

THE MITCHELL ORATION 1993

"Whither Australia?
Shaping The Future Of Our Nation"

by

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Her Excellency, The Honourable Dame Roma Mitchell:

It is with a deep sense of honour that I respond to the challenge of presenting the fifth Mitchell Oration which honours a great Australian and a pioneer in the field of human rights.

Without appearing to be ungallant, may I congratulate Dame Roma on achieving the milestone of her eightieth birthday, the more remarkable for the fact that she continues to exercise the office of Governor of this state with dignity, energy and enthusiasm.

When lesser spirits might, understandably, withdraw to enjoy the benefits of retirement, Dame Roma has continued to work tirelessly as an outstanding example of that ideal of public duty which she has exercised at the highest level.

I also wish to commend the Equal Opportunity Commission of South Australia for its action in providing an occasion such as this every year, not only to reflect upon Dame Roma's remarkable achievements, but also to pursue issues of equality and human rights in this important area of community life.

WHERE SHOULD AUSTRALIA BE HEADING?

Over the past few years a great deal has been written about the subject of the kind of nation we might become, especially as we have entered into the last decade of the second millennium. At the end of it lies the centenary of federation which marked our emergence as a nation.

I clearly remember taking some time to reflect quietly upon events, at the end of the Bicentenary Year in 1988. I came to the conclusion that we had chosen the wrong year for such a celebration and that the real focus of our activities should have been 2001.

In the case of Australia, the year 1988 did not celebrate a glorious revolution, nor the emergence of our nationhood, nor indeed the establishment of a human rights regime with the release from political bondage nor did it celebrate the establishment of the democratic form of government.

Unthinkingly we followed the United States of America which celebrated its Bicentenary in 1976 with its Independence from Britain after a revolution. Then came the French Bicentenary in 1989 which marked the storming of the Bastille.

The Australian Bicentenary was intended to celebrate our progress to our present state of political, social and economic development. Yet alongside this celebration we were also reminded of the grim facts about our treatment of indigenous people over 200 years.

On that New Year's Eve of 1988 I posed what was essentially an ethical question: "What values will be needed to shape our society in the 21st Century?".

I raised the same question two years later, here in Adelaide the city of my birth, when I - gave the 1990 Playford Lecture entitled "Australia 2001 - A Vision for the Future". It drew forth a prime ministerial reaction in the House - he would deal with the unholy Trinity of fiscal, wages, and tax policy, I should stick to the Holy Trinity.

THE ENLIGHTENMENT TRADITION IN AUSTRALIA

It is worth going back to the beginning of European settlement in Australia to remind ourselves that this occurred at a time which has been described as the apex of the liberal enlightenment in the late eighteenth century.

Philosophers of the Enlightenment had already affirmed the importance of political and social doctrines such as freedom, equality and democracy, which they asserted would come about through the application of pure reason.

In line with that enlightenment tradition, Australia as a new nation in the early years of this century established a number of important policies which made us one of the leading democracies of the day.

- In the ten brief years after 1901, Australian governments had put in place a social security system which was the envy of the world.

Universal suffrage was granted from the outset, following the earlier practice already in place in this state of South Australia.

The concept of the basic wage was established through the Harvester Judgement.

- A national system of industrial arbitration and industrial reconciliation was established.
- The trade union movement took firm root in the wake of the depression and the strikes of the 1890s, the outcome of which was to make Australia something of a workers' paradise.

In the succeeding decades, which included a Depression and two World Wars, steady progress was nonetheless made by improving the Health and Social Security system and enhancing the industrial conditions of workers. With this also came the gradual institutionalisation of many areas of public life.

The next phase in our social development began in the 1970s with the further development of equal opportunities and human rights for groups such as Women, Aboriginal peoples, disabled people and other minorities. The Australian government also moved to ratify the International Covenants on Human Rights through the appropriate legislative processes.

To date we have not gone as far as some other countries in providing constitutional guarantees of fundamental rights.

