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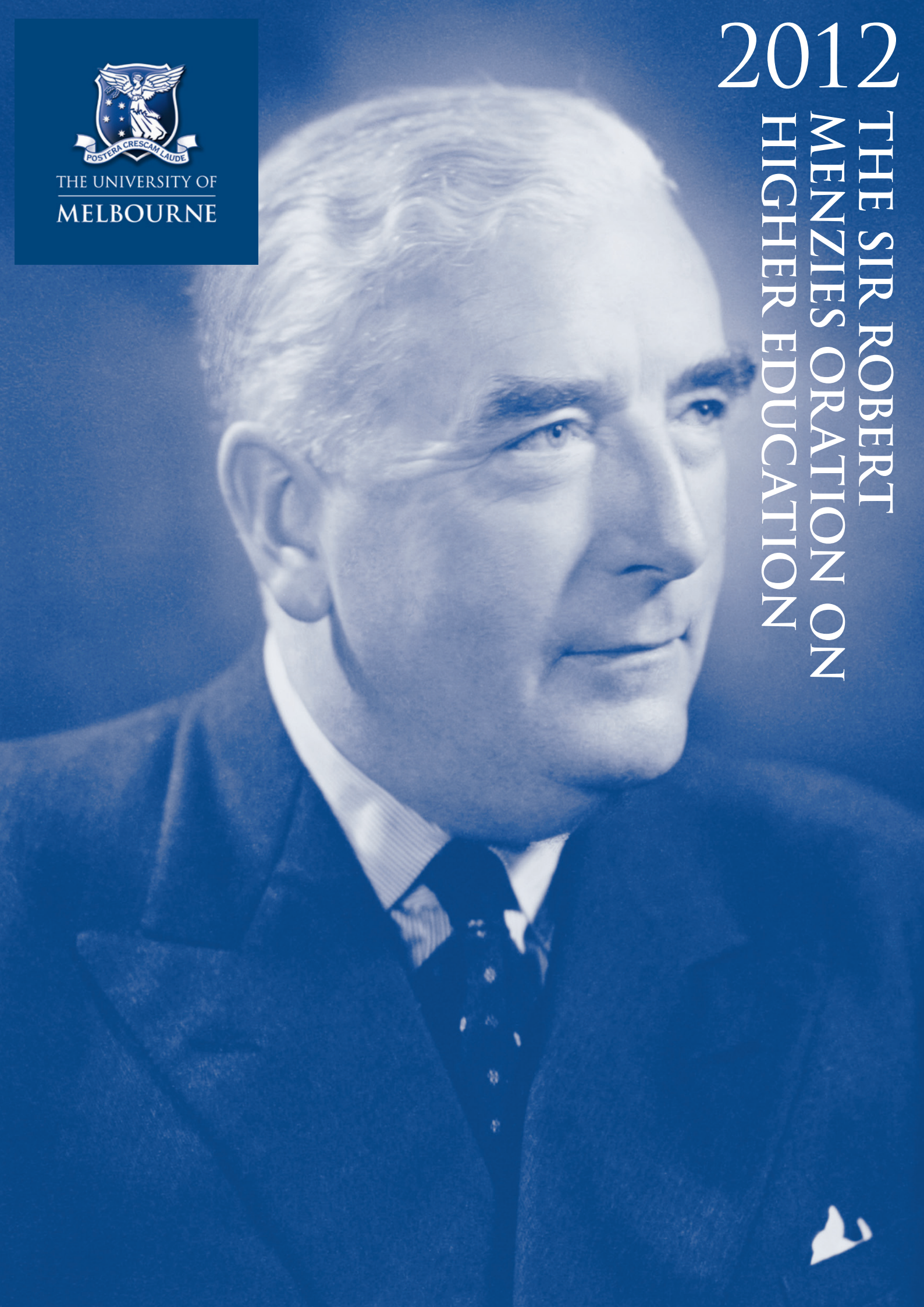
2012

