



SPEECH TO INSTITUTE OF DIRECTORS

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a singular honour and privilege to speak to such an esteemed audience this morning on the weighty topic of a strategic view in education of the direction and future of New Zealand. I do not speak as an academic but a practitioner, one who has taught in schools for twenty eight years and who is acutely aware of Mark Twain's famous comment that he never let his schooling get in the way of a good education. Our schools have often been the butt of robust criticism, and the perception is widespread that the standards evident today are not quite what they were. I discovered recently a quotation which seems to convey some of that deep-seated angst:

“The young today do not heed their teachers. They are willful and go their own way. They do not obey their parents and those in natural authority over them. They are lazy and I fear for the future.”

Does this criticism have a familiar ring to it? An implication, perhaps, that standards and values are falling apart and that the inexorable moral trend is downwards. An implication that somehow things used to be so much better and that the very fabric of our society is under assault. The suggestion too that our schools are not what they were and that students are emerging educationally impoverished and morally bereft. If this commentator's concerns strike a chord with you this morning, then take some heart from the fact that the afore-mentioned quotation is a translation of a cuneiform clay tablet, unearthed in the ancient city of Ninevah and written by some elder nearly three thousand years ago!

The message is inescapable. Such complaints have been with us from time immemorial and simply reflect one of those rites of passage as one generation gives way to the next.

Therefore, as we look to prepare the next generation, what emphases should we include in our educational vision? Some weeks ago, I attended a Secondary Principals' Conference in Queenstown. The setting, as you would imagine, was particularly convivial, as indeed was the company of my colleagues. I had anticipated, with interest, a lecture to be delivered by a respected Australian 'futurist' on "Preparing our Young for 21st Century Success".

The more I listened to this address, however, the more uneasy I became.

His utopian dreams of a 'brave new world' were expressed in such complex language as "embracing a personal value system which is compatible with emerging 21st century paradigms and realities, which in turn will determine the nature of future markets, industries, jobs and ethics. This emerging 21st century paradigm is one I call Planetism. To carry a value system of yesteryear, such as modernism, into the future will invite becoming a misfit!"

I read a copy of his lecture afterwards, but, despite acknowledging his sincerity, still found myself in fundamental disagreement. We seemed to operate from an entirely different set of presuppositions. The problem is, as I reflected later, that I don't have a great deal of confidence in either utopian visions or our ability to predict the future.

The 20th century had two major dreams of a society freed from the shackles of the past. One ended in the ovens of Auschwitz and the other in the Gulag Archipelago. I am mindful of Malcolm Muggeridge's acerbic comment some thirty years ago that he had more confidence in the ancient Roman method of predicting the future by examining the entrails of a slaughtered chicken, than in modern-day soothsayers who place their faith in the progress of technology.

Therefore, rather than speculative musings about the future, I would prefer to look back and to consider those elements of education that have stood the test of time, for it is also those elements, I believe, that will serve us well in the future. Paul Johnson, the English historian and journalist, summed up those elements well when he made the following observation of what most people want from a public education system:

The demands of ordinary people are not exorbitant. They want all children to read, to read easily, accurately and sustainedly, to form if possible, the habit of reading and acquire the taste for good literature. They want all children to be taught to write, legibly, fluently and grammatically, to acquire a reasonably wide vocabulary and to spell correctly. They want all children to be numerate and to handle proficiently the elementary instruments of a modern electronic society.

Children, they think, should be taught about their country's history and geography ... and learn to value its qualities. They want children to acquire in school, reinforcing home training, habits of diligence, punctuality, neatness, cleanliness and civility. And, not least, they want the schools to provide, for all children, a moral education: to instill, not just directly and specifically, but through all the school structures and procedures, clear distinctions between right and wrong, good and evil, decent behaviour and wickedness.

Such a summary, I believe, is an excellent foundation for a strategic view of where education in New Zealand should be headed. It does not preclude the need for New Zealand to produce citizens who are technologically savvy, creative and entrepreneurial. But it does suggest that a liberal education is more than simply training. Martin Hawes, who died tragically a couple of years ago, put it this way in his book *The Crisis in New Zealand Schools*:

... A liberal education was certainly not intended to preclude young people from being creative or from thinking critically about their society. But it believed that little high-quality creativity of critical thinking would go on in an empty head – that these activities needed a basis in knowledge. To add to the useful stock of ideas, one first needed to appreciate what had already been thought; to write a good poem, one first needed to know English. Nor did a liberal education neglect the development of skills. However, it was believed that one developed skills as one went about acquiring knowledge.

