

## PERTH MODERN SCHOOL: ANNUAL ORATION

### UNFINISHED BUSINESS

Thursday 24/08/2017

Thank you Ms Joll and the Modernians who have asked me to speak today.

I start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting, the Wadjuk peoples of the Perth Region. I want also to acknowledge their continuing culture, their elders past and present and the contributions they continue to make. I'd like also to recognise the strength, patience and resilience of all indigenous peoples.

I also want to recognise the successful campaign run by Old and current Modernians to keep this school for its purpose on this site. The leadership was terrific. And I want to acknowledge former colleagues in the new State Government for listening to us and for revoking the election commitment: it doesn't often happen and all parties deserve congratulation for their grace.

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### Introduction

I have been asked to speak about having been a politician and about my advocacy for refugees. As a former Minister for women, multiculturalism and Aboriginal Affairs I'll touch on each of these topics, each of which continues to need serious attention, not only by politicians, but by all of us. I'll be speaking about unfinished business.

Four years after we had arrived here from England I came to Perth Modern School with a scholarship in 1953; my brother David followed 2 years later. It's a long story but I left at the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> year and as an adult undertook tertiary education to a doctorate in 1982. David went on to be a school prefect and straight on to UWA.

Our migration programme was really stepping up. Australia held out hope and new opportunities for its new migrants and especially for their children. On the whole we were decidedly white. I look at your faces now and smile because until I left this school I had never met as far as I know or remember, an indigenous Australian, a person of colour, an American, an Asian, nor a Muslim. However for the first time I met Jewish kids here. My mother told me to be kind to them as she did at primary school, in regards to who she called DPs, from Latvia and Lithuania- we now would know them as refugees. There were many prejudices against Catholics.

The school then reflected the times; the domestic science curriculum was exclusively for girls and even though our mothers were using electric irons, we all learned to iron with a flat iron heated on a stove. I think the start of my feminism could have been making starch for a man's detachable shirt collar and ironing the shirt. We weren't allowed to mix with boys at this co-educational school and a line in the grass specified the boundaries of where each gender could reach at lunch time. Honestly! Unless you were Jewish or Catholic we had a weekly scripture lesson. Our history was of the Roman Empire and the Kings and Queens of Britain, and our geography of the then extensive British Empire and its industries and rivers. Depending on whether you had opted for arts or science, so you learned French or German. As for English studies we read Shakespeare 10 lines at a time up and

down classroom rows. Thankfully much has moved on since the 50's, and you know, most of us turned out to be OK.

We were of a time where the place of women was ultimately domestic but the scholarship opened both possibilities and potential for all of us.

I started my nurse training at Royal Perth before my school class mates had completed their Leaving exams. During that time ever-present threats were infectious diseases. I nursed infants and adults with whooping cough, poliomyelitis, diphtheria and tetanus, and saw the consequences of measles and German measles; there was a hospital for infectious diseases and another for tuberculosis. Later as a midwife I nursed women having large numbers of children, single women surrendering a baby, or young women dying from an unsafe abortion. Capital punishment was the penalty for murder. Most of these conditions have thankfully been overcome through technology such as vaccination and contraception and more progressive social values.

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### Politics

In 1999 I was asked to contribute to a book to mark the centenary of women's suffrage in W.A, and then update it in 2012; excerpts from that writing are reflected today on what follows about my Parliamentary career.

This part of my life started by chance with a series of opportunities that I was able to respond to. During the course of my doctoral research with injured workers I began to advocate within the Australian Labor Party for reforms to occupational health and safety laws. To cut a long story short, I became adviser to the state Labor Government in 1983 and had the remarkable experience of translating Labor Party policy into government policy and then in turn preparing that for legislation.

I was endorsed for the state seat of Canning which I won in February 1986. The wonderful thing was that I participated in the debates which delivered the health and safety laws for working men and women of WA.

Much of the work I did in politics was with and on behalf of women to deal with the consequences of current or past violence—sadly an ongoing experience for too many women. In 1995 I was a delegate to the 4<sup>th</sup> World Conference on Women in Beijing and previously to a meeting of World Women Parliamentarians for Peace held in Zimbabwe. There is no international or local forum for women that delegates do not recognise the issue of violence against women; it knows no boundaries and remains a dreadful indictment. More recently there has been acceptance that this is a matter of public policy, not private shame and that it should be dealt with as a criminal offence.

