THE MUD OF PREJUDICE (1989)

In April 1989, I gave this address to graduating arts students at the University of New South Wales. I had already resigned from the Opposition front bench. That I was invited was in itself a political statement by that university. The speech, arranged months before, was given during a strike by airline pilots. The Senate was sitting and I had to drive (at the last minute) from Canberra to Kensington in a rented car because there were no aeroplanes to catch.

This graduation is a recognition by this university of several things.

It is an opportunity to congratulate you individually for your persistence, your exam cunning, and your success. It is an opportunity to congratulate your spouses and your families for their part in that success.

It is an opportunity to acknowledge that this graduation day is a day of celebration and happiness.

It is an opportunity too, to welcome each of you, formally, to the community of scholars. To welcome you to the rights and to the obligations that go with membership of that community.

In the United States occasions like this one are not called graduations. They are called commencement. If words are bullets in the war of ideas then this choice of name is both deliberate and revealing. Commencement emphasises the concept of starting anew, of using the qualifications you now possess to do something new, to achieve something more, of setting out rather than of having arrived.

Each one of you has now had some months since you knew of your success and graduand status here. Most of you have moved into your own communities to work, with new standing and new status. You will continue to do so for the rest of your working lives, as contributors, as leaders, and hopefully, as exemplars.
Let us together spend a few moments on that last point. Let us think a little about just what you will be able to offer to the society that has chosen to educate you.

As graduates in Arts you have the advantage of a generalised degree. You are likely to reap the benefits it offers—the wider and extra options, the extra opportunities, and also the rather wider view of society that made graduates like you the main recruits to positions of eventual power in the greatest bureaucracies in the world. With those opportunities, however, there are extra and onerous responsibilities. You, and particularly you graduates in Arts, become the trustees of community values and the defenders of those values.

Today in Australia we find ourselves in one of those ebb phases of political life. The tide of liberalism—lower case spelling at a university occasion—is retreating before a new and different force. You will know that the ebb tide is not always attractive, for example, if one lives on Pittwater and sees that body of water at low tide. And in this ebb tide of our political times we find that the mud of prejudice is everywhere; it is not good to walk in; it clings to you; it is worse to smell; and one cannot walk in it without becoming soiled.

So it is in Australia today.

The values that in my generation were accepted as proper starting points for policy are now discarded, sneered at, and rejected. Tolerance of those of other religions, of other political persuasions, of other value systems, of other races, is no longer automatically accepted as proper or even desirable. My mail now contains more hate letters based on race or religion than ever before. The old liberal balance of rights balanced by obligations is now threatened on one side by those who call for rights but reject any idea of obligation, on the other by those prepared to deny to others rights that they claim for themselves.

Some politicians, aware of their capacity to alter the legitimacy of values, have promoted policies based on matters beyond the control of individuals—matters like the colour of their skin—instead of insisting that it is the value and worth of the person that should determine our views and our decisions. You will know that the little skirmish last year turned that issue aside, but you will also realise that it was only a temporary stay, a momentary victory.

The attack on values like tolerance, like pluralism, on our traditions of valuing and profiting from diversity, is gathering force. A creed of self and selfishness, a lack of care and concern for others, blindness to what we might be leaving to our children, are all of them present, and accepted, and even valued.

Which is where you become vital.
You are not the people you were when first you came here as undergraduates. You have had some glimpse of the history of human thought and achievement, you have shared in some of the ideas that have inspired and led societies, you have examined, analysed and understood some of the enduring values that have led humans to create a better world. You have studied philosophy. You understand history, its themes and messages. You have a love of our language and many of you have capacity in other languages too.

You are not narrow technocrats from some professional faculty as so many of us were. You are the trustees for the accumulated culture and wisdom of millennia. In this harsh time you are also, like it or not, those who must be advocates and participants in the unending battles about values and purposes and directions.

In a famous quotation, Thucydides put the following words into the mouth of Pericles as he stood over the bodies of those who had died in the defence of Athens:

We do not think that a person who takes no part in politics is minding his own business. We think he has no business in a democracy at all.¹

Thucydides was right. If those who can contribute choose not to do so, then the civilisation of which they are a valued part is in peril.

So today, here at your graduation, your commencement, your formal acceptance into the community of scholars, each of you must decide whether you will be a passenger or a participant, an inspiration or an incubus. You have seen the signs with the ugliness of debate and disputation in 1988.

Congratulations again on all you have done and on all that you have achieved so far. This society is now yours. You hold it in trust. This is commencement day. Your real task now lies before you, and the way in which you discharge that task will be the society you bequeath to those who follow.

¹ Thucydides (1972: 147).