

## Occasional Speech at Graduation

Charles Darwin University

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**'The Tensions Within Us'**

by Don Aitkin

I love graduation ceremonies, and I have attended scores of them. I love them because they show a university at its best: a place where those who entered some years ago emerge wiser, better educated, more confident and yet more humble. Recent graduates know just how much they have learned, and also have some notion of how much more there is to know. If we could go to university for the rest of our lives, and always learn something new, we would still never know it all. I used to think that if I could bottle the goodwill and exuberance of graduation day, I could make a fortune distilling it into a kind of perfume to be sprayed around when things are glum.

And my first happy task is to congratulate those who have graduated today, and indeed those who were there to help the graduates concentrate on their work over three or more years — parents, spouses, children, friends. For most, university study is a co-operative endeavour. My second congratulation is to Charles Darwin University itself. I am one who believes that universities are basic to Australian life today, and that they should be funded accordingly. I especially believe that regional universities are vital to the health of their communities, and that the existence of universities in Australia's regional areas is in harmony with one of the guiding principles of Federation more than a hundred years ago: that Australians should have access to the same important services, no matter where they lived. This University's contribution to life in its region is, I would argue, proportionately greater than that of any other Australian university. I note in your most recent *Annual Report* that one person in every twelve in the Territory is enrolled in some education program run by the University, and that its reach extends to all facets of Territory life.

My reading of the *Report* prompted the 'message' of this speech, for there is always a message. It is a simple one, but it is possible that many of you graduating today have not heard it in quite the form I am going to use now. The message is this: throughout our society today two powerful sentiments are in tension. Indeed, I believe that such a tension is always present to some degree in all human societies. One sentiment is a fundamental belief in human equality. The other is our urge to distinguish ourselves from other people in some way. As I just said, the two are always in tension, and they are powerfully so in contemporary Australia, most notably in the domain of education. My message

is that you graduates need to be aware of the tension, and decide what you ought to do about it.

Let me begin with the belief in equality. I used to think of 'equality' in almost rhetorical terms. There was equality before the law, and you could see this in operation when some high-profile person was hauled before the courts and packed off to prison for embezzlement or some other crime. There was equality of opportunity, and that meant we all had some sort of right to a fair go or a fair start. It wasn't all that clear what equality of opportunity meant in practice, but we all agreed that it was important. Then there was equality of status: why should women be paid less than men for doing exactly the same work? Equality is also plainly part of our notions of fairness and justice — though again it is not always clear what we mean by it. There was equality in voting: 'one person, one vote', although actually some electorates are smaller than others and that means some people have rather more than one vote, when measured against people in bigger electorates. And so on. A fuzzy sense that equality is important runs through our culture.

But of course there is inequality everywhere, and we saw that as natural too. Some players and teams are just better than others, and we know that because they win. Some people earn more money than others, because what they do seems to be more valuable, all things considered, and that seems to be a natural part of life. At school and at university only one person comes top of the class, and we took that to mean that some were just brighter than others, just as some were just better swimmers than others. Life was like that.

I stopped seeing inequality as natural some twenty years ago, when I noticed that secondary school enrolments had grown very large. It seemed that anyone could profitably continue to the end of high school. The same thing seemed to be true about university: there are nearly a million students in Australia's universities today, compared to around 30,000 when I was an undergraduate. The same process seemed to be true in the arts and in sport. There were simply many more people performing at a high level, and in more areas of endeavour, than ought to be the case if talent were distributed along some kind of normal curve. Then I read Howard Gardner's *Frames of Mind*, and I learned that all the evidence pointed to human beings having at birth the same essential intellectual and creative and athletic capacities. Love, encouragement, motivation and preparation, not intelligence or some kind of 'natural gift', seemed largely to determine life chances.

This view of the world has slowly gained ground over the last twenty years. I should make it clear that not everyone can be a winner, because we usually define winners so that there is only one. But if we speak of 'competence' and define it quite toughly, it seems to be the case that any child can become competent at anything, provided that he or she has sufficient encouragement, motivation and preparation. All of you know someone of whom this can be said, notwithstanding the start they had in life. Most of you today do not have parents who are themselves university graduates, and that is further evidence of what I am saying. We can't of course become competent at everything, because

competence takes time and energy, and we do not live long enough lives to develop all of our talents. But we are all naturally capable of competence.

It seems, therefore, that an initial equality is part of our heritage. It would be nice to be able to say that knowing this we can now build a much better world. Alas, we first have to ensure that every child is loved and encouraged, and that every child has a supportive and stable environment. That is presently beyond the capacity of any Australian government, even if were inclined to go down that path. Moreover, which talents should be developed, and in what order? It is tantalising that while we can see how a better society could be built — on the basis of the fundamental equality of all human beings — the requirements in policy terms look very difficult indeed.

And that brings me to the other powerful sentiment. As human beings we need others near us: we are social beings. And though we need them, we also like to be admired and respected by them. Every human society that we know of has constructed rules that embody not only admiration and respect but also power and authority as well. Sociologists call the divisions that result ‘cleavages’. Religion can provide a cleavage, as can social class, caste, nobility, race, language and so on. Political divisions often fasten themselves on to cleavages. In our country all those cleavages are present, but in comparison to other countries they are rather muted. And so Australians have elevated ‘status’ into a cleavage. We must be among the world’s most notable status-seekers, always seeking to climb higher in a society that has no sharp cleavages.

And of course, status-seeking is almost the opposite of equality. Does it matter? I think it does. There is an entirely human tendency for those who have acquired status in our society to think it comes from their own virtue, and from their superiority over others. There is then a tendency to shore up that high status by building privileged walls around it. It is hard for that to happen in sport, because in sport winning is the ultimate test of high status, though, for that reason, one’s status is always open to further testing. But then sporting teams that carry the names of particular towns or suburbs or even countries often bring people into their teams who come from somewhere else, to ensure that their team stays on top. In social terms we see status-seeking everywhere — in the flight of parents from public schools to private schools, in the notion that there are ‘leading’ universities, and in the path that private schools make to their door for their own students, in the notion that health and well-being are a matter for private choice (meaning for those who have money), in the notion that some suburbs are somehow ‘better’ than others (meaning that the houses there cost more on average), and so on. All this is the foundation of privilege, and a good society has little time for privilege.

What can you do about it? Well, you are standing at the door of the next stage of your lives, having just done something quite special — earning a university degree. Out there is an Australia of some 21 million people, all of them, I would argue, capable of doing what you and I have done, given the right start. You may not be able to give them that start, but you can do the next best thing, which is to realise their potential, and therefore to help where you can. Above all, do not

categorise those whom you come across as 'no hopers' or 'losers': we may have all had that said about us, and it wasn't true.

Australia has come a long way in the last half-century, and one powerful reason is that increasingly we have begun to recognise that every human being has great potential. If you can keep that realisation in the front of your mind, then you will help to produce and even better society by 2050. I would love to be there to see it!