In speaking, then, about a strategic direction for education in New Zealand, I would like to comment briefly on four key areas:

1. The Curriculum – what should be taught;
2. The Teachers – who should teach it and how it should be taught;
3. The System of Assessment – how the learning should be evaluated; and
4. The Moral and Ethical Context—are there certain values that are enduring, that transcend particularities of space and time?

First, then the curriculum. One of the prevailing mantras that we hear constantly is that our curriculum must be “relevant to the needs of our students”. By ‘relevant’, the implication is that our programmes should focus on outcomes that are readily demonstrable. Because ‘knowledge’ has expanded exponentially, the argument goes, we should concentrate on skills and techniques that are transferable and useful for the future world of employment.

How could one possibly argue with such high-minded idealism that seeks to tailor the curriculum to the imperatives of the 21st century and to present schooling as both entertaining and informative? The problem is, that when content is removed from the curriculum, ignorance is the inevitable consequence. In discussing modern-day Europe recently, one relatively intelligent Year 13 student asked me where NATO was, ie. was it closer to Germany or Bosnia? Thomas Sowell, the greatly respected Afro-American writer, makes the following observation in reference to a curriculum which lacks content:

Those who are in the business of teaching the young, whether in the public schools or on college campuses, too often see this not as a responsibility to pass on what is known but as an opportunity to indoctrinate students with their own beliefs. Many ‘educators’ and the gurus who indoctrinated them actively disparage ‘mere facts’ which they say you can get from an almanac or encyclopedia.

The net result is a student population that does not even know enough to know what needs to be looked up, much less how to analyse facts, so as to test opposing beliefs – as distinguished from how to gather information to support a preconceived notion that happens to be fashionable in the schools and colleges.

Yet, people are considered to be ‘educated’ after they have spent so many years in ivy-covered buildings, absorbing the preconceptions that prevail there.

Far too often, I believe, we simply follow the lead of the latest educational fad from America, accepting it as revealed truth and repackaging it for the New Zealand market as if it were our own. So that I am not misunderstood, let me clarify my position. I am not opposed to the teaching of skills in Information Technology, or critical of some of the

superb work occurring in Graphics, the Applied Arts or even emerging subjects such as Tourism and Hospitality. But these aspects of the curriculum have more to do with vocational training than a liberal education. When such apparently ‘relevant’ subjects, with immediate appeal, supplant the importance of History, English Literature, Mathematics or Science, an imbalance occurs.

For example, the marginalized place of History in our schools is both a tragedy and a disgrace. How can anyone understand the world post-September 11 without any understanding of the clash between a Western and an Islamic world view? On the importance of history, Will Durant made the following poignant comment:

It is a mistake to think that the past is dead. Nothing that has ever happened is quite without influence at this moment. The present is merely the past rolled up and concentrated in this second of time. You, too, are your past; often your face is your autobiography; you are what you are because of what you have been; because of your heredity stretching back into forgotten generations; because of every element of environment that has affected you, every man or woman that has met you, every book that you have read, every experience that you have had; all these are accumulated in your memory, your body, your character, your soul. So with a city, a country, and a race; it is the past, and cannot be understood without it.

Paul Johnson writes:

The study of history is a powerful antidote to contemporary arrogance. It is humbling to discover how many of our glib assumptions, which seem to us novel and plausible, have been tested before not once but many times and in innumerable guises; and discovered to be, at great human cost, wholly false.

In my experience, youngsters love good content taught well. It explains in part why subjects such as Classical Studies have enjoyed spectacular growth in recent year. I am mindful of Bob Jones’ memorable quip from a few years back when he stated that he would rather employ a Classics graduate than someone with a management degree from Massey. I guess what he was really illustrating was that students with access to a liberal

education are intellectually stimulated people, able to make their own judgements and therefore readily flexible in a wide variety of jobs.

Similarly, the study of great literature is of enduring value and in Matthew Arnold's famous phrase, "exposes young people to the best that has been known and said in the world". Shakespeare is not easy but in Roger Kimball's words, "provides a window into the soul of humanity". What better way to understand blind ambition than a study of *Macbeth*, sexual jealousy than a study of *Othello*, or arrogant and foolish leadership than a study of *King Lear*. I fear that in our drive for a relevant curriculum, we may be selling too many of our students short by underestimating their ability to come to grips with the great works that have inspired men and women throughout the world and throughout the ages.

