

The last Boilerhouse Speech, University of Canberra

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This is my last 'Boilerhouse' speech, and there have been, I think, 22 of them, although the earlier ones were delivered in 2B9 and 2B11. It is not a farewell speech. All being well I will be able to do that at Commencement next year, and there is to be a public occasion in October, at the National Museum, when I will also be able to say something.

Nonetheless, the truth is that I am going, and what I want to say bears on that. I do not have to be told that there is some nervousness about at the prospect of my departure. My understanding is that the Chancellor will announce the outcome of the search for the new Vice-Chancellor at a press conference to be held at the University at 9.30am tomorrow week — Thursday, August 2nd. Who that person is, and the nature of the field, and the fine details of the process — I know as much or as little about all that as you do. It is quite inappropriate that a Vice-Chancellor should be involved in the selection of the person who is to succeed. But I have great confidence in the process and those responsible for it. The days have passed when the whole University community could know the shortlist, and applicants (and their partners!) did the rounds of the University, meeting, listening, talking and finally waiting. Council has given the major responsibility to the Chancellor, the Deputy Chancellor and the Chair of Academic Board. Their job has been to search for the right person. It is a tribute to the professionalism of their work that not a single sentence has emerged in the press about the search, and who might be in the running.

When my successor has been announced then that person and I will have a series of meetings, and no doubt exchange lots of emails and telephone calls, culminating, I hope, in a period of what in hospitals is called 'handover' — a fortnight in which we go through the extraordinary complexity of a Vice-Chancellor's job and I provide information and advice about whatever needs explanation. Then I go. All this depends, of course, on my successor's situation and time frame. But you have to make plans, and that's my tentative expectation for the next six months.

I want to say something about a perspective that I have encountered over the past few weeks — that when I go then everything that has been accomplished here in the last decade will be at risk, both at the level of the University and on a smaller scale. I understand why people may have that view, but I think it is fundamentally mistaken. There are 39 universities in Australia, and this is a very strong one. Its strengths are basic to it, and do not depend on or flow from the Vice-Chancellor. I want to say to you that you work in one of the best universities in our country, and that the credit for its success is due to us all. There's no need for nervousness about the outcome, quite apart from the fact that the Chancellor will make the best appointment she can, and that will be a very good one. Of course, I'm also aware that there are people who think that the whole university sector has gone in the wrong direction, and that disaster

stares us all in the face, not just at UC but everywhere. I think that is a fundamentally mistaken view too. It implies that there is a best or proper university and therefore a best or proper way of organising and funding it. But I see universities as social means, not as social ends. If society's needs and values change, so too will universities change. Australia, in comparison to other Western, developed societies, has moved in my working life from being a high-tax, public-sector country to being a low-tax, private-sector country. We may wish that our society had gone down another path, but it seems to me idle to ignore what has actually happened in Australia, as though universities are somehow above all that. This is a perspective that is more frequently encountered in the older universities and in other countries, but I have met it here too.

The search for the next Vice-Chancellor has had a number of interesting consequences, and one of them is that I now encounter people who know about the search and want to tell me about our University. At a public function in another city recently I met a senior officer of another university, one of the Group of Eight, as it happens, who said to me, quite out of the blue, 'You ought to know just how good your University is. You have such a distinct identity, and it's such a good one!' The vice-chancellor of another university broke off to say to me, while we were engaged in discussing a separate matter, 'Look, it's important who gets your job, quite apart from you, because the University of Canberra is important in the system.' I could give you several other examples of the same kind. It is the best kind of publicity, because it is positive and it comes from others. I sometimes joke about our being 'The Group of One', because there is such a tendency to see being alone as a problem. But we are distinctive, and that distinctiveness is recognised throughout our country. It is a great asset.

So I thought I would talk about what I think it is that makes the current University of Canberra strong, in this country, now. I think there are seven important factors and, to repeat myself, you will see that the majority of them are independent of the Vice-Chancellor. I want to spend some time on the last of them, which centres on the proportions and relations of men and women on the campus.