Have we been unduly slow to move on these matters? A retrospective look indicates that our governments have been trying to act with integrity by promising only what they knew they could deliver.

It also has become clear that our complicated federal system of government meant that it took considerably more time to put the protocols through the state governments and to overcome various administrative and bureaucratic procedural difficulties in the introduction of new laws guaranteeing human rights and removing discriminatory practices in the institutions of society.

However it can be said that much has been achieved throughout the decade of the eighties up to the present time.

There is still more progress to be made as we seek to administer laws to overcome discrimination, to treat minorities more fairly and to ensure that gender is no barrier to opportunity or advancement.

The question I want to pose tonight is whether these enlightenment values and their derivative practices are, on their own, capable of driving us forward into the kind of future we desire?

The truth of the matter is that we cannot legislate to make people good. But we can legislate to outlaw bad or discriminatory behaviour.

So the human rights tradition will continue to play an important role in the setting of benchmarks as indicators of social progress in an imperfect world. But do they release the dynamic energy and vision needed for the shaping of our future as a nation?.

Do those values placing emphasis on human rights and equality now have to be incorporated into a broader framework which includes notions of innovation and entrepreneurship on the one hand, and compassion and mutual trust on the other?

Five years ago I began to argue that a healthy Australia in the next century needed to be rooted and grounded in the principles of justice, sustainability participation and efficiency.

I suggested at the time, and I still believe, that these different values have to be held together within a common framework of reference. This will produce a tension which could none the less be a creative one in which all of these objectives have an important role to play in forging our national identity. Yet no one of them can be promoted above the others, nor any of them be regarded as being in permanent conflict with each other.

In more recent times it has become necessary to add more to this list of values. To 'justice' we need to add 'compassion' because the two of them represent the hard and the soft edges of the virtue of love. Both are needed to counterbalance each other.

It has also become important to put beside the notion of "efficiency" that of "effectiveness". Businesses can achieve efficiency in the workplace by reducing the number of workers on the pay-roll and thereby make short-term profitability gains, but that might not make them effective in achieving their longer term objectives, if the valuable skills and

experiences of people are lost through redundancy measures which are themselves costly and inefficient.

Furthermore, as Australia seeks to find its own place in the sun, it is obvious that we need to take more seriously the value of "innovation".

There is a long list of inventions and new products developed here in Australia which have had to go off-shore in order to secure the necessary capital backing and sponsorship for world-wide production.

This represents a tragic loss of revenue and of jobs, not to mention pride in our national achievements.

Clearly, the cultural environment in which we live has paid too little attention to the importance of inventiveness and creative skill.

Now all these things need to be balanced and rectified through the introduction of sound policies at a national level, but as we have seen in recent times, good policies and good intentions are not enough.

There is a need for something else which involves the rekindling of the human spirit in a creative way that will release new energies and new hope.

This brings us directly back to the realm of vision and belief - and growing numbers of commentators today are acknowledging the need for people to experience some sense of transformation and the rediscovery of themselves as persons and their identity as free human beings.

If we go back to basic principles, most of us can identify and agree with each other that there are certain self-evident truths about our life on earth and our nature as human beings. Each of you here may wish to develop your own list and express it in your own way, as I would want to identify mine.

May I outline them?

- The first is that each of us has been made in the Divine image (the *Imago Dei*) which implies we have a human potential that extends far beyond our present capacity to think and to act.

- The second is that it is as human beings made in that image we are of infinite value and worth as individuals. That value is to be expressed by granting us the opportunity to live freely and responsibly and in turn to be treated and to treat others as we would have ourselves be treated. This implies not only individual rights but reciprocal obligations.
- The third is that although we are valued individuals, we were meant to live together in community, to form co-operative relationships based upon mutual trust and be encouraged to participate in building up a quality of the communal life.
- The fourth is that although we are certainly of equal value and worth, our abilities and capacities are not equal.

This means we must acknowledge and develop a hierarchy of skills, and at the same time create basic conditions of social justice which provide windows of opportunity for people to grow to their full potential and which encourage their participation, recognising that some may need special assistance or support in order to achieve it and live life in reasonable dignity.