THE SIR ROBERT
MENZIES ORATION ON
HIGHER EDUCATION

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Professor Janice Reid has been Vice-Chancellor of the University of Western Sydney since 1998. She is a recipient of several awards and honours both in Australia and overseas, and has been a member of the boards of public agencies at State and Federal levels in the areas of health information and research, welfare, schools, arts, higher education, energy and international relations. She is currently a member of the NSW Innovation and Productivity Council, National Cultural Heritage Committee, Boards of the NSW Clinical Excellence Commission and NSW Agency for Clinical Innovation, a Trustee of the Art Gallery of New South Wales and the National Library of Australia, Convenor of the NSW Vice-Chancellors' Committee and Vice-Chair, Steering Committee of International Talloires Network of Universities. In January 1998 Professor Reid was made a Member of the Order of Australia for services to cross-cultural public health research and the development of health services for socio-economically disadvantaged groups in the community, and in 2003 received the Centenary Medal for service to Australian society through health and university administration.

Menzies, Whitlam, and Social Justice: A View from The Academy

2012 Sir Robert Menzies Oration on Higher Education

Delivered by Professor Janice Reid AM

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, distinguished guests. To be invited to give this oration is a great honour and I thank the University and the Board for this privilege. I begin by acknowledging the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation, the traditional owners of the land on which this oration and ceremony are being held. I also acknowledge all Aboriginal people here today, and the ancestors who cared for this land for countless millennia.

Comment has been made on my professional longevity – 14 years in my current role. I'm not sure that the accretion of years is especially noteworthy but it did bring to mind Gough Whitlam who, when in his mid-80s, as guest speaker at a commemorative event in western Sydney said by way of introduction, "I expect you're all rather surprised to see me here today". A long pause. "You probably expected me to have been taken up by now". He gazed at his bemused audience and continued, "Frankly, I think the Almighty doesn't want the competition". With masterful timing he waited until the mirth had subsided and added ponderously, "Personally I'd have thought He'd enjoy the conversation".

The Commanding Heights

I should declare that the title of my talk today, *Menzies, Whitlam, and Social Justice* is respectfully appropriated from the 1999 Sir Robert Menzies Lecture by Petro Georgiou, entitled *Menzies, Liberalism and Social Justice.* I shall return to this theme but first a word on the legacy of another Prime Minister, E.G. Whitlam, who was a practiced adversary of Menzies in the parliamentary chamber and in partisan political oratory. Yet Whitlam not only respected Menzies, it could be argued he built several of the monumental reforms for which he is remembered on the bedrock of a political consensus which Menzies had in part laid and without question considerably strengthened. After the 1972 election Menzies wrote a gracious note of congratulations to Whitlam:

> You have been emphatically called to an office of great power and great responsibility. Nobody knows better than I do what demands will be made upon your mental vigour and physical health. I hope that you will be able to maintain both and send you my personal congratulations (Hocking 2012: 9).

Whitlam replied:

> I was profoundly moved by your magnanimous message on my election to this great office. No Australian is more conscious than I how much the lustre, honour and authority of that office owe to the manner in which you held it with such distinction for so long . . . You would, I think, be surprised to know how much I feel indebted to your example, despite the great differences in our philosophies (Hocking 2012: 9).

Today I address most specifically the influences these two figures had on higher education. I trace the threads which linked their visions for Australia's universities and venture some thoughts on their salience for higher education today.

Let me begin with the man whose political vision was so greatly shaped over the years 1952 to 1978 as Federal Member for the seat of Werriwa in western Sydney. Werriwa was one of the original 75 seats created at the time of Federation. When Whitlam and his family lived there, it encompassed a vast portion of south-western Sydney, which now takes in no less than seven Federal electorates. The electorate had no high school, no hospital and, as Whitlam regularly recalled, no reticulated sewerage. Werriwa was in a sense "the orphan child of the constitutional division process, ever following the edge of metropolitan population growth and so underservicing"[1]. It was from this "rough and tumble electorate" that Whitlam fought two elections as Prime Minister, and cemented his place in the affections of "westies" and much of the nation.

Twelve years ago the University of Western Sydney entered an agreement with Gough Whitlam to establish The Whitlam Institute. Subsequently, through a *Deed of Gift*, he entrusted the Institute with the Prime Ministerial Collection: all of his personal papers, letters, books and memorabilia. The Institute's mandate is to pursue scholarship, public outreach and advocacy in those areas of domestic policy relevant to Whitlam's life and leadership. These include, *inter alia*, health, social welfare, urban and regional development, economic growth, education, immigration, the rights of Indigenous Australians and social justice.

