

**Occasional Address, Graduation Ceremony
Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences
University of Western Australia**

Chief Justice Robert French
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Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Graduands, ladies and gentlemen: graduation speeches challenge us all. They challenge the speakers who have to present them and the graduands and their families and friends who want to get on with the real business of the evening. It is for that reason, no doubt, that the words "graduation speeches" are linked to many helpful sites on the Internet. There is one which lists 331 graduation speeches, organised in a hierarchy of merit from "free" through to "better", "stronger" and "powerful". Those rated "free" can be downloaded at no charge. The "better", the "stronger" and the "powerful" cost between \$9.95 and \$14.95 each. A "free" graduation speech, picked at random from this list, begins with the deathless words:

Tonight marks the end of an era.

There is another site which offers the ten best graduation speeches ever made. They are of variable quality. One was delivered by the comic actor, Will Ferrell to the Harvard Class of 2003. He began:

As most of you are probably aware, I didn't graduate from Harvard.
In fact, I never even got a call back from Admissions.¹

¹ 352nd Harvard Commencement, Class Day Speech June 4, 2003 Will Ferrell, available at <http://commencement/harvard.edu/2003/ferrell.html>

He went on to speak of getting his degree from the "School of Hard Knocks" under the "Dean of Bloody Noses", with class notes from "Professor Knuckle Sandwich". It was obviously received very well. It is interesting that many speakers at graduation ceremonies, at least in the United States, seem to be actors, singers and sporting heroes.

I picked the speeches which I have mentioned from the great orchard that is the Internet. It has many low-hanging fruit. They offer easily accessible alternatives to original thought. They liberate us from the burdens of protracted concentration. I am not a social scientist, but the Internet seems to me, in some ways, to extend a phenomenon, described by Marshall McLuhan a Canadian cultural philosopher of the 1960s when I was a student at this University. McLuhan was famous for his statement "The medium is the message". He theorised that the media we use to receive and transmit information define the way we think. So the move from ancient, traditional orality to the written and printed word corresponded with the evolution of linear thought and logic. The development of electronic media took us away from that straight and narrow path. Instead of reading a text which would leave us with a clear set of worked out ideas, we drift into an electronically generated cloud of words and images and come out not so much with ideas, as with impressions. The result has sometimes been described appropriately, in this age of Twitter and Tweet, as "pixelated consciousness". On the other hand, it may be hoped that electronic books represent the empire of print striking back. Perhaps we may yet see the survival of reflective and logical thought and measurable spans of attention.

These sentiments are probably the kind of thing that many of you would expect to hear from a person approaching his mid-sixties, who graduated from this University well before most of you were born, and when most of your parents were in early adolescence. However, in spite of the yawning gulf of the years there are things, as graduates of this University, which we can find in common to talk about.

Australian society in general and universities in particular, have changed immeasurably in the forty or so years that have passed since I graduated from this place. The world views of our respective generations have been shaped by

significantly different events, social conditions and technologies, and a very different relationship with the natural environment. The students of the 1960s and early 1970s were the young of the Baby Boomer generation. The future seemed to offer endless possibilities. And yet, as Hugh Mackay wrote of my generation: while we lived through a time of economic prosperity, we lived under the real threat of nuclear war. A belief in a rosy future co-existed with a belief in the possibility of no future at all.²

Each generation faces its own opportunities and must confront its own challenges. All of you, the graduands in the Faculty of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, have opportunities created by the combination of your own endeavours and your education through those endeavours at a fine Australian university.

You live, on the oldest continent, at a time when, more than ever before, Australians are conscious of the convergence and collision of its diverse human histories. There is the history of the first Australians 40,000 to 60,000 years old written across the landscape in the art and stories, aural, visual and kinetic, which form the beautiful intricacies of the Dreamtime. In the first half of the twentieth century it seemed to some as though that history might have vanished. Remember the sad vision of loss elicited by Judith Wright's poem "Bora Ring":

The song is gone, the dance
is secret with the dancers in the earth,
the ritual useless, and the tribal story
lost in an alien tale.

In the decades that have passed since that verse was written in 1946, Australia has seen increasing affirmation by its indigenous people of their traditions and cultural

² Mackay, *Generations Baby Boomers, their parents and their children* (Sydney, Macmillan, 1991) p 62.

identity expressed in their art and agitation for the recognition of traditional land title. That identity is now part of ours.

Beginning in the late eighteenth century is the history of the British colonisers of Australia. Their coming was in many ways a tragedy for generations of Australian Aborigines. Nevertheless, out of that colonising history arose a Constitution and a nation which has become one of the world's oldest enduring representative democracies. Beyond the indigenous and colonising histories are the histories of those who have come to Australia from many other countries bearing with them their own enriching traditions and customs, art, literature, food and culture. Today, we live in a society which, despite the white nationalism that informed its constitutional beginnings at the end of the nineteenth century, has evolved to accommodate, to a significant extent, cultural and ethnic diversity. There are, of course, frictions and debates and conflicts and some elements of our society are more accommodating to difference than others. The reality today is that 44 per cent of Australians were either born overseas or have one parent who was born overseas. Our population comes from 180 different countries. It is not necessary to resort to rose-coloured glasses to have a degree of modest pride in the society of which you are part.

There is, however, much to engage your attention beyond contented contemplation of the good things about our society. Despite our prosperity, there is inequality. There is inequality which seems at times intractable and does not lend itself to simple solutions. Despite all of the advances that have been made over the last half century indigenous disadvantage in health, education and employment and the awful simple fact of the imprisonment of significant numbers of young Aboriginal people for criminal offences presents us all with an ongoing moral challenge. There are many other species of unfair disadvantage in our society. In particular the needs of those who are mentally ill or suffer from intellectual disabilities, cry out for a higher level of attention and commitment than our society has been able to muster to this time. Often, but not always, connected with questions of disadvantage is the problem of how we deal with those who offend against the criminal law generally and with their victims. This is an issue in respect of which nobody seems particularly satisfied with the current solutions.

All of these matters require intelligent and creative thought, and the development of ideas which can be communicated persuasively to the wider community rather than orbiting around tight inward looking clusters of right thinking people.

As graduates of this University you should be able to make a contribution to Australian society in all of these and many other areas of local, national and global significance. Your contribution may be made by advocacy on the public stage, or in the working environment of public or private sectors, in literature and the arts, or simply by conversation in the company of friends and colleagues. Your contributions should be informed by the ability to think and to make judgments, which can be both critical and constructive. These are the most valuable assets which you can take from this place.

I congratulate you all on your achievements. You have much to hope for and much to give. The one aspiration which this University offers, which is common to all generations who pass through its doors, is reflected in its motto: "Seek Wisdom". You have begun the process here. Having begun it, you will never finish it. But what you pick up along the way, you should share.