In her excellent book, *The Death of Liberal England*, Melanie Phillips speaks of the anger felt by the young West Indian community worker, who angrily denounced the ideology that had given young black people like himself an inferior education, refusing to give them the knowledge they needed of Maths and language and history. "They teach them all these things in private schools", he said. "That's why those children go on to run everything. So why aren't they teaching them to us?"

On a personal level, I am mindful of my time as Deputy Principal at Waihi College where a brilliant teacher by the name of Bill Snelling, year after year, produced Shakespearean plays which entertained packed houses every night. I have often thought how fascinated the old bard would have been to know how popular his plays were, four hundred years removed in a small, working-class town on the other side of the world, amongst youngsters of different races and from almost completely uneducated backgrounds. If Shakespeare can relate to teenagers in Waihi, then his relevance is universal indeed.

As we look strategically at the future of the curriculum in New Zealand schools, by all means include subjects such as Business Studies and the Performing Arts. I can see great value, for example, in teaching all students about their personal finances. Encourage those dimensions which have a distinctly New Zealand emphasis. It is right and proper that the place and contribution of Maori to New Zealand society is both taught and

acknowledged. But in the process, let us not ignore or sideline the roots of our Western civilization.

As one writer has put it, “Western civilization is not a product of geography. It is a body of knowledge and values. Western civilization, or any civilization, can continue only insofar as its intellectual substance lives on in the minds of new generations. And it can do so only if it is imparted to young minds through education.”

I have spoken of the curriculum, and it is now appropriate for me to turn my attention to the kind of people we need to deliver it. How many of you this morning, I wonder, have sons or daughters who have chosen teaching as a career? What proportion of top secondary school students nationwide opt for teaching? Why is there such a dearth of men, both at primary and increasingly at secondary level, who make teaching their chosen profession? We cannot hope for a first class education system in New Zealand if we staff it with second-rate people. A couple of years ago, I was rummaging through some long lost papers of my late father. He had spent his life in education and, in the last year of his life, committed some of his thoughts to paper. He was writing of his friendship with Sir Henry Cooper, the former Headmaster of Auckland Grammar:

Often we spoke of the things that made a school great – its tradition, the care it took of individual pupils, the integration of sport, music, drama and hobbies into its life, the academic and moral standards it sets before its pupils. I believe that these things are important and we jettison them at our peril. But most important of all is the quality of staff a school can attract. I believe that people will beat a path for miles to sit in a tin shed at the feet of a good teacher who will encourage and inspire them. If I had the choice of people or things or money I would choose people every time. A staff of good teachers will attract the other things in time. A staff of poor teachers will lose them.

I am sure that most of us here today can think of one teacher who, somewhere in our schooling, fired our imagination. Last year, I had the privilege but sad duty of delivering a eulogy at the funeral of Ken Trembath, the finest teacher I ever had. He was a man whose teaching transformed my life. Ken had personality, he had passion, he had a great mind and made literature come alive. He was still teaching at the time of his death and

the many teenagers who came to his funeral bore testimony to the fact that his magic continued thirty five years after he taught me.

I am mindful of the anonymous student who said, “We think of the effective teachers we have had over the years with a sense of recognition, but those who have touched our humanity we remember with a deep sense of gratitude.”

We need a profession full of practitioners like Ken, animated, innovative, creative and knowledgeable. While I believe in traditional content, I am not suggesting that teachers should be locked into traditional teaching methodology. There is so much at the teacher’s disposal today to make learning dynamic and absorbing.

How do we attract such people? More flexible salary arrangements are part of the equation, but I do not believe that greater remuneration is the only answer. Without sounding too precious, there needs to be some rediscovery of a sense of vocation, a conviction perhaps, that society values teaching and that something worthwhile is being achieved. In Robert’s Bolt’s play, *A Man for All Seasons*, Sir Thomas More is speaking with the highly ambitious Richard Rich who yearns for power and prestige. More says:

But, Richard, in office they offer you all sorts of things. I was once offered a whole village, with a mill; and a manor house, and heaven knows what else – a coat of arms I shouldn’t be surprised. Why not be a teacher? You’d be a fine teacher. Perhaps a great one.

RICH: And if I was who would know it?

MORE: You, your pupils, your friends, God. Not a bad public, that.

Having spoken about the curriculum and the quality of teachers we need to attract, it is now timely for me to touch briefly on our qualifications system and, in particular, the much debated NCEA. Do any of you recall the caucus race from *Alice in Wonderland*?

