



THE CHURCHILL FELLOWS ASSOCIATION OF QLD Annual dinner

Hilton Hotel, Friday 30 July 2004, 6:30pm

Chief Justice, Paul de Jersey AC

I am very pleased to have the opportunity to speak with you tonight. It is enlivening to be in the company of such publicly minded, high achievers. It is also however a challenge to say something which will both interest and entertain. I trust the heroic personage who has inspired you, may now inspire me. But then I am greatly inspired as always by my wife, who is I suspect one of the most widely read Churchill aficionados. In her interest, I should however make clear that what follows is my own inadequate contribution.

Australians reacted with great enthusiasm to the establishment of the Memorial Trust in the mid-60's, and that was unsurprising. When Churchill died on 25 January 1965 at the age of 90, Australians lionized him as a "secular saint". The magnitude of the homage was not unheralded. Certainly from the time of his second Prime Ministership in 1951, leading to his 80th birthday three years later and his travelling art exhibition in 1957, Australian reaction to the great man was almost invariably laudatory, as well epitomized in the Menzies line: "The greatest privilege in life is to meet and know and talk with an immortal" – rather interesting bearing in mind that Churchill was agnostic.

He was a hero who never visited Australia, despite numerous entreaties. Yet Churchill is daily remembered here to the present – for example, if at a rather pedestrian level, through the naming of streets, where he outshines all Australian



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politicians and is apparently surpassed only by Sir Donald Bradman and Sir John Monash (John Ramsden: *Man of the century*, Winston Churchill and his legends since 1945; 2002, Harper Collins, p 475). This city boasts 11 Churchill streets and there are 14 elsewhere in the State.

And he is to this day enthusiastically celebrated by our Prime Minister – who bears his name, and whose immediate predecessor Paul Keating acknowledged Churchill as the inspiring force which led him into public life.

Bearing in mind that Churchill was entirely indifferent to our “national game” of cricket (Ramsden p 438), the Australian homage is you may feel particularly remarkable. The uniquely beneficial leadership he provided during World War 2, and in presaging the Cold War, overwhelmingly dispels other less favourable considerations, like his committing Australian troops to doomed military campaigns and his sometimes insensitive reference to “the colonies”. His great radio speeches stand alone as peerless clarion calls, including for the young.

Now it is pardonable, at a celebratory occasion like this, to acknowledge that Churchill was a great lover of Pol Roger champagne. Substantial consumption destroys the brain power of most of us: it seems to have enhanced his. Maybe it fed his imagination to believe in himself, and the confidence and courage to stand up to the forces of darkness, capacities which led to his saying “no” loudly and clearly when the craven would have capitulated: to Kitchener, Lloyd George, Chamberlain, Hitler, Stalin, de Gaulle...



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As a consummate reservoir of common sense, I am sure Churchill would have been intrigued by modern governments which tell people what they should eat, tell parents what their children should read, governments which appear to believe they have the capacity to save people from themselves.

Far better, I suggest, that any warranted encouragement in these areas be left to people like social scientists. I am please to see one of this year's Fellows from Queensland, Bronwyn Ashton, is to look at the issue of childhood obesity. If people have to be saved from gluttony, then this is a project well undertaken by a person like Ms Ashton. Some things she will know already, including that the less well off eat more fast food because it gives them affordable pleasure, and so the outlets abound in the poorer suburbs. She may also possibly have heard of the restaurant in Kiev which serves a moderately unhealthy dish: pork fat within a chocolate coating. There is a lot of heart disease in the Ukraine. Well, Ms Ashton may identify a way of reversing these trends in children, and better her than government. Churchill would have been pleased: though recalling his size, his personal attitude towards obesity may have been somewhat ambivalent.

Ladies and gentlemen, you are honoured to have received fellowships bearing the name Churchill, and the community is the grateful beneficiary of the studies you have made. As you have travelled and studied, you have done so in the memory of Churchill, and I am confident you would have been greatly inspired by that aura.

Since the inception of the Fund in 1966, as many as 2,720 fellowships have been awarded. 426, or 15%, have gone to Queenslanders. The numbers have steadily



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increased over the years, from a mere six to nine annually in the first decade, up to 18 last year. The high point was in 2002, where there were 35 recipients. The topics studied by the Fellows have predominately focused on the arts – about 25%, with law, I note, accounting for a mere 4%: what does that signify as to my profession? Medicine, agriculture, education and engineering all feature strongly, averaging about 12% of the total. Particular areas of study have included the somewhat curious – pre-Columbian pottery, Purse Seine fishing, lichens, ecclesiastical embroidery... It must be said the Fellows have over the years been absorbed in an extraordinary array of fields, and it is inevitable their discoveries will have benefited the community greatly. That is not to say the areas of study have been predominately utilitarian: far from it, they present a dazzling array of fascinating subjects where usefulness and interest vie for supremacy. Purse Seine fishing, by the way, involves large vertical nets drawn by two boats – but you probably knew that.

I acknowledge the dedication of the Committee, led in this State by my colleague Justice Margaret White. The voluntary commitment of committee members is substantial, something which sadly attracts little recognition, although committee members do not live and work for recognition. I hope the Committee may be able to elevate public awareness of the interesting and beneficial endeavours of the Fellows: you set a commendable example in exploiting personal talent for community benefit. Your contribution is truly a source of potential inspiration, and inspiration is something our contemporary society craves.

Two years ago the BBC conducted a poll to identify the 100 greatest Britons of all time. Churchill topped it. But what of the related findings, which ranked, in terms of



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cultural contribution, Boy George and Robbie Williams ahead of Turner and Keats; and David Beckham and Sir Cliff Richard ahead of Constable and Wordsworth (The Times, September 2002)?

It is I suppose difficult to struggle against widely-read pop magazines which reserve to themselves the right to declare annually what and who are “in” or “out”. An obsession with celebrity is, I fear, denying many people an appreciation of the value of great personal achievement. From time to time, thinking people bewail the sparseness of our truly heroic rank. It does concern me whether the community is prepared to seek to identify its truly heroic members, and let themselves be inspired.

The aggregation of personal achievement and beneficial community contribution present in this room tonight must be of immense proportion. No doubt you have all been a source of inspiration to many others. We can only hope that that sort of inspiration continues to lift the spirit of the community to a point where many more strive for the public good.

But then again, you are right, also, to delight in being honoured for this personal achievement. Churchill, probably the only man in history to have turned down a dukedom, but who did become a Knight Companion of the Most Noble Order of the Garter, a member of the Order of Merit, and a Companion of Honour, had this to say about the purpose of the formal honours system: “The object in presenting medals, stars and ribbons is to give pride and pleasure to those who deserve them.” Your fellowships have served a widely beneficial purpose, and your achievement is one rightly honoured.



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Churchill's wartime Deputy Prime Minister, Earl Attlee, commenting in his own modest way on a life of not inconsiderable achievement, perhaps deserves the last word, for doodling one day in retirement he came up with that hardest achievement of all, the perfect limerick:

"Few thought he was even a starter
There were many who thought themselves smarter
But he ended PM
CH and OM
an Earl and a Knight of the Garter." (M. de-la-Noy: The Honours System, 1985, Allison and Busby, pp 180-1).

You have not sought personal recognition, but to deploy your talents optimally for all. In that, you exemplify the essence of Churchill's legacy: on behalf of the community of Queensland, I applaud you!