

# WELCOMING SPEECH TO CHASS CONFERENCE

Parliament House, Canberra

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Senator George Brandis

It is a great pleasure to welcome you to Parliament House for this conference.

It is very fitting that you should be meeting in this building, whose whole purpose is to be the ultimate public forum in which ideas about the shape and direction of our society are contested every sitting day. It is often said that Australian politics is anti-intellectual; that Parliament has ceased to be a debating chamber and has become nothing but a glorified television studio where political leaders, during Question Time, dutifully utter glib doses of unworthy rhetoric to provide the "seven second grab" for the evening news. Of course that does happen – it is part of the theatre of the place – but it isn't all that goes on. In truth, throughout the day, Members of Parliament engage, with various levels of sophistication, in the battle of ideas.

If you went into the Senate today, you would hear Senators debating the Government's reforms to workplace relations laws, to protect individual workers from the collective power of monopolies of labour; if you decided to look in on the House of Representatives, you would hear MPs debating the Government's reforms to the *Trade Practices Act*, to protect small businesses from the market power of monopolies of capital. And although the arguments might not always be measured and elegant, I am sure that they would remind you of Lord Keynes' remark about people in authority "who believe

themselves to be quite exempt from intellectual influences, [yet] are usually the slaves of some defunct economist". Keynes' observation, in the famous concluding passage of *The General Theory*, that far from practical men being immune from the influence of ideas, "the world is ruled by little else", that "soon or late, it is ideas, not vested interests, which are dangerous for good or evil" could not be more true than it is in this place, particularly in this important year.

Nor are some of our leading politicians wanting in erudition. We may have come a long way from the spacious days of a century ago, when Alfred Deakin amused himself on the long sea-voyage to London in 1900 to finalize the terms of the Constitution by reading *The Brothers Karamazov* in the French translation,<sup>1</sup> while in 1903 Edmund Barton outraged Protestant sentiment in Australia by conversing easily with Pope Pius X in Latin.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, today we have a Prime Minister who relishes "the clash of ideas" – and is far more widely read in modern history than some modern history professors I have known – contesting the great issues of the day against a famously Mandarin-speaking Opposition Leader who has shown us just how far a Bachelor of Arts degree can take you to being designated an "intellectual".

The work of those who devote their careers to the humanities, arts and social sciences is to study, interpret and explain humanity and society. The work of those who devote their careers to Parliamentary service is to make decisions

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<sup>1</sup> Souter, *Lion and Kangaroo* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2000), p. 89.

about our own society, in the service of its people. So it seems to me that what is of interest to CHASS, and the daily work of politicians, occupies much common territory. Their work may be very different, but their focus is much the same.

We often hear the lament that the humanities are in decline. The declining enrolment in Arts degrees at Australian universities over recent years lends credence to that view. As I understand from the conversations I have had with Toss Gascoigne and others, the purpose for which CHASS was formed was to respond to that perception, and to arrest it. I applaud that goal, and will do whatever I can to assist you. But why has this happened?

I must say that, in my own experience, of the three university degrees which I hold – two in law and one in arts – far and away the most useful has been my Bachelor of Arts, simply because it encouraged me to read widely and to think for myself. Particularly in a society in which students might be expected to have a sequence of careers, not just one, I firmly believe that the future belongs to the intelligent, adaptable generalist, not to the narrow, immobile specialist.

But apart from vocational issues, there are, I believe, deeper reasons why the esteem of the humanities and social sciences seems to have suffered. I cannot help thinking that, at least in part, it is because many of its academic

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<sup>2</sup> Reynolds, *Edmund Barton* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1979), p. 183.

practitioners have, in seeking to understand human society, blundered down blind alleyways and fallen prey to the worship of false gods.

