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## PRIME MINISTER

SPEECH BY THE PRIME MINISTER, THE HON P J KEATING, MP

THE UNIVERSITY OF NOTRE DAME AUSTRALIA GRADUATION CEREMONY  
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It is a great pleasure to be here tonight.

I suspect that until you see a graduation ceremony you haven't fully appreciated what education means to people.

I mean you don't very often see the sort of general and unmitigated happiness you see on people's faces here.

You don't see all that evidence of fulfilment and hope in one room very often.

For me, being with you this evening is also a pleasure, because I missed my own graduation ceremony.

Not that I didn't have a classical education - but it was in the Australian Labor Party.

Apart from a few degrees in economics, it afforded me a Ph.D in Varieties of Human Behaviour.

In fact, of all the Prime Ministers since the 1940s, with the exception of John McEwen, who was in the job for just a few days, I am the only one not to have had a university education.

My academic education ended at the age of seventeen.

I am quite sure that the great majority of people from my background in those years would not have expected to set foot in a university in their lifetimes.

It was beyond reach - or at least seemed to be.

It is true that with application and intelligence the sons and daughters of working people could get there.

But not many of them. The majority simply couldn't afford it. And there were not many universities.

However, the physical limits were not the only impediment, nor perhaps the most important one.

There was a psychological obstacle. A university education was beyond the reach of our social expectations.

It required young people to think beyond their circumstances, beyond the patterns of life in their families and communities. It meant very often leaving those families and communities.

It required a leap of the imagination which most of us could not make.

Most did not expect to go to university or even finish secondary school - indeed, just a decade ago only three in ten Australians were finishing secondary school. That is in 1984.

And so long as jobs were available we were not very concerned.

In the 1950s and 1960s jobs were available: not particularly interesting jobs - but jobs. Jobs like the one I took, aged fifteen, as a clerk in the Sydney County Council.

But that job no longer exists. That's the point. That's what this era of our history is all about.

All over the world in modern economies like this one, the old low-skill jobs are going. All over the world the story is education and training.

Personal opportunities depend on it. The success of nations depends on it.

Now, I suspect that it is customary for politicians making these addresses to speak on one of two or three themes - themes from which some lesson can be learned to guide you through your lives.

For instance, I could tell you that while your formal education is a very good thing, your real education is about to begin - in life, in work, in the school of hard knocks. I could tell you there is no substitute for experience.

Or I could tell you that we're delighted to see you all graduating today at this lovely new university - but, in all modesty, you owe it to us, for really we made it all possible.

I intend to spare you a speech on these themes today, but there is a little truth in both of them.

On the second one, I cannot refrain from saying that my pleasure in seeing these young people graduate today is appreciably greater because I know that, in the course of the last decade, tens of thousands of young Australians have been given an opportunity to study and earn degrees at new universities and colleges.

Since the 1980s, the equivalent of twenty major universities have been added to the system by the Commonwealth Government - Commonwealth Labor Government.

This expansion of our tertiary education has not only delivered new opportunities to countless individuals, but it has made it possible for people to get higher education without leaving their communities.

My pleasure is greater because the Government, and particularly John Dawkins, played a part in it. If you like, the milestone you reached today is something of a milestone for us as well.

Where people from working class suburbs and poorer rural areas not so long ago never imagined that their children might go to university, it is now one of their life options.

The lesson is: look what can flow from engagement in public life, look what this democracy can do, look how we have it in our power to change.

Look how, like the graduates here today, we can imagine something better and turn it to reality. We can do it as individuals, as communities and as a nation.

As for the first of the familiar themes - it is true that the very best of formal education is still no substitute for life lived. It is true that in this life one is constantly learning.

But no one today would stand here now and discount the need for a formal education. The fact is young Australians need one as never before - more than one, because it is a statistical certainty that the majority of people graduating today will be re-trained at least once and probably twice in their lives.

So what is the lesson? Be open to change. Believe in your capacities to understand the contemporary world and confront the challenges. Embrace the future, don't retreat from it.

Which leads me to a third cliché of these addresses: it is to say that in your hands the future of Australia lies.

