

## **The 1998 Boilerhouse Address**

*by Professor Don Aitkin  
Vice-Chancellor, University of Canberra*

### **'Losing the Security Blanket'**

Let me start with the good news. We finished 1997 with a small cash surplus. Our natural attrition strategy is working. Our enrolments for 1998 are excellent in almost all respects, and it was probably a mistake to lower our entry point TER. If we hold to last year's management strategy and practices we should finish 1998 with a good financial outcome, despite the Government's withdrawal of \$1.5 million from our core grant this year. An analysis of data about the Australian higher education system published in January by DEETYA shows us to be in many respects the typical Australian university. We have a distinctive blend of local, national and international endeavours. We are financially sound, attractive to students, robust, and steadily improving what is in any case a very fine campus.

Yet, I detect a pervasive weariness here, within all our universities, and within academic and general staff alike; it can even be detected among vice-chancellors. My brother, a professor in an English university, says the same about universities in Britain. "We struggle on," he writes, "wondering whether we can get through to the end of the year without compulsory redundancies." A few years ago Australian universities were all being asked to engage in long-term planning. We still do it, but our universal pre-occupation is with the here and now. We inspect the financial results for each of our thirteen four-weekly budget periods with the same kind of attention that private sector firms do. We cannot afford a bad result.

And anyone with a long enough memory will from time to time recall the way it used to be. In those days, these people will tell the younger ones, universities and colleges lived a more certain life. Finance was guaranteed, and so too was our place in the sun. People from the higher education sector were looked up to, and taken seriously when they advised government about the needs of higher education. The status of academic life and knowledge was also more securely defined. Knowledge was organised in well-established disciplines, and the ways in which young academics got published, the journals they needed to submit articles to, the career paths ahead of them — all that was pretty straightforward. For general staff, too, there was a clear structure and hierarchy, presided over by the Olympian figure of the Registrar. People knew what they had to do, and they had time in which to do it. Why did we let all that go? Who is to blame?

You can read articles and letters to the editor like this almost every week. I have some sympathy for the writers, because if the need arises I can do this sort of looking backwards myself. But there is another side to it, whatever postwar decade you look back fondly to. The 1950s? Compared to today, very little research undertaken, no postgraduate scholarships until 1959, no research funding at all from government, tiny departments and huge classes, inadequate infrastructure, nothing much spent on buildings since the 1920s, little contact with the outside world save by post (slow) and by ship (the cause

of the year-long sabbatical), higher education almost entirely removed from mainstream Australian life.

You prefer the 1960s? OK — funded growth that never kept pace with the extraordinary demand for places, everyone trying to do everything at once, not enough properly trained staff, many tenured appointments made of people who later on turned out to be pedestrian, the first serious regulation of universities (and later colleges) by the ‘buffer’ body of the Australian Universities Commission, the creation of a binary system which was politically expedient but impossible to justify intellectually, higher education becoming politically important and the campus replacing the dam as the archetypal election-day promise, not enough money to do the job properly, the first signs of student disagreement with the way things were done, not only within higher education, but outside it, especially Vietnam.

What about the 1970s? Serious student strife on most campuses, leading to much greater student involvement in university decision-making at the expense of staff, the oil-price shock of 1973 which put great pressure on Commonwealth funding at about the time that the Commonwealth adopted financial responsibility for the whole sector, the last set of universities established, with smaller funding than was characteristic of Monash and UNSW in the early 1960s, colleges finding that they were controlled both by State and Federal Governments, and chafing under what seemed indifferent and insensitive rule, universities and colleges competing for the same kinds of students, thereby destroying any rationale for the binary system, higher education increasingly ‘political’ and under scrutiny (an enquiry into study leave and discussion about it in the Federal Parliament being a good example).

You really meant the 1980s? The end of steady growth, at least in money, for most parts of most higher education institutions, but no-one much does anything about it, so this is the decade of ‘the death by a thousand cuts’, the first signs of student sensitivity to market signals (is it better to go to university or college or to get a job first?), academic disciplines now so large that no-one could be knowledgeable about a single discipline, half a million learned journals, a devaluation in 1985 which ended any serious attempt to build Australian research libraries of world class, a period of paralysis in which many things which ought to have been done by Government somehow seemed too difficult and were put off, the first cold breath of economic rationalism, in this case asking what return if any the community was getting from all the research that academics did, and not getting much of an answer, the Dawkins changes, the amalgamation ballet, the unhappy beginnings of the ‘unified national system’.

