

## Speech made at a dinner celebrating Peter Howson's 80th birthday

Melbourne, 20 May 1999

There comes a moment in life, most often in our fifties or sixties, when we ask the great Life question: 'What has it all been for?' When we are young, it is enough to be alive — excitement and future possibilities possess a powerful magic. A little further on, with marriages to shape, careers to make, children to rear, mortgages to meet, Life keeps our heads down and our eyes on the ball — one of the many balls that are all important to us. But towards the close of our paid working lives it becomes important to us to find a pattern or shape or purpose to our lives as we have experienced them so far. We are people of the Western Enlightenment, and we seek understanding and explanation about everything, and not least about our own lives.

When we ask the question 'What has it all been for?' we do it internally, and we are the audience as well as the questioner. It is part of our maturity that we can ask the question and work towards an answer; not only that, we have had sufficient experience of life to have a lot to work through in coming to an answer. It is not my purpose tonight to provide an answer for Peter, because these are peculiarly personal tasks. But I can happily provide you with some of the material that he would have considered in dealing with the question himself, and I can suggest the kind of answer that we his friends might like to offer him.

Peter Howson's life has elements of a fable or fairy story. You all know the fable: a young man is sent off into the world to seek his fortune (in this case, to recover it!), encounters many perils, endures many vicissitudes, but wins through — *and* marries the beautiful princess. No doubt everyone in this room knows parts of the story, but it is my privilege to remind you of it. And it starts here, in Melbourne, because Peter is the grandson of William Gibson, who founded Foy & Gibson and became one of Melbourne's best-known entrepreneurs in the first great period of Australian entrepreneurial history that followed the gold rushes of the 1850s and the subsequent building of the infrastructure of cities, factories, roads, railways and bridges.

William Gibson went to England in 1914 on a buying trip, and took some of his family with him. They were all caught there by the outbreak of the Great War, and could not return. Peter's grandfather died in England before the war ended, and his fortune was left in trust to his daughters. Peter's mother Jessie Gibson married Major George Howson MC, a British engineer, and Peter was their eldest child and only son. Indeed, he was the only male descendant on the Gibson daughters' side, and so it became his destiny to recover for his mother and aunts and sisters the control of the inheritance which was theirs and diminishing in value because of poor management and the adverse economic conditions in Australia.

He came to Australia at the end of his school years at Stowe, where he met the young Gordon Darling, who is with us tonight, to see what that destiny might mean, but Cambridge was to come first, and then the second world war provided another interruption. By the time it was over, Peter was 26, had served with distinction in the Fleet Air Arm, had been shot down in the Mediterranean and forced down in the Atlantic, missed being a prisoner of war, earned the scar you see tonight, did staff work as well as ops, and was invited to stay on in the peacetime Royal Navy. But there was the quest, and he declined gracefully if regretfully. Admiral Howson he was not to be.

He set off for Melbourne by flying boat, a trip that lasted twelve days, and his first job with Foy and Gibson saw him unloading china from straw-filled crates in a warehouse in summer. His talents saw him rise quickly from that humble position, and he became a manager of progressively larger undertakings within the firm, with an eventual seat on the board. But he had by then discovered something that satisfied his need for service, used all his talents, and gave him a leading role in his new country. Entrepreneur Howson he was not to be. He had found politics, in much the way that some people find religion.

He had also, along the way, found Kitty, and the rest of this story is about her as well as about him, even if he gets all the attention. As was the case for many others at the time, it was the decision of the Chifley Government to attempt to nationalise the private banks that pushed Peter into political activity. And Peter's nicely integrated personal talents, that have been referred to already tonight, meant that he would rise quickly in the political world: he had abundant energy, a well-developed intelligence, pleasant manners, self-confidence and a quickly developed sense of the importance of public affairs. His wife Kitty understood what political life was all about, and she helped him to succeed in it.

It is always tempting to recreate the past in the image of the present, and equally easy to assume that Peter was always going to win a seat in Parliament. But it did not seem that way in the early 1950s, and the Parliament in which he finally took his seat might have been that of Victoria rather than that of the Commonwealth. In the event, he defeated a well-liked Labor man, Bill Bourke, in the Division of Fawkner, on his third try in 1955, and was greatly helped in doing so by a disastrous explosion within the ALP set off by the late Dr Evatt. Senator Harradine, surely one of the best-known figures in Australian politics this year, owes his own rise to fame to that same explosion. Peter worked the seat of Fawkner so that it became his own, and it remained so until a redistribution, the most feared word in the parliamentary dictionary, pushed him out to the Division of Casey in the 'nappy valley' of outer Melbourne, and to eventual defeat in 1972.

