

# **ADDRESS TO GRADUANDS OF THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION, ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH AUSTRALIA**

*His Excellency the Governor of South Australia Rear-Admiral Kevin Scarce, Deputy Chancellor Ms Alice McCleary, Vice-Chancellor Professor Peter Høj, Pro Vice-Chancellor Professor Pal Ahluwalia, Pro Vice-Chancellor Dr Anna Ciccarelli, Academics of the University, Distinguished Guests and very importantly, Graduands and their Families:*

It is certainly a great honour and a tremendous pleasure to be invited to speak at this important day in the lives of the graduands seated here and also in the life of this vigorous university. When I first arrived in South Australia as the new principal of Pembroke School back in 1991, this university has just entered the world and it is now the largest university in the State. Its reputation is growing strongly and the range of courses it offers is quite astonishing while the diversity of its academic and student community is one of its many strengths.

My qualifications are based in Asian history, Chinese language and world politics and I have found the field both fascinating and alarming over the years. Fascinating because of the complex inter-play between diverse Asian cultures over the course of history and it has been alarming, because as a human race, we seemed to have learned little about treating each other with both respect and decency. Being scholars from the divisions of psychology, communication and international studies, there are ample reasons for you to be thinking about these issues in a rigorous imaginative and adventurous manner.

I know that every group of leavers from any university in Australia has gone out into the world facing the unique challenges of their day. For example, the graduates of April 1939 were surely not going into a peaceful and well-ordered world. However, I believe it is fair to say that politics and world affairs have become a lot more complicated since that time. After all, in 1939 there were only about 50 countries in the world while now there are 195 while in 1939, the world population was only 2.2 billion compared with 6.7 billion today. In terms of sheer numbers the world just has to be more complex.

The simple fact is, therefore, that there is increasing competition for diminishing resources. There is less oil, less water, less arable land and

less clean air to go round at precisely the time we need more of each. A telling example of this stark reality is found in the following anecdote quoted in the 2000 BBC Reith lecture by the eminent Indian scientist, Vananda Shiva,

*On March 27th, the 25 year-old Betavati Ratan took his life because he could not pay back debts for drilling a deep tube well on his two acre farm. The wells are now dry, as are the wells in Gujarat and Rajasthan where more than 50 million people face a water famine. The drought is not a "natural disaster". It is "man-made". It is the result of mining scarce ground water in arid regions to grow thirsty cash crops for exports instead of water-prudent food crops for local needs.*

This story has a familiar ring to it.

The hunger for more goods and services is exacerbated by the rapidly-growing middle classes in India and China where legitimate demands for the accoutrements of a modern and affluent society, as we have come to know it, are growing at an enormous rate. When I first went to China in 1974, there were no highways, no private car ownership and it was impossible to actually drive from Beijing to Shanghai. Now, it is estimated that there are 130,000 kilometres of highways increasingly choked with traffic. In 1980, China was an oil exporter, now it imports the precious liquid at an ever-increasing rate thus entering the competition to source good quality cheap oil for the over 7 million vehicles added to the Chinese road fleet each year. For this, read India as well.

Why is this relevant? It is because this snapshot of competition, growth and change is affecting how the world's countries relate to each other. Competition for scarce resources produces world friction and flashpoints which often erupt into conflict. There is no doubt that the current conflict in the Middle East, with all of its oil resources, is linked to this proposition. Furthermore, certain undesirable regimes are propped up by powerful countries who want access to their riches. These are just some of the potentially lethal issues of the twenty-first century which we have to face.

The world all the more needs lateral, even radical, thinkers. This is all the more so because conventional ways of addressing issues has changed so much. Some observers reflect nostalgically upon the Cold War and the division of the world into the so-called "free world" and the "socialist

camp". Sure, this division produced enmity and flare ups often with enormous human cost but world politics then seemed predictable in its disagreements. State-to-state relations these days (with some notable exceptions) are generally calm, it's what's happening *inside* many states (some of which exist in name only) which is not.

Successful and viable countries, of which Australia is one, have to deal with and try to relate to these uncertainties and there are no simple answers. Therefore, all the more reason to train experts such as yourselves. International studies graduates may benefit from a report just released by the Lowy Institute in which its chairman, and former diplomat, Allan Gyngell wrote,

*there's too few Australian diplomats and overseas missions and said even Iceland outranks Australia with the number of its posts abroad.*

It seems that Australia is losing influence and political clout at the very time we need a lot more of it! The increasing complexity of world conflict and the harsh ideological clashes we are now facing will require competent people who can get inside the minds of the polarised, marginalised and usually very disconnected people who commit acts of terror.

Polarised intransigence, where there is no wish for rivals to be empathetic with alternate points of view, where it's my way and no other and where the protagonists play with guns, makes for a lethal cocktail. International examples of this can be found in flashpoints in many places including the Korean peninsula, the South China Sea, Afghanistan and Iraq, the Middle East, the Sudan and again, tragically, in Northern Ireland.

Such intransigence, and its attendant refusal to compromise, flies in the face of people who have been privileged to enjoy a liberal education, such as you, and it threatens world stability on a daily basis. Humanity, decency and reason are running up against violence, suicide and mayhem. It is abundantly clear that there is plenty of room for internationalists, psychologists and communicators in this unhappy mix!

Let us not be too downhearted, however. There are good things happening in the world. Better communications of all sorts have forged closer links of friendship and commitment to each other and among many of the world's peoples there is a far greater understanding of other cultures, religions, philosophies and customs.

Unfortunately, the assumption that English and the Western (read American) ways of doing things still are traditionally seen by us as better than the many alternatives. This is reinforced daily by the media, popular entertainment, the internet and the economic power of the West. I hope that the newly graduated people here play a part in de-mystifying non-European cultures by more fully acknowledging thousands of years of cultural, social, educational and political achievements in other parts of the world to a higher level of understanding and appreciation. Three centuries of colonialism in the bulk of the world's lands have a lot to answer for.

Finally, I wish you all the very best for your futures and the opportunities you will have to contribute to making a better world. Celebrate this auspicious occasion and then enjoy the excitement of building a fascinating life beyond. Look back with pride but go forward with confidence: you have truly earned this day!