

YOUR EXCELLENCY

CHANCELLOR, VICE CHANCELLOR,

DISTINGUISHED GUESTS,

GRADUANDS

AND PARENTS, PARTNERS AND FRIENDS WHO HAVE SUPPORTED YOU

THROUGH YOUR STUDIES

FIRST, CHANCELLOR, THANK YOU FOR THE HONOUR YOU HAVE BESTOWED ON ME TODAY – AND THE OPPORTUNITY TO BRIEFLY SHARE SOME THOUGHTS.

THIRTY YEARS AGO, JUST A FEW BLOCKS FROM HERE, I HAD THE PLEASURE OF MEETING A WONDERFUL WOMAN – YOUR FORMER GOVERNOR AND ONE OF THE MOST DISTINGUISHED SOUTH AUSTRALIANS, DAME ROMA MITCHELL.

AFTER SEVERAL YEARS ADVISING OUR POLITICAL LEADERS IN CANBERRA, I WAS BEING OFFERED AN AMBASSADORSHIP – OR THE CHALLENGE OF SETTING UP A NEW HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION. DAME ROMA ENCOURAGED ME TO ACCEPT THE POSITION AS AUSTRALIA'S FIRST NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSIONER – AND I DID.

IN THE LAST 30 YEARS, AFTER SERVING IN THAT ROLE, I HAVE HAD THE PRIVILEGE OF WORKING IN OVER 70 COUNTRIES TO ESTABLISH INDEPENDENT NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSIONS - OFTEN IN COUNTRIES THAT HAVE SUFFERED HORRIFIC HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS – INCLUDING:

- UGANDA
- RWANDA
- SOUTH AFRICA
- INDONESIA
- AFGHANISTAN
- AND EAST TIMOR

SOME OF THESE COUNTRIES SUCH AS INDONESIA ARE EMERGING DEMOCRACIES.

OTHERS, SUCH AS RWANDA, CAMBODIA, SIERRA LEONE AND AFGHANISTAN ARE STILL MISERABLY POOR AND CONFLICT RIDDEN.

MY MAIN MESSAGE TO YOU THIS MORNING IS THAT WE LIVE IN AN ENORMOUSLY FORTUNATE COUNTRY . . . AND THAT OUR BIRTHRIGHT CARRIES RESPONSIBILITIES COMMENSURATE WITH OUR RESOURCES AND NATURAL WEALTH.

MOST OF THE PEOPLE IN MOST OF THE COUNTRIES I HAVE BEEN WORKING IN LIVE LIVES OF POVERTY, MISERY AND DEGRADATION THAT IT IS DIFFICULT FOR AUSTRALIANS TO COMPREHEND.

BY CONTRAST, OUR COUNTRY IS BLESSED WITH VAST NATURAL RESOURCES
AND MORE WEALTH THAN THE WORLD'S 70 POOREST COUNTRIES PUT
TOGETHER.

OUR “VALUE SYSTEM”

CONSCIOUSLY OR SUB-CONSCIOUSLY WE ALL SEEK SOME VALUE SYSTEM BY WHICH TO LEAD OUR LIVES.

IN THE PAST, THOSE VALUE SYSTEMS HAVE GENERALLY BEEN CENTRED ON RELIGION, POLITICAL IDEOLOGY OR CULTURAL CONVENTIONS.

HOWEVER, MORE AND MORE – IN EVERY COUNTRY WHERE I AM WORKING (INCLUDING CHINA AND MYANMAR WHERE I WAS LAST MONTH) THE VALUE SYSTEM – PARTICULARLY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE - IS INCREASINGLY FOCUSED ON HUMAN RIGHTS.

THE GROWTH AND IMPORTANCE OF NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSIONS

ALMOST 30 YEARS AGO WHEN WE ESTABLISHED THE AUSTRALIAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION, THERE WERE ONLY 3 COUNTRIES IN THE ASIA PACIFIC AND 7 IN THE WORLD WHICH HAD GENUINELY INDEPENDENT NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS INSTITUTIONS.

THERE ARE NOW OVER 70 COUNTRIES WHICH HAVE SUCH INSTITUTIONS – AND MANY OF THOSE – PARTICULARLY IN ASIA AND AFRICA ARE BASED ON THE AUSTRALIAN MODEL.

TO TAKE JUST ONE EXAMPLE - THE COMMISSION WE HELPED ESTABLISH IN INDIA IN 1993 NOW HANDLES OVER 100,000 CASES OF HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS EVERY YEAR.

THAT IS SOMETHING WE CAN BE VERY PROUD OF.

BUT WHEN OUR GOVERNMENT VIOLATES HUMAN RIGHTS:

- BY HOLDING CHILDREN FOR LONG PERIODS IN OFF-SHORE DETENTION FACILITIES
- OR ATTEMPTING TO TRANSFER TO OTHER COUNTRIES OUR OBLIGATIONS FOR REFUGEES OR THOSE SEEKING ASYLUM

THAT SHAMES US ALL -

AND WE HAVE NOT ONLY THE RIGHT, BUT I BELIEVE, THE OBLIGATION TO MAKE OUR VIEWS KNOWN.

IN THE LAST HUNDRED YEARS, GOVERNMENTS IN LATIN AMERICA, AFRICA, ASIA AND EUROPE:

- MURDERED
- TORTURED
- TERRORISED
- OR DISPOSSESSED

TENS OF MILLIONS OF OUR FELLOW HUMAN BEINGS.

THESE GROSS VIOLATIONS OF HUMAN RIGHTS WERE COMMITTED BY GOVERNMENTS – INVARIABLY PROFESSING THAT THEY WERE ACTING FOR THE GREATER GOOD OR PURSUING SOME HIGHER GOAL.