- The fifth is what makes us human is our innate capacity to love and to serve one another in a relationship based on freedom.
- The sixth is that we have a sense of reverence for human life as a gift from the one who is the Lord and giver of all life, which must therefore not be ended at will.

We can recognise qualities like truth, beauty and goodness when we see them. This means we are to be encouraged to support artistic and ethical endeavours, expressing these values in daily life.

It also means we are expected to take responsibility for, to nurture and value the created order and the natural environment which sustains and supports us.

- The seventh is that we have the ability to live freely and responsibly, in community, which requires that our acts and transactions have to be based upon a relationship of mutual trust.

These things cannot be legislated or imposed if the value of freedom is to be maintained. The mistake of the liberal enlightenment was that its proponents failed to recognise that we can never quite manage to achieve our potential. This is because our humanity is marred by a sense of innate selfishness, a tendency to damage and destroy the things we value and sometimes to obscure the image of God in ourselves and each other.

It is because of this tendency to err, to miss the mark and fail in our good intentions (this is what sin means), that we have needed to regulate our behaviour by law, in order to avoid doing serious damage to others or denying them their rights. The critical judgement is how far should regulatory activity go?

At a practical level, especially in recent times, much human activity is biased upon formal contracts which require certain obligatory responses, for example in delivery of services to other people.

This involves a legally binding commitment to deliver what we promise according to agreed terms and conditions.

I believe the time has now come when we need to acknowledge an important ethical point, which is that an excessive emphasis upon human rights on their own and to the exclusion of other obligations has become somewhat rigid and inflexible in its operation.

There is of course nothing wrong with a contract insofar as it expresses the basic obligations and undertakings we make regarding the provision for certain goods, fees and services to each other.

What is tending to happen in our society and other western countries is that where life is overly determined by legal, industrial and professional contracts, this can lead to a serious loss of trust between people.

The professional person has been regarded as a person whom one could trust. There was a clear understanding that they should offer their service within an implicit framework of mutual trust based on a duty to care.

Increasingly, the delivery of service is now dominated by fears of litigation, so that professional service-givers now seek to limit the extent of their professional obligation and thereby avoid the likelihood of expensive litigation.

It is becoming increasingly clear that an over-emphasis in this area can have the unintended effect of diminishing the quality of life and relationships in society.

These are commonly described as "unintended consequences" of well-intentioned laws.

We must therefore take great care to anticipate such unintended consequences and to monitor our ethical progress as a society. This means we must recognise that from time to time overly rigid approaches to the regulation of human behaviour will need to be modified, if the human spirit is to be liberated to allow people to feel once again that they belong to the human family and will therefore seek to enjoy conditions of freedom in order to give and receive from each other.

We need to recognise also that freedom is itself a two-edged sword which is capable of allowing people to come into their own and achieve their potential, but also of turning into selfish and wanton disregard of other people's rights and which causes people to act in isolation from others in the pursuit of a narrow self-interest.

Over the past decade we have witnessed the re-emergence of the doctrine of economic individualism which has led to the deregulation of markets and industrial activity, allowing people and organisations to behave in ways that are in their own perceived best interests, in the belief that what is in the best interest of one will ultimately be in the best interests of all.

We would do well to be nervous of such approaches because it is likely that the strong will trample on the weak in the area of industrial activity. Total freedom from all economic and industrial constraints may lead to unacceptably high levels of unemployment on the one hand, and the exploitation of those who remain in the workforce under unacceptable conditions on the other.

As we seek to deal with this moral conundrum within the framework of setting goals for our future, we will need to inculcate or at least re-establish some basic ethical commitments in which everyone is expected to share.

Faith, hope and love are three cardinal virtues, and the greatest of these, according to St Paul, is love. Yet love can only thrive within a framework of freedom, of reciprocal action and basic trust in one another. Without these things little good can occur in a voluntary sense.

