

# SCU Graduation Occasional Address

## Mr Robyn Williams AM Science Presenter, Journalist and Author

10.00 am, Saturday, 10 December 2016  
Whitebrook Theatre, Lismore Campus

### **Subject: Don't Abandon the Future**

We used to have a future. Do you remember that time? We dreamt of personal adventures, of national glories, of Utopias even, or just of kids growing up, new puppies, of when that new road would finally open or that precious day when the exams would end.

Now the future is too soon, it's short, it's TOMORROW, or even becoming an obstacle course, like a dangerous visit to some Fun Park on the Gold Coast, a challenge to survival. Politicians never mention a future beyond a couple of years from now, if that. The next election is, at best, three years away, but the campaign starts much sooner. It really never goes away. Politics is a game, not a government, and games must have winners & losers. And talking about a distant future sounds like social engineering, you don't PLAN any more, you allow markets to emerge and decide for themselves. Things just happen. Maybe that's why so many are so cross.

Nowadays, you even try to make the future go backwards. Make America Great again, Australia, perhaps, great again. Again, key word. Go back to where we were. Have factories open again, make stuff like we used to. AGAIN. Forget those horrid wind turbines and silicon roves. What did Tony Abbott say last week? THE PUBLIC DOESN'T UNDERSTAND ALL THAT STUFF ABOUT INNOVATION AND AGILITY. Has the PM assumed the same thing? Have we, as national policy, all abandoned the future? Are we agreed that we shall just make it up as we go along?

I, as you can see, am very old. When I was born Adolf Hitler still had a year to go. Hiroshima and Nagasaki hadn't happened yet and modern computers were yet to be invented. Churchill was a war hero and assumed, in 1945, to be the chap to lead the peace in Britain, where I grew up. But, much to everyone's astonishment - well, nearly everyone, Churchill was defeated and a new government, which happened to be Labour, was installed with far reaching policies to build a better world: a free health service, education for all, houses and towns for people to enjoy following the miseries of destruction and death, and culturally, a revival of the arts and sciences hardly seen before. Future unfolded before us.

The same was happening in Australia. I heard about it growing up - all those famous names from Oz, having fun and enjoying a hope of progress. Building the Snowy Scheme, opening the borders to thousands of foreigners, including me, discovering that science could flourish HERE, not just abroad.

Yes, we had dreams of kinds of Utopias. Some were socialistic, some were hippy (like those experiments just up the road from here), some were libertarian and imagined ways people could just get on with their businesses without the throttling encumbrances of all those old RULES.

Now, today, Utopia is the name of a TV series produced here by Working Dog in which every move is thwarted by some idiot with an insane press release, some managerial maniac with too many buzz words or some Dill who got a job with you by mistake, but seems always to be there at the crucial minute to stuff up everything and yet to be still around to fail again when the next Utopian dream comes around.

Well, for me the future is real. It is not an artificial construct or a political plot like a Soviet Five a Year Plan. It is something WE MAKE, you and I. But, as I indicated, given my great age, more you than me.

We begin with small things, local things, achievable goals. Such as the new ways of making precious pharmaceutical drugs those schoolboys achieved in Sydney, as you saw, perhaps on the news last week. Of you set up a way of teaching science to primary school kids as several winners of the PM's prizes for teaching science have done in various parts of Australia. I note, by the way, that it is at this university that I heard of one of the practical ways to solve the problem of confidence in teaching young children science: you don't pretend to be omniscient, instead you agree to find out answers TOGETHER, and share the experience of discover. NOT THE FEAR OF FAILURE.

We can begin to solve our environmental challenges also by starting small and local. Josh Byrne in Perth does it by showing you Josh's House. Look it up on the Internet and see that Josh is the same bloke you see on the ABC Gardening show on TV and he experiments with new affordable technologies for heating or cooling or insulating and there they are being tested and proven and you can follow this example to go scientifically green with going bonkers or broke.

And, as Josh does his stuff locally, so his mates at Curtin University are scaling up the lessons in transport, power supplies and urban agriculture to show how more pleasantly and efficiently we can live - it is doable. But don't be put off by the crass political rhetoric. How can you take seriously someone, like Trump, like Jo Hockey, who says they loathe ugly wind farms when they said not a word about ghastly electric pylons marching across the landscape or filthy Satanic Mills and Power Stations whose fumes kill millions globally every year?

Those in individual enterprise can also help invent a better future. Steve did it in computers. Her actual name is Stephanie, but way back when she began nobody replied to get communications using that name, so she became Steve - and things took off. Her computer business relied on lots of women, working from home and Stephanie gave them shares in the enterprise. It grew - phenomenally. Despite the inevitable hiccups, which you can read about on Prof mark Dodgson's radio talk about her on Ockham's Razor on RN (look it up) Stephanie, now Dame Stephanie Shirley, became a multimillionaire and was instrumental in setting up the Internet

Institute at Balliol College in Oxford, the first of its kind in the world. Not bad for a little refugee from Nazi Germany who arrived destitute in Britain aged five and who, as a mother, had to look after a child with autism as she ran her affairs. You make your own future, despite the odds.

So why are we in this strange twilight zone, this bleak interregnum when a real hope of progress seems so elusive? There are many reasons but I shall offer you two.

The first comes from Todd Sampson on Gruen, of all places. He noted that in advertising you don't attack the other firm's products generically: you don't say X's Cars will kill you or that Y's beans are poisonous because that kind of brand warfare will destroy trust in all cars and beans. Yet that is exactly what politicians are doing all the time. The PM is a witch or a bitch, Hillary should go to jail, Malcolm is a liar...on it goes, every day. They have trashed the brand of politics. They have smashed their own calling. And now it must be repaired, and soon.

The second reason we have lost a hope of progress and the future is that much of the media have played the same game. Paul Keating complained about this aspect of ABC news two weeks ago. It is too full of road smashes, family murders, broken lives. This is not an entreaty to have the news done by Pollyanna, it is to get a sense of proportion. The same can be said of shock jockery, those thousands of hours on radio and TV, on line and in tabloid so-called newspapers in which the so-called elite are depicted as enemies of ordinary people. Real people.

You are the elite. You are on a campus of a university, likely to become a professional. I am obviously in the elite conspiracy, I am in the ABC and qualify automatically. The smear has worked. Which is why, as you know, we are supposed to be in a post-factual, post-forward looking society.

Well, the advantage I have of being of great age is that I have seen all such tripe, such simplistic garbage come and go many times. Science works because it is about nature, about reality. The future is real because we create it, it does not land from the sky like the great boot in Monty Python's Flying Circus.

The future is going to be difficult, it always is, but it can be dealt with by clever, enterprising and well-tested young people, people like you. So let's do it.

NOT ...BACK TO THE FUTURE, BUT ONWARDS AND UPWARD. And this is a splendid place from which to start.