Location

The first is our location. I love our city, and I have spent much more than half my life here, in four separate periods. I love it because it is not at all parochial, which cannot be said of the State capitals, any of them, let alone of smaller settlements. I love Canberra because I think of myself as an Australian and not at all in State terms (though I was born in Sydney and have spent ten years there). I feel at home in all parts of our great country, and I have had the luck to visit most parts of settled Australia. For someone who thinks like that Canberra is the only place to be, and a location in Canberra gives a university an enormous capacity to have a national effect. Our work in mathematics, through the Australian Mathematics Competition, which we invented, takes us into virtually every high school in Australia. Brian Gray's stunningly successful work in Aboriginal literacy takes the University into every State and Territory. We have

several courses and programs that are either unique or close to it. We are a good partner for any other organisation that shares an interest of ours and wants a foothold in the national capital. We probably have the largest number of countries represented in our student body — the number presently stands at 92 — of any Australian university, and that comes from our location and the fact that we have been educating the children of embassy families for thirty years. We have a great word-of-mouth reputation for looking after our students, and that gets passed on through the Embassy circuit and out into the hundred countries represented in Canberra. Our partnerships outside Australia are greatly helped by the fact that we are the University of the national capital of our country.

And we are the University of our region as well as of our city. That region, the Australian Capital Region, is itself distinctive, not just in its name but in the diversity of the ecological systems contained in it. And we are a university with a long-standing reputation in understanding ecological systems. In short, our location is a great plus. I see no need to say that ‘we’re a national (or regional) university too’. In this world we are recognised for what we do, not for what we say. Let’s keep doing in this domain what we already do well, and extend our national and regional activities in a purposeful and beneficial way.

Setting

I’m sure I’m allowed a little bias in saying that UC has one of the prettiest campuses in Australia. I’ve visited more than one hundred of the campuses of the system (the number keeps growing and I don’t, alas, keep visiting), and I can think of particularly beautiful places elsewhere. These include Sydney University’s old quadrangle, UWA’s wonderful lawn with its magnificent trees, New England’s wonderful great houses of the 1880s, the striking post-modern bits of RMIT. But I can’t think of another university that marries the built and the natural environments as well as UC does. So it should be, of course, as our city is the world exemplar of just that marriage. The outcome is a feeling of harmony. Visitors say again and again how pretty and calm and harmonious our campus is, and they are right. It is also conspicuously free of graffiti and vandalism, which says something about the attitudes of our students, and by implication, something about our attitudes to our students. Most Australian universities are a jumble of the old and the new, the beautiful and the ghastly, the functional and the dysfunctional. Some universities, like UTS, UNSW and Melbourne, have made valiant attempts to improve on the ugliness and thoughtlessness of previous generations. But here we can only bless our founders for their wisdom and good taste in designing as they did and establishing design rules which keep the academic precinct of the University as a coherent whole.

Cohesion

That coherence in design has been a great asset in building a community. Unless a university community sees itself as a whole it will descend to seeing itself as a set of suspicious and mutually hostile tribes, for whom common action has often

to be imposed from above. The design of our campus was influenced, I am sure, by the fact that most of our founders knew the ANU, where it has never been possible to get a mutually agreed basic site design for the entire campus. As a result, our sister institution often finds it hard to act as a whole, because design and location encourage tribalism rather than community. I speak as someone who spent 18 years at that excellent though difficult place. Our founders set down a strong shape for our campus, and it has worked very well. It is not only easy to walk around the academic precinct, but it is a tonic for the senses as well. In the 1970s I had a go at a conceptual design for the new university that was going to be built in Albury-Wodonga — these were the great days of DURD, the Whitlam Government's Department of Urban and Regional Development. The imagined outcome was not unlike the campus of the University of Canberra today, where eating, drinking, shopping, banking, posting and the rest are in the centre, close to the Library and the lecture theatres. It is hard to go from one point to another without bumping into someone from another part of the University. From these casual contacts come the breaking down of 'silo' mentalities and tribal loyalties, to the benefit of us all. There are other contributing elements, like the Staff Club, *Monitor*, our concentration on wide rather than narrow representation when committees are formed, my own preference for occasions like these rather than sending memoranda out, and so on. But the design of the University is a huge plus.

