

ANTI-INTELLECTUALISM, LEADERSHIP
and
THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF GRADUATES IN PUBLIC LIFE:

*Address by Alan Powell to the graduates of Monash University
on the occasion of the conferral on him of the degree of Doctor of
Economics (honoris causa), 24 October 2002*

Mr Deputy Chancellor, Mr Vice-Chancellor, Mr Acting Deputy Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests, colleagues and fellow graduates:

My fellow graduates, this a curious encounter between you and me: you are at the beginning of your career and I am at the close of mine. My excuse for taking your time is the hope that there may be something of value that I have learned and that I can pass on to you. But the world that you face is 45 years on from the one that I faced as a young graduate. The circumstances are altogether different – some for better, some for worse – but different. So are there some valid guidelines that apply quite generally, irrespective of the circumstances of the time?

Let me duck this hard question for the moment, and first indulge myself in some reflections of my times.

Anti-intellectualism and leadership

The second half of the nineteen fifties when I was an undergraduate in agricultural science at the University of Sydney was generally seen as something of an anti-climax. My cohort of students were largely at the University on Australian Commonwealth scholarships: we replaced a student body of the late 'forties and early 'fifties which contained a fairly large number of veterans of World War 2 who had taken advantage of government assistance to study at the University. They had been older than the fresh-faced seventeen-year-olds in my cohort and much more mature. Certainly, they had seen much more of life, and of death, than we had. They took an active interest in social issues and in politics. Having seen what a global war could do to the world, they were determined to try for a better future. My group, on the other hand, became famous for its apathy.

The apathy of young middle-class Australians at the beginning of their university education, while not something to be proud of, perhaps was not so bad – after all, we had little experience or wisdom to offer the world. But a continuation of that disengagement after graduation is another matter. The community had made a substantial investment in our education, and was entitled to expect an input from us into the life of the society.

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Hopefully that expectation was fulfilled as my peer group outgrew its apathy.

In marked contra-distinction to Europe, America and Asia, some strange quirk of Australian history has resulted in this country being extremely anti-intellectual at the grass roots level. I first became aware of this when as a graduate student I shared some office facilities with an American graduate of Harvard University who was spending a year at an Australian university to broaden his experience before taking up a job in the US foreign service. On his first trip to the University from down-town Sydney he had asked the bus conductor to tell him when to get off the bus. The conductor agreed to do so. It was the manner in which the information was conveyed, however, that shocked the visitor. The conductor yelled out “we’re at the nut factory, mate”. Coming from a society that placed a high value on education, the visitor found the pejorative more sick than funny.

This distrust of the intellectual by the ordinary Australian person greatly complicates leadership in Australian public life. It offers scope for leaders with vision to achieve great things, and for those with backward-looking or tunnel vision to wreak great harm. Let me illustrate with two examples from this country’s immigration history.

About the time I was an undergraduate, a bi-partisan effort was mounted to abolish the White Australia Policy. This policy had been a shibboleth with ordinary Australians for more than half a century. Those most inclined to support the political effort to turn this racist policy around were intellectuals, and especially young university-trained people.

In the ‘fifties there had been a sizeable sprinkling of Colombo Plan scholars from south and south-east Asia on Australian government scholarships at Australian universities. They provided the first opportunity that most young Australians had ever had to get to know and make friends with people from a radically different cultural and ethnic background. The Asian students in Sydney and Melbourne were excellent ambassadors for their homelands, and helped reinforce the lead taken by Australia’s main-line politicians and supported by her intellectuals. This example shows that political leadership with vision can achieve great good.

Now for a second, and not so happy, example. I refer to recent events in the treatment of asylum seekers. Our leaders (in both major political parties, unfortunately) chose not to lead, but to follow. They followed the lowest-common denominator in public perception, as mobilized by radio talk-back

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hosts (or ‘shock jocks’ as they are known in the vernacular). Of course, they were out of step with most educated opinion, and so they resorted to the time-honored abuse that had always served to demolish intellectuals in Australia. Some of our most prominent political leaders refer to their opponents on the issue of asylum seekers as members of “the chattering classes”, a put-down that is on a par with the bus-conductor’s “nut factory”.

Do not misunderstand me: I am not seeking a privileged position for an educated elite: their views must be argued through just like anyone else’s. But their views deserve to be taken seriously since, apart from anything else, the people holding these views as a rule will have had access to more information, and have had a better chance to come to a balanced point of view. It is not stupidity that drives the public in other countries to value the views of their university educated people more highly than we do here.

Plea to the Australian graduates

How does this concern you, the new graduates? Australian graduates, I am pleading that you do not become discouraged by the anti-intellectual put-downs that you will assuredly encounter; rather that you attempt to remain engaged in the debates on all important social issues. You account for a higher percentage of your age group than graduates of my time. If you become actively involved, not just in the pursuit of your own careers and the physical comfort of yourself and your family, but in the social concerns of the community in which you live, you can make a big difference to the Australia of the future. Even if you disagree with the personal views I have expressed tonight, I still encourage you get involved in the debate.

Perspective and flexibility

There are two dimensions to the education that you have received at Monash. One will be obvious to all: you have received some training in formal analysis of particular problems, and in the techniques necessary to solve them. These may be in accounting, business management, economics, finance, marketing, or several other fields. As valuable as this training may be, it is not the most important dimension of what you carry with you from Monash. You should not be surprised if in 10 or 15 years time you find yourself in an entirely different professional role to the one for which you specialized in your first degree.

The second and more important dimension of your educational background is the sense of perspective, and the adaptability, which you will have

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developed (at least latently) during your stay here. This sense of perspective means that you will be able to distinguish forests from trees. The adaptability that such a perspective entails means that you will cope flexibly with the changing demands made on you by your professional career. For almost all of you these changes will be continuous throughout your career. In many cases you will find that you need at some stage to contemplate a second degree or diploma. In line with your extra maturity, most of you will find this additional university work very rewarding intellectually and somewhat easier than your undergraduate days.

Plea to the graduates from other countries

About half a century ago as a member of the audience I attended a public speaking competition at my high school – I was fifteen at the time. The winning entry was a talk which had as its theme that the 19th Century had been dominated by Britain; that the 20th Century was being and would continue to be dominated by America; and that the 21st Century would be dominated by Asia. I think the speaker (now a Catholic priest of the Dominican Order but then a sixteen year old school boy) got it right. In a recent visit to Beijing I could scarce believe that this highly modern metropolis was the same city I had visited some 20 years ago. Such extraordinary growth in physical wealth, of course, is not everything, but it is at last an extraordinary leap forward. And of course the *tigers* of south east Asia are on the whole recovering well from the melt-down of 1998.

So to you graduates from countries other than Australia, and especially to you from Asia, my plea is similar to my plea to the Australian graduates. Your region is the most vibrant in the world. You will contribute importantly to the progress of your homelands. In the pursuit of economic prosperity you must not neglect the broader gifts that you have to offer to your society at home. These include tolerance (a virtue often learned as an undergraduate) and respect for democratic institutions. And respect for higher education.

So: were there some valid guidelines that apply quite generally? I will leave you to be the judge. My well wishes for a fulfilling and exciting career go with you.