I suspect this has most often been said by politicians who didn't care to have the future in their hands.

It is a half-truth.

It is obviously true that the future depends on young Australians, but I have to tell you my generation is not quite ready to hand over responsibility.

It is my generation on whom the responsibility falls: we hold the instruments of power - in the national parliament, in the states, in the community.

And your generation should judge us all by the same criteria: Are we prepared to confront the necessities which face us? Are we prepared to make over those elements of our national life which need making over?

Or are we prepared to let things drift?

The temptation in politics is always to let things drift.

It is very easy to decide to play safe and manage your way through.

It is much harder to imagine reforms, set them as goals and go for them - and trust that the momentum which comes from the pursuit will carry you through.

It is also easy to become preoccupied with the day to day business of politics - warding off aggressors, pursuing a more potent media profile, handling the little crises which dog all democratic governments.

Sometimes political life is a bit like being inside a pinball machine: with balls whizzing around all over the place, you can find yourself with your eyes closed and your hands over your head adopting a crouch as a permanent political position.

You can preoccupy yourself with every missile, with every seeming necessity, with every process, with every ritual and think you're playing the game, yet forget that the game is ultimately about getting done what has to be done.

The lesson is: power is for using. It is not to be wasted - or feared or despised. It is to be used to deliver our democratic ambitions - in my case, our social democratic ambitions.

Which brings me to my theme for tonight.

You will have heard, I'm sure - I sincerely hope you have heard - those terms which have become watchwords of the Australian economy, and for that matter, Australian society.

I mean words like "competitive", "internationally competitive" - "an internationally competitive economy". You will have heard a lot of talk about "productivity".

These were the words which emerged to describe our economic ambitions in the 1980s. In the 1990s, we can safely say, they describe much more of the reality.

What you might have heard less frequently are the words which describe our social ambitions.

Yet we pursued them with equal energy. We were determined from the start to make the Australian economy internationally competitive, yet no less determined to see

that the principles of a competitive economy did not flow over, as it has in some countries, into a creed of selfishness, or a justification for abandoning our traditions of social fairness.

Because if you abandon these, you abandon opportunity and thereby abandon talent. And you abandon the social cohesion on which national success depends.

In the nineties, I think it is essential that we maintain the momentum of our economic reform while also maintaining our determination to see Australia emerge as one of the truly advanced social democracies of the world.

This was our reputation at the end of the last century. I have absolutely no doubt that it can be our reality at the end of this century.

We can do it through continuing to make our economy and our federation more creative and efficient, and at each step in that process ensuring that the benefits flow to the whole of the country and all of the people: making the safety net of social services more effective and sophisticated, extending the reach of opportunity and assistance to communities and regions which have been denied them.

I am talking about dealing everyone into national recovery and national prosperity - and making everyone feel part of the national equation.

There is no intellectual copyright in political life - only the satisfaction which comes from having persuaded the other side of politics to one's own view.

So it is deeply satisfying, not to say flattering, to hear Dr Hewson talking about remaking Liberal Party policy into something more socially "inclusive" - in other words something rather like Labor Party policy.

For, in fact, it will be no bad thing if there emerges a general consensus on the need to share in Australia's future, because there are extraordinary opportunities for Australia in the modern world - most particularly in modern Asia.

"Asia" is another word you hear a lot of these days, and often in the context of "competitiveness" and "productivity".

For Asia does set us these same economic imperatives: and meeting them successfully translates into words like "opportunity" - unprecedented opportunity to build a rich, creative, complex society and set up generations of Australians in the twenty-first century.

The truth is we have never been in this situation before: not with a chance to make it on our own, in our own region, by our own genius and endeavour.

But it is essential that in doing this we make sure that these opportunities - the chance to benefit and the chance to contribute - are extended to Australians wherever they come from and whatever their social and economic circumstances may now be.

The economic and the social are not separate categories.

The major issue now facing us, long-term unemployment, falls into both.

We have to tackle long-term unemployment for reasons of social equity, for reasons of compassion, for the reason that we will never be able to say that we have succeeded as a nation so long as we have several hundred thousand men and women and their families unable to find work, and with it dignity and hope.

