

Occasional Address 29.12.14

Neville Newell – Southern Cross University

Deputy Chancellor John Shanahan, and Mrs Shanahan, Vice Chancellor Peter Lee and Mrs Lee, Councillor Cainpiero Battista LCC , Academic and Professional Staff, Graduates, and your family and friends.

Firstly, let me also acknowledge the Indigenous peoples of the Bundjalung speaking nations and their prior ownership of the land on which this ceremony is now held. Secondly, thank the University for honouring me with Fellowship of the University. I do rate this highly, perhaps only a small degree behind the pride and honour I know parents of our graduates rightly feel to have a son or daughter who has achieved the educational standard of a tertiary degree: this especially for those amongst you who are the first in the family to achieve this. I thank the university.

I have had the privilege of 15 years direct association with Southern Cross through its Council. That in itself was both an honour and community service gladly given. I will miss the contact and involvement with what is now the North Coast's major employer, the north coast's cerebral source and the north coast's flag bearer for our region on the world stage. This, a statement I am delighted to make from almost a lifetime of watching SCU's evolution from Lismore Teachers College of 1970, my HSC year at Mullumbimby High, to a leading regional Uni in 2014. And after 15 years as member of Council however, I do recognise the deemed well known 'it's time' factor. Though hopefully not in the call to arms context from which I have just borrowed that hallowed phrase.

That phrase did however bell ring the entry of a rich period of expanded education, tertiary education in particular. Don't be miss-lead or persuaded by attempts today to rewrite and downplay just how successful those Whitlam years were in getting access to tertiary education for young people. Young people previously precluded from Tertiary education due to costs, and or family circumstances, did make it to and thru tertiary studies. And in numbers. The student cohorts of the years that followed me thru Mullumbimby High, put the torch to this calumny. And it would be the same for every other North Coast High School, and across Australia.

The political contempt evidenced by the current federal Govt for those of less than privileged circumstances is beyond the pale. To implement Education policy that restricts education to the economic elite should be anathema to everyone. Despite this misuse of education policy to carve out an elite and beholden constituency for the conservative, one factor cannot be greedily or selfishly ignored; to borrow a phrase, Education is still and will remain the greatest lever yet found for elevating the condition of mankind. And from my background, let me add, science education is paramount. Today both community and nations have fallen to measuring success thru the ever narrowing tunnel of the economic, the now holy grail of our material existence, the bottom line. The unquestionable: The infallible: Profit, Loss and Asset Growth. A Balance Sheet, be your arbiter. We must rise up from this. Your value today and contribution to State or National GDP should not be measured in dollars on that balance sheet, deciding, determining, the value you and I place on each other, and thus directly affecting Govt policy and Govt support in whatever form or quantum.

Essentially outside our family and closest friend this is the all too common view we take of each other. Yes, not very pleasant is it. Let me challenge you and ask you to challenge yourself now and thru out your ( and I say just somewhat jealously ), magnificent years ahead of you; Your University degree gives you the

opportunity to make a difference in today's society: Carpe Diem. But your real challenge will be to have the courage to be different. The courage to bring our society back to humankind-back to a society peopled by leaders who put societal values, not material values, on their own life ( and ahead of personal aspirations ) and more importantly, societal values, not material values on the lives of others.

The planet will be stronger and the better when nations develop leaders who are leaders not because of appeals to short term popularity thru garnering support with the lollipop of materialism, successful as that has proven to be. But instead receive our, your, support through unabashed promotion of policies founded on humanitarian values.

Sometimes you will be faced with choices, sometimes tough, sometimes unpleasant. History can judge critically and severely and sometimes unfairly, especially if you're in the minority or worse, on the losing side of some conflict. Courage is seen in Michael Mori's book, In the Company of Cowards, and his resolute actions in speaking out. It is not seen in ASIC Chair David Metcalf withdrawing his comments about his timely and justifiable concerns made loud and clear when he said Australia was a 'paradise for white collar crime' then withdrawing same in the wake of a reprimand from his political master. Courage is the steadfastness Jeffrey Morris, the Commonwealth Bank whistle blower standing tall while regulators imitated those proverbial three monkeys. I could add, Edward Snowden, Julian Assange, Dr. Kerry Schott, from our own state of NSW. I am sure you can add from your own list.

