Transcript | Address by Bill Kelty AC, former Secretary, Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU)

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Thanks Bill. It is my great pleasure to be here. To share this day, this is your day. It's your family's day, a day that you've planned for. The great part of your lives today, your families have planned for, for a great part of their lives. It's a day of celebration. Because it's not just passing the degrees. It is your hard work, commitment and support and love. When all those things are embodied in one special event in your life. And I know it's important and I know it's an honour to be here. And an honour to be at the university.

Last week, a young journalist rang and said they'd noticed, "Bill, you're no longer on the Linfox Board." Now, Linfox Australia is the largest Australian transport company. Its owner is worth six or seven billion dollars. He's an entrepreneur and has been a friend of mine for the last 40 years. I've been on his boards for the past 25 years.

But before that, I worked in the union movement for 30 years. So I have a sense of what unions are about, a sense of what business is about, but more importantly, I think I have a sense of what this country is about.

The interesting question was: how did I cope with changing sides—from the union side to the business side? Well, I never saw it as changing sides. I never saw Australia in those terms. I never saw working for unions as being against companies, or being on a company board as being against workers and unions. I never saw life as consisting of swapping sides.

I saw Australia differently. I saw unions differently. I saw workers differently. And I saw companies differently. I think part of what unites this country—what makes it unique—is a level of maturity, understanding, and practicality. That's what I've always tried to bring to my work.

That's why it's so special to be here, speaking to people pursuing university degrees—educators, planners, architects. You are the people who build nations. Through education, city planning, designing buildings, and simply having ideas.

If you ask me how a nation's greatness is created, it's created by people like you. It's created by ideas. It's created by educators, planners, builders, and designers. That's what makes nations. That's what makes societies. That's what makes communities.

So it's a very special honour to acknowledge those three groups of people.

I've always known where I stood in economics, even back when I was part of student societies. I never saw myself as a libertarian—I was the little boy who wouldn't break the rules. So liberty and authority were unconscious concepts to me.

I've always been a socialist, but not a communist. I've always believed in competition—not monopolies and oligopolies. I've always believed in football—not opera and ballet. I've always been a working-class kid.

I've always believed in the Labor Party as my political party. In state schools—not private. In national health—not private insurance. In national superannuation for everyone—not private super. In higher wages that a country can afford for its working people—not the lowest possible. And I've always said I support entrepreneurs, as well as others.

So what was it? My own set of values. My own set of beliefs.

Even when things got interrupted or messy, I held onto those values. After all, some of my best friends in the union movement were in the Communist Party. And one of my lifelong friends was in the Liberal Party.

I have private health insurance. My children went to a Montessori private school. I've paid into personal super. So I've never had a rigid, ideological view.

I've always believed that what makes this country special—what gives us our unique quality—is our ability to absorb all these things in a very special way.

I went to La Trobe University, and that institution was incredibly important to me. As a working-class kid attending a working-class university in the 1960s, it was a pretty unique thing to do. People used to say, "It's not Melbourne University, it's not Monash." La Trobe was the newest university on the block, and some said I made a bad decision going there.

I had marks high enough to get into one of the more established universities, but I chose La Trobe deliberately. Some called it a poor choice, but I remember having discussions with Professor Whitehead about superannuation back in 1968—talking about how we could develop a system for all Australians. And we did that, in 1984.

I also spoke with Professor Ross Martin about creating a broader system where unions could bargain for higher minimum wages. Just two years later, we began doing that. And in 1991, we expanded it across the whole country.

That university was a catalyst for ideas. It brought together the best teachers and the best students—people who debated, discussed, and imagined. That's what universities are about. That's what ideas are about. That's what makes societies better. Universities are a fundamental part of making this country better.

On the very last day I attended university, we went to the local pub—as we did in those days. Heading home we spotted some rabbits crossing a field. We pulled over into the fields of La Trobe University chasing them.

Sure enough, the police pulled us over and asked what we were doing. We said, “We’re chasing rabbits.” They took the car keys and told us we could pick them up the next day.

But for me, that moment was symbolic—chasing a dream. A bit silly, yes, but joyful. That’s what youth is about: chasing your dreams.

When I left university, I didn’t just want to chase dreams anymore—I wanted to catch them. I wanted to fulfil them. I wanted to represent working people in this country and help improve their position. I wanted to make Australia a better place.

In recent years, people have been able to catch up thanks to one powerful piece of technology. And that, too, is part of the dream—making progress accessible to everyone through YouTube. I watch it occasionally, I watch it quite often really. And the one thing I've noticed is that it brings the world to you. But it brings the world to you as the world sees itself and not you as the way you see the world.

In China, they are developing some incredible bridges, there are some incredible places of architecture, some of the most incredible cities, fast trains, highways, schools, and people use automation and artificial intelligence to change their societies. Incredible.

Not less incredible than Henry Ford and the creation of the motor vehicle as part of the American Society, for that matter. Brand vehicle companies, the grand robes of the Germans in the 1930s. You don't have to admire their philosophy. You can even hate them. But to admire a nation changing and doing spectacular things is, I think, important. And you see the United States, this incredible nation of ideas. And intellect and debate. You see it in its current position, not knowing what way to go and how to get there, but it doesn't take away the intrinsic greatness and capacity and democracy of that nation.