But it also has to be understood that unemployment has economic costs as well: we lose the productive output that they would otherwise create, we lose their talent and energy. And we lose again, because we need to support them when they might be supporting themselves.

Now there are some people who will say that the way to make Australia more competitive is to reduce wages. They believe that a less equal society is a more efficient one because the labour market is more competitive. For which read - more desperate, more "do or die".

This is the path that some countries chose in the 1980s.

It is emphatically the wrong one for Australia.

The human and social cost of privation and uncertainty is too high. The cost of inequalities to efficiency and cohesion is too high. The cost to Australian ambitions - to our sense of what it means to be Australian - is too high.

In my view it would betray not just our century-old traditions of social justice, but all we have done in the past decade to make Australia a country which can profitably make its way in the world.

The acceptance of a low wage society would be to deny our capacity to improve. It conveniently takes the pressure off our efforts to create a better country here - a low wage society for instance, has less need to provide educational opportunity for all.

The alternative - the only alternative - is to improve productivity: improve the quality of everything we do from the workplace to the boardroom, our farms, our schools, colleges and universities, in government, be it local, State or Commonwealth.

And this is where you come in - the graduates here tonight and their families.

This is where every Australian comes in.

Higher levels of productivity are only possible with high quality human resources - high quality people.

If we are going to be competitive, we need a skilled, highly educated population.

The future belongs to societies that organise themselves for learning. What we know and what we can do now holds the key to our economic success, just as our command of natural resources once did.

Because we are so rich in natural resources, it has often been said that for much of our history we have tended to believe that our country would always deliver us. Now there is no question that we have to deliver our country.

Our mining and pastoral industries, like the great freedoms which Australia's space and environment provides, will continue to enrich us.

But only if we match it with human creativity, engagement and ideas. Only if we do things and make things which in one way or another wear the badge of Australian learning, imagination, confidence and endeavour.

As I said, that is where you come in.

Where once the great majority of Australians left school to do work that required few skills and little knowledge, and had no reason to expect that they would ever need them; where once it could be safely said that the best school was the school of experience, now the acquisition of skills and knowledge must be inseparable from that experience.

It therefore must be the duty of my generation, and especially the duty of those of us in positions of power, to deliver to the generation of people represented by those who graduated here tonight educational systems which make learning part of our national life - part of the experience of all Australians.

I said a moment ago that these remarks applied not just to the new graduates, but to their families.

And of course it is true. The most fundamental learning begins with them: it is where our attitudes are shaped, our aspirations and expectations formed.

We get our approach to learning from our families. They can teach the value of work and faith in the future. They can teach us the value of ourselves and others.

They can also fail to do these things.

But when they do them, they do for Australia everything good governments strive to do. I mean they provide security nets, education, health care, cohesion, certainty, identity, ambition.

And the truth is, they do it so much better than governments.

It would be inappropriate to conclude this speech without saying something about Notre Dame University. The least I can say is how impressed I am.

Impressed, yet not so terribly surprised. When we are talking about extending educational opportunity to everyone, we are talking about extending human dignity. I am very well aware of just how powerful a motive this is in Catholic education. And so long as I am in the Australian Labor Party, it is quite impossible to forget it.

I began by talking about how opportunities for tertiary education were largely denied to most Australians in the days when I was growing up. The great change which has come over our education system since then has been reflected in virtually every element of Australia's life.

Those new educational opportunities for people of working class backgrounds were vital in the transformation of the union movement and the Labor movement in general. They were vital to a generation of migrants and their children. They were vital for women. They have been vital for business and the public service.

The confidence and capacity to transform ourselves as an economy and a society in this last decade has been substantially derived from the transformation in our education system.

It seems to me that in the 1980s, for the first time in our history, Australians had the confidence to take on the world. That has been the task of my generation. It will also be yours.

In this, the education you have had here at Notre Dame will serve you well - but as an old De La Salle boy, and a Labor Party man, let me tell you that while education is essential to your lives, and always will be, there is no substitute for faith.

That's my lesson: believe in yourselves, believe in your generation, believe in your ideals, believe in your country.

Keep the faith.