Some of you will have read the most interesting book by Simon Marginson and Mark Considine called *The Enterprise University*. The authors concluded that the most successful 'enterprise' universities were those who had managed to integrate the staff into a vision of what might be, and to act corporately. We have done that as well as any other university. The Marginson-Considine book is the outcome, in part, of a study of 17 universities in the mid 1990s, of which UC was not one. But it is evidence of the generality of their analysis that the list of criteria they set out for what they call the 'corporate' university applies in every respect to us. Some of you may not like that term, because it seems to carry associations with the business world. That is not the meaning the authors intended; rather, they had in mind a university's capacity to act as a whole. At this time in the history of the university, to act as a whole is a great asset. It is one we possess.

Management

We are regarded in our city, and more widely, as a notably well-managed university. I would be happy to take credit for that, but indeed it is not my work. Only in the most general sense do I manage the University. Those responsible are the members of VCAC, the Heads of Schools and the section managers. There is a culture here that good management should be the norm, what is expected. And good management does not refer simply to an accounting bottom line, but to the management of people. With around a thousand continuing staff and about the same number of sessional and occasional staff, there is little possibility of our getting everything right all the time. But we have high standards, and departures from that high standard are rare. One test is the

University's standing in the community, where we pay our bills promptly and do our best to act as a good corporate citizen. We seem to be seen as such.

Another is the frequency of our appearance in court. In the time I have been here the University has never been in court either as a plaintiff or as the defendant. I have made one brief appearance in the Administrative Appeals Tribunal, defending the University's decision not to make the examination scripts of other students available to a student who wanted to see why he had failed and other students had passed. The student challenged us on Freedom of Information grounds, and lost. In the past several years we have lost no days through industrial unrest, our workers' compensation premiums are much lower than they used to be, we have excellent relations with the local branch of the NTEU, and sickness and absenteeism rates are low. Our culture is consultative and persuasive, not authoritarian. My own belief is that UC can be sensibly described as a 'self-managed' institution, which if I am right directs the credit for its success to the good sense and general trust of those who work here.

Money

About money I can be brief. We are not rich, and we have no endowments, but we are not poor. We have no debts of any consequence, and we earn 40 per cent of our expenditure, which puts us in the very top bracket of Australian universities on that measure. We know that we have to work hard to earn the money that keeps the University going; very few of us have anything left of a cargo cult mentality. though it still exists in other places. We invest in ourselves and on our campus, not in other places, let alone in other countries. We never have enough money to do what we would like, but in my experience universities with a very great deal of money tend to hoard it anyway. UC is, in comparison with other Australian universities I know reasonably well, lean and mean. Our general financial culture is prudent. Long may it remain so.

The skills of our staff

One enormous strength of the University of Canberra is the skill mix of our staff. In conventional universities of the old style, academic appointments were made almost on the relative weight of publications: the heavier the pile, the more likely you were to be appointed. I have made no senior appointments on that basis, and I doubt that many junior ones have been so determined. In making senior appointments I have always looked for a soundly-based self-confidence, a capacity to mentor one's staff, an interest in teaching and in students, and possession of the kinds of skills and interests that would make a professor generally useful to the University. There is no doubt that an interest in research is important in a professor: in universities we respect people for what they have written and done, not for what their title is. But once there is obvious demonstration of an abiding interest in research and scholarship, I pass on to what I see as more important criteria. This is a University, not a research grants scheme. In short, I look for breadth, not for height. From experience I know that a university full of people who know a great deal about some small domain will find it difficult to agree that some things are more important than others. What

is more, it is hard for a university to give a proper weight to teaching and learning if the advancement of knowledge is prized above its transmission. That seems to me to distort the central purpose of a university, which is education.

If we in UC are to give substance to the tag that we 'educate professionals, professionally', then we have to appoint people who greatly enjoy educating and are good at it. Our distinctive reputation comes in part from having found lots of them, and mobilised them to effect. Many have had extensive experience in other walks of life than the academic, and that applies even more strongly to our general staff. I am constantly surprised and pleased to discover how much knowledge and experience you all have. The result is that UC has a pragmatic, resourceful 'can do' approach to problems. When we need to move in a new direction the typical response is 'let's see how we can do that', rather than a traditional or timid one like, 'Oh, we don't do things like that'. We are good at learning as we go. We do make mistakes, but they are usually recognised as mistakes and studied.

I cannot be wholly sure, but I'm pretty confident that this skill mix has been a part of this University almost from the beginning. I think it is another great asset, and believe that it will be even more important in the future.

