

## Speech at 'Don's Party'

12 October 2001

Your Excellencies, distinguished former Prime Ministers, Chief Ministers and Ministers, distinguished present Ministers, chancellors and vice-chancellors, past and present, ladies and gentlemen:

It is 50 years since Jack Williams, the Deputy Headmaster of Armidale High School, came into 3A and asked who among us was planning to go on to 4<sup>th</sup> year, and who was planning to go to University, and thus do Honours in one or more subjects. I didn't know much about universities in 1951, but I have spent my life in them. Tonight is a powerful summary moment for me. I was born in 1937, the year of the lowest birthrate in 20<sup>th</sup> century Australia, and partly as a result of that accident of timing, I have been privileged to enjoy a fascinating, enjoyable and productive life. I fluctuate between passing on all the credit to my birth-year, and wanting to argue that I did actually have something to do with what followed.

I thank Ian Sinclair for his most entertaining speech. It is forty years now since we first met, or maybe even longer, and we have been good friends throughout. I have always enjoyed his frankness, intelligence and good humour. His qualities were well revealed ten days or so after the defeat of the McMahon Government, of which he was a junior member. I saw him in Manuka where he seemed to be whistling a happy tune. 'How are you?' I asked, expecting gloom. 'Isn't it wonderful!' he exclaimed. I was puzzled. 'What is?' 'What Whitlam and Barnard are doing,' he enthused. 'I thought you'd be unhappy,' I said. 'Not a bit of it,' he cried. 'Recognising China, ending conscription, releasing anti-conscriptionists — it's wonderful!' My astonishment must have shone through. 'Look,' he said, 'it's simple. All those things had to be done. But we couldn't do them. We said we couldn't so often that we couldn't. We'd have looked fools. So it's all been done. And when we get back into power all that will be over!' And off he went, whistling.

I thank those who organised this evening, especially Wendy McCarthy and her committee. I was not allowed to know much about how this evening was intended to be, but it has been a revelation and a great pleasure. I also thank those who are not here for taking part and saying the nice things that we have heard.

And I thank those who are here, especially my children, Susan, Lesley, Gaby, Alex and Max, and their mothers, Jan Aitkin and Sue Elderton, who played their own most important parts in the shaping of me as well as in the making of our children. I include in my thanks also Bev's children, Scott, Lucy, Matthew and Joshua, who have become close to me over the years, and whose pleasant interaction with my own kids has been a source of great pleasure to me as well as to Bev.

I'd like to mention my two brothers and their wives, who would like to be here, but who are in three different countries tonight, if they have stuck to their plans, formed before the date for this function was fixed. If you will allow me, I would like to include my parents, who cannot be here, but would be 96 and 95 if they were. I know that I was a variously a problem and a disappointment to them when I was a boy. My mother too often had to explain to others that 'Don means well', and the really good summaries on my school report cards rarely got past 'could do better'. My parents stuck to the view that I was worth persevering with, and had the satisfaction of seeing, well before their lives had come to an end, that their judgment was not wholly astray.

I thank all of those who, like Mum and Dad, took the gamble and backed me against the evidence, Jack Williams, that tough, perceptive and kindly Deputy Headmaster, Ted Tapp, the head of History at UNE, Russel Ward, who took me on as his first graduate student, Colin Hughes and Bruce Graham, who started me on the road in political science, Henry Mayer, who adopted me as a bright young man as he adopted so many, Robert Parker, who decided that he would back my wish to undertake large-scale (and expensive) survey research in my own country, and David Butler and Donald Stokes, my British and American mentors. Of that list all too many are no longer with us. How can we pay proper tribute to those who helped us, when they and we are mortal, and they are usually much older than we are? One way is by acting towards others as our mentors acted towards ourselves, and I have been doing that consciously since I was a young professor. Mentoring others is a most important task for older people. Another, for me at least, is being kind to other 'late developers'.

If you will indulge me, I would like to talk about three matters tonight in the context of my own life. One is Australia, one is Canberra, and one is the university, and especially this one, though I value all universities, wherever they are. When I was young it was important to 'go overseas' and undertake the antipodean version of what was once called 'the Grand Tour'. Jan and I and our two little girls left by ship in August 1964, with our possessions, such as they were, in a tin trunk. Given the times, it was predictable that we not only went to the UK, and to Oxford, but also that we had never considered alternatives such as the USA or Canada. Later generations were more discerning. Oxford was a most seductive place, and we discovered many Australians who had been seduced to the point that they had stayed there. I was urged to put my hat in the ring for fellowships in my subject that were coming available — almost every week, it seemed — in the Oxford colleges. Without knowing quite why, I decided against it. We then went to the USA, where once again there were abundant possibilities for well-paid jobs. But by now I knew that I wanted to return to my own country and somehow help build it. It needed building, and I wanted to be part of that process.