What it all means to me—when we think of this country, when we think of Australia—is something George Orwell wrote in 1943. He said there’s a big difference between nationalism and patriotism.

Nationalism is the belief that your nation-state stands above all others. It’s rooted in homogeneity, exclusiveness, and a fear of outsiders. Patriotism, on the other hand, is a belief in your country—a pride not in its singularity, but in its plurality. Pride in its ideas, its diversity, and its humility.

Patriotism is what I believe in. It’s what I feel about this country.

I love Australia—for its people, for its diversity, for its multiculturalism. I’m incredibly proud of this country. I’m proud of the working people I’ve represented for 30 years and the decisions they’ve made—like choosing a national healthcare system that covers everyone, rather than adopting the American model.

I’m proud of the choices working people made—not just to pursue superannuation for themselves, but to fight for it for everyone. I’m proud that Australia has one of the highest

minimum wages and wage rates in the world. I'm proud that this nation, through leaders like Bill Shorten, chose to care for everyone by creating a National Disability Insurance Scheme.

And I'm proud that we can say to any nation on Earth: we don't have to choose sides. China can't tell us who to align with. The United States can't tell us who to be friends with or who to trade with. We make those decisions ourselves—because we are who we are, and we've been that way for a long time.

This is a country of humility, kindness, and compassion. We care for people—perhaps as much as any nation on Earth. Our healthcare system, our disability insurance, our superannuation system, and our wage protections reflect that.

Of course, our history hasn't been perfect. It has its blemishes, its faults. I was raised to believe in Indigenous people. I've always stood with them. I've always supported a treaty. I've always believed in their right to claim sovereignty over this land. Not without question—but with deep respect. These are people who have been here for 60,000 years.

I hated the White Australia policy. I hated what it represented—the denial of our shared humanity and humility. We haven't yet achieved a treaty, and we lived under the White Australia policy for far too long. So yes, there are things this country has done badly. We've been involved in wars we shouldn't have been in. But this nation is kind-hearted, caring, and productive. It has produced some of the highest living standards and educational outcomes in the world.

Part of that is our universities. Part of that is our education system.

And I know that, like many of you, there were people in our lives who didn't get the chance to finish school. I remember one friend who couldn't complete Year 7, Year 8, or Year 9. He said to me, "I don't know why they asked me to leave, Bill—I was getting better every year." His average was 13 or 14 percent, but he still loved the school. He still loved the teachers.

As for me, when I was seven years old, I got the strap for talking too much. I was the quietest kid in the class—maybe even in the whole school. I didn't think it was fair. But another boy, also seven, stood up for me. He said, "It's not fair—he never said a word." And then he took the strap in my place.

My response was to say nothing. I didn't speak for a year. And for that, I was placed in the "opportunity class."

But let me tell you—the opportunity class wasn't about opportunity. It was the class for the mischievous, the very poor, the physically handicapped, and the mentally challenged. It was the class where they put all the kids they thought would disturb the rest.

And I was in the middle of that class. I remember thinking: what will ever become of me?

When you sound like this, when you feel like this, you wonder—what will ever be?

And then along came a great teacher. I still remember him, He was not only a good teacher, but a great teacher. He was the greatest teacher that you could ever meet. He wrote school books, he wrote the books for the whole state on that matter. This great teacher was teaching an opportunity class in the poorest suburb. The poor school in Melbourne.

Well, I became the chalk monitor, then the ink monitor, and soon one of the best students in the class—eventually one of the best students in the school. I became vice-captain of the team. My friend Brian Saunders and I became projectionists and monitors. We were the kings of the school.

What changed? One teacher.

Some people ask me, "What's important? Who are the people that count?" Let me make it absolutely clear: teachers are the heart and soul of most communities and societies. They're the ones who look at you and give you a chance.

I've been to Canberra hundreds and hundreds of times. Today, I got up and walked around the city at 7:30 in the morning. It was very quiet. It's changed so much since I first came here in 1970. There are hundreds more buildings, more universities, more schools, more restaurants.

This is a place where architects, engineers, and builders have rebuilt the city—rebuilt part of Australia. When you look at their contribution to society and where they stand, you realise something: most countries forget about the people at the top. But it's the people who build from the ground up who truly shape a nation.

You are those people. You are the ones who will make this country in the next seven years, in the next sixty years.

Since I got my degree, this country has changed dramatically. It's a society that's been remodelled and rebuilt—yet it has never lost its sense of compassion and care. I've always believed that it's the people who build from the bottom up who create nations that last.

You'll have to confront the next sixty or seventy years, just as I did. And I ask you—I plead with you—to preserve what makes this country uniquely better than most: its compassion, its productivity, its humanity.

Never give away Indigenous rights. Never give away national superannuation. Never give away high minimum wage rates. Never give away our national healthcare system. These are pillars of decency and humanity. Our nation needs them. Our nation fought for them. And our nation must preserve them.

But it's more than that.

None of these great things can survive, be sustained, or be enriched without an economy that improves productivity—an economy that adjusts, evolves, and produces. You can't hang

on to things simply because you love them. You must sustain them. You must build the foundation that allows them to thrive.

I think you're wonderful. Thank you everyone. Again, chase the rabbits. Chase your dreams. Thank you.