

## **OCCASIONAL ADDRESS**

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Delivered at the graduations ceremony for graduates from  
the Faculties Humanities and Social Sciences and Science and  
the Institutes for International Studies and Sustainable Futures

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There is a high honour to be asked to address men and women who have made the enormous effort to graduate with qualifications.

It is often thought that getting an education is something we do for ourselves. And to an extent that is true. But I think there is often an oversight of what we have to give up to get the education that will take us through life.

It is time away from our families, our loved ones. It is time away from our work. And this can often result in financial hardship. It is time away from the community activities that enrich our life. So this work, this passion to be educated, is something that comes with sacrifice.

For this reason, I always think that graduations are a time to reflect on that sacrifice and to also acknowledge those who have taken that journey with us. For me, they are always a celebration of our family, friends and support networks as much as they are occasions for the conferment of awards and degrees. So, for these reasons, I begin by acknowledging that sacrifice, that commitment and that support.

Although I didn't know why at the time, I felt at my graduation for my last degree that it was the celebration of a start far more than it was the celebration of the three years of study that led to my doctorate. It was only after as I returned to Australia and went back into professional life that I realised that what I had created was a pathway forward and I envy all of you the anticipation and promise that awaits you as a reward for what you have achieved.

But as you take that journey, I would encourage you to think more broadly about the society in which you live and work.

Many commentators have noted that the real issues that influenced Australians at the last election were issues of interest rates. Social researcher, Hugh Mackay has linked this introversion, this self-interest to a post-9/11 world where people are fearful of perceived dangers such as the war on terrorism and turn their attention instead to areas of their world that

they can control. He explains that the increased popularity of home renovation and cooking shows are evidence of this.

I have seen this hardened opinion – this introversion and increased self-interest, this hardening of social conscience – in the work I undertook as a member of the act bill of rights consultative committee in 2003. During the community consultation processes in our inquiry as to whether there should be a bill of rights in the nations capital, there appeared a strong reluctance to recognise the rights of minorities. Feedback from those consultations included comments such as “if a bill of rights includes the protection of Indigenous people, it will not be for the benefit of all Canberrans” and “if a bill of rights mentions indigenous rights and the rights of other minorities it will have no legitimacy.”

What is noticeable in this example is the meanness of spirit about the possible protections that a democratic society can offer. This mentality protectively guards the rights and benefits that are given to citizens within a community and seems to assume that if those rights are extended to the poor, the culturally distinct and the historically marginalised that they will be worse off.

This worldview sees the recognition and protection of the rights of the disadvantaged and culturally distinct as being in direct competition with their own position. It is an “us” and “them” mentality that psychologically separates one sector of the community from the other.

It is perhaps easy to understand the tenacity to which middle Australia clings to its position in a time of economic uncertainty and change. In his book, *The Experience of Middle Australia: the Dark side of Economic Reform*, Michael Pusey writes:

We might well ask ... ‘if the GDP is up, how come Australia is down?’ as we have seen, middle Australia is forming its own answers to this question, as disappointed expectations look for answers and generate resentments of a kind that exploded into the public arena with the advent of the Hanson phenomenon in the late 1990s.<sup>i</sup>

When middle Australia feels as vulnerable about its own economic position as Pusey’s research shows, it is no wonder that the fear of change and the fear of the unknown is unsettling. But this explanation does not forgive the way in which the fear of uncertainty and the desire for security translate into racism and xenophobia. And it should not forgive the failure to recognise rights nor should it endorse their breach.

In his book, *Against Paranoid Nationalism*, Ghassan Hage describes the difference between a caring society and a defensive one. He writes:

The caring society is essentially an embracing society that generates hope among its citizens and induces them to care for it. The defensive society, such as the one we have in Australia today suffers from a scarcity of hope and creates citizens who see threats everywhere. It generates worrying citizens and a paranoid nationalism.<sup>ii</sup>

If we are to have a society that values fairness, equality and justice, we must strive towards the vision of a caring society. In order to do that, we need to move from an “us” and “them” mentality and realise that the way to measure the effectiveness and fairness of our laws is to test them against the way in which they work for the poor, the marginalised and the culturally distinct.

It is not enough that they work well for the rich, well-educated and culturally dominant. This measure of fairness and equity rejects an “us” and “them” mentality and holds that our fate and our worth as a society are measured best by how the most disadvantaged within our community fare. By valuing laws, policies and practices that work best because they achieve an equality of outcome, society begins to understand that extending the protections of a democratic society to those who are marginalised does not disadvantage another sector; it actually makes everyone better off.

Those of you graduating today will enjoy a hard-earned but well-deserved ability to improve your socio-economic position by virtue of your education. No matter what you choose to do with your skills or which path it has created for you, understand and appreciate that you can contribute to the broader debates about where we should be going as a nation and what kind of country we would like Australia to be.

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<sup>i</sup> Michael Pusey. *The Experience of Middle Australia: The Dark Side of Economic Reform*. Port Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 2003. At p.41

<sup>ii</sup> Ghassan Hage. *Against Paranoid Nationalism: Searching for Hope in a Shrinking Society*. Annandale: Pluto Press, 2003. At p.3.