I could put in a lot more detail. But my point is mostly to convey the view not only that there wasn’t a golden age back then but that the Australian higher education system has been in a state of pretty considerable change throughout the last fifty years. In 1950 there were around 30,000 students. Today there are around 660,000, sixty thousand of them from overseas, whose contribution to Australia’s export income exceeds that of wool, of beef and of wheat. There hasn’t ever been, in my view, any period when things in Australian higher education were stable or predictable or settled. So why do

so many people think back fondly, apart from the truth that a rosy backward view is a widespread human trait?

One kind of answer was given to me the other day by a friend in CSIRO. "We've lost the security blanket" he said, by which he meant both that we used to think we were in control even when we weren't, and that we've lost the feeling that the Government would, finally, come to our aid if things got tough. We know that it won't. We are on our own, and responsible for our own future; a lot of people in the universities find that most unsettling and disagreeable. Part of the change is that nearly everyone knows that Australia is no longer a very rich country which is absolutely secure and can look forward to a pleasant and prosperous future. In 1998 Australia is simply one of twenty or so countries of much the same GDP/head. It has to work hard, just like every other country, and it isn't and can't be secure about its future.

But part of the cause of our change is our very success. The University of Canberra has graduated nearly 35,000 people, and we are about 1.5 per cent of the system. Very roughly, that means that the whole system has graduated about 2.3 million graduates since UC began graduating people in the early 1970s. Most of them are alive, and in this country, as are many of those, like myself, who graduated earlier than this. Our country has been transformed by the work of higher education in the past fifty years, and in almost every way, for the better.

But there is a downside. Our graduates have been well educated, and they are capable of asking questions, assessing evidence and drawing conclusions. Nothing stops them asking questions about higher education and what goes on in it. During the Dawkins years I pointed out to those of my academic colleagues who most fiercely resisted the changes which were occurring, people who loved to talk passionately about "the Huns at the gate", that the Minister and all of those who advised him, and most of the Cabinet (which contained three Rhodes scholars, I think), and all the senior public servants in all Government departments, were university graduates — our products. Should we not be pondering on why they had the views that they had, instead of luxuriating in the belief that we were menaced by illiterate peasants?

What we are facing today is what every other part of the old public sector has already faced: an insistent demand that we define what we are doing in terms which are relevant to an educated electorate. We have lost the security blanket. We cannot any longer gain mileage out of pronouncements that we know best, or that we've always done it this way, or that there is an inextricable link between teaching and research, or that something called the very idea of a university is at stake, or that what we do takes a long time to mature. This sort of talk, however pleasing to university people, cuts no ice at all outside the university. We in universities have our favourite ways of doing things, we have our vested interests and protected places, and we too are essentially conservative, just like every other major sector in Australian society. But remember that when we in the university world are talking to someone in government on policy matters affecting higher education we are nearly always talking to a university graduate, and often a highly qualified one. He or she will have formed views about all of these things which are partly a consequence of having been taught by us and partly a consequence

of the person's own experiences, good and bad, at one of our universities. It seems most important to me that such experiences should have been good ones, and that the university in question put students, teaching and learning, and support services high on the priority list.

Let me give a recent illustration of the problem, which you can generalise to your own domain. Last week I attended a National Press Club lunch that was part of a conference which attracted many eminent scientists to look at the present situation of science in this country, which was pronounced to be bad (it has always been so pronounced, at least in my memory). The core subjects of science — physics, chemistry and mathematics — were said to be in a state of crisis, losing experienced faculty very quickly, not attracting students, HECS fee an obstacle, not enough money for research, salaries too low, and so on. In the 1950s and the 1960s talk of this kind had an effect on government. Today it does not. Our government, whatever its party composition, is likely to reply: you sort it out, it's your responsibility. A leading physicist asked us at the lunch to remember that the very artefacts we take for granted every day, like mobile phones and CD players, were the results of research in physics. What was Australia going to do about it? When was the country going to wake up?

There was no reply, partly because the great majority of the audience were of the converted. But one reply, from any reasonably well-informed public servant, might have been: Australia can indeed enjoy these things without ever having done the research, as we do with motor vehicles, aeroplanes and almost everything else, because hardly anything was invented here. In this we simply behave like the rest of the world. Shouldn't the real question be: What research should Australia be doing that is important to us and that no-one else will do?

Another reply, perhaps from another public servant, like the first a university graduate, might have been that these disciplinary categories and their institutional form in faculties and departments are products of the European late 19th century: what are the knowledge categories which are important to Australia now? Aren't they the ones which help professionals everywhere do their work better? Aren't we at least as interested in the matters which fall between the old disciplinary boundaries?

