

**Right Honourable Sir John Grey Gorton, PC, AC, CH**

a speech in presentation of Sir John Gorton  
for the degree of  
Doctor of the University of Canberra *honoris causa*  
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The Right Honourable Sir John Grey Gorton has served his country over almost a lifetime, in peace as in war. He served in the RAAF during the second world war, and in local government in Victoria after it. He was elected to the Senate in 1949, and left the Australian Parliament in 1975, as the member for Higgins and a former distinguished Prime Minister. Anyone who knows about postwar Australian politics knows about John Gorton, and he is widely respected on all sides of politics.

Universities know him for particular reasons. He was Minister in Charge of Commonwealth Activities in Education and Research in the Menzies Government, and Minister for Education and Science in the Holt Government. Then, thirty years ago, he led an actively reformist Coalition Government which confronted rising demand for higher education by developing a sector of advanced education, one of the roles of which was to focus on professional education and applied research.

The Gorton years were the years of action in higher education. They saw the development of research as an important element of higher education in Australia, and the establishment of the Australian Research Grants Committee, which I had the honour to chair. They also saw the building of a large number of institutions of higher education, among them this University, Macquarie, Griffith, La Trobe, Flinders, Central Queensland and Southern Queensland. John Gorton played a role in all their beginnings.

Of particular interest to us is his persuasion of the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Menzies, of the need to provide an alternative to the more traditional university education available in Canberra, and established an enquiry into the need for a college of advanced education in the ACT. In 1966, as the responsible Minister in the Holt Government, Senator Gorton reported that the Government accepted the recommendations of the enquiry, announcing the establishment of the Canberra College of Advanced Education.

At the end of 1967 Senator Gorton, again as the responsible Minister, turned the first sod at the College's site in Bruce, driving a large earth-mover along the exposed ridge of the main concourse, and almost a year later unveiled a stone to mark the establishment of the College on its site. In doing so he pointed out that the colleges of advanced education, for which he saw CCAE as the model, '...will provide scholarship, not only for the sake of scholarship which was the genesis

of university education, but to meet specific needs of industry and of human endeavour in specialised areas”.

The University of Canberra’s sense of mission, embodied in the phrase “Educating professionals, professionally” stems from these beginnings. It is an indication of Sir John’s particular understanding and foresight that subsequent reforms to Australian higher education have shaped all of Australian university education more closely to this concept. The reforms of the 1980s which almost doubled the availability of university education in our country, would not have been possible without the basis of the strong, professionally relevant advanced education sector, enrolments in which had passed those in the traditional university sector by 1985.

Former Governor-General Bill Hayden summed up Sir John as having “an attractive, knock-about egalitarianism which resonated powerfully with a great many Australians”. With his ardent nationalism and “ordinary bloke” image, he seems likely to be cast in the folk-hero tradition. But that would be to underplay his achievements: he should be regarded as a man who was, as all good leaders are, ahead of his time, pushing his party and his country to show more concern for issues of social justice and equal educational opportunity.

Sir John Gorton has made a significant contribution to Australia, to higher education and, in particular, to the University of Canberra. It is therefore most appropriate that this University recognise Sir John’s outstanding contribution to our country and our University by admitting him to the honorary degree of Doctor of the University.

[John Gorton was too ill to attend the ceremony, and Dr John Hewson, another former leader of the Parliamentary Liberal Party, accepted the award on his behalf, and gave the Occasional Address. Some months later the Chancellor, Wendy Mccarthy, and I presented Sir John with the testamur at his home in Vaucluse, Sydney.]