The culture I have spoken about previously did not emerge quickly, it emerged over the decades.

The Speaker at my graduation in agriculture some time ago, well OK, let's settle for last century, was perhaps ahead of his time in that – just as we warn those setting out on their career today, that in all likelihood you will change careers a number of times, he had already achieved this genre by starting out in mathematic research, transitioned via stops in molecular matters of polymers and plastics then DNA and proteins involving wool research to the hallowed hall of academia.

Of course I didn't recall or retain any of that, but it was just a reference to problems of feeding the worlds growing population, and perhaps it was what at the time registered with me as a perplexing reference to the green revolution having failed to continue to see enhanced food production from its acclaimed early successes and expectations.

In today's language or terminology, of nothing greater than two words or two syllables that failure so described would aptly be summarized now as Big AG or AG Inc. Yes even then, the infamous bottom line referred to earlier was having an insidious effect. The very genesis of civilisation, agriculture, after being the beneficiary of some decades of applied science, was no match for the statistics of marginal costs, profits and shareholders demands.

Agriculture is not the last sector of a developing economy to be swept with the broom of the accountant or financial officer. With the dangle of each end of year bonus every line item is examined as just that. Yes it matters not that some of the line items are working conditions and safety, or people, with family dependents. The exceptions to this do exist, however, as you can well imagine, somewhat few and declining in number, the larger the corporation.

And this culture has entered into politics and hence government. Whereas Governments State and Federal should be steadfast in the requirement to ensure a fair redistribution of wealth in our capitalist society, this has fallen foul of the pragmatic and or ideologue. Hiding behind what to most should be a transparent veil, the balanced budget, our country is beset with ideologues fiercely determined to reduce to discards, those not needed in their tent.

Well enough of the brickbats, now for an acknowledgement. Well of sorts. In just one area, I repeat one area our Federal minister for Education has said something I can agree with. Though it is with an acknowledgment I am by-passing his torching of Gonski and the future tertiary education opportunities for so many.

I refer to his announcement of foreign language education in this country and the woeful state of Australia's efforts at ensuring attainment for school leavers. I can only back my comments with 14 years as a teacher and a similar number of years in politics. Let me say he is not the first education minister, to hoist this from the political kitbag. Even Premiers have sallied forth with this worthy ideal. Yet despite the promises and zeal, from both sides of politics, the overall sad fact is that none have results, either short or medium term to match the crowing at the outset.

Resources are stretched too thin for there to be any synergies within any community or within schools. There are clear mostly singular examples of success. These are invariably located in primary schools. This should not surprise. It is where we should be starting. I mentioned the problem of resources; we just do not have sufficient qualified language teachers to resource all schools. We are failing to even get a start in this important domain not because of this but because of ineptitude in utilising the resources we do have.

To illustrate let me compare what happened to another federal program initiated by my own Labor Govt that bit the dust. In the early 1990's Labor commenced an army reserve training program for senior school leavers to do 12 months full time training and service before commencing full time tertiary study and continuing service in the reserves. It could be seen as a type of Gap Year. It was to operate as a battalion of battalion minus size; About 500 recruits, who would train and operate together. Every State and Territory insisted it had to have a piece of the action and the pollies couldn't say no. They tried to please all. The cost of bringing them together from every corner of the country was an enormous drain on the Defence budget. The result, Defence chiefs soon had it wither and killed off.

Languages must start in primary school and the earlier the better. Qualified teachers, of just one language, as they are too few, must be congregated preferably in the primary schools in a high schools feeder schools: This to allow language development and consolidation in high school. Only through these types of synergies thus made available, will we start to see tangible results. Yes there will what the media will trumpet as losers both students and high schools at the start. Compare this to the stagnation and negative growth being produced today, and you quickly realise we would lose nothing.

Neither Hilary and Tensing nor Chairman Mao had the luxury of starting their journeys at their destination.

Graduates, my sincere congratulations on your achievement. Do go and join with your families and friends and enjoy the pride both you and family are entitled on this day. Let your own journey begin.