

AUSTRALIA IN 2041

ANNUAL AUSTRALIAN LEADERSHIP LECTURE PRESBYTERIAN AND METHODIST SCHOOLS ASSOCIATION

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I acknowledge the First Nations of this city and bring greetings from Cape York Peninsula.

For the honour of being here with senior students of Clayfield College, Somerville House, Sunshine Coast Grammar School and Brisbane Boys College I thank your schools and the Presbyterian and Methodist Schools Association.

I want particularly to pay tribute to Clayfield College in recognition of the love you gave and received from your alumni, Tania Major. We started our Cape York boarding school scholarships with Tania when as an articled clerk at the Melbourne law firm of Arnold Bloch Leibler I heard from a teacher at Kowanyama of a young girl whose mother was selling cakes to raise money for her schooling at a prestigious Brisbane school. My Jewish mentors impressed me with the priority they accorded mentorship and education, and my duty to create educational opportunities for our younger generations in Cape York became clear.

Tania graduated from Clayfield and became Kowanyama's first university graduate and later Young Australian of the Year. Her leadership continues to be a credit to herself, her mother and family and to Clayfield College: her first home away from home.

These 25 years since we have seen hundreds of our young scholars succeed in Queensland's best private boarding schools, and we continue to grow our Year 12 completions and university graduates. My Jewish mentors, Clayfield and Tania taught me the importance of spreading opportunity: there is hardly a privileged school that does not provide scholarships for the disadvantaged and indigenous students, in Queensland and across the country. If your school does not, then it needs to start. There is no principle of philosophy that justifies the refusal to open the doors of opportunity to those who stand in need.

Let me explain my thoughts about school education and the great privileges each of you have, which your parents and family members enjoyed and which I myself had when I left the Hope Vale Lutheran Mission of my childhood to attend boarding school at St Peters Lutheran College 43 years ago as a Year 8 student: they were the best years of my life.

My old school and yours are immensely great and extraordinary in terms of what our teachers do and what we as students experience and achieve. But ours are not the really great schools of Queensland.

This is because our schools are what I call reproduction schools: they faithfully reproduce the advantages of the students and the families from which they are drawn. Life trajectories for those of us who have the privilege of attending St Peters or Somerville House, are not much altered by the schooling we receive there. Indeed if there is a change it is most often to greater advantage than one already has. This is the nature of reproduction schools: they reproduce privilege and advantage. And well may they do so.

Of course there is a downside to reproduction schools. Students and families from disadvantaged communities that cannot enter schools such as ours, are served by schools – chiefly public schools – that reproduce the disadvantages of their students. Life trajectories are seldom changed. The odd student defies the reproductive processes of these schools, but the general rule is that disadvantaged schools reproduce disadvantaged graduates.

I will be blunt: any school with students from advantaged backgrounds can do well with their students. That Queensland's best private schools and most selective public schools like Brisbane State High routinely achieve outstanding results is nothing to crow about.

Real greatness lies with the transformational schools: those schools that take students wherever their socio-economic background and whatever their personal learning attributes and circumstances – and transform their life prospects. The transformation schools defy the forces of reproduction. They have the hardest challenges with the most struggling students from the most benighted families: and they offer an alternative future to the perpetuation of their backstories.

We have a rare privilege. For every school like ours that routinely reproduce advantage there are 100 schools that reproduce disadvantage. This is an injustice not of merit or choice or outcome but an injustice of opportunity.

Once we realise the opportunity we have, the call on our obligation to spread educational opportunity to all Queenslanders becomes a moral imperative in our lives. From sharing our advantages, to supplying poor schools with great teachers, to getting out of our comfort zones as schools and partnering with disadvantaged communities and families to extend a hand up rather than a hand out through the power of a good school education.

I am briefed with talking about the subject of Australian leadership.

Upon reflection I have some misgiving speaking to leadership as I am not and have never been elected to represent anyone. Whilst I may have had my nose pressed to the glass of the big houses of elected leadership, these are not houses easily entered by people like me. The truth is I am an activist in the public life of our country. I deal in the currency of ideas rather than mandate from electors. I am not sure I can truly make a claim to leadership because I have never held structural or executive power. No law or public institution mandates my power.