I reiterate an earlier point, that we will now need to be very careful both to maintain a balance between rights and responsibilities and then to acknowledge that such things in the end have to be based upon relationships of human trust and integrity.

In recent years some writers and social commentators have called for the reestablishment of what they call the "communitarian ethic".

Such an ethic is basic to the re-establishment of a communitarian society whose major emphasis is one of mutual support and co-operation within a free and democratic framework, where all the members of that community acknowledge their obligations towards one another in a charitable spirit.

This may well prove to be one of the most important things we can do as we seek to re-affirm our identity as a nation and as a people.

In addition we must of course set this value alongside that important economic value of efficiency in production because we also have to generate sufficient wealth to support our best aspirations for one another as a people, according to our needs.

We will therefore need a dynamism which keeps together these two principles in creative tension and balance.

We must avoid the temptation of trying to imitate the Asian "tigers" to the north of us who are having considerable economic success but who, in some cases, also have a very poor human rights record that we would not want to emulate.

Thus efficiency is a value that will need careful qualification, although its cutting edge must not be overly blunted.

I now want to identify and list some of our basic problems which we have to solve as a nation.

- They include the serious level of our national debt and the problems we have in servicing it.
- The dramatic rate of family breakdown which is now leading to serious social instability, with behavioural problems manifesting themselves among children and homelessness among young people.
- The record levels of long-term unemployment and their ramifications. We now have a "new poor" which includes large sections of the rural population, including farmers and those who depend upon them in the towns, where some have had negative income for several years on end.
- A generation of young people, many of whom believe that the future holds very little for them and who are deeply cynical of the society into which they have been born.
- The events of recent days also serve to highlight the fact that the indigenous people of our land are now beginning to express feelings of alienation and anger.

The Mabo ruling on Native Title brings into stark relief the issue of land rights and the potential for tension between the traditional people of the land and major mining and pastoral interests.

Aboriginals and Europeans have different and divergent views about the nature and purpose of the land. The former think in terms of an unchanging spiritual relationship, the latter think in terms of usage, exploitation and development.

We will need to recognise and appreciate these significant differences which mean that both parties will need to make compromises. My deepest concern is that this is a very one-sided power relationship where the dominant group is always likely to win.

It is relatively easy to describe and diagnose the causes of many of these problems, but it is much more difficult to find clear solutions.

I want to suggest a number of courses of action for the future that could point the way forward for us as a nation:

- The first is to foster and encourage the gift of leadership. It is generally agreed that we lack the right kind of leadership which is capable of motivating, inspiring and bringing people forward in order to give of their best.

Our national ethos is not one which gives much encouragement to people to strive to do their best and to exercise their leadership gifts for the good of all. Indeed, we usually do the opposite. We tend to cut down leaders if we think they are getting too far ahead of the crowd.

The negative side of this egalitarian spirit may have its place, but must not be confused with suppressing the right kind of leadership which motivates and enables other people to share their gifts and allows them to be exercised for good ends.

Presently, there are several organisations addressing the question of national leadership.

Two with which I have been associated are the Queen's Trust and the R E Williamson Foundation, both of whom seek to find young people who are likely to be in positions of influence and authority in future and to bring them together on programs that allow them to explore, analyse, understand and grow in their ability to exercise leadership.

- The second important initiative is to overcome the problem of fragmentation within our systems of government.

We need a better pooling of our knowledge, and our skills as a nation. Government departments must be required to work more collaboratively in joint efforts to solve problems. Too often they pull in counterproductive ways and different directions often because their policy orientations are different, or because they have built up their own departmental ethos.

It has been truly said that we are one of the most over-governed nations in the world, given our small population of 18 million people.

It is probable that more people are concerned about structural inefficiencies and wasteful duplication in government than whether we should become a republic or not. The present republican debate has not addressed the real issues of governance flagged in the Centenary Constitutional review process.

- The third area for action is that of family life. Next year is the International Year of the Family and every effort must be made to develop policies and programs which help support and buttress family life, and above all, help to avoid the likelihood of family breakdown.