Whitlam's own instructions for the Institute were unambiguous. It should not be a mausoleum but a lively place of ideas and debate and a source of non-partisan analysis and advocacy in the contested and complex domain of public policy. It was an ambitious canvass but one which vividly rendered the issues that had been so real to him, his family and his outer western Sydney community. Gough's meticulously annotated and obsessively archived papers are being progressively gifted to the University. The Institute and collection will move to the Female Orphan School on the Parramatta campus once the restoration of the building is complete. This is a magnificent 200 year old colonial structure commissioned by Mrs Macquarie, the first three-storey building in Australia, and with an 1813 foundation stone, believed to be the oldest on any of this country's university campuses.

Commemorative institutions gain character and definition through their programs, events and, especially, memorable moments. High on the list for the University would be the exceptional Whitlam Orations delivered by the current Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, and former Prime Minister, Malcolm Fraser. Then there is the very occasional public scholarly reverie that speaks only to the *cognoscenti*. I recall at one such public lecture the Chancellor leaning across to Gough and asking sotto voce, "Do you understand any of this?". Said Gough in a stentorian whisper, "No idea comrade, but just look solemn". The event, however, that has perhaps the most resonance is the *What Matters?* school essay competition (which this year attracted over 3,500 entries). For this competition students are asked to articulate what really matters to them in today's world. The winning entries are invariably insightful and heartfelt, ranging from a reasoned call for politicians to be "more patient with people, even those [they] disagree with", through to mature rationales for the "sharing of wealth", and articulate advocacy for tolerance of difference and compassion born of understanding.

The most indelible memory of my own was when Gough, Margaret and family came to sign the *Deed of Gift* for his books, letters and papers (hers later to follow). He brought with him a battered manila folder containing the first of the endowments under the Deed, the original of the Dismissal letter. The Institute archivist turned white, clasping the folder with an anxious reverence and locked it in the Institute safe where it sits today.

On the face of it, Whitlam, a passionate Labor social reformer, and Menzies, a patriotic, deeply conservative son of the British Empire, were in time and tradition cut from very different cloth. But the personal, political and historical threads that entwine them are surprisingly alike. As the UWS historian, Mark Hutchinson writes, "Menzies, Whitlam, Fraser . . . all come from the broad school of Scots humanism which has so substantially contributed to what people – mostly unconsciously – now refer to as the 'values' of Australia when the best of that category is intended"[2] . These values were famously encapsulated by James Reid speaking upon his election as Rector of the University of Glasgow in 1972. Reid advocated the recognition of our common humanity, the "rooting out" of anything that distorts and devalues human relations, and the rejection of insidious pressures that would blunt our critical faculties or caution silence in the face of injustice. The price for neglecting these values, he warned, is the loss of dignity and human spirit. "Let us gear our society", he concluded, "to social need, not personal greed" (Reid 1972: 10).

A steadfast commitment to and unshakeable belief in the value of "common humanity" permeated the parliamentary tone set respectively by Menzies and Whitlam. Each man was, as Malcolm Fraser recently described Gough Whitlam, "a formidable political warrior" (2012: 1). Each knew that the other was not just formidable but intelligent and canny. Sir James Killen recalled Menzies saying to him (when Killen was in his own words "an obscure MP"), "That fellow Whitlam will lead the Labor Party one day. It won't be dull" (Cohen 1996: ix).

As was the case for so many parliamentarians of their era, Menzies and Whitlam were moulded by the privations of the Depression and the trauma and social ramifications of World War II. The gravity of this setting was not lost on them. Again, in Fraser's words, "Both Government and Opposition knew that Australia was embarking on a great adventure in nation building . . . It was recognised that no one should play politics by seeking to exploit racial or sectarian divisions . . . they had to put differences, even hatreds aside and seek to build a future in which humankind could survive and prosper . . . Leaders of countries across the world, both victors and vanquished, knew that the international community had to cooperate and build a productive and peaceful world" (2012: 4).