I can only speak. Ultimately, like so many others who have no structural power, I speak for myself. And my irrelevance to public debate is always a likely question. Without the currency of ideas people like me would have no purchase in public life.

So what I have to say about our country has to be taken with these qualifications, because what I have to say are things that normally fall within the province of elected leaders.

Socrates told those who advised him to recant and save himself from death that “it is impossible for me to keep quiet”. I know this allusion is outrageous (so forgive me) but it is for me the source of leadership: the imperative to speak no matter one’s station in life, and needing no other legitimacy other than one’s moral responsibilities as a human.

Having made these admissions, I want to speak to a time when most of you will be parents with young children, many of them on their way to attending your schools as students of old scholars. I pray that in 2041 your children will live in a nation that is clear about who they are, where they have come from and who the Australian people are.

I recently made the observation to the National Museum of Australia that because Australia failed to recognise the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander First Nations of the country – not in 1770 when Lieutenant James Cook navigated the eastern seaboard, not in 1788 with the landing of the First Fleet in Sydney Cove, not in the subsequent founding of the colonies and not in their federation under the Commonwealth of Australia in 1901 – Australia remains deeply uncertain about its origins and its identity. My point was that Australia is an absurdity without its Indigenous peoples.

This uncertainty and confusion is growing as more and more Australians join with Indigenous peoples each Australia Day. The dissonance grows yearly and our political leaders don’t know what to do. They think they can chart a course for the 21st century with a 19th century mindset.

What is Australia and who are the Australian people?

What answer will you be able to furnish to your children in 20 years?

What will need to happen if we are to have a shared answer to this question that respects our diversity and becomes the wellspring of the unity of our Commonwealth?

The recognition of Indigenous Australians in the Australian Constitution is a project of long standing. It is older than the cause of same sex marriage which succeeded with the passage by the Commonwealth Parliament of amendments to the Marriage Act in 2017. It is older than the cause of women's equality which has made gains, but as Grace Tame and Brittany Higgins have told us so clearly: is a cause of justice that we still need to confront.

The current process of public discussion, parliamentary investigations and public consultations began with Prime Minister John Howard's initiative on eve of the 2007 federal election campaign to commit to constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians. It is now 13 years later. It is 10 years since the first official process – Prime Minister Julia Gillard's appointment of an Expert Panel reported on options for recognition in 2011.

But as anyone familiar with the history of indigenous rights will know, this campaign for indigenous justice and inclusion is now into its third century.

1770. 1788. 1901. If not then, then why not now?

2007 to 2021. If not now, then when?

The parlous present, this burning platform from which we consider our situation, is plain. We live in an extraordinary nation with such bounty and among the highest standards of living in the world and yet the anomaly of the status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders stares us in the face. Its most striking manifestation is the rates of imprisonment of Indigenous peoples: 3 per cent of the country's population represent 30 per cent of the prison population. The rates in Western Australia and the Northern Territory are even more egregious.

Rates of children in out of home care are obscene, as are the rates of youth in detention. Young people just like you coming from a miniscule proportion of the population fill the detention centres across the country, and will likely go on to adult incarceration.

The *Uluru Statement from the Heart* made these startling truths the starting point for its case for recognition. It said:

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our

youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. *This is the torment of our powerlessness.*

Where could we be in 2041? I told the National Museum this is what lies on the horizon for us as Australians: “With constitutional recognition soon will come the day when we acknowledge three stories: the *Ancient Indigenous Heritage* which is Australia’s foundation, the *British Institutions* built upon it, and the adorning *Gift of Multicultural Migration.*”

This would be an Australia where we are all confident about who we are, where we have come from and what binds us together in mutual recognition, respect and unity.

But we will need some ideas to get there. Let me make five proposals for what I think we will need to do in order to secure the kind of Australia that resolves the contradictions and absurdities that are the consequence of the failure of recognition.