We introduced new laws and policies to prevent and deal with both sexual assault and with harassment. However it is disappointing to acknowledge that these forms of gender based violence persist as borne out by a recent study. Responses from some sections of the media to the recent AHRC report on sexual harassment and assaults of University students during 2015-16 was a demonstration of a continuing disregard of respect for women.

You can access the report and its findings, the commentary and the Commission's response last week, which explains its methodology and its confidence that the response of >30,000 students across Australia provides statistically reliable data. I am telling you this today because most of you here will be attending a university campus next year; across the country 1 in 5 women students reported sexual harassment on a campus and 1.6% were assaulted. That is they were raped. Of those who said they had been assaulted 87% did not report it or complain to their university. These are clearly huge matters for young men and women –for you- and for the universities.

During my time in Parliament there were many high points to celebrate round women's achievements. One was at the end of the struggle for the ordination of women priests in the Anglican Church and to join the service at St George's Cathedral in 1992. The second, later that year, was to be invited to an Aboriginal women's meeting in the desert near Lake Gregory where over 700 women transacted secret and sacred business for the first time for decades. Each of these sacred ceremonies was historic for the women involved and their importance stays with me also.

Increasingly girls and young women see politics as a legitimate career option. Women who are prepared to work on issues important to the community are well able to make a difference; perhaps the major factor that motivates the decision to go into a political life, no matter which party.

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### Refugees

Since 2000 –the year I think that you were born - I have volunteered with refugee communities, especially with those who arrived by boat and who are damned by most politicians, most media and by a large part of the community.

I have seen the worst and also the best, in people. The worst behaviours are born in racism, ignorance, fear and prejudice; the best comes from other volunteers and advocates as well as from the resilience and grace of the men, women and children who have sought our protection.

Asylum seekers in detention have been called by number rather than by name since 2000. They have been labelled as "illegals" and worse, and the laws governing the procedures to determine their refugee status continue to be changed and legal advice for claimants drastically reduced. There have been numerous delays and according to The Refugee Council it is likely to be the end of 2018 before the backlog is cleared. The appeal procedures have been changed and many will no longer be able to appeal a negative decision. References to the Refugee Convention have been removed from the migration laws. For refugees who arrived by boat, applications for family reunion are not likely to succeed. It is also unlikely that they will be able to become Australian citizens if legislative changes now before Parliament pass.

There has been no political leadership where a Prime Minister of either stripe has explained the global crisis and our obligations. On the whole the media have been irresponsible. Worst of all Ministers lie without a blink, refuse to provide information, claim that human rights groups including the United Nations should 'butt out'. The last two Ministers blame desperate acts of self harm on the individuals themselves or on their advocates; they like to deny responsibility for Manus and Nauru. Children have been detained in appalling conditions; eight people have died off shore, some

for want of specialist medical care; on both islands refugees are resented by locals and violent acts have been perpetrated against them.

Hamed Shamshiripour a 31 year old Iranian was found dead on Manus Island 2 weeks ago. His worsening mental health had concerned his friends for many months. It appears his behaviour did not inspire medical management but a term of imprisonment.

The Government has turned water and power off in compounds on Manus in preparation for closing the centre down in October to force men to find a life outside detention. On the mainland, detention centres still operating have become more like prisons than ever.

As of 30 April 2017, the government of Papua New Guinea had found that 70% of the asylum seekers on Manus are refugees, while the government of Nauru had found that 85% of the total are refugees. There remain 45 children on Nauru. In my view those found to be refugees should be brought here. The Government can then make a sensible decision about those left, almost all detained for over 4 years. On the mainland 377 people remain in locked or community detention; this includes 216 children who have suffered enormously. Thousands of people do not yet know their status. Physical as well as mental health is compromised. We rob people of that most vital need-the need for hope.