It was apparent that most of those present accepted without question that the natural sciences had a natural primacy in the university world — indeed, in the real world — and that not to look after them was akin to national folly. But anyone with a good feeling for the history of the past two centuries might want to argue, against the assumption that Science has been solely responsible for the modern world's technological advancement, that a more accurate attribution would be the marriage of Politics (the French and American Revolutions, the Declaration of the Rights of Man, the democratic movement), Economics (Adam Smith, the notion that each person's wants are as valid as each other person's) and Science-as-Technology (especially the innovations of the Industrial Revolution, the public health movement of the 19th century, and inventors like Edison, Pasteur and Marconi). Our modern civilisation is, in university terms, an outcome of a long interaction between the objectives of the social sciences and the natural sciences.

Science as we know it today could not have occurred without a national taxation system for generating public revenue, large public budgets for universities and science, the notion of public welfare, and a democracy with widespread public schooling. Without these social and political changes, 'science' would still be as it was in the early 19th century, something indulged in by gentlemen as a hobby, and by innovators looking for new products and new processes from which they could make money.

I have spent a lot of time on this point because to me it typifies the gap between the remembered past (in this case, the high status that science enjoyed as a result of the part it was thought to have played in ensuring an Allied victory in the second world war) and the real present. I cannot see any contemporary Australian government being persuaded by the sort of talk I heard at the National Press Club. It will say to us: We don't think science really is a problem. But if it is, it's your problem. What are you in the universities going to do about it?

Now where does all this get us, you may be wanting to ask. It is this. I too regret the passing of some of the really good aspects of higher education's past. There is a lot to celebrate. I remember the intimacy of undergraduate life at the almost wholly residential University of New England in the 1950s, the excitement of discovery in the 1960s and of being connected through the Boeing 707 to the international world of research, the capacity to teach new things in the 1960s and 1970s, the really serious way in which Australia wrestled with its coming of age in the 1980s, in which university people played a major part. Many of you will have similar recollections. Some of you will want to add that the assumptions under which you signed on, so to speak, to university life have disappeared, and that what you thought was possible doesn't seem possible any longer. It's not that the goalposts have changed, but the very playing field has altered, and a different game is being played. There is a lot in that.

If you want to grieve for what is no longer, then grieve. But eventually we have to move on. In the world in which we have to operate, our Government, made up largely of university graduates, and advised by university graduates, no longer thinks that universities need to be fed only from the public-funding stream. All universities are diversifying, finding new clients, new businesses, new ways of thinking and working. We are decently successful at it ourselves, having a lower-than-average dependence on Commonwealth funding. There is no doubt whatever that moving away from dependence on Commonwealth funding makes our lives harder but, as I said before, that has been the fate of all public-sector workers in the past ten years. If you don't like it, and want to do something about it, then you have to persuade the electorate. An easy test is to ask yourself whether or not you would be prepared to pay more in taxation for some public-sector endeavour other than our own, like defence, or unemployment relief, or mental health, or foreign representation. Not much, or not at all? Maybe that's the way our fellow citizens feel about higher education.

Certainly there is no sign that either of the major parties is going to campaign on a policy of restoring public funding to higher education, and if they do, then I'll believe them when I see the colour of their money. I can see no sign of a mood to return to the past. Indeed, there is a widespread view within

our society that we neither need nor would benefit from ‘the nanny State’, an all-wise, all-providing beneficent public sector, planning, regulating, disposing, in our case about higher education. One reason is that university-educated people — and there are a lot of them — like making their own decisions and judgments and don’t make obedient citizens automatically respectful of governments. Another, the whole tenor of our materialistic civilisation, is that buying things is important, and the more income you dispose of yourself the happier you are thought to be; that makes it hard to find more money for public activities. A third: there has been a great loss of confidence over the past generation in the capacity of governments to do good and necessary things without stuffing up. A fourth: I doubt if anyone much in the higher education sector actually wants the return of CTEC or some equivalent, with its natural tendency to poke its nose into what people do. We have got used to a kind of independence, and few will want to give it up.

In short, we are on our own, and likely to stay that way. And despite talk of ‘the gang of eight’ and of the groupings of technological institutions, regional universities, distance educators and so on, the greater truth is that each university is alone, and competing most of the time with all the others, or at least those which are practical competitors — in our case about fifteen or so. Each university is doing the best it can to mobilise its strengths and reduce its weaknesses; each of them is having the sort of troubles that we are. Each of them has to make proper provision for the future, for there is no likelihood that the Commonwealth will be interested in doing so. Each of them, for the same reason, has to make sure its staff are paid properly, and that it makes the right trade-offs for increased pay, not the wrong ones.

And so let me say something about all that, by going back to where I began. Our natural attrition strategy has been a success in financial terms, but the outcome has been that the University has some 80 fewer positions than was the case two years ago, 60 of which were lost last year. That loss has been shared over the whole University, and the outcome is that 780 people (in full-time equivalent terms) are doing the work that 860 did two years ago. Actually, it’s rather worse than that. We have dropped some activities, but we’ve also gained more, so the outcome is that 780 people are pretty certainly doing more than the 860 did two years ago.