Along the way he served as Deputy Government Whip, Government Whip, Minister for Air, Minister Assisting the Treasurer, Minister for the Environment, Aborigines and the Arts. He became a senior figure in his party and in Parliament, a senior figure in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, an experienced and effective member of committees, which do so much of the useful work of our parliaments, and of course a most effective local member,

without which nothing much else happens for longer than three years, unless you have a very safe seat indeed!

He did not attain the highest position, but then in this century which is drawing to a close (and the pedant in me prompts me to remind you that it still has nineteen months to go!) only 24 people have been the Prime Minister of our country, although nearly 1500 have been members of our Federal Parliament. What you can say of Peter's political career is that it lasted for the best part of 20 years, that he reached high office and exercised it with distinction and honour, and that he left it with dignity.

You can also say that he was asked to take on perhaps the most difficult assignment given to any Minister in the last fifty years, that of creating a Department of the Environment, Aborigines and the Arts out of elements drawn from other portfolios, with no staff, no central office, no obvious mission around which to create an organisation, and with a first permanent head, Sir Lenox Hewitt, who had gone from the most senior public service post to this, the most junior secretaryship. And worst of all, the three principal elements of his portfolio were highly newsworthy, had powerful extra-parliamentary pressure groups, were dear in one form or another to many senior people inside and outside Parliament, and were matters on which no other Ministry would concede that Peter Howson, as the notionally responsible Minister, ought to take the running on anything important. It is fair to say that each of these three important concerns — the environment, relations with our indigenous people, and the arts broadly defined — have been a continuing problem for every Australian Government since the McMahon Government, and for much the same general reasons, even though they now have separate Ministers.

Peter would have done well to survive, which of course he did. But he did more: Australia made its first tentative steps in representing its own environmental interests internationally with Peter's leading of the Australian delegation to the UN Conference on the Environment in Stockholm in 1971, and he made a number of decisions in the separate areas of the environment and relations with Aborigines which were subsequently adopted by the Whitlam Government and made the orthodoxy of their time.

But to have said all this is only to say the half of it. When I came to edit Peter's diaries in the early 1980s I was struck by his extraordinary capacity to take on voluntary work in a life that was marked by hard work anyway. So to all this we must add his long-standing involvements in the work of his church, of the Botanic Gardens, of the Royal Victorian Eye and Ear Hospital, of the Deafness Foundation, of the Foundation for the Prevention of Blindness, of the Council on Inter-Governmental Relations, and of the Council of the Australian Institute for International Affairs. You would have to say that his range has always been wide, and his service exemplary. What is more, his mind is always active: if there is a possible way forward, Peter will think of it — he is not on your committee simply as a name. The restless energy and urge for improvement which is so much a part of Peter can be seen in everything he touches.

So what has it all been about? Let me start with the most obvious: eldest sons (and I am one) — indeed, eldest children — grow up with a strong sense of responsibility for the world and for their family. This must have been compounded in Peter's case by the family story. Most of us have a family story, and in that story we have a place, a role, a responsibility. Peter's was a romantic one, and there were many who depended on his success. There, I think, we see the purpose, the drive, the determination of Peter Howson the man.

Second, Peter represents in his life a view of the world which needs to be much stronger these days, when the notion of individual responsibility for one's own situation has so much prominence, and that is the tradition of disinterested service to their society by those who can afford to offer it. Peter's whole life has been about service to the community, and there, I think, we can see the influence and example of his father George Howson, who used his own skills as an engineer, his influence and connections to build an organisation to employ disabled returned soldiers. Peter's work with the E and E, with the Botanic Gardens, with the AIIA and other organisations carries on that tradition. Australia needs much more of it.

Finally, there is the person. How we get to be the way we are is a complex thing. Where does Peter's sense of humour come from? Where does he get his optimism? Where the love of life? These are immensely positive traits, for they affect in a good way all who come into contact with him, while they are surely recipes for long life, health and happiness. The integration of one's best personal traits with the possibilities offered by one's life situation and life chances, so that the outcome is a person of whom one can be justifiably (but quietly!) proud, is the Life task which is given to each of us, and is always ours responsibility and no-one else's. I am sure that I speak for all of us in saying that in our view, Peter, you have delivered on that contract.

Peter, we who have gathered here tonight are privileged to have been part of your story, and to be part of this celebration tonight, where we lift our glasses and raise them in a toast to the achievements of your past, your present and your future, and to Kitty, and the part she has played in it all!