Could we take more refugees? In the year 2015-6 as a proportion of Australia's total migration, the Refugee and Humanitarian Programme comprised 8.5% of the 207,325 permanent additions through migration. When my family immigrated, the post-war humanitarian arrivals comprised 48.9% of Australia's settler intake in 1949-50; the proportion exceeded 20% in both 1979-80 and 1983-84. It is estimated by the U.N. that more than 65 million people are displaced including over 21 million refugees. For some it could be 20 years before they are settled. The world's largest refugee crisis has been produced by the Syrian conflict

Uncertainty has been tough and hard for everyone. In my view boat arrivals have endured punishments. Refugees have endured a lot of unspeakable traumas and losses and need to be able to get on with their new lives. No matter how they arrived or where they come from refugees can teach us about how to start anew and shape a new future. When I have asked men what the best thing about Australia is, they tell me they are safe; the women often tell me that the tap is.

After being targeted by the Taliban, Mr Mohammad Yousef Sadiqi, an Afghan Hazara, his wife and 2 sons engaged a smuggler and left Oruzgan to live in Iran. They had no papers, no chance to return and were under constant threat from the Iranian authorities. In Iran the youngest son was imprisoned for working without papers, then deported to Afghanistan and then went back to Iran. Mr Sadiqi arrived in WA in 2011 as part of a family group reuniting with other family members already living here, and who I had volunteered to support. From the age of twelve Mr Sadiqi developed his skills as a master craftsman in metal work, wood carving, jewellery making and stone masonry.

He was very proud of the achievements of his 5 adult children in Perth. Three years later his own achievements in metal and wood crafts were on display at the WA Museum's exhibition *Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul*. During the exhibition Alec Coles, the Museum's CEO publically presented a certificate to Mr Sadiqi in recognition of his long years as a

craftsman. Never before had his work, or his skills, been recognised. Aged 89 he died two or three weeks later; his body was taken back to Iran to be buried near his wife. This is a remarkable family story.

And there are so many proud stories of achievement among people who start a new life as refugee and who make enormous contributions to this country.

We have a complex humanitarian, legal, ethical and political mess and a morally bankrupt refugee and asylum seeker policy. We could do much better than we do now. The caveat is we need better political leadership.

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### Imminent Challenges

During my lifetime the world has been changed in many ways by new technologies that have in turn brought huge social changes, some planned, some unforeseen. In my view the most urgent priority for the future –your future and that of your own children concerns climate change. We can't let it wait and your generation will have to expand knowledge and invent and utilise new means to prevent its progression.

The vital and urgent challenge for all Australian citizens is to engage with the negotiation of justice for indigenous Australians. It is up to all of us to understand the agenda made clear recently. The Uluru Statement From The Heart asserts that “we are the most incarcerated people on the planet” that “our children are alienated from their families” and that “our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers.” It is a statement for the future and the concerns have to be addressed.

To illustrate I want to touch on the deaths of Aboriginal children and young people. The coroner is currently investigating the suicides of 13 children in the Kimberley, one a 10 year old girl whose 14 year old sister had killed her-self 3 years earlier. Those 13 children had short and wretched lives.

The coroner also investigated the death of a 22 year old woman known as Ms Dhu, who was taken into police custody in South Hedland as a debtor, owing over \$3500 for unpaid fines. A rib broken in a domestic assault 4 months earlier became infected. She was twice taken to the local hospital with pain and twice returned to the lock up. A doctor diagnosed her with “behavioural issues”. On the third day she was taken in the back of a police vehicle to hospital and was pronounced dead. As reported by the coroner in December 2016 Ms. Dhu had died of septicemia within 3 days. She released CCTV footage that she said demonstrated the inhumane treatment she criticised.

Another recent death concerns Elijah Doughty, a 14 year old boy from Kalgoorlie run over and killed while riding a bike. An aboriginal writer, Celeste Liddle reported for Eureka Street. The man who drove the vehicle was sentenced and imprisoned for 3 years for reckless driving causing death. Liddle claims that, not only is the conviction reduced to a “bad traffic misdemeanour”, but also it seemed the man's actions were excused by a general belief that Elijah had “stolen a motorbike” from him.

She says that the circumstances around how Elijah came to be riding that bike have never been established. Nobody knows whether Elijah even knew the bike was stolen. Elijah had two bikes of his own which had previously been taken by the police under “suspicion” of being stolen. They were

returned after his death because it was confirmed that they were his. None of these facts seemed to matter. She reported that there was no evidence of braking or swerving at the crime scene. She claims that the man sentenced to 3 years for the death is likely to be released from prison before one of the Aboriginal men imprisoned after the riot that followed Elijah's death.