The first idea is that we must learn to think of layers of identity rather than identity fundamentalism. We are all members of communities of identity that are common to our families, but we also harbour identities that we don’t share with our families. Identity is not just religion and ethnicity, but extends to other passions and interests we share with other citizens, many unknown to us. I am not only Aboriginal, I am particularly a *Murri* from Queensland, and even more so *Pama* from Cape York Peninsula, and even more so a *Guugu Yimithirr* from southeastern Cape York, whilst at the level of my clan estate I am *Bagaarmugu* from the Jeannie River: the seat of my great grandfathers. I am a North Queenslander, and a Queenslander for other purposes, and I am Australian when I am moved to be. But my identity is also based in the Lutheran Mission of my family, but I share an identity with Lutherans all over the country and indeed I feel an affiliation with the Lutherans of Bavaria who sent the missionaries to Cape Bedford in 1886. I am a member of a strange recreational community that believes that there is a game played in Heaven, and it is neither Rugby League nor Australian Rules.

The point is that we have multiple identities that create bonds with people known to us and bridges to those unknown to us. All of these layers of identity are of different degree and meaning and they are highly contextual – and the combinations of the warp and weft that make each of our own contributions to the national fabric of our country, are unique to each of us. The more bonds and bridges we have the stronger the unity of our national fabric.

It is when we fall for ideas of identity fundamentalism that we make a mistake. When we make religion, ethnicity or sexual orientation our fundamental identity, and we lose sight of

the layers of other identities that define us – identity turns from a blessing and celebration and becomes the problem of identity politics.

We must learn to respect individuals in all of their diversity, including all of the layers of identity that bind each of us to each other.

To simply demonise identity politics is not the right response. The rejection of identity ends up sounding like a call for assimilation and the repression of diversity, and the legitimate claims to recognition and justice are denied on this basis.

The second idea is that we see that ours is a triune Commonwealth: comprising its Indigenous foundations, British institutional heritage and the gifts of multicultural migration. This is plainly who we are and where we have come from. This is the meaning of our inheritance as Australians. Every nation on the planet has its own story. The triune Commonwealth is ours.

The third idea is we must rethink our economy. I call it Adam Smith's economy, not in the same sense that those who have advocated the neo-liberal turn over the past 40 years have interpreted Adam Smith, but in the proper way that the Canadian philosopher John Ralston Saul outlined three decades ago¹. Adam Smith is famous for two books. The first, *The Wealth of Nations*², is the book that the neo-liberals appropriated as their Bible: the invisible hand of the market was the best way to allocate resources of the economy. The second, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*³, was disregarded, and this was Ralston Saul's complaint. I share his complaint.

Whereas I agree that the self regard that underpins liberal economics is a great engine, we must balance our commitment to markets with a proper social motivation: our regard for others. This is where our obligation to ensure that we resist monopolies and we ensure everyone has opportunity, stems from.

We need to develop an inclusive economy that gives a hand-up to the disadvantaged, strengthens the working middle, and unleashes the entrepreneurs in a way that combines the liberal engine of self-regard with the social regard of moral sentiment.

The fourth idea is Edmund Burke's⁴ idea of society. No better definition of the meaning of society has ever been articulated by a political leader than that of the 19th century British prime minister. Society is a convocation of our ancestors, us the living and our future unborn.

¹ John Ralston Saul *Voltaire's Bastards*, Vintage, 1992, John Ralston Saul *The Unconscious Civilisation*, Simon and Schuster 1999

² Adam Smith *The Wealth of Nations*, 1776

³ Adam Smith *Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 1759

⁴ Jesse Norman *Edmund Burke*, Basic Books, 2013

We inherit good things from our ancestors and we want to hand them on to our future generations. We owe our ancestors for the gifts they have bequeathed us and we owe our unborn an obligation to pass things on to them in a good stead. We are trustees for our future children on behalf of our predecessors. Society is not only us the living is Burke's enduring conception.

The fifth idea is from another conservative English philosopher, Roger Scruton, who wrote in a 2012 book *Green Philosophy*⁵, about oikophilia, the love of home.