Gender Balance

I have called this section 'Gender Balance' even though I was taught that 'gender' was a term applying to words; 'sex' was the term applying to humans and living creatures generally. But 'sex' is now such an indiscriminately used term, and carries so many meanings, that it is probably sensible to use 'gender' as I have used it here. As a Vice-Chancellor, I have found one of the most engaging aspects of the University of Canberra to be the equal numerical balance of men and women, which makes our community life the most civilised of any university I have known anywhere in the world. At the same time I am deeply conscious that in hierarchical terms the proportion of women at the more senior levels is no better than when I arrived, though of course the numbers are larger.

I have been interested in what used to be called the 'equality of the sexes' debate since the 1960s, and those who know my personal history and that I used to be a political scientist will understand at least part of why I have had that interest. I supported, and still support, the efforts of women to obtain proper recognition for their contribution to our society, and for equality of consideration whatever the domain in which that consideration is sought. But long study, continuous observation and some reasonably wide reading are pushing me to want to depart a little from what I think is current orthodoxy. In what follows I hope that no one will think that my broad-brush characterisations necessarily apply to themselves or anyone they know well; an '80/20 rule' operates whenever one engages in this sort of general talk, as is unavoidable now. One more thing: this subject really requires comprehensive treatment. I think I could do it justice if I had the time, for it fascinates me. But I have little time, so I recognise that my treatment will be too cursory, and for that I apologise in advance.

It may help if I digress for a moment to talk about intelligence. I grew up with the notion that only a small proportion of people was really intelligent, and that IQ tests told you where everybody was on the intelligence continuum; fortunately, as I thought at the time, people who went to university were part of that small proportion. My whole working life has produced one powerful example after another to suggest something much more basic: that all human beings are intelligent, and that there are many forms of intelligence, or, if you like, many intelligences. If it were not so we could not be educating half the 18 year old cohort at university (now or later). We know that opportunity, preparation and motivation are the principal factors preventing the other half from being here as well.

In similar vein, for much of the last thirty years I have assumed that men and women are essentially the same, that culture, habit and 'patriarchy' combine to make men dominant, and that a truly civilised and democratic society would ensure that professions and occupations and positions of power were open to all, to women no less than to men. I am still onside with the moral thrust of that perception, but I no longer start with the same assumption. It has become plain to me that men and women are different in crucial respects, and some important consequences flow from these differences.

For me, the central differences flow from major variations in brain architecture, which we have come to know about through the application of magnetic resonance imaging. I should say at once that the research I am referring does not automatically lead to the points I shall be making. Research findings are always conjectural, at least if you follow the reasoning of Popper, which on the whole I do. At the moment I find this research persuasive, though I claim no more than that. I should also say that the outcomes of this research can be dismaying to any men who read the work. Women turn out to be able to do many things at once, while men are quite limited. Lyndon Johnson's famous quip about Gerald Ford, that he was unable to do two fairly common things at the same time, could apply to all men, including of course Lyndon Johnson. If you will allow the metaphor, the male brain is constructed so that there are a number of rooms over a vat of energy or capacity to act, but the occupant of the brain, so to speak, can only be in any one of the rooms at any time. This leads to two familiar consequences: one, that men can bring a great deal of power and energy to a single problem and two, that they find it difficult to do anything else while they're doing that. Women use many different parts of their brain all the time, and all of the rooms are connected to each other, as well as to the vat of energy or capacity. In physiological terms, the inter-connections between the hemispheres of the brain are much bigger and better developed. It puzzles a woman that a man cannot watch television and listen to her at the same time: she can watch television, listen to him, hold the baby, make dinner and if necessary answer the telephone as well. She is, in a temporal sense, multi-skilled. He can do all those things, but not at the same time, and if it must be at the same time, not at all well.

Another central difference that cannot yet be explained through brain architecture, though there is undoubtedly something there, is in the mental construction of what life is about. Conventionally, these obvious differences are

explained in two ways, first by observation, in that they seem to apply in virtually all human societies, past and present, and secondly by inference from evolution: they must have arisen through natural selection over the last million years. I was taught as a young social scientist not to use the same body of data to derive my hypotheses and also to test them, and that makes me a little apprehensive about these explanations. But they also seem plausible to me, and I therefore put them forward.