Let me make my point plainly, in this building devoted to the clash of ideas, with a concededly sweeping generalization: that for most of our lifetimes, and earlier, far too many academic practitioners of the humanities and social sciences simply got the twentieth century wrong. In Toynbeeian terms, they interpreted the twentieth century as a struggle between the values of the political Left and the values of the political Right, with the Left representing sometimes misguided virtue which at least captured the forward movement of history, and the Right representing recalcitrance, bigotry and ignorance. That prejudice still informs so much of our public debate. It was certainly the dominant sentiment in history and politics departments when I was an undergraduate, and I know from my own contemporaries how much they too felt that sentiment at other Australian universities than the one with which I was directly familiar.

In the end, the story of the twentieth century turned out not to be the story of the contest between the Left and the Right, but of the contest between open societies – liberal democracies - and authoritarian societies of both the Left and the Right. The insight of Sir Karl Popper, when he published *The Open Society and Its Enemies* in 1948, or of F A Hayek, who published *The Road to Serfdom* at about the same time, seems to me, on any fair reading of the history of the half-century since, to have been plainly right. And yet one looks in vain for Karl Popper, Hayek or for that matter Michael Oakeshott, on political science reading lists: if they appear at all, it is as curiosities, aside

from the mainstream, while to this day there are still some universities teach Marxism as part of mainstream political science courses, rather than as part of the history of ideas.

The American writer Tom Wolfe, in his amusing essay "In the Land of the Rococo Marxists", satirized the state of American humanities departments.

Asking where one was to find "the 2000 versions of Immanuel Kant, John Stuart Mill and David Hume", he wrote:

"Here we come upon one of the choicest chapters in the human comedy. Today, at any leading American university, a Kant, with all his dithering about God, freedom and immortality, or even Hume, wouldn't survive a year in graduate school, much less get hired as an instructor. The philosophy departments, history departments, English and comparative literature departments and, at many universities, anthropology, sociology and even psychology departments are now divided, in John l'Heureux's delicious terminology (*The Handmaid of Desire*) into the Young Turks and the Fools. Most Fools are old, mid-fifties, early sixties, but a Fool can be any age, twenty-eight as easily as fifty-eight, if he is one of that minority on the faculty who still believe in the old nineteenth century Germanic modes of so-called objective scholarship. Today the humanities faculties are hives of abstruse doctrines such as structuralism, postmodernism, deconstruction, reader response theory, commodification theory ... the names vary, but the subtext is always the same: Marxism may be dead, and the proletariat has proved to be hopeless. They're all at sea with their third wives. But we can find new proletariats whose ideological benefactors we can be – women, non-whites, put-upon white ethnics, homosexuals, transsexuals, the polymorphously perverse, pornographers, prostitutes ("sex workers"), hardwood trees – which we can use to express our indignation toward the powers that be and our aloofness to their bourgeois stooges, to keep the flame of scepticism, cynicism, irony and contempt burning. This would not be Vulgar Marxism; it would be ... Rococo Marxism, elegant as a Fragonard, sly as a Watteau."<sup>3</sup>

Yet this malaise is not merely a feature of the current state of many humanities departments. It has been part of the mainstream of the

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<sup>3</sup> Tom Wolfe, "In the Land of the Rococo Marxists", *Hooking Up*, (London: Random House, 2000), pp. 123-4.

humanities for much of the twentieth century. The name Eric Hobsbawm still carries lustre among historians. His history of the twentieth century, *The Age of Extremes*, still appears on many undergraduate reading lists. Reflect on that title: a history of the century which saw the triumph of moderation – of liberalism and democracy – over authoritarianism – is still characterized as a debate between extremes of right and left. In October 1994, Hobsbawm was interviewed on British television by Michael Ignatieff. He was asked "In 1934, millions of people were dying in the Soviet experiment. If you had known that, would it have made a difference to you at the time?" He replied: "I don't actually know that it has any bearing on this history I have written. If I were to give you a retrospective answer ... I would have said probably not." Ignatieff: "What that comes down to is saying that had the radiant tomorrow actually been created the loss of 15, 20 million people might have been justified." Hobsbawm replied: "Yes."<sup>4</sup>

