have to decide on where we stand and, no less importantly, why we stand there.

I start from the position that modern Australia is built on the expropriation of the lands of the original inhabitants of this island continent. Without that expropriation nothing could have been the way it now is. The expropriation occurred without consent, without compensation and without apology. It was the outcome of a mixture of overwhelming force, disease and the abandonment of hope on the part of the Aboriginal peoples.

No-one at the University of Canberra was directly involved in any of this, but the very existence of the University is an outcome of that expropriation. The buildings, roads, telecommunications, pattern of life and expectations of contemporary Australia are an outcome of that expropriation.

Perhaps this would not matter if we were another kind of society, one that saw such expropriation as part of the natural order of things. But we are different, in part because there is in Australian culture the yearning to build under the southern skies a better kind of society than that which did and does occur elsewhere. For the past 150 years Australians have tried to work out ways of doing it better.

By and large, they and we have succeeded. Contemporary Australia has, in my judgment, few peers and no betters in its construction of a society that is tolerant, progressive, curious, supportive and un-imperialist. Of course there is a lot that could be improved, and I doubt that we human beings have it within us to construct a society free from human frailty. But if our comparative gaze is on other contemporary societies, then Australia surely looks pretty good.

And it is precisely for this reason that reconciliation is so important, and that all of us who are the beneficiaries, from the Commonwealth Government downwards, need to move ahead on it. For the glaring paradox is that inside Australian society the Aboriginal peoples are still treated as other, as separate, as ignorable. Moreover — and this is the current sticking point — by not recognising the distinction between beneficiaries and victims, let alone feeling any embarrassment at being in group rather than another, our Government and those who support its current position make it impossible for the whole society to move forward.

It is a form of denial, at best a collective shrug of the shoulders. Yet the accumulated knowledge of the last fifty years tells us that human beings are

indeed extraordinarily similar, that they are all intelligent, that they all love and suffer and die, and that they all contribute. In my judgment Australian society has made a kind of mental exception in the case of the original inhabitants of this land, because that makes it easier for us to be beneficiaries with an untroubled conscience.

If we were to say, officially, that we recognise that we are beneficiaries, and that we apologise for the wrongs that were done, that we want to move on, and that moving on involves bringing the Aboriginal peoples into Australian society in ways which are acceptable to them, then that paradox would start to disappear. I should add that people in other countries often bring up the paradox, not always in a condemnatory way, but as something that needs an explanation. The sooner we don't have to explain, the better for our country's international status.

Of course, we don't have to wait for the present Commonwealth Government, and reconciliation initiatives of all kinds abound. Here at UC we are developing, with the assistance of Tracey Bunda and the local branch of the NTEU, an employment strategy for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and Tracey is moving, with my support and assistance, to construct a major in Aboriginal studies.

Finally, I see reconciliation as a hugely important step for the beneficiaries, although there is a tendency to portray it as something that is in the interests only of the original inhabitants. In comparison to that of past generations, I find the present tenor of Australian society to be over-concerned with material things, more selfish and less compassionate. For contemporary Australia to take reconciliation seriously would be a major and welcome step in the other direction, and we would all benefit from that.

, were doing pretty well. Isn't that what it's all about? And that brings me to the point of my address, the bit that I would like you to take away and reflect on. For I want to argue that despite the fact that some universities are doing well, higher education itself is in a mess. And it is in a mess because, by and large, governments no longer seem to know what it is for, or what to do with it. And so they sideline it, hoping that no-one will notice, or that other matters will take more public attention.

It is important that universities are well run, and pay their bills, and keep looking for opportunities. But it is perfectly possible for universities to be successful business organisations and yet fail to produce collectively an excellent system of higher education. The reason is that what drives a successful business organisation is profit and the interests of the shareholder. What drives a successful university is the desire to educate, to solve problems and to achieve understanding. What drives a successful country is the need to shape its own future and to leave a heritage to its young people. What drives us is and ought to be social good, as we interpret it through our work. And I doubt that our Government has this at the forefront of its policies for higher education.

I have a simple contribution to propose to you, and that is that our universities are the essential part of the building of 21st century Australia, the one that you graduates are inheriting and will shape. Universities have that importance because 21st century Australia is being built on the knowledge of a large number of professions, all of them interacting, all of them essential. It is easy to disparage professions and the knowledge they represent, but if one of the things you take for granted stops working, you'll want that professional knowledge quickly. Universities prepare professionals, help them to advance in their chosen profession, and develop the knowledge which makes the professions ever more useful. It is important for Australia that our universities do these things very well. It is important also that there is a university available to you when you wish to attend one.

It wasn't governments that gave us the excellent system of universities that we now have, nor was it governments which built the nation. It was, rather, the communities of our parents and grandparents, and their pressure for change and improvement, which worked through our political system and the governments of the time to produce what we now have. As graduates who are moving into the professions, you now inherit the responsibility of speaking for your communities, and of ensuring that the governments that are elected fulfil the needs and wishes of our society.

This is not a bleat for more public funding, but it is a cry for understanding. Our diverse higher education system is of high quality. It is going through — indeed, it has been going through for the past decade — a long period of transition from a comprehensively public-funded system to one where government operating grants, student fees, research and consultancy grants, and many other sources are all part of the funding basket. Don't assume that all these changes are inevitable or necessarily for the common good. It is important that 21st century Australia is a land where everyone is educated well, because such a society can make good and well-informed decisions. It is important that our governments see higher education as part of the continuing business of shaping a society, or 'nation-building', as it is sometimes called. If it does that, then the public funding of universities ought to follow a wide debate about the kind of society we want. Without that debate, then universities can slide into being a kind of intellectual supermarket, effective entry into which depends on how much money you have.

Those of you graduating today know what a good university is, because you have been to one. You also know that good universities are a gift by past and present generations for future generations. Please make sure, as you pass out into the great world with acclamation from all of us, that that your generation makes the same gift. Your children and grandchildren surely deserve no less.