The family is and must remain the basic nurturing unit of society. Whatever shape it may take, family life is critical to the health and well-being of future Australians as well as to our own generation.

The rate and cost of family breakdown has now become so serious that much effort and financial resource will need to be applied to preventing and treating the problem, before further social dislocation and dysfunction occurs.

- The fourth initiative must be to recognise that there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the creation or generation of wealth, provided it is based upon sound ethical principles and not simply on greed. In the immediate future it will need to become a paramount objective for us as a nation.

It stands to reason that we will be unable to maintain present levels of public expenditure in areas of health, welfare, education, human rights and equal opportunities - let alone increase them, because we are operating today on a wealth base which is shrinking, as our economic fortunes here have declined in the wake of dynamic new world markets.

We will therefore need to give much more encouragement and support to the development of viable and innovative new business enterprises.

Preferably they should be small-scale in nature, and have the capacity both to generate wealth and to provide new job opportunities, especially for those who are presently unemployed. This is an area where we will need to encourage innovation as we seek new markets and opportunities, such as "People Helping People" in Queensland.

- The fifth initiative relates to the value of commitment. In a society which has been somewhat slack and self-indulgent, there is a need for commitment at every level, starting with a commitment to the Creator God and leading to renewed commitments in areas such as family relationships, work and living in community.

It has been said that a lack of commitment tends to cause people to drift, and so be deflected from the central value priorities. This in turn further undermines our relationships and our capacity to produce what is necessary for the good life.

- Finally alongside the question of commitment comes a renewed sense of vocation.

We need to recover the belief that we were placed on this earth for a purpose and that we are called upon to undertake certain tasks and to give our lives in co-operation with others so as to advance the common good.

This means that we will need to look at all our institutions in the light of core values, to ensure these are properly grounded in their life, and in such a way that they will generate new energy along with a renewed sense of purpose.

The Biblical notion of the Kingdom of God, as well as being communal in its connotation also implies the idea of a people being on a journey of discovery from birth to death to eternity, all the time extending beyond the limits of present possibilities, and transforming them.

As far as I can tell it has never been easy to discuss such things as ethical and religious values in public arenas here in Australia, despite our commitment to freedom of religion and its expression in the Enlightenment tradition.

I am conscious that excessive religious discourse has often been dismissed by the exponents of the Enlightenment, many of whom believe that religion is no longer necessary. Indeed it is seen as divisive and regarded as harmful to the promotion of a free, rational and humane society.

Yet the fact remains that these so-called "enlightenment values" have been inadequate in bringing about significant changes for good in people's behaviour. This is largely due to the fact that we do not teach and uphold clear moral imperatives to shape and direct public and private behaviour.

Issues of ethics must be explored and placed again at the centre of public life if it is to be reinvigorated with a sense of community and with a sense of shared purpose.

It must be said, gently but firmly, that we must all work together in achieving a sense of national identity and purpose, which is based not so much upon sectarian political objectives but more upon a sense of sound values and prophetic vision which will bring about, under God, the dynamic achievement of a better life for all.

Such things only come when people reach basic agreement about what they want for themselves and each other and are prepared to work together in trust, with persistence and patience, with imagination and intelligence which in our case means putting more creative energy into innovation and intellectual achievement.

Looking back upon our recent past, it is clear that we have squandered valuable opportunities and not achieved our potential as a nation, given the fact that we are blessed with rich resources and are still relatively free from inter-racial conflict.

Yet there are clear signs that unless we act with determination and moral purpose and in most positive spirit we will decline further and drift away from the opportunity of building a good life for all people within our nation.

We simply cannot allow ourselves to drift into the future. We must strive to shape it in accordance with sound values and appropriate actions, driven by that creative energy which is sometimes described as the Holy Spirit of God.

I want to conclude simply by noting that there may be significance in the fact that when the Spanish explorer De Quiros thought he found the Great South Land, he named it after the Holy Spirit.