Scruton's profound insight was that conservatives should be for conservation because we have the Burkeian view of society and we love our homes and want to bequeath to our descendants the blessings of nature for their future enjoyment.

The love of our home, Australia, is the reason we want to conserve it for our descendants. The animation for responses to climate change and the calamitous loss of biodiversity due to the action of humans, is oikophilia: the common love we all must have for home.

These are five ideas that are crucial if we are to create a better Australia within 20 years of your taking leave of your high school education.

What we need: is leadership.

Will it be forthcoming from our elected leaders?

Each of the political parties are not as bad as each considers the other and neither of them are anywhere as good as they think they are. Since the 2007 election and the subsequent regicide of Prime Minister Kevin Rudd at the hands of his own party, our national political leadership has been at a low ebb.

Will the Prime Minister, Scott Morrison or his erstwhile successor, Opposition Leader Anthony Albanese, be able to provide the leadership we need? I cannot say.

I can only say we need leadership.

The kind of leadership President Abraham Lincoln showed when he remade America out of the blood-soaked fields of the Civil War with his words at Gettysberg. An astounding example of how leadership can remake a nation.

⁵ Roger Scruton *Green Philosophy*, Authentic Books, 2012

The kind of leadership shown by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt when he remade the American economy following the Great Depression, as an economy for all and not just the few.

The kind of leadership shown by Lyndon Baines Johnson when he plotted the success of the Civil Rights Act 1964 and the Voting Rights Act in 1965, through the thickets of a hostile Congress.

The kind of leadership shown by Prime Minister Paul Keating when he defended the Mabo decision from annihilation and secured the passage of the Native Title Act in 1993.

The kind of leadership shown by Prime Minister John Howard when he started the campaign for constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians in 2007.

What can we do as Australian citizens?

Let me paraphrase BBC College Captain Mason Black in his tectonic speech about respect for the equality of women, because the personal responsibility all of us share to make a better Commonwealth is where our work for the next 20 years must start. Mason told this school:

Every person in this room must not just be an advocate for *[the recognition of Indigenous Australians]* but in our every action indeed we have to be proactive in stopping the *[denial]*, this starts with putting an end to slurs and derogatory comments about *[Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people]*, it means standing up to any *[power]* no matter *[who]* they are if we see it happening and we have to keep our mates accountable no matter where it may be. Each and every one of us have an obligation to each other to not follow the ways of the past and to take our future on a new path, a path that uplifts and values *[our First Nations]* for who they are, appreciates their intelligence, strength and inner beauty and most importantly empowers them to live a life where they can *[take their rightful place in the country]*, without judgment and they feel supported to be themselves, not changed to be anyone different.

I salute Mason Black for his outrageous and exemplary courage. We have learned from his leadership. He has shown us what we can and must do if we want to build a better Commonwealth that respects women as equals, and shone a light for me on the personal responsibility we have to remake the nation.

You all will be of voting age when the question of constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians will be put to the Australian people. The referendum will require a majority of voters in a majority of the states to vote yes.

This will require your vote.

But more than your vote, it will require your participation in the campaign for recognition. It will require you to take the personal responsibility that Mason talked about. It will require you to mobilise so that the 97 per cent of Australians recognise the 3 per cent of its First Nations.

Campaign research produced by Crosby Textor shows that as of June last year only 17% would vote no in a referendum on a voice, 56% would vote yes with the remainder undecided. The research also found that undecided voters were more likely to support a voice once they are aware of it and understood it.

If there is anything I want to impress upon you is that the question of recognition is not only about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It is about all Australians and the very idea of Australia.

I told the National Museum: "... recognition is a mirror. When the descendants of the British colonists, the Italians, the Greeks, the Vietnamese, the Congolese, the Sudanese and the Indians, the Lebanese and the Chinese, are recognised by the Indigenous: there is mutual recognition and we see ourselves in each other's eyes. There can be no unilateral recognition of a part without mutual recognition of the whole."

We are building a mirror. To recognise each other. As Australians.

Thankyou.