There was no ‘One, two, three and away’, but they began running when they liked, and left off when they liked, so that it was not easy to know when the race was over. However, when they had been running half an hour or so, and were

quite dry again, the Dodo suddenly called out “The race is over” and they all crowded round, panting and asking, “But who has won?” This question the Dodo could not answer without a great deal of thought, and it sat for a long time with one finger pressed upon its forehead (the position in which you usually see Shakespeare, in the pictures of him) while the rest waited in silence. At last the Dodo said, “Everybody has won, and all must have prizes.”

The problem is that life is not like the caucus race. In reality, there are winners and losers and used effectively, failure can be our greatest teacher.

I want to preface my comments by acknowledging the significant progress that has been made at NZQA over the past year under the fine leadership of Karen Sewell. Most of the problems surrounding the Scholarship examinations have been attended to and there has been a real change of culture in the organisation, acknowledging the issues raised by those who have been critical on both a philosophical and implementational level. The underpinning assumptions of the new system have some merit. Far better, its proponents would argue, to give credit where students have achieved, rather than to fail automatically approximately 50% of the candidates. It is important also to recognize that some subjects and some parts of subjects are assessed better internally than in a traditional three-hour examination.

But there are, I would suggest, several underlying issues about the system that cannot be resolved readily by merely competent administration.

First, I believe there are some real dangers in breaking subjects up into discrete parts, or achievement standards, which are all assessed individually. There is strong anecdotal evidence that students are picking and choosing those parts of a subject that suit them and disregarding those they find difficult. When all the student needs to do is to achieve 80 credits to gain Level 1, 2 or 3, there is a real danger of a smorgasbord approach being adopted. In the long term, I do not think that this is educationally sound.

Second, the four categories of ‘not achieve, achieve, merit and excellence’ are too blunt an instrument. The original concept was even worse – that students should simply achieve or not achieve. At university level, there are at least 10 levels of discrimination,

from A+ to D. In my opinion, more levels of achievement would provide far greater motivation for students.

Third, the notion that students should be assessed against a 'standard' rather than compared with others is a lofty ideal but, in practice, very hard to implement. Standards may be easy to define in practical subjects but are much more difficult to specify in traditional, academic subjects.

And this leads on to my final point. There is the prevailing assumption that competition between individuals is both undesirable and unhealthy. Argument by analogy is a dangerous thing, but it is as if running races have been replaced with time trials in which individuals compete against the clock but not fellow athletes. Improving your own time is very satisfying but, in my opinion, nothing is more challenging than competing in a race.

Enough of extending analogies, but it does explain, perhaps, why boys seem to have performed so much better in the Scholarship examinations than NCEA Levels 1-3. Scholarship, in 2005, reintroduced a competitive element where students were competing against each other and for considerable financial reward. It certainly galvanized the boys of Wellington College and I am very proud to say that we gained more scholarships than any other school in the country.

Whatever the ultimate outcome of NCEA, we must not seek to remove that competitive dimension which is a key part of human nature. As a noted principal of a tough South Auckland school once commented, "If you remove failure, you also remove success."

I want to conclude my talk to you today by referring to the moral and ethical climate we must seek to preserve in any strategic analysis of where education in New Zealand is headed.

As I quoted to you from Paul Johnson at the beginning of my address, parents want schools to provide a moral education and to instill "clear distinctions between right and wrong, good and evil, decent behaviour and wickedness".

I do not for one minute want to suggest imposing any sectarian religious viewpoint, but rather encouraging those values which are the hallmark of any decent society – values such as honesty, integrity, fairness, responsibility, compassion, mutual respect and tolerance. Any education system divorced from a moral framework is doomed to perdition.

May I bring things to a close by sharing a letter written by an American high school principal to his staff. Every year, I read it to the boys of Wellington College. It is a poignant reminder that any education system should be linked inextricably to a moral vision and our shared humanity.

Dear Teacher,

I am a survivor of a concentration camp.

My eyes saw what no man should witness:

gas chambers built by learned engineers;

children poisoned by educated physicians;

infants killed by trained nurses;

women and babies shot and burned by high school and college graduates.

So, I am suspicious of Education.

My request is: help your students become more human.

Your efforts must never produce learned monsters,

skilled psychopaths, educated Eichmanns.

Reading, writing, arithmetic are important only

if they serve to make our children more human.

Thank you for your attendance this morning.