These stories about 14 children and a young woman illustrate particular concerns expressed in the Uluru Statement.

The majority of constitutional convention delegates of over 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who met at Uluru supported The Uluru Statement From The Heart of June 19<sup>th</sup> 2017. It calls for a First Nations' voice to be enshrined in the Australian Constitution. It also calls for a Makarrata Commission to supervise truth telling and agreement making between Governments and First Nations, especially truth-telling about history.<sup>1</sup> The delegates said that in 1967 they were counted; in 2017 they seek to be heard. As Gough Whitlam would have said "It's Time".

According to a paper published by the Australian Parliamentary Library "These objectives reflect the nature of reform desired rather than specifying the fine detail of any proposed changes to the Australian Constitution" The Statement articulates very clearly that an objective of the proposed Constitutional change is to provide a 'better future for our children based on justice and self-determination', its concluding sentence being an invitation "... to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future".

A few weeks after the release of the Uluru Statement, Galarrwuy Yunupingu and local elders welcomed Indigenous leaders and leaders of Australia's political, business and industry groups to Garma. The unified call of Indigenous people for meaningful and substantial constitutional change was a chance to make good on the Uluru Statement but no timetable was provided by the Prime Minister; he said he is listening.

The theme of Garma was Makarrata which Dr Yunupingu defines as a "final settlement" or coming together after a struggle. Calls for a treaty of some kind are not new. Stan Grant pointed out that Windradyne had asked Governor Brisbane [he followed Gov. Macquarrie in 1821 as Governor of N.S.W.] for peace in the 1820s. In 1988, the year of the bicentenary, the same Galarrwuy Yunupingu presented Bob Hawke with the Barunga Statement written on bark as a draft treaty. Prime Minister Hawke said he was committed to a treaty by 1990. Indigenous people continue to wait for simple justice.

One commentator wrote that Dr Yunupingu reminded us that we live next to each other, black and white, but we have never truly been comfortable. He said that the Garma meeting was part of a campaign to correct historic wrongs, to make us a fairer country. It is about a rightful place in our country. It is about peace and nation building. He said that this is not easy business; it is serious business. Importantly, a campaign must include non Aboriginal peoples. We all have to be part of that challenge.

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<sup>1</sup> A Rightful Place: A Road Map to Recognition edited by Shireen Morris is a collection of essays by eminent Aboriginal writers who ask "... if a rightful place can be found for Australia's original peoples? The promotional words include: These eloquent essays show what constitutional recognition means, and what it could make possible: a fairer relationship and a renewed appreciation of an ancient culture. With remarkable clarity and power, they traverse law, history and culture to map the path to change".

One young man with Wadjuk inheritance, Clinton Pryor, is aged 26 and showing us his efforts in this regard. He is almost at the end of a walk from Perth to Canberra, aiming to draw attention to the plight of indigenous Australians and to protest plans to close remote communities. He wanted to educate non indigenous Australians, including politicians. But along the way he has met many elders and his political aim is now to discuss a treaty with the Governor General early in September. [Incidentally he stayed in Kalgoorlie last year for Elijah's funeral.] There is a lovely account of the walk in this week's The Saturday Paper. He wants us all to start...."to walk side by side together to move forward as a multicultural nation."

I have outlined concerns I have for our oldest Australians and our newest, as well as half the whole population. There is too much unfinished business for indigenous Australians, refugees and women. I'd like to think we keep justice for them all at the top of our mind and act accordingly; don't walk past injustices because that's a sign you condone or accept them. I hope that you'll each consider what you might do as individuals and as a community for indigenous Australians and for refugees.

But please wait till after the exams for which I wish you all you wish yourselves. And my best wishes for an enriching future however you decide to use your talents.

I started this talk with an acknowledgement of the Wadjuk and their elders on this land. I'd like to think that audiences take meaning from words of welcome and/or acknowledgement. To close I'd like to remind you of someone who made us listen about the meaning of country and culture, even though rarely in English. Galarrawuy Yunupingu's nephew Dr G Yunupingu died too young and in sad circumstances just before Garma. He sang to all of us and I think it fitting to end with a beautiful song from him to all of us about country he knew but had never seen. The song is Bapa.

**Judyth Watson**