On matters of national interest and policy both men could be each other's trenchant critic: Menzies' attachment to Britain, commitment to the American alliance, opposition to all things nominally communist; Whitlam's prescient embrace of China, his socialist and republican convictions. All of these proud characteristics were fodder for mutual jousting and insult. Whitlam was particularly bitter about Menzies' opposition to the lost 1944 referendum on post-war reconstruction. This was the "democratic renovation" which would have seen greater Federal responsibility for key domains of policy, not least the extension of Commonwealth powers to legislate for Aboriginal Australians. The latter was a power for which Whitlam campaigned among his fellow servicemen while stationed in Gove (now Nhulunbuy) during the War, a power that was delayed until the referendum of 1967 (Hocking 2008; Reid 2010).

These ideological differences notwithstanding, both men placed great value on the appurtenances of respect and civility, wonderfully tempered by wit, eloquence and good humour. As Bob Carr, Minister for Foreign Affairs and former Premier of New South Wales, notes (2008: 52), both men took public speaking seriously, the magic of timing and intonation being part of their rhetorical style. Many of us old enough can recall our parents' and grandparents' admiration of Menzies, assuming Liberal sympathies. With two grandfathers who were Liberal politicians and with parents who met at a Young Liberals event, one can assume such sympathies in my lineage. One grandfather was the Mayor of Unley in South Australia in the depths of the Depression, organising soup kitchens and relief for the hungry and indigent. The other, having been moved by the privations of the homeless during the 1930s, was the founder of the first public housing authority in Australia, the Housing Trust of South Australia.

Some of us also remember Menzies' oft-quoted quips; for instance, to the woman who at Williamstown in 1954 heckled him with, "I wouldn't vote for you if you were the Archangel Gabriel", his supposed riposte, "Madam, if I were the Archangel Gabriel I'm afraid you wouldn't be in my constituency".

This was a time in Australian political life when passions and prejudices ran strong but wit, reason, purpose and clarity of expression were at least acknowledged for their value in tempering the language and posturing of political contest. Unlike the divisive hardening of political rhetoric, the retreat of civility and the ideological polarities of our time, Australian post-war politics at its best was memorably human.

With a literary flourish and apparent disregard for the most unlikely of requests, in 1974 Gough wrote with sincere and studied courtesy to Sir Robert asking if he would become a member of the appeal committee raising funds for John Curtin House, the planned national headquarters of the Labor Party in Canberra[3]. "As a contemporary, indeed an adversary, of Curtin's", wrote Gough, "you understood better than most the quality and courage of his public service. It would be an honour for my party and for Curtin's family . . . if you were to agree to this proposal". Declining the invitation, Menzies replied, "My dear Gough" and suggested that such an association would be regarded as somewhat "unreal" and "ironical". Menzies did, however, seize the opportunity to revisit his assessment of Curtin as "one of the very greatest Labour (sic) leaders of my time". He continued, ". . . my declining of your invitation is in no sense to be taken as a failure to realise what great work John Curtin did for our country" (Henderson 2011: 276-7). In a similar vein Menzies wrote to Whitlam in 1974 thanking him for his "thoughtful and kind act" in offering his daughter Heather a place on the Prime Ministerial plane from Manila to Canberra. "It is indeed a pleasant thing that at a time when political feelings (including, of course, my own) run high you should have given us the opportunity of a family reunion"[4].

Menzies' political feelings, on the other hand, were amply expressed. In his letters to his daughter (Henderson 2011) in 1973 he deplored Whitlam's "carrying out a purely communist policy" (2011: 243) and despaired of "the incompetence and the lack of courage of my successors in the Federal Parliament" (2011: 250). It was not clear whether he meant by this the incumbents or his own party, the Opposition. He was in fact shocked by the prospect of the Liberal-Country Party Coalition blocking supply in the Senate (2011: 260). (After the event, however, in a letter of reassurance to Sir John Kerr following the dismissal, he described Whitlam as "a complete fool" and a "bad loser" [Bramston 2012: 16].) By mid-1974, describing the Government as "disastrous" and lamenting the inaction of the Opposition, Menzies was convinced that within a year Whitlam would be out. He was, however, quite mistaken about the means, suggesting that the knife would be "delivered into his ribs by his Deputy" whom Menzies called "Comrade Cairns".

