In May 1997 I was invited to address a graduation at the University of Canberra and to give the occasional address there. I was troubled as the evidence of a new racism had been appearing and was shocked that prominent people were slow to condemn it. I believed that a national tone was set by what those in leadership roles were saying.

To the new graduates, and to your families, congratulations. The qualifications of the University of Canberra, the degrees, the diplomas, the certificates, are valued by scholars, by the community, and by employers alike. If we really want a clever country then it is to people like you that we look to achieve it. It is people like you who will deliver it. Your families are proud that you have seen the distance, that you have prevailed, that you have succeeded in the exams with their support, and their sacrifices, and their encouragement. Remember, it is their success too and that it has been with their help that you have succeeded.

You have added to this university as well. It is different because you are among its graduate alumni. You are now members of the worldwide community of scholars and will be so for the remainder of your lives. It is a good community, this community of scholars. It adds to every society in which it is found. It provides much of the intellectual ‘oomph’ that impels us on and improves our lives.

It is a community often under attack, not least in an anti-intellectual country like Australia. What scholars must do, always, repeatedly, whenever asked, is to find ways of examining what happens, to state what they see and believe without fear. The message will not always be correct. But it is the duty of
scholars to offer their constructions, their theories, their views. It is the message that is more important than the messenger. Actually, the tradition in Australia is to kill the messenger if the message is inconvenient or if the message challenges established orthodoxies, or established forms or established relationships.

Scholars are not frightened of new things, or new information, or new evidence, or new theories, or new ways of seeing old things. So now you are part of the worldwide community of scholars. Protect and further this community. After all, you cannot now leave it, so it had better do well. But now let me speak out as I have been urging you to do. Let me ‘put my money where my mouth is’. Let us talk about racism in Australia.

A little more than a year ago a hitherto unknown candidate for Federal Parliament resurrected the race debate in her election campaign. To its credit, the party she sought to represent dis-endorsed her quickly and decisively. To its shame, the electorate she appealed to with her ugly message elected her. She then, in her first speech in Parliament, reiterated her racist views and has reiterated them since. She is appealing to a darker side of the character of Australia. It is a side that held sway when awful things happened to inhabitants of this continent who were here long before we whites were. It is a side which was associated with bloodshed, and which has resulted today in poverty, disease, death, disadvantage and dispossession.

Today the descendants of earlier Australians live in squalor, have disease rates which are shamefully high, have high premature mortality rates—life for blacks is 20 years less than for whites—have awful infant mortality rates, and so on. How can any of us be happy with any of these figures? How can any of us escape feelings of shame at these figures? I have never heard that particular constituency politician say, for instance, anything about the extreme degree of Aboriginal disadvantage, have never heard her say she cares. She blames the victims, instead of addressing the problems.

The extent of disadvantage for anyone, black or white, has no place in a wealthy and affluent country. And I expect—no, I demand—that national leaders speak for us, that they make clear the values that we hold on this and on other moral matters. That they have been relatively silent when they could have spoken out, when they could have spoken for the nation, is an indictment on them, on the standards they set, on what they are prepared to tolerate, on the values they articulate for us that they wish to transmit to the world.

To stay relatively silent when one has the platform and the opportunity to speak out is to put populism before principle. You new graduates must be brave and ready always to speak out, whenever need exists, for you are the future leaders of this society and it will be what you make it. Let us all assert that we
will not tolerate extreme disadvantage, whomever it affects. Let us assert that we demand that it be overcome. Let us assert that we are angry—especially at a minister who boasts proudly that he will, during his time as minister, not become emotionally involved in his task, and at leaders who will not, on our behalf, when they are able, make crystal clear that we reject anyone who wishes to reactivate a race debate that should have ended with the referendum of 1967.

I was minister for Aboriginal affairs. I failed to fix the situation. But I tried, and things were better at the end of my stewardship than they were at the beginning. My fear is that we, as a nation, are going backwards now, that communal commitment is less, that racism, in the absence of its unequivocal rejection at the highest levels, is getting stronger, and is becoming more acceptable.

We are talking about an Australia that you will inherit, that you will shape, in which you will be movers and shakers, and in which the dominant values will be what you assert. I want no part of any nation such as I fear ours is becoming. I want no part of pretending things are other than as they are. I want no part of political leaders who fail to state clearly that racism is wrong, that it has no part in modern Australia, and that Aboriginal disadvantage demands action now from all governments acting on our behalf. I doubt that you want it either.

Reconciliation was always a worthwhile and important process. That is why so many prominent people wanted to be part of it. I believe that reconciliation points the way. I want the process to be valued and nurtured—not to have it sidelined.

A word too about Mabo and Wik. A lot of dangerous nonsense has been talked about both, and some quite disgraceful attacks have been mounted on judges of the High Court who are doing no more than tell us, as they see it, what the law and Constitution mean. The Mabo decision asserted that the concept of *terra nullius* was wrong. Fancy asking us to believe that the continent was uninhabited before white settlement and then basing a system of land tenure on that fiction. The Wik decision merely formalises what has happened for generations where pastoralists and Aborigines have worked together for access to traditional sites. There is no question of civilisation as we know it ending with either decision unless rednecks carry the day and compliant governments follow.

With those sombre thoughts, I congratulate all of you again, wish you well, hope that you will continue to support this splendid university that cares so much and which has given each of you such a good start for the journey that lies ahead. I ask only that you speak out whenever it is needed and whenever you can. And congratulations to you all.