

THIS I BELIEVE

Contribution from Don Aitkin (Professor Don Aitkin AO)

I tried a few times, but I really didn't ever leave the education system. I started in it in 1942, at kindergarten in Newcastle, and retired from it in 2002 as the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Canberra. Along the way I experienced a primary school, two high schools, four universities in Australia and three overseas. I chaired an enquiry into the legislation governing school education, and at other times I chaired a number of bodies whose purpose was to distribute large amounts of money for research. It has been a rich, enjoyable and always interesting life.

And out of it I learned one enormously important truth, which shapes the way I think about the world. It is this: *Everyone is born intelligent.* Or put it another way: *Just about anyone can become anything they want to be, if they are properly encouraged, motivated and prepared.* It is not the want of intelligence that prevents people succeeding, but the lack of those other attributes of life.

How do I know this? Well, when I started at university only 2 per cent of my age group went there, and we were thought to be the 'bright' kids. Today, about 50 per cent of the same age group go to university, though more would like to, and some will go later. Over fifty years I have watched the proportion of students entering university increase, and I've taught some of them. In my judgment, the students of today are better than we were. They are about a year older, their knowledge is broader and their self-confidence is higher.

But they're not 'brighter', only better motivated, better prepared and more generally encouraged (by parents, school and society) to keep learning and aspire to go to university. Incidentally, exit examinations (the HSC or its equivalents) and university are both tougher and more searching than they were in my day, too.

There's no good reason why everyone shouldn't aspire to a university education. But you need to be motivated, encouraged and prepared. The same is true about playing tennis, or singing, or skiing. These are all learned skills. Yes, some people have no trouble in hitting the ball effectively, just as some find singing easy and others don't instantly fall over when they put on skis for the first time. But the great truth is that if you want to be a good tennis player badly enough, and you find a good teacher, and you practise and practise, you will be an excellent tennis player. It isn't true that some people don't have hand-eye co-ordination, or balance, or an 'ear'. We all do, but it's quite easy for us to play down our skills and capacities if they are not well developed. No one wants to appear a dummy when others are plainly proficient. And we only have one life: to be very good at anything requires large amounts of time, energy and sacrifice.

All this means that I try not to categorise people as 'bright' or 'dim'. No one is good at everything – no one has time to be. It also means that I am one of those who tries to help the late developers, partly because we all are in one or more

aspects of our lives! It means that I am an egalitarian not an elitist, since I recognise that while people may be wonderfully developed in one activity they will be, necessarily, undeveloped in others. Finally, it means that my urge always is to equalise life chances: we all deserve the opportunity to develop at least some of our capacities.

Need more persuading? Read Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind*. It's a great book.

[Don Aitkin AO is a retired Vice-Chancellor (University of Canberra, 1991-2002) who finds himself just as busy in 'retirement', where he spent six months of that long-awaited release serving as the CEO of a R&D company . He is the Chairman of the Boards of the Cultural Facilities Corporation, the Australian Mathematics Trust, the NRMA/ACT Road Safety Trust, and Pro Musica Inc.. He has a continuing role with the Canada Foundation for Innovation as well as a number of Australian organisations interested in education, research, urban development, and governance, matters about which he has strong views, and on the whole unorthodox ones. He is a Fellow of the Academy of the Social Sciences in Australian, the Australian College of Education and the Australian Planning Institute. He was the first Chairman of the Australian Research Council (1988-1990), where he trebled the budget and established the ARC as an organisation of world class; he served for six years as a member of the Australian Science and Technology Council (1996-2002).

A historian and political scientist, he was a professor at Macquarie University (1971-1979) and the ANU (1980-1988), and the author of a number of books on Australian politics as well as a novel. He was also a widely read newspaper columnist in the National Times and the Canberra Times, a contributing editor of Newsweek, and a television and radio commentator. In what passes for his spare time he writes books and plays the piano.]