WE HAVE LEARNED, UNFORTUNATELY, THAT GOVERNMENTS (EVEN THOSE DEMOCRATICALLY ELECTED) WILL VIOLATE HUMAN RIGHTS – UNLESS THEY ARE HELD TO ACCOUNT BY CIVIL SOCIETY – BY YOU, BY ME, BY OUR INSTITUTES OF HIGHER LEARNING, BY OUR CHURCHES, BY NGOS AND OUR PROFESSIONAL ORGANISATIONS.

WE ALL HAVE AN INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY TO HOLD THOSE WE ELECT TO ACCOUNT.

OUR INTERNATIONAL OBLIGATIONS

IN THE 1970'S AND 80'S, AS ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S DIPLOMATS, I WAS OFTEN INVOLVED IN NEGOTIATING INTERNATIONAL TREATIES.

- ❖ WHEN WE RATIFY AN INTERNATIONAL TRADE AGREEMENT – WE STICK TO IT.
- ❖ WHEN WE CONCLUDE AN INTERNATIONAL DEFENCE TREATY - WE HONOUR IT.
- ❖ WHEN WE NEGOTIATE AN INTERNATIONAL AIR TRANSPORT TREATY – WE ABIDE BY IT.

BUT WHEN WE RATIFY INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS TREATIES – WHICH ARE ALSO BINDING ON US AS A MATTER OF INTERNATIONAL LAW – (AS WE SOLEMNLY HAVE)

OUR GOVERNMENTS HAVE FREQUENTLY TREATED THEM AS “OPTIONAL EXTRAS”

THEY ARE NOT!

THE POWER OF ONE

NEVER DOUBT THAT ONE PERSON CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

NEVER DOUBT THAT YOU CAN!

AND, NEVER DOUBT – IF YOU SEE SOCIAL INJUSTICE – OR VIOLATION OF THE RIGHTS OF THE MOST VULNERABLE AND MARGINALISED IN OUR COMMUNITY – THAT YOU HAVE AN OBLIGATION TO DO WHAT YOU CAN TO CHANGE THAT.

IF YOU DO RISE TO THAT CHALLENGE – I CAN PROMISE YOU – IT WILL BE THE MOST REWARDING PART OF YOUR LIFE.

A TRIBUTE:

I AM ALSO HONOURED – AND HUMBLLED – BY THE PRESENCE HERE TODAY OF ANOTHER WONDERFUL SOUTH AUSTRALIAN WOMEN – SISTER JANET MEADE.

FOR THE LAST 30 YEARS, JANET AND HER COLLEAGUES AT THE ADELAIDE DAY CENTRE HAVE CARED FOR THE HOMELESS, THE MENTALLY UNWELL AND MANY OF THE MOST VULNERABLE AND MARGINALISED PEOPLE IN YOUR COMMUNITY.

FOR THE LAST 30 YEARS, AS I HAVE WORKED IN:

- RWANDA
- UGANDA
- CAMBODIA
- BOSNIA
- SIERRA LEONE
- EAST TIMOR

AND OTHER SCENES OF UNSPEAKABLE ATROCITIES –

I HAVE SOMETIMES BEEN ASKED HOW I REMAIN OPTIMISTIC ABOUT HUMANITY. AND ON THOSE OCCASIONS I HAVE ALWAYS REMEMBERED – AND BEEN INSPIRED BY – JANET AND HER LITTLE TEAM.

CONCLUSION

THOSE OF YOU GRADUATING TODAY HAVE HAD THE ADVANTAGE OF AN EXCELLENT EDUCATION IN ONE OF AUSTRALIA'S LEADING UNIVERSITIES.

I WANT TO CONGRATULATE YOU – BUT, IN CONCLUSION, I ALSO WANT TO CHALLENGE YOU TO BE CONSCIOUS OF THE OBLIGATIONS WE ALL SHARE – BOTH PROFESSIONALLY AND PERSONALLY – TO CREATE A CULTURE OF HUMAN RIGHTS:

- OF TOLERANCE
- OF NON-DISCRIMINATION
- OF RESPECT FOR INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCE
- AND ONE IN WHICH THE RIGHTS OF THE MOST VULNERABLE AND DISADVANTAGED IN OUR COMMUNITY ARE RESPECTED AND PROTECTED.

SOME OF YOU WILL BE TEACHERS AND HAVE THE OPPORTUNITY TO SHAPE THE VALUES AND ATTITUDES OF THE NEXT GENERATION.

SOME OF YOU WILL BE SOCIAL WORKERS – AND HAVE THE CHALLENGE AND SATISFACTION OF HELPING MANY OF THE MOST VULNERABLE IN OUR SOCIETY.

SOME OF YOU WILL BE JOURNALISTS AND HAVE THE INFLUENCE OF COMMUNICATING.

SOME OF YOU WILL BE GOVERNMENT OFFICIALS AND HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF ADVISING OUR POLITICAL LEADERS ON APPROPRIATE POLICIES AND PROGRAMMES.

BUT WHATEVER YOU DO . .

- **NEVER FORGET - THAT THE BIRTHRIGHT YOU HAVE IN THIS ENORMOUSLY FORTUNATE COUNTRY**
- **AND THE PRIVILEGE YOU HAVE HAD OF A HIGHER EDUCATION**

GIVE YOU OPPORTUNITIES AND RESPONSIBILITIES TO HELP THOSE LESS FORTUNATE THAN YOURSELVES.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR COURTESY AND ATTENTION.