That sentiment, formed almost consciously in the mid 1960s, has stayed with me ever after. There have been further possibilities for me to work overseas, some of them really attractive. But I have been stuck on my own country, its possibilities and its fortunes. I want to say strongly that what my generation has done, and the generation before mine as well, has been most worthwhile. Contemporary

Australia is in my view incomparably better as a society than the one I grew up in. It is more tolerant, more curious, more cultured, better educated, more creative and more enjoyable. That endeavour was brought about in part by Australia's public servants, who have never received the credit that they deserved. There are a number of my friends here tonight who have served Australia, as I did, briefly, in the public service, and I value their work as well as their friendship. I am reminded of one of the memorable remarks of Don McNicol who, like me, played a role at the national level in higher education policy. 'You and I took the Queen's shilling,' he once observed to me, 'and once you do that it is hard to see things except as to how they affect Australia as a whole.' I agree whole-heartedly.

I think that in all the world only Canada can match the creative nation-building that Australia undertook in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and I am proud to have played a part in that energetic activity. Let me make the generational point again. Every generation can only build on what earlier generations have accomplished. But I believe that what was done by my parent's generation and the generation that followed — very roughly, those 20<sup>th</sup> century people born before the Second World War— has been most important. I regret that more recent generations do not seem to value what has been achieved, at least as much as I think they ought. But this is not a night for regrets.

Australia suffered greatly in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century because of a series of depressions and wars that began in 1890 and did not end, really, until about 1947. The national task of building a new and fair society under the southern sun had to be put on hold. That task was begun again in the late 1940s, and it continued until quite recently, when political parties in Australia lost confidence in the idea of nation-building, as indeed political parties have done in most Western countries. Perhaps because I was schooled in history, in part under the influence of Russel Ward, the task of building Australia has had an appeal for me, and I respond to political leaders, of whatever party, who see that as their mission. It follows that I do not have much time for those who think that nation building is no longer necessary.

An interest in nation building led to an interest in person building. In my early middle age I came to see that each of us had a life task, which was to create a person of whom each could be truly proud, a person who was true to himself or herself, and gave back to society a contribution for the blessings that society had given to us in the beginning. That person, of course, is ourselves. I needed some moral compass as I grew older because I could never find it in organised or even unorganised religion. Those who can find it there seem to me to be very lucky people.

So I move from my country to its capital. This city of Canberra has always had a powerful hold on me. I have lived here four times, and I have no earlier memory of another place. Canberra has a powerful symbolic meaning for me, too, and not just because this is the national capital of the nation I wanted to help to build. My parents met here, in the headmaster's study at Telopea Park School in 1929, the year in which my mother had a hand in the teaching of one of the school's

more difficult students, Edward Gough Whitlam, who I am delighted to see here tonight. When Gough was at the ANU in the early 1980s I organised a meeting between him, Geoff Yeend, whom my father had taught, and who had been the Secretary of the Prime Minister's Department in Gough's time, and my parents, who were in their late 70s. Gough moved in confidently, 'Ah, Edna Taylor,' he cried, 'Just as pretty as ever!' 'You haven't changed, Gough Whitlam!' she retorted. But she was very pleased.

I grew up in Reid in the 1940s, where I learned to play tennis, attended Ainslie Primary School (represented tonight by Barbara Christian, in the same class as me for the whole time we were there) and then Canberra High School for a year (where I met Graham Kelleher, who is also here tonight), returned to Canberra in the 1960s first as a PhD student and later in the 60s as a young staff member, and returned to Canberra again in 1980 as the head of my old Department. In all, I have lived in Canberra for 38 years. I learned to write well here, too, largely through writing for the *Canberra Times*, first as a leader-writer for the Monday morning edition, then as a columnist. I was not as persuasive with the editorial pen as I expected to be. My first editorial, an absolute model of its kind, showed the Liberal Party all the good reasons why it should elect Paul Hasluck rather than John Gorton as its leader following the disappearance of Harold Holt. I retain a soft spot for the *Canberra Times*, even though it didn't pay very well. I had a year as Contributing Editor for *Newsweek*, following Donald Horne (who is here tonight) in that role. Now *Newsweek* did pay well!

A fondness for Canberra and its life extends to my family. Bev has been here for one year more than me, a distinction that seems likely to persist. All my children had at least some of their primary school education at Forrest Primary, and my mother, father, Jan and I have all played a role in teaching here, over 72 years. I think Canberra is one of the world's most distinctive cities, as well as one of its most beautiful, most enjoyable and best thought-out. It is also Australia's least parochial city, because its purpose is the nation, and its inhabitants for the most part have come from somewhere else. It receives around a hundred delegations every year whose purpose is to find out how Australia pulled off such an urban planning success.