Again I will use metaphor. Men appear to construct their picture of the world in competitive terms, as a Game, if you like. The Game has rules, the object of the Game is to win, and great virtue follows from winning — power, status, wealth and women, most obviously. Once you adopt this perspective, you can see it applying everywhere. War is the ultimate Game, big business is the current peaceful alternative (read the sub-heads of the business sections of any paper and see how often metaphors about the Game recur), organised sport requires only to be mentioned, and so on. I have a community responsibility in the area of road safety: there can be no doubt that men are much less safe on the roads than women, because they have a much greater tendency than women to see the road and the motor vehicle in terms of competition and winning. I can tell you that this pattern is as obvious in Ho Chi Minh City, where I was a week or so ago, as it is in Canberra. One of the most depressing things about the recent fuss about the ACT medical school was how the press always referred to it in Game terms, that is, it had to be a Win for someone and a Loss for someone else. The proper purpose, context and output of the medical school were hardly mentioned. Interest lay only in which university should get it. 'Loser' is a current pejorative among males, though why someone who loses should be categorised as someone of no account is not immediately obvious, especially to women.

For women the ruling metaphor is the Relationship, which is much less about winning than about good outcomes and, by extension, about harmony. Although there is an extensive array of women's sports, which are taken seriously by those who take part in them, it is hard to see the Game as having any concrete existence for women outside sport. I am much more tentative in offering this metaphor as an explanatory device, and I am conscious of Maureen Bettle's warning to me that no matter how good a feminist I became I could never be a woman! Nonetheless, for thirty years or so I have watched men being Competitors and women being Collaborators, and the Relationship metaphor for women seems to me to be an accurate one.

What has all this to do with our University, you might want to ask. My short answer is that the university, like all institutions in our society, has been largely defined in male terms, and thus as a Game. I am most conscious of this in an area in which I spent ten years: the business of research funding. Research grants schemes are all about winning, and great virtue comes from gaining a grant: one has a new and important entry on the c.v., promotion is greatly assisted, one can buy pieces of equipment for one's own use or travel to distant places, one's general status is enhanced. To me this is a classic Game. Since the research is being done with other people's money you might think that there is

an implied contract, and that the outcomes of the research will be scrutinised to see if the contract has been honoured. Not a bit of it. Those running such schemes usually have to be pressed into looking at outcomes at all. For the research community the outcome is tested when the peers in the peer review scheme decide whether or not to give the applicant another grant. One critic of the system has said mordantly that the only certain outcome of publicly-funded research is a further research grant application. After thirty years in this system I have come to the view that it is fundamentally wasteful of money and ought to be replaced, but I do not have to tell you that it is fiercely defended, overwhelmingly by men, who are its overwhelming beneficiaries.

I have noticed that women are generally more interested in outcomes. 'Why are we doing this?' or 'What are we trying to achieve' are questions that are frequently asked by women. For men success (or winning) is usually a sufficient incentive. Women are likely to go past that explanation and ask what will happen as a result of the success or win. That is not a question that men find easy to answer; indeed such a question for us is often a puzzle in itself.

The value system of the modern university is too heavily male, in my view. Some of that has recently been forced on us by our political masters, who have enshrined 'competition' as the way to go. As I have indicated, I think that 'competition' is a very male approach to life. My own preference is for collaboration, which I see as much more a female value. Our University works so well as a community because it has many women staff members, academic and general, who at the crunch will make an extra effort to gain a good general outcome even at the sacrifice of their own careers. Some men will do that, too, but it is less common. I have chaired the EO Committee since my arrival, and equity of all kinds is a strongly held personal value of mine. A senior woman in UC has written to me on another matter recently and said in passing that in her view hers was 'a happy and collegial workplace, where it is a pleasure to come to work'. She went on to add, 'There is no "glass ceiling" at the University of Canberra', and I think she is right.