Whatever the perceived failings of his Government and parliamentary comrades, Gough is remembered as the Prime Minister who won government for Labor after 26 years in opposition. He was the leader who gave form and voice to the sometimes inchoate frustrations and aspirations of a generation born at War's end. As Hutchinson writes (2011: 5), "It is well that we do not forget that the Whitlam period was more than another list of partially successful reform proposals; it was an attempted coming of age". Kim Beazley, now Australian Ambassador to the United States, observes wryly[5] that for a "Labor Party . . . committed to the socialisation of the means of production, distribution and exchange", Whitlam posed an ideological alternative, and an achievable social objective, namely equality of opportunity.

Over and over I have heard the same refrains from the countless men and women who approach him with reverence at Institute functions to say, "Mr Whitlam, if it wasn't for you I would never have gone to University". I have seen first generation immigrants living in western Sydney hovering at Institute events awed by his very presence.

This intense personalisation of Whitlam's reforms is not something felt only now with the passing of time. In 1974, as the fledgling outstation movement gained pace, I was at Yirrkala with Gawarrin Gumana, one of the great Yolngu leaders of the Dhaḻwangu clan who said to me with heartfelt conviction, "If it wasn't for Mr Whitlam we couldn't have gone home". This same sense of place, respect and recognition, afforded parliamentary legitimacy by Whitlam, also resonated with the young men who were to become the leaders of the nation of Papua New Guinea, some of whom I met when working there in the late 60s and early 80s, who applauded him for the granting of independence in 1975 (anticipated albeit much earlier by Menzies [Aitkin and Wolfers 1973: 2096]). This political affirmation also permeated the 1976 Northern Territory Land Rights Act, which helped to redress the loss of the Yirrkala case brought by the Yolngu people against the Commonwealth and the mining company Nabalco. The protagonists of this case were also the signatories on the bark petition now displayed in Parliament House. The legislation in question was in preparation on Whitlam's parliamentary watch, but remarkably, at least to our activist minds at the time, was enacted by the Fraser Government in its first year of office. And it was the Whitlam Government which "ended the final legal remnants of the White Australia Policy", already eroded but yet to be renounced when he took office (Fraser 2012: 2-3).

Whitlam is undoubtedly best remembered by the post-War generation for making a university education free. This reform was not, however, conceived in the flush of prime ministerial incumbency. In 1965, addressing the Government's response to the Martin Report on tertiary education, the then Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Whitlam sought to characterise Menzies' attitude as a belief in "higher education for an elite based on competition". Invoking the findings of the Martin Report Whitlam added, "The better off your parents are, the more likely it is that you will have a full secondary education and some tertiary education". Not only was this socially abhorrent to Whitlam, he could find little economic justification for the continuation of restrictive policies when, as he observed "to give a free place . . . to every student at present in a university would cost only slightly more than £3M a year". On these grounds, "there should", he said, "be no test other than comparative talent for admission to the universities". Quoting Hasluck's experience of school entry exams, he concluded, "I do not believe that low income alone had any relevance to our ability to pass examinations" (Whitlam 1965: 2).

In the well-honed tradition of parliamentary hyperbole, Whitlam opined, "There is a sedulously fostered legend that education will be the Menzies Government's greatest monument. It could not possibly have done less than it has done" (Whitlam 1965: 1). Although fit for the purpose of adversarial rhetoric, Whitlam would have known this assertion was far from the truth.

In office, Menzies harboured a deep reverence for universities, as expressed in his early speech on the place of a university in the modern community. Given in 1939, when "barbaric philosophies of blood and iron [were] resurgent" throughout Europe and the Pacific, Menzies asked what we should expect of a true university. His answers, seven in number, were that the university must:

be a home of pure culture and learning (p.11);
serve as a training school for the professions (p.19) . . . (leavened by) . . . scholarship and sensibility (p.21);
[ensure] mutuality between the theory and the practice (p.22);
be the home of research . . . [requiring] . . . infinite patience, precise observation, an objective mind and unclouded honesty (p.25);
be a trainer of character (p.26);
be a training ground for leaders (p.27); and
be a custodian of mental liberty, and the unfettered search for truth (p.30).

He continued:

to me a rugged honesty of mind that does not (p.31) shrink from the truth . . . (is) . . . one of the noblest of virtues; a glib dishonesty of mind which argues to a predetermined conclusion, determined in the light of passion or prejudice or selfishness, has always seemed to me the most contemptible of vices (p.32).