It is, of course, characteristic of our country that those who don't live in Canberra love to knock it. After defending Canberra against such attacks for many years I decided to shift my stance, and employed to assist me Aitkin's Theory of the Plurality of Pleasure. That theory, you will remember, enjoins you to support people who like to do things that you don't do, on the ground that they are therefore unlikely to compete with you for access to the things you do like to do. So I now say, when a knocker starts on my city — 'Ah, yes, of course. I'm sure that someone like you wouldn't like it here. Melbourne [Adelaide, Sydney, wherever] would have to be much nicer. Can't imagine why I stay here myself, really.' And so on. I feel extraordinarily privileged to be able to live in Canberra, even though my rates went up four times when I moved from Sydney.

Of course, one reason I like Canberra is that it is Australia's best university city, and I like university cities. I like them because I like universities, and I see them

as simply central in the building of a civilised society. It follows that I also see them as means, not as ends, and that has earned me a degree of criticism over the years from those of my academic colleagues who have persuaded themselves that they are not just among the builders of civilisation but are indeed civilisation itself. I have known four Australian universities very well, and each of them is represented here tonight: the University of New England by Bruce Milligan, Ken Riordan, Jack Caldwell, and of course Wendy McCarthy, my contemporaries in the 1950s, Macquarie by Doug Kelly, a colleague in the School of History, Philosophy and Politics in the 1970s, ANU by its Chancellor Peter Baume, and by Jack Caldwell, Doug Kelly, Mary Dickenson, Robin Stanton and John Warhurst, and UC by a very large number of my colleagues and friends from everywhere in this lovely place.

What I remember most from my early universities is the nurturing I received, at New England from people like Russel, Ted Tapp, Brian Dalton, Len Turner and others, and then at ANU from not just my own Department but from people like Geoff Sawyer, Perce Partridge, Fred Gruen, George Zubrzycki and others. I think that the 1960s were a wonderful time to be in universities and to be young. At Macquarie in the 1970s I was a young professor learning his trade, and the near-decade I spent there was probably the most productive time of my life. I came back to ANU in the 1980s as the head of the Department in which I had been a student, the kind of transition that always has some psychological costs to offset its benefits, and before long I moved into the field in which I have spent the last twenty or so years: policymaking in practice rather than in theory.

Running universities and the organisations connected to them and advising governments on the issues involved is difficult, and one tends to get more criticism than praise. Much of the criticism comes from one's academic colleagues, and I have come to the view that as an academic I want to echo what the composer Richard Strauss said about himself: 'I am not first-rate, but I am a talented second-rater'. I don't know what Strauss said after that, but I would want to say that really first-rate academics are very few, and that it is the talented second-raters (and there are many more of us) who keep organisations functioning well. Will you allow me to say that the time I have spent at the University of Canberra has been the most supportive time of my life? Of my four universities this one, in my judgment, has achieved the best balance between competition and collaboration, between teaching and research and between past, present and future. It is, for those reasons and some others, a lovely place to work, to learn and to live, and I thank all of you who have helped to make it so.

It has a weakness shared by all Australian universities in these times, and that is the preoccupation of its students with work. Our students can hardly be faulted in terms of their application to their studies. But every now and then I want them to stop, to listen to some Mozart or Bach, or to go to a play in the Union Theatre. We are in danger of turning work into a pathology. It is for this reason that I wanted to create a fund that would support the cultural context of the University and supplement the considerable efforts the University has itself made over the years. All of you are helping to that end tonight, and I thank you for it. Bev and I will make our own contribution as well.

Finally, there is someone who must be recognised for her contribution both to the University and to me in the time I have been here. Bev and I met at the beginning of my term as Vice-Chancellor in what can only be described as unpleasant circumstances. I was admitted to her ward in John James Hospital for surgery. I noticed after a few days how calm and harmonious the ward was, and how much improvement I felt whenever she came through on her rounds. I discovered that she was a graduand of my own University, and I met her again at Graduation, when I was more or less healed. I will pass over the next few months and tell you simply that we married at the end of the year. She then had to learn what Vice-Chancellor's wives did. There are others of that special tribe present tonight, and they will all agree that there is only one thing more difficult than being a Vice-Chancellor, and that is being the spouse of a Vice-Chancellor. It is fair to say that Bev has always taken the University of Canberra seriously. She herself has two UC degrees, and her four children each have at least one. She has been a wonderful partner in this joint venture of ours, a wonderful hostess throughout, a gardener without peer, and a staunch supporter of the University in every respect. I cannot thank her enough for what she has done to help me and the University of which we are both so proud, and I ask that she join me here so that you can assist me in doing so.

I thank you all again for coming to this celebratory night, and for your friendship and support for Bev and me, and for our University.