The English historian Andrew Roberts, in his recent (rather self-consciously entitled) *History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900* argues that, from the 1920s onward, the leading intellectuals of the day were mesmerized by the idea of constructing a new society from the grass roots up, as Lenin and Stalin were apparently seeking to do. George Bernard Shaw wrote of his visit to the Soviet Union:

"Russia flaunts her roaring and multiplying factories, her efficient rulers, her atmosphere of such hope and security as has never before been seen by a civilized country on earth."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> cited in Andrew Roberts, *A History of the English-Speaking Peoples Since 1900* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2006) p. 217.

<sup>5</sup> cited, *ibid.*, p. 214.

He went on to say that he had never met a man "more candid, fair and honest" than Stalin; "no-one is afraid of him and everyone trusts him."<sup>6</sup> The comparisons with Manning Clark are irresistible.

So, argues Roberts, a whole generation of the educated went from admiring *the idea of power as a reconstructive force* to falling in love with *the idea of power itself* – and so were prepared to make any excuse for those who exercised it.<sup>7</sup> Far from speaking truth to power, these intellectuals concealed the truth in their devotion to power.

If you think that is a cautionary tale of the 1920s and 1930s, might I direct you to the English writer Nick Cohen's excellent recent book, *What's Left?*<sup>8</sup> for a study of just how contemporary are the resonances of the prejudices of that earlier generation.

Now, of course, all of the foregoing is a terrible generalization. Of course there are honourable exceptions – George Orwell in particular comes to mind – but I do believe that there remain echoes of that naïve, jejune, historically discredited leftism in the humanities faculties of Australian universities today.

If the humanities are to recover their prestige, one thing which they certainly need to do is to embrace the standards of objective, rigorous scholarship which were once among their glories; to accept that critical inquiry is not well

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<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.* pp. 213ff.

served when it is – whether admittedly or implicitly – regarded instrumentally, in service of some ideology or social philosophy, rather than as an end in itself.

I doubt few here would disagree with the view that the pursuit of knowledge is an end in itself. I expect most of you would agree with me in rejecting an exclusively utilitarian conception of scholarship. My point is that scholarship in the mainstream of the humanities has been degraded for the very reason that for much of the time, it was dominated by an instrumentalist method, to fit scholarly inquiry into an historical paradigm which the events of the late twentieth century have utterly discredited.

It seems almost antique in these days to speak of the virtue of pure learning. Yet I believe that is where the future of the humanities lies. We have had too much of ideology, of utilitarianism, of instrumentalism, of journalism, and not enough of fearlessly objective inquiry. In concluding my remarks, allow me to quote the words of another Australian political leader – the one who did more than any other to advance the interests of Australian universities, and whose deep learning in the humanities has been unmatched by any Australian political leader since. Upon receiving an honorary degree of Doctor of Laws from The Queen's University, Belfast in 1941, Robert Menzies said:

"I have a life-long interest in the work of universities. I have, sir, and I say it without shame, an almost passionate belief in pure learning. I have never been able to accept the view that a university is a mere technical school. If time permitted ... I should be prepared to discuss ... the value of pure learning in a world in which too much applied, or misapplied, learning has brought humanity to a very strange pass.

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<sup>8</sup> London: Fourth Estate, 2007, especially ch 8.

Why, sir, do I defend pure learning? Because to me pure learning, the freeing of the mind from the inhibitions of ignorance, is one of those great moving forces that distinguish the civilized world from the uncivilized world, one of those great underlying things for which this war is being fought. And because I believe that ... this too precious thing, this scholarship for which universities stand, is an essential ingredient in the freedom not only of the human mind but of the human spirit."<sup>9</sup>

In that spirit, may I once again welcome you to this great building and wish you well in your deliberations.

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<sup>9</sup> Menzies, *To the People of Britain at War from the Prime Minister of Australia* (London: Longmans, 1941), pp. 79-80.