Menzies increased expenditure on universities tenfold between 1955 and 1966. In 1938 enrolment was just over 12,000. By the time he retired it had reached 95,000 (Cater 2012). The Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme, though as Menzies acknowledged adumbrated by Chifley, was implemented by Menzies. It effectively supplanted the post-War Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme which had enabled so many returned service men and women to gain further education, many at university. In response to the pleadings of Vice-Chancellors, Menzies commissioned the 1957 Murray Report on universities and later the 1965 Martin Inquiry into the future of tertiary education in Australia. The latter led to the establishment of the colleges of advanced education.

The Murray Report (Commonwealth of Australia 1957) outlined a series of impediments to meeting the "urgent demand" for the provision of sufficient graduates of an immense variety of kinds". Singled out for particular attention were:

- the "intractable difficulties" presented by the pressure of student numbers;

- the high failure rate of around a third of first-year students (a factor the Report decried as a "national extravagance which can ill be afforded");

- the poor preparation of students at school;

- the "congestion" of the curricula;

- poor staff to student ratios (ranging from 1:4 to 1:12);

- "sadly lacking" teaching facilities and equipment;

- inadequate funding for science and technology teaching; and

- universities "bursting at the seams".

Noting that in 1956 about a quarter (though in his response Menzies was to say one third) of students at university were in possession of a Commonwealth Scholarship, the Murray Committee held that the number should be increased without delay and an Australian University Grants Committee established. They continued, ". . . we think the time has come when the interests of the Commonwealth in the welfare and development of the universities is such that the Commonwealth Government should now contribute towards the capital, as well as the recurrent, expenditure of the universities" (1957: para 502, p.110).

This was to be a turning point: the commitment of the Commonwealth to much more expansive support of the States' universities. In his response to the Report, Menzies announced an immediate increase in Commonwealth grants for academic salary increases and a capital program for both universities and residential colleges. Funding was to increase from £6M in the period 1955-57 to £22M in 1958-60 (Menzies 1957). In concluding his response, Menzies said:

Mr Speaker, if I may confess it, this is rather a special night in my political life . . . It is not yet adequately understood that a university education is not, and certainly should not be, the perquisite of a privileged few . . .
We must . . . become a more and more educated democracy if we are to raise our spiritual, intellectual, and material living standards . . .
The new charter for the universities, as I believe it to be, should serve to open many doors and to give opportunity and advantage to many students . . . (p.2701)
It is, I think, a happy thing that we should have had the opportunity of reviving our conception of the universities and their work by the presentation and discussion of this brilliant and provocative report (p.2702).

Menzies pithily summarised his pride in his contributions to higher education in his policy speech for the 1963 Federal election. Detailing his Government's key achievements he regarded as especially gratifying, he noted:

- the 1951 block grants to the States for their universities;

- the Murray Committee of 1956 and the adoption of its recommendations;

- the establishment in 1959 of the Australian Universities Commission;

- major increases in university funding over the previous decade;

- the doubling of undergraduate student numbers from 32,000 students in 1949 to 69,000 in 1963; and

- increases in the number of Commonwealth Scholarships (1963: 19).

Menzies might also have mentioned the Commonwealth's support for the establishment of the CAEs and a cohort of new universities in the 1960s, although the implications of this move were not fully realised at that point.

Given the extent and scope of Menzies' reformist agenda, it may seem a curious oversight that this aspect of his prime ministership is not more broadly acknowledged. This is most likely a symptom of the man's manner rather than his vision. Menzies was, in the words of his biographer, Allan Martin, "a university man of the old school, a graduate devoted to his own *alma mater*, the University of Melbourne, and by sentiment and tradition a believer in liberal studies and university autonomy" (1999: 390). But Martin (1999: 398) dampens somewhat Menzies' own representation of his role as a pioneer in higher education reforms and the heroic view some hold of Menzies as the saviour of Australian universities. "He was not, as he was prone to imply", writes Martin, "the originator of Commonwealth support for universities" and was initially resistant to the idea of what became the Murray Inquiry. But Murray himself observed that Menzies had "a deep seated devotion to universities' welfare and to scholarship in general" (Martin 1999: 399). Once he was persuaded, Menzies used all his power in Cabinet to promote the cause.