But in some respects I think we have gone as far as we can go within the present value system. I have tried especially hard to secure woman professors, but I have come across what I see as a very female resistance, in which the general good of family, partners, children and social setting has priority over personal advancement. Anyone who has served on senior selection committees will know that it is common for us to be interviewing a man (and he will be one of the three or four applicants we are interviewing in this final stage) who may be offered this job and has not yet even *discussed* with his partner their proposed move to Canberra! I know that executive search firms find it especially hard to locate appointable women who even want the highest jobs in industry, because the way the duties are defined puts them off. In my view, the way these jobs are defined is overwhelmingly male: power, status and wealth are the male incentives. A woman will ask what she could *achieve* if she had the job, whereas a man will see the achievement simply as *having* the job. A man will apply for promotion because some other man is doing so, or because 'you've got to be in it to win it', or just on the off-chance — just as men will apply for jobs they haven't the

faintest hope of getting. Generally women will not do so even when they would be strong contenders. Fortunately, the mentoring system we set up is beginning to deal effectively with that attitude.

If we are to attract more women to senior positions we will have to learn how to redefine the posts and their responsibilities. In the same way, if we are to attract more women to studies in engineering, we will have to redefine what engineering is about. It is men who are fascinated with things, how they work and how to make them go faster or better in some particular way. Women are much more instrumental. A car is there to get them from point A to point B; it is not an extension of their ego in the same fashion as is the case for men. As for computers and other machines, women see them as being there for their use; they are not much interested in pulling them apart to see what makes them tick. This does not mean that women are less capable of using machines. All the evidence from road safety statistics points to men's over-estimating their own level of skill, while women have a more accurate sense of their skill level, and stay within it. Indeed, it is probable that at the margin women generally have higher skills, since they can cope with more variables at the same time than men can. I am told that the US Navy has found that women pilots are better than their male counterparts in two very tricky activities, refuelling in the air at night, and landing on an aircraft-carrier deck in stormy seas. The person who told me that, the CEO of a large mining company, also told me that mining companies prefer women to men as drivers of the 150 tonne dump trucks, because on average a truck that has had a women driver lasts 10,000 hours longer than one driven by a man. I don't have to tell you why that would be.

These reactions of mine are not an attack on women or on feminism, and I would be disappointed if they were construed in that way. No more are they a denunciation of men, although there are moments when in disgust at yet another mindless piece of murder or brutality committed by one of my fellow men, I want to confine men to the domain of organised sports of all kinds and hand the running of the world over to women (who in every society are hugely under-represented as well in the lists of those who use guns and violence to gain their ends). I think that it is overwhelmingly likely that we men are as we are through a million or so years of natural selection, and that the civilisation of mankind in the last 10,000 years has been an attempt, by thoughtful men as well as by apprehensive women, to overcome the aggressive, competitive spirit of men and convert that single-minded energy into peaceful and useful outcomes. While I will go on searching for and supporting women for the most senior jobs, I do not think that making it easier for women to be more like men will assist the process of converting male single-mindedness into socially useful outcomes, which is essential if humanity is to survive. Rather, I think we need to work on ways to emphasise and accredit the instinctive values that women hold, which are also in large part the outcome of that very long story of *homo sapiens*. I would like to see nursing and early childhood education, for example, given the same extrinsic valuation as finance, advertising or running things. I think I will be waiting for some time, but I think I can see a shift coming. If for no other reason, our superb UC women graduates will quickly reject as insupportable the sort of complacent male hierarchy which abounds in Australia's hospitals.

The University of Canberra cannot by itself change our society, or even the higher education system, but if you agree with what I am saying we can at least begin to move in a challenging direction. We should think again about what we are trying to do, how we can achieve most effectively good outcomes for our students and for ourselves. We should think again about what 'merit' is in our University context, and find new measures of it. We should celebrate each other, and recognise that all good outcomes are obtained collaboratively. We could even start to re-imagine and redesign courses so that they attract women students in greater number. The great asset we have is that this is a most civilised and thoughtful community, and it is so because men and women here are in about the same proportion that obtains in the wider community, and because our numbers and our environment bring out the best in each other. This is not a university dominated by competing male egos, at least in my judgment, and one reason is that there are sufficient women present to reduce that ego clash and divert it into useful outcomes. In this way, too, we are something of a model for the system. All universities would be better if their gender balance were like ours.

The message of my talk is that the University of Canberra is very well placed to accept a new Vice-Chancellor. Its strengths are abiding strengths, and will survive my going. If I have helped to enhance them, well and good. I can tell you that I do not think there is another University in Australia where the Vice-Chancellor could have given such an address before such an attentive, well-disposed and reflective audience. To be the leader of such a company has been a great joy. I thank you all.