You know what that means. It puts pressure on everything we do, and increases the chance of a mistake. I’m tempted to say that the timetabling problem is a good example, but nearly all of the 17 universities that adopted the timetabling software have had comparable difficulties with it, and some of them have not come as far along the track as we have done. Yet all the universities have had to down-size and all of them have had to face our dilemma: where are the extra resources to come from? We are now much more vulnerable to stuff-ups, to the departure of key staff, to fatigue, than we were a few years ago. How are we to cope?

We have had a strategic choice: we can try to be what one of you the other day characterised as “a beaut little university trying to bust out of all this” — that is to say, we can cut and trim and stay small, concentrating only on the very best things that we do and hoping that the students will come to us in the usual numbers. Or we can follow the growth strategy and, since there is

no growth in Canberra's student population, look for our growth in activities other than in teaching students on our campus — in training activities in the nation as a whole and in countries overseas; that strategy offers us some hope of achieving a greater income and a more secure future. We are especially well placed to do that.

As you know, we are following the growth strategy, and its likely success is evident, even if the financial rewards are slower to come. We already have a partnership with the Australian Customs Service, and a different one with the Australian Army; there are other bids in preparation of a comparable kind. Overseas, we are being asked to become the partners of major universities in developing countries who want to use us as a model, and employ us to help them restructure and modernise. The difficulty for everyone is that we do not have the luxury of taking lots of people off line while they get on with the new business. Natural attrition has paid for our salary increases; it hasn't been asked to do more than that, and I doubt that it could do so.

So we have to look even harder at what we do to make sure that we are not unnecessarily cramping our own style by hanging on to past practices simply because we've always done things that way. The Innovations Steering Committee has had some good effects, but I think we need to keep a continuing eye on this problem, and I have discussed with the Vice-Chancellor's Advisory Committee a simple mechanism that would keep us on the plain and simple; I'll say more about that in a few days.

And that brings me to the final point in this address. I said that we are on our own, and that our system has been in a condition of continual irregular change since the end of the second world war (and almost by definition, since the beginning of it) — that is nearly sixty years. Yet we in academic institutions love to hang on to the past, as though it were an utterly reliable guide to the present and the future. I don't think for a moment that it is. Too much regret for the past hampers us in dealing with contemporary problems.

Let me jump to a clear and present need. We have a lot to do, and no surplus of people with which to do it. The Chancellor's equity report last year made clear that while women make up 43 per cent of our academic staff and over 60 per cent of our general staff, there are parts of the University in which they seem to do more than their fair share of the work. I believe that we could generalise this past gender equity: it seems very likely to me that the young, the junior and the non-tenured also do more than their fair share of the work of the University.

One of the hangovers from the past is an assumption that such a distribution of the load is part of the natural order of things. It is not, and the University of Canberra will not prosper while it continues. We certainly need to make sure that we refine our processes and rules to make them simple and effective and thereby reduce the load, but we also need to make sure that the load we have is shared equitably and that we pay due recognition to the various kinds of work that make the University flourish. This can best be done by discussion at the School and Section level, and I ask that this discussion commence. We have a chance to build a co-operative working environment in which everyone accepts a fair share of the load. Let us do it.

I ask in particular that we argue out the '13 days per quarter' dispensation, under which members of academic staff (but not general staff) are permitted to conduct outside consultancies for their own profit, provided that they have the approval of the Dean, which would always be given unless the proposed consultancy was being done in competition with a University activity. I am aware — or more accurately, I am told — that there are members of staff who have never sought such permission, and I ought to say once more that if I were in fact to discover that a member of staff was indeed conducting such a consultancy without having obtained the necessary permission I would take the dimmest possible view of such behaviour.

But more to the point, taking one or more of those days for private purposes plainly puts more of the load on to the shoulders of those who do not conduct consultancies, or conduct them in the name of the University (which benefits their colleagues). However you look at it, at times like the present this privilege is hard to justify on grounds of equity. In this matter too I am discussing with my senior colleagues what can be done to steer consultancies to the benefit of the School, the Faculty and the University. I would be most grateful for any constructive suggestions.

Finally, some thanks. I have written to all those who took part in the Herculean attempt to get a computer-generated timetable ready for First Semester. They worked far beyond the call of duty. I have asked Deans and Executive Directors of Divisions to make sure that they are all properly compensated for the extra time spent on what was for all of them an infuriating experience. I thank all of you have coped with those of our students who were angry at the delays. And I thank you for sticking by the University in a time of trouble. It is possible that we will have other experiences like this one, because we have few resources to throw at problems if they emerge unexpectedly. The important thing is that we learn from our errors, and that we improve. I am sure that we will.