

# **Southern Cross University**

**Occasional Address. 4 May 2013**

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Acknowledgements of guests

I commence by acknowledging the original custodians of the land on which we meet, and pay my respects to their elders, past and present.

It is my great honour, and pleasure, to attend and speak at your ceremony; and I wish to extend my thanks to your Vice Chancellor, the Hon John Dowd for offering me the opportunity to speak here today. For the record, this was not nepotism at work, and there is no family relationship between us, at least not a close one. I am aware that our respective forbears both originated in Ireland, so perhaps we are distant cousins after all...

In speaking to you today, I am acutely conscious that I am enormously modestly qualified, compared to the group beside me and indeed to you, in front of me. It was daunting just watching this group don their various robes and regalia for today's procession. The legal profession does this quite well, but the academic profession far surpasses our own efforts.

Today is a very special day for all you graduates and I offer my congratulations to you. The ceremony marks the successful conclusion of a part of your education, and this is properly a moment to celebrate, and to feel a deep sense of satisfaction for a job well done.

I am also conscious that this has been a long ceremony, and you wish to get out and celebrate with family and friends. I will hold you only long enough to make three points:

Firstly, the fact that you have completed a university course marks you as a person of significant ability and application. Graduation does not occur without an inherent ability, which is genetic and for which you can really take no credit; the right environment, for which your family and friends also deserve credit; and application, for which you rightly can claim to have been yours alone.

In Australia, as a university graduate, you will get jobs more easily, find more satisfying work, earn a higher income and indeed live longer, than your peers without that education. Whether this is because you have a degree, or because to get a degree you have to have a lot of other things going for you, I leave to others to determine. The fact is though, that you are in that cohort of people.

My second point and primary point is this. As persons of significant ability and application, you have, I suggest, the opportunity, and responsibility, to be leaders in society. As teachers, lawyers, business people, parents, family members....in whatever role you find yourself, you have the chance to contribute to our social fabric in a real way. Take that chance and respect that responsibility.

You will know I am a lawyer, as many of you here today have become. As such, and maybe already, people will take pleasure in telling you lawyer jokes. Personally, I don't find them funny in the least, for I have spent my professional life trying to help people in crises. Be that as it may, you will also be aware of the famous line, written by William Shakespeare and spoken by Henry VI..... "Firstly, let's kill all the lawyers." It is often used as an insult, but in fact it is one of the most famous compliments for lawyers ever written and one that I am proud of. What Henry (and Shakespeare) was acknowledging, was that lawyers, as far ago as the 15th century, were the real bulwark of the people against executive, and even legislative, tyranny. He wanted to get rid of the lawyers so that he could

govern without restraint. This is not an out of date concept; last year, the Prime Minister of PNG had the Chief Justice of that country arrested and charged with subversion when he gave a decision with which he didn't agree. In Sri Lanka at the present time a similar event has occurred. A couple of years ago, in Pakistan, the judges effectively went on strike as a last resort affirmation of the importance of the rule of law and independence of the judiciary, to support their own Chief Justice against the government.

I have just returned from South Africa, where I visited Robben Island, the prison in which Nelson Mandela spent 18 years, of a total of nearly 30 years, in prison, doing hard labour, for seeking equal rights for all people in that country.

And to bring the rest of you into it, if this ceremony was taking place in Kampuchea in the early 1970s, you would be feeling good today for graduating, but the chances are that all of us would be eradicated by the murderous Pol Pot, who feared all educated people, over the next few years.

Those extremes, happily, don't occur in Australia, but there are ever increasing encroachments on our traditional way of life. If you live in NSW, you have just lost your absolute right to remain silent if charged with certain offences, a right that has existed for hundreds of years; next week, it appears likely that you will lose your right to claim redress from people who cause you injury in many circumstances....these things happen all the time and we must guard against them. It is true that the price of good governance and a just society is eternal vigilance and it is up to each of us to play our part. As leaders of society, you have the ability and the responsibility to do this.

My third point is easier. It is simply this. I acknowledge, congratulate and respect all you graduates for your achievements culminating in today's ceremony. I suggest most, if not all of you could not have achieved this without the love and support in many ways of your families, particularly parents and partners. To them I also say congratulations on a job well done. I understand the effort, and sense of satisfaction, you feel today, for only 18 months ago, I sat in this very audience as my daughter received her own degree, after years of stop/start studying. I felt much pride in her achievement as I'm sure you all do in your own families. Much longer ago, I also recall my girlfriend in my university days spending countless hours on "dates" at the university library, doubly frustrating to her because she could learn much more quickly than me and could have passed most of my exams with flying colours. It takes a lot of commitment and tolerance in your partners and families to support you though this. (My then girlfriend has now been my wife for 37 years, so I figure we are even at last)

Thank you for the opportunity to be here today; I wish each of you every success in the future.

Thank you.