

OCCASIONAL SPEECH delivered at the Faculty of Arts Graduation Ceremony at the University of New England on Friday, 7 April 2000

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests, graduands, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for your kind invitation to speak to this graduating class.

Let me commence by telling you a story about Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson who go bush walking (perhaps in the New England National Park). Evening comes and they light a fire and cook their dinner, unroll their sleeping bags and settle down for the night.

In the middle of the night Sherlock Holmes leans over to Dr Watson and says "Dr Watson, wake up." Watson does so rather sleepily and Sherlock Holmes says "Look up above you and tell me what conclusion you draw from what you see".

So Dr Watson looks up at the night sky and says, "Well Holmes, I see the stars. Epistemologically that makes me think of the enormous march of human knowledge since the Renaissance when Galileo first turned his telescope from the earth to the heavens, and yet I think too of how much there is still to discover. Ontologically I think how in essence we are all poor creatures under heaven, knowing not what the true meaning is of our lives. And spiritually I think how it must have been when the earliest humans, gazing on such a sight as this, first began to ask such questions and to imagine the existence of a divine being, all knowing yet beyond our comprehension, gazing down on us. But tell me, Holmes, what is your conclusion?"

And Sherlock Holmes turns to Dr Watson and says: "Watson, my conclusion is that some thief has stolen our tent."

So much of learning today operates on the principle of knowing only what one needs to know: to get from A to B in the shortest possible time, to fix the problem, to make the machine work, to make money. This, however, is not what makes us human. Sherlock Holmes is right to draw attention to the obvious if indeed there is a thief about, or if it is about to rain.

But Dr Watson is right too. The search for knowledge is not just for the mundane and practical. If we do not ask the big questions, speculate about the essence of things and about the spirit as well as the body, then we are not human beings. When we discover a new moon, we name it after one of the classical gods. Humans want to know, as the Monty Python movie reminds us, the meaning of life. This is why we need history, theology, philosophy, archaeology, music, anthropology, politics, geography, literature and the classics, and not just practical training. In law we need to study not just the rules of law but also the impact of the

law on ordinary people and the ideals of justice and fairness which underpin and justify our legal system.

For hundreds of years, universities have been the place where those big questions were asked most insistently and at the highest level of thought. This affected all students. Whether they were training to be dentists, agricultural scientists, lawyers or economists, they also read history, philosophy, literature and art. I have just seen an abstract of a recently published book entitled *Shakespeare and the Legal Imagination*, in which Ian Ward, a Professor of Law, analyses English constitutional law using Shakespeare's plays as legal texts, looking at the development of constitutional ideas such as sovereignty, commonwealth, the law of the market and politics of poverty, conscience and moral law and the art of government and finally surveying major debates in contemporary legal theory. Lawyers have also contributed much as actors and playwrights. It is remarkable how many of the world's great musicians trained as medical practitioners. Politicians were steeped in classical and modern history where they looked at the ways in which leaders throughout the ages tried to shape the destinies of nations.

We are now living in an age where, for the first time since the European Renaissance, this pursuit of a broader education is being questioned. Attacks are being mounted on universities from governments of all political persuasions and programs in traditional humanities disciplines are being wound back, where they haven't disappeared altogether.

Oddly, however, once they emerge at the other end and find themselves in jobs, the rationalists begin to find that their training isn't enough for their employers, let alone for their own satisfaction. Recently both the Careers Council of Australia and the Queensland Division of the Institution of Engineers reported on surveys of employers which found that they thought too many graduates were deficient in creativity and flair, oral communication skills, problem-solving, and general self-reliance. Interestingly, this was particularly true of students of engineering and surveying; those two most traditional of no-nonsense practical training for stable and useful jobs in private enterprise. Students of the humanities were amongst those best able to present themselves in the world and communicate their ideas effectively.

I am myself a graduate in Arts from the University of Queensland, which gave me a broad liberal education and to which I attribute my ability to think laterally, to problem solve, to consider the broader questions rather than just a multitude of instances and to strive to achieve the ideals of fairness and justice in my professional life. My education in English language, literature and drama taught me the performance skills and the precision in language, which were brilliant training for a barrister. Literature also enables one to see events from someone else's point of view to view life as others see it.

I am one of those who benefited from a rare time in the history of education itself when a tertiary education was free. If it had not been, I would not be here today addressing you. In 1979 I went back to university to study law; I sat for my first exam in hospital days after my son, our second child, was born. There is no way that I could have paid the kind of charges, HECS or full-fees, that the system now demands of you.

It is important therefore for people of my generation, to remember that now that we are in positions in which we can influence society, that we owe what we achieved first and foremost to free education, and to speak publicly as I am doing now about the importance of that opportunity.

We need to make sure that the education each student receives is broad, exciting, well taught and well resourced. The stories coming out of universities at present are not encouraging. Since 1990 the number of students at the University of Queensland, to give but one example, has increased by 12,000 or approximately 66%; but the number of academics has increased by only 10% (just over 100).

The pay scales for academic staff at universities are also unattractive, when compared to those in the United States or Great Britain. The professorial rates of pay would have to rise by at least \$35,000 per year just to match those in the US or the UK, let alone entice a top teacher and researcher away from those centres of intellect and culture to an underfunded and understaffed Australian university, where their teaching workloads will approximately double.

Let me finish however with an optimistic observation from my own experience. I was the first and for some years the only member of the Anti-Discrimination Tribunal in Queensland, set up to adjudicate cases of alleged discrimination particularly against women, Aboriginal people, and migrants, often in workplace situations. I travelled and sat throughout Queensland and northern New South Wales hearing evidence and making rulings in those difficult cases which could not be dealt with by conciliation.

Overwhelmingly the coverage given to these cases in the press and the reaction of the public was positive. This wasn't always true, of course; there are some issues on which the Australian community in general is genuinely divided. Nevertheless when the facts of most matters were clearly explained, it was reassuring to see how much common ground we all share. We do not believe that our young people, male or female, should have to work in situations where they lose their jobs if they refuse to provide sexual favours to their boss. We do not believe that a young woman who wants to work in a predominantly male workplace should be denied that job because there are no women's toilets on site, or subjected to such sustained and repeated humiliating and derogatory remarks about her body that she abandons the job she has wanted all her life. We don't believe that an Aboriginal or migrant person with the relevant qualifications should be fobbed off

without even an interview, or be told when they turn up and the employer sees what community they come from, that the position has been filled.

Nor, I believe, does the Australian community have such a poor opinion of our universities that they will allow whole disciplines of knowledge to disappear, with those that survive doing so only because they can be measured by the crudest criterion of short-term economic value, and be taught in the cheapest and most soul-destroying way by teachers too overwhelmed by sheer numbers to notice the student who needs special help or to keep up with the latest developments in their areas of expertise.

You, who are graduating in the Faculty of Arts at the University of New England, know what I am talking about; you've managed in these difficult times to gain the knowledge to achieve your degrees. I congratulate you and the families and friends who have supported you and the academic staff who have taught, bullied and cajoled through your degrees. As Arts graduates, you will have those skills I have been talking about which you can use to articulate the true goals of higher education. As you now move from the university, your lives will demonstrate to the community in a very practical way the value of a university education in arts and the humanities.