

Tuesday 14 April 2015
**Occasional Address to Graduands (Edited for
distribution)**

The Honourable Chris Kourakis, Chief Justice of South Australia

I thank Flinders University for bestowing this award on me. I value greatly, and believe that governments and all Australians, should better understand the enormous contribution academia has made to our prosperity and our democracy. And so I am deeply humbled by this honour.

I graduated in law from Adelaide University in 1980. It was then the only Adelaide law school so it is my academic home or, for those who prefer the Latin, my alma mater. However, for a number of reasons I feel a personal political and philosophical affinity to Flinders University.

Please bear with me while I mention what will appear to be a random miscellany of circumstances and connections which I hope to bring together with some final comments.

First my daughter Chloe, who happily is here today, is a recent graduate of this University in Law and International Studies. By studying at Flinders, Chloe was able to take subjects in Modern Greek. And that is the next connection I mention.

Over the years I have been much impressed by the work of professor Tsanikas. He is, as many of you know, the Professor of Modern Greek Studies and the Director of Australian Centre for Hellenic Language and Culture at Flinders University. It is that centre which attracted the gift of the bronze of Aristotle which is found in the main plaza. Aristotle is acclaimed as the world's first scientist and first logician. Importantly, to

Islamic scholars of the medieval period he was also known as the first teacher. The debt the world owes to Islamic scholars for safekeeping classical learning in that period is not often publically acknowledged.

Next, a political connection.

The first Chancellor of Flinders University from 1966 to 1971 was Professor Peter Henry Karmel.

In the first 100 days following the election of the Whitlam Labour Government in December 1972, he was appointed chair of the Australian Schools Commission charged with examining the funding basis of government and non-government schools.

The Committee identified a lack of human and material resources, and a lack of quality in teaching curriculum and school organisation. It recommended Commonwealth funding to State Government schools to address inequities in educational opportunity.

In December 2011, close to four decades later, the review panel chaired by David Gonski reported that many schools, particularly those in the government sector continue to suffer from a lack of capital investment which impacts on educational opportunities afforded to students.

It recommended better coordination to maximise funding efforts on the improvement of the educational outcomes for disadvantaged students. The fundamental political and philosophical premise of both reports – equality of educational opportunity – should be regarded as sacrosanct.

I move to another Vice Chancellor, Professor Chubb, who served from 1995-2000. Professor Chubb was appointed Australia's Chief Scientist in May 2011. In recent times he has stoutly defended scientific learning from those who, from ignorance or for private advantage, have waged war on it. He also has strongly advocated for adequate research funding.

Only the scientific method, empirical investigation and rational analysis, allows us to distinguish between what works on the one hand and blind prejudice on the other.

I move now to some of this University's academic staff.

Professor Medlin was the Foundation Professor of Philosophy at Flinders University. He actively campaigned against the Vietnam War and was imprisoned for three weeks in 1970. He was also a strong advocate of greater political economic and cultural independence for Australia, a cause which I strongly supported in my undergraduate years.

The Honourable Elliott Johnston accepted a position as an Honorary Professor of Law at Flinders University in the early 1990s. I had the honour of working in the law firm he established immediately after my graduation. He was, until his appointment as a Supreme Court Judge, an active member of the Communist Party of Australia. He later presided over the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. He was committed to both the Rule of Law and the economic advancement of the underprivileged.

It should not be forgotten that the purpose of universities is not limited to industrial and technological advances but extends to the improvement of government and social institutions, and to the achievement of a just society.

Kim Economides is the Dean of the Law School. With Kim I share not only a Greek heritage, but also the fact that our parents participated in the antifascist movements before the outbreak of World War II; Kim's father, as a member of the international brigades who fought General Franco in Spain, and my mother, as a member of the underground resistance to the Greek dictator General Metacas.

Let me now attempt to link those connections I have mentioned. In my view, the great advancements in human civilisation and the lives of ordinary people over the centuries have been driven largely by the collective and collaborative effort of communities and have been directed to the common good.

Gradually over time the social institutions through which that collective action has been organised have been democratised. By democracy I mean not just tick-a-box majority rule. I include within the term democracy a political culture supported by the rule of law and which protects fundamental human rights.

In recent times the great social pendulum has swung a little from the collective to personal advancement.

Responsibility now falls on you and other tertiary graduates in Australia and around the world to maintain the progressive history of human civilisation.

In Australia and abroad members of your generation are the first who can truly claim to be citizens of the world. Information technology has connected you with billions of people around the world. You are, and will continue to be, participants in a great global competition of ideas. In that competition Australia can proudly hold its own. Our high standards of education, our democracy and our unique cultural identity allow us to confidently take our independent position in the world. Your opinions are more valuable than any that have come before; they are built on the shoulders of the past and from a much wider base than those that they follow. Individually and united, your ideas will shape this exponentially changing world.

In that world it is critical that every child, whatever his or her social circumstances, have the same opportunity for education and advancement as any other child. That is not just because it is socially just but as importantly it ensures that we harness all of our intellectual resources to meet the great challenges of the future.

Of those challenges climate change is potentially the most calamitous. It can only be addressed by objective scientific analysis eschewing quackery and self interest.

I know that many of you face the reality that a degree does not in itself guarantee employment. Do not lose heart. Stay confident and keep yourself work ready. We all should urge State and Federal governments to facilitate and support employment opportunities which allow the Australian community to harness your skills.

I have already stressed how important it is that scientific investigation, rationality and reasonableness prevail over ignorance, personal advantage, bigotry and hatred.

In the Middle East and in Africa neo-fascist forces disguising themselves in the cloak of one of the world's great religion have in effect declared war on human civilisation. There is no simple solution to the misery which they inflict on millions of people.

However, ultimately they will fail when the root causes which sustain them are tackled by bringing educational, vocational and employment opportunities to the peoples of those regions.

In countries like ours we must take care not to unduly curtail the rights and liberties of our own citizens because of the fear these forces engender. Again evidence based decision making, not politicking, is required.

Finally, a comment about the digital age.

I am optimistic about the contribution of technology and, the virtual and online worlds, in particular to human progress. I am confident that overall the world will benefit from it.

However, there is much more to life than the binary system of the digital world. If we limit ourselves to what is in or out, what should be bought or sold, or what should be liked or disliked, nuance and difference will be lost and innovation suppressed.

More important than the data and information which you have assimilated in the course of your studies is your training to think. It is the greatest of the gifts your university education has given you and the most important of the qualities which you now take out into your professions, workplaces and communities.

Do not become lazy.

Continue to practice and refine that skill.

The “comment” box on social media is more important than the “like” button. The group mentality has its use but also its limits as lemmings eventually discover. It is your reasoned opinions which will make a difference, which will change the world, for the better.