

# **Address to New Graduates, University of South Australia,**

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**Prof Gary Banks AO, Dean, ANZSOG**

## **Introduction**

It is an honour and a pleasure for me today to address this large cohort of new graduates of the University of South Australia. I congratulate you all on your achievements – which I hope will be the precursor to many more in the future.

I have been asked to provide you with insights that may be helpful as you embark on your careers, both to you personally and for society. I have also been encouraged to keep my remarks brief, which is very sensible when asking anyone of my advanced years (and accumulated anecdotes) to address people of your (average) age!

So I shall confine myself in the few minutes allotted me to some brief remarks inspired by three disciplines within the Schools represented by those graduating here today: indigenous education, social policy and communications.

## **Indigenous education**

Indigenous people by definition comprise descendants of the first inhabitants of a country. In Australia, the arrival of aboriginal tribes via land bridges from Asia pre-dated that of European settlers by some 50 000 years. Aboriginal history and culture are therefore of great significance and form part of what it is to be an 'Australian'. Yet, as in other advanced countries with indigenous populations – such as the USA, Canada, and New Zealand – aboriginal Australians have struggled to find a place in our contemporary economic, social and political life commensurate with their long prior tenure in this country.

Indeed, as is well known, welfare dependence, unemployment, incarceration and other indicators of disadvantage and 'exclusion' are orders of magnitude

greater on average for indigenous people than for other Australians (including new migrants).

It is well known that a key to overcoming economic or social disadvantage is education. This has been played out in countless stories of migrants without any formal education, whose children have gone on to achieve great things in law, medicine, science, the arts and other learned fields. The same has been true for many indigenous people themselves. However the potential for education to transform lives is far from being fully realised in this country, especially for many Indigenous families and communities.

Why is that? I don't pretend to have the answer, or at least one that I could convey in the time available. And I won't deny that it involves complex challenges for our governments and Indigenous people themselves.

That said, surely a big part of the answer must lie in upgrading the standards of schooling available to aboriginal children (including by making it possible for some of our best teachers go to the most challenging schools) and in developing core curricula that excite children's interest in learning, despite lack of parental interest at home. Deficiencies in these areas abound, especially in regional and remote Australia. Those engaged in indigenous education are therefore to be commended as an important part of the solution.

## **Social policy**

Indigenous education, and indeed education generally, come under the rubric of 'social policy': those government interventions directed at creating a better society.

The reach of such interventions has greatly increased over time, as our society has become more affluent, with a greater capacity to expend resources on areas of need. Issues of domestic violence, alcohol and drug abuse, sexual harassment and bullying, disability and other welfare support, discrimination, and so on constitute a greater focus of public and policy attention today than at any time in the past. Also, economic policies are more frequently seen through a social lens than they used to be, as the vigorous debate about the distributional consequences of raising the GST and superannuation taxation illustrates.

Policies with respect to the gambling industries provide a good example. The liberalization in the 1990s of long-standing strict controls on gambling in most states of Australia was prompted primarily by presumed economic and financial benefits – more tourism, more jobs and, not least, more tax revenue for governments. But in light of the adverse impacts for many families and communities of widespread access to ‘the pokies’, regulation of gambling is now seen much more in social policy terms than solely as a form of industry policy. And that is a good thing, even if not much real progress has yet been made.

Gambling policy is illustrative of the fact that in many respects social policies are harder for governments to get right than economic policies. The best solutions are rarely self-evident. And those adopted in the past have sometimes made matters worse. Why is that? Well, a good starting point is that people are *complicated*. Their motivations can be hard to discern and their reactions to new programs hard to predict. This is compounded by the frequent lack of reliable data on which to base policy decisions. Governments often have to rely on peoples’ opinions rather than empirical observations of behaviour or responses. And, once a policy is introduced, it can take a long time to discern its full impacts.

To be effective, and even more so to be *cost-effective*, social policy requires good process in its development and implementation -- but it has not always had it. By a ‘good’ process I mean one that involves closely analysing the *causes* of a problem, carefully considering how government can help and assessing the relative merits of all available options, and finally monitoring implementation to confirm that the chosen approach achieves its goals without having unintended consequences. To do all this well demands close consultation with stakeholders, and clear communication of the policy itself.

## **Communications**

That brings me to my third and final topic. Those of you who have studied communications will be more conscious than most of the revolution that has occurred in technologies for transmitting information, ideas and opinions. The pervasiveness and individualisation of information flows – epitomized by the relatively new buzz words, ‘24/7 media’ and ‘social media’ – constitute a

revolution that is arguably re-shaping our societies and their politics every bit as much as the violent revolutions of the past. The communications revolution that we are experiencing daily is thus a very big deal and I could have used up all of my time (and more) talking about it.

Instead, I want to narrow the focus from the macro to the micro level. My message is that, regardless of your qualifications, how good you are at communicating will largely determine how successful you are in life. You may think that a bit far-fetched. So I hasten to add that innate intelligence and acquired knowledge will obviously also play an important part. Your degree does matter! But the ability to explain, to persuade and to influence are central to one's performance, one's ability to lead and be part of a team -- and ultimately therefore one's impact. This is true almost regardless of your field of endeavour – not just for those choosing 'communications' as a career.

During my own career I have seen many clever, well-trained people fail to make their mark in life because of an inability to get their message across. It is conceivable that new technologies might ameliorate that in the future, just as recording artists can now have their tone improved, or photographic models their image enhanced, by electronic means. But the 'raw material' still matters. There will ever only be two basic forms of communication, the verbal and the written, and if these are poor to start with, there is only so much that technology could ever do to make up for that.

So unless you have already attained a state of perfection, which I doubt, my advice is to continue to work hard on your writing and your oral communication skills. This may be the most important post-graduate study you can pursue.

## **In conclusion**

Once again, congratulations on completing your degrees. This is a milestone that will expand the possibilities for your future and for your contribution to society. It is now up to you to make the most of it.

