

University of Canberra Graduation Ceremony

Parliament House, Friday 2 October 2015

Occasional Address by Dr Dawn Casey PSM FAHA

Chancellor Dr Tom Calma AO

Vice Chancellor Professor Stephen Parker AO

Graduating Students

Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to acknowledge the Ngunawal/Ngunnawal people, Traditional Owners of this land upon which we stand today.

May I say what a pleasure and honour it is to be asked to address you today. Whilst my traditional country is around Croydon and I spent my childhood and early adult life in Cairns, I have lived most of my life working in Canberra and was at one time a member of the University of Canberra Council.

I came to Canberra in the mid eighties to write Australia's first Equal Opportunity Plan. In my teens I couldn't have imagined this would be one of my achievements and on reflection, I believe my career choices has been as a result of experiencing and witnessing barriers confronting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

For example, at high school I nominated French as one of my subjects and when the classes were allocated I was surprised to see I was not included in the French classes. I found myself in a domestic science class. This was the last subject I needed to be taught given, I was the eldest girl at home with three younger brothers, a sister and had learned to sew, cook and clean by the time I was ten.

I also remember being surprised when one our teachers said that most of us were destined to work in the sugar cane fields and timber mills. There was no

discussion of trades or university studies—or for that matter even of becoming a shop assistant. Both my parents saw education as extremely important as they'd had no access to any form of education. But they didn't know how to help me deal with this situation.

Like many others at that time I left school before completing Grade 10, then had a child and married very young. I earned a living from cleaning and babysitting but grew to expect more from my life. I saved money to attend the local business college. I graduated with distinction in 1974 and accepted a position as a typist/receptionist in the Cairns office of the Commonwealth Department of Education.

Shortly after joining the department I was advised I could not be appointed permanently as I didn't have a Grade 10 certificate. In the space of six months I studied by correspondence for the certificate and gained a permanent position in the Commonwealth Public Service.

However, the lack of formal education is not going to be a problem for new graduates here today. Something you have worked hard for over the past years is being celebrated today, and you are receiving a token of that achievement, a proof that you studied, you passed, and you can proudly claim that level of knowledge or that special qualification.

It gives me much pleasure to see the latest generation of educated and informed Australians about to take their place in the world. Whether you have obtained first or postgraduate degrees really makes less difference in the long run than the fact that you *have* studied. You have taken a field which interested you or in which you had a special talent, explored it, enjoyed doing so I hope, but most importantly, you changed. You are not the same person you were when you started. You are a little older of course, but more importantly you now have insights into many areas of life or society or civilisation, which you didn't have before. You know where to go in future to find things out that intrigue you or puzzle you.

Most importantly, you are beginning to understand how much you *don't* know. In other words today is just the beginning. Your studies are not over. You may or may not undertake further formal education, but in order to be a self-respecting and independent citizen you need to keep learning, across a surprising spectrum of subjects. I suspect that your most memorable or impressive lecturers and tutors over the last few years were the ones who taught you to think for yourselves - do the work, find the data, prove or disprove the thesis, argue the case based on the evidence. I'm asking you to keep doing that. I'm talking about self-generated life long learning. You know how to do it - and best of all, you know that following up an interest out of sheer intellectual curiosity can also be rewarding and a lot of fun. It is also important given the difficult and complex issues you will need to deal with in years to come.

The employment market is much tougher than it used to be. But I am also thinking more of the fact that you will be pursuing your careers and life choices, and making your mark in different professions, at a time when public life in Australia is being dominated by anti-intellectual forces and uninformed opinions.

The usual catch-cry is that this is a free country, and everybody is entitled to his or her opinion. Well, so they are - but I would suggest people should offer their opinions when they have been thought through and based on available evidence, and not just borrowed from someone else or ticking the 'like' box on Facebook for convenience.

You don't have to look further than the daily news or even, regrettably, the debates in Parliament to hear ignorant nonsense talked about Indigenous people, refugees, Muslims, same sex marriage or the environment. In recent months we have seen the booing of Adam Goodes, the protest against the construction of the Mosque in Bendigo and the rallies to 'Reclaim Australia' with banners saying: 'Patriotism is not racism'. I ask you, what Australia are they reclaiming?

The lazy minded do not want to hear that the truth is complex, policies need careful thought rather than knee-jerk reactions, and that further study of any issue or any human culture is often both rewarding and surprising.

Looking around us in the year 2015 we find a world which is threatened by major conflict and intolerance, and in which far-reaching decisions are being made, supposedly on our behalf.

It is my strong view this is a world in which education is more crucial than ever before. With or without the help of formal courses, we need to teach ourselves about other cultures, other religions, other economies, and other people's hopes for the future, and encourage them to understand ours. Ignorance is a great encourager of superstition and intolerance, and we simply cannot afford it any more.

In this new world you are entering you will face disappointments in your career. There will times when you may not obtain the job or promotion you had hoped. Or like me you may even have your contract not renewed as happened with my position as Director of the National Museum of Australia. I had the responsibility for the management of its design and construction. By any reasonable measure it was a success. It was completed on time and on budget with some 2 million visitors in the first few years but this did not count during the politics of the time. Naturally, I was devastated. At the time there were cartoons in the Canberra Times and one depicted me in a coffin with a version of Grim Reaper standing over me.

In situations like this you remember the good times, look after your staff and you move on without any bitterness. I was deeply moved by the extraordinary amount of support from the Canberra and wider Australian community. My mother who never really understood how senior my role was rang me to ask if I hadn't worked hard enough?

Therefore, the last piece of advice I will share with you is that as well as your formal education the personal qualities you need and should remember to maintain and build include: resilience, integrity, compassion and courage. There is no better example of a person who had all of these than Nelson Mandela. Nelson Mandela became the first black South African to become President of South Africa after having served some 27 years in prison said, "From the moment the results were in and it was apparent that the ANC was to form the government, I saw my mission as one of preaching reconciliation, of binding the wounds of the country, of engendering trust and confidence. I knew that many people, particularly the minorities, whites, Coloureds, and Indians, would be feeling anxious about the future, and I wanted them to feel secure. I reminded people again and again that the liberation struggle was not a battle against any one group or colour, but a fight against a system of repression."

Once again congratulations on the success of your studies and I wish you every success for your future career. Have courage and follow your dreams, stretch the boundaries, help erode the prejudices, check up on the facts behind the bold claim or the vague generalisation. You won't necessarily agree with me or with each other after doing that, but at least your conclusion will be an educated one - and your own.

Thank you very much.