

University of Adelaide Graduation Address

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Distinguished Guests – and you wouldn't be here if you were not distinguished in the eyes of the stars of today's event – so, most of all, a warm welcome to the stars themselves,

You, the Graduating Class.

It is a huge honour for me to be here with you today. When I first entered the University in 1977, I could never have imagined that one day I would be standing here addressing a Graduating Class.

To me that just highlights that you can never plan your life.

In some cases life will throw up circumstances for which you are prepared. At other times it presents situations that are complex, challenging and which require brave and courageous action – and taking positions which may leave you isolated.

How you respond in these latter circumstances goes to the core of you, your integrity, vision and leadership.

Let me share with you 2 cases of great vision, leadership and complexity, both of which happened to be outlined at University Graduation addresses.

- At Harvard, in 1947, US Secretary of State, George Marshall outlined his ideas on how to rebuild Europe and curb the spread of communism – what became known as the Marshall Plan; and

- At American University, in 1963, US President John F Kennedy discussed the challenge of achieving world peace, stating that:

“Our problems are man-made – therefore they can be solved by man. ... No problem of human destiny is beyond human beings. Man’s reason and spirit have often solved the unsolvable – and we believe we can do it again.”

Do not fear – it is beyond me to address challenges of the magnitude of those Marshall and Kennedy spoke about, or to do it as eloquently.

But I want to make two points.

First, to those who suggest that today’s problems are bigger or more difficult than in the past - nonsense. Fixing the Australian budget or addressing climate change hardly rival rebuilding Europe or ensuring world peace!

Second, that these thoughts were aired publicly, in graduation addresses such as this, with people of similar education, age and background to those of you in this room, highlights how privileged you are.

But some words of caution - while you are privileged, you are not special.

And with privilege comes obligation.

What do I mean by this?

First, you are privileged to have received a world class education from one of the finest institutions in the country. And you are doubly privileged because, in part, that education has been paid for by people who will never have the opportunities you have already had, and will continue to have.

But privilege doesn’t make someone special – not you, not me, not anyone here on this dais, is more or less worthy than others in our society – the single mother struggling to make ends meet, the foster parents caring for abused or abandoned children, the old couple at the supermarket checkout in front of you.

As you go forward in life and build on today's success, keep that in mind and respect people for being individuals, not for what position they hold in society or in any hierarchy.

I also said that with privilege comes obligation.

As Woodrow Wilson, then President of the United States, told the graduating class at Swarthmore College in 1913:

“Do not forget... why you are here. You are not here merely to prepare to make a living. You are here in order to enable the world to live more amply, with greater vision, with a finer spirit of hope and achievement. You are here to enrich the world and you impoverish yourself if you forget that errand.”

To some, service to the community, service to the nation and to the world may seem quaint and terribly old-fashioned in an era focused on immediate self-gratification.

But these are noble ambitions.

So how can you enrich the world? Well, frankly, that's up to you.

A few thoughts, though, based on the trial and error of my own journey to here – in my case, quite a lot of error!

First, follow your interests and don't worry about career advancement – it will come, and it will probably come more quickly if you focus on what interests you, as that is, more likely than not, also what you're good at.

Second, while following your interests, don't allow your passion to overwhelm your judgement. This is not an argument for the status quo, but remember where the political centre is – more often than not, you will ultimately need to bring the centre with you if you want to change things.

Third, keep an open and enquiring mind. Question opinions – particularly your own – ask “why is it so?” and then ask “is this the best we can do”? And try to walk in other’s shoes – try to understand why they see the world as they do.

Fourth, seek challenges and new experiences. You only get one go at life and if you fear to embrace opportunity it is forever lost.

Fifth, recognise that together you can change the world – and that it needs changing.

My generation has failed you on some key challenges – climate change, indigenous advancement, or entrenched disadvantage, to name a few – despite having benefited from massive growth in living standards, income and wealth.

Why is this so?

Some may disagree, but I think we became complacent.

We rode the benefits of other’s reform efforts, and thought that success was our doing. In the process, we conflated self-interest with national-interest. We lost sight of the big picture and applauded the things that made me better off, irrespective of the cost to others in our community, or to future generations. And more recently, as Australia continued to get richer on the back of growth in China and other emerging economies, we became even more self-centred, spending the temporary proceeds of the mining boom on permanent tax cuts and expenditure increases – in short, we began to believe we were special, that success was inevitable and, indeed, our right.

You can see this in our politics – few today have Marshall’s vision or Kennedy’s frankness. Rather, our political discourse, for lack of a better word, consists of leaders pretending problems don’t exist, or, just as bad, that they can be solved costlessly. They’re aided by different interest groups, from all parts of the community, shouting through megaphones, shamelessly pushing their own self-interest – ignoring Kennedy’s belief that no problem is beyond us and ignoring Wilson’s exhortation to hand over a better place to those who come next.

We have failed Wilson's test – your generation is at risk of being the first in modern history whose living standards will be lower than those of their parents. Think about that – especially the parents in the audience.

And the longer we wait to address today's challenges – including restoring the budget to health and building a more innovative economy – the greater the damage wilfully being done to future living standards.

It need not be this way. Australia sits astride massive, truly massive, opportunities for social, environmental and economic advancement, if only we are prepared to act.

Please, demand that action!

Finally, Graduates, never abandon your core values and principles. Admit when you're wrong; don't give up – most setbacks are temporary; don't fall prey to cynicism – it is wilful blindness and ultimately corrosive and destructive, to you and to others; and remember, financial success does not necessarily correspond to economic or social contribution, so maintain your social conscience and strive to be part of a fair, just and prosperous community.

Graduates, when you leave Bonython Hall today, you enter a world with challenges, but with an abundance of opportunities.

Your generation will live through a time where our region not only drives global economic growth but shapes global institutions and norms.

I've quoted American Presidents today – a future Graduation Address may be quoting Chinese, Indian or Indonesian leaders, or perhaps even one of you!

It is an exciting time in the history of humanity, but the challenges are yours to resolve and the opportunities yours to grasp.

Well done, and may the years ahead be a source of wonderment and joy.

Thank you.