Menzies' push for a "modern doctrine" of educational entitlement was tempered by a keen awareness of the financial "demands" such an approach would place on the Commonwealth. Pre-empting the funding "tipping point", which some of today's higher education commentators suggest we have reached, he presciently observed in 1957 that "Governments may find that, with all the other demands . . . made upon them, they may reach a point at which some limitation must be put upon the demands of tertiary education". Somewhat uncharacteristically, he retorted, "I hope not" (Menzies 1972: 92). This, he suggested, could be avoided by strong and sustained investment in "highly qualified people". People and not "bricks and mortar" were the key to maintaining his vision.

Notwithstanding their jousting in public and on the floor of the House, Menzies and Whitlam, both legally trained and classically schooled in the Christian humanist tradition, expressed a reverence for the transformative power of university education and of its centrality to national prosperity, civic inclusion and social stability. These were convictions to which both continually returned. Speaking of school education, Whitlam said, "Our approach to education has never been based on elitist, regional, sectarian or other discriminatory grounds . . . No democratic government", he argued, "can accept this disparity [in completion rates between public, Catholic and private schools]. It is", he concluded, "morally unjust [and] socially wasteful" (Whitlam quoted in Hutchinson 2011: 9).

Menzies' creation of the Australian Universities Commission in 1959 was, for Whitlam, a template and precedent for the creation of a Schools Commission and needs-based Federal funding support for public and Catholic schools. Both leaders grasped the potency of Section 96 of the Constitution empowering Parliament to grant financial aid to the States as it saw fit (Freudenberg 1977: 74). For Whitlam this was an instrument advancing his goal of creating equality. The "archetypal humanist" was inspired by the example of the "simple Presbyterian".[6]

The vision of Australia's universities articulated by each man was influenced by the strong strands of British protestant liberalism that permeated their upbringing and education. Educational theorists Geoffrey Sherington and Craig Campbell (2004) point to Menzies' conviction that those privileged by an extended education had an obligation to use their knowledge for social benefit, and that the State in turn had a moral duty to act for the greater good, to strive to remove barriers to equality and create the basis for participation in civic education and democratic citizenship. Similar sentiments, though expressed at different times and in different keys, informed the "new liberalism" of Whitlam and the social movements addressing Aboriginal and women's rights, multiculturalism, the demise of the White Australia Policy, and universal access to health care and social security.

Menzies' vision of the place and role of the university in Australian society was at once humanistic and utilitarian. Importantly, this view was also shaped by the "progressive 19th century" tenets of "free enterprise and social equity" on which his party was founded. "[W]hat we must look for", he said in 1944, "and it is a matter of desperate importance to our society, is a true revival of liberal thought which will work for social justice and security" (Georgiou 1999: 1). Countering subsequent denunciations and critiques within the Liberal Party of the concept of social justice, Georgiou makes a spirited case for Menzies' commitment to "the weak, the sick, and the unfortunate" (p.9). For Menzies, he observes, it was axiomatic that to "every good citizen the State owes not only a chance in life, but a self-respecting life. Not as charity. But as a fundamental right" (Georgiou 1999: 9).

Mark Hutchinson suggests that for Menzies, a university education was a privilege to be afforded to as many as had the aptitude for tertiary study. It should be blind to background and buffered by the means-tested Commonwealth Scholarship Scheme to support those for whom the cost was prohibitive (and I was one). His was a "patrician view of the world"[7]. For Whitlam, on the other hand, higher education was the "spear point" for equality of opportunity, a right to be unencumbered by happenstance of birth or fortune. As he enunciated it in the 1975 Chifley Memorial Lecture:

What we aim at is the achievement of the classic liberal idea of the career open to the talents – equality of opportunity – in a vastly expanded forum (1975: 7).

Education was central to his 1972 policy speech, to his aspiration "to liberate the talents and uplift the horizons of the Australian people . . . [and], . . . to give a new life and a new meaning in this new nation to the touchstone of modern democracy – to liberty, equality, fraternity" (1972: 2). The nexus of education and opportunity was a longstanding theme for Whitlam; indeed, it was also the focus of his 1969 campaign launch (1969: 2):

When government makes opportunities for any of the citizens, it makes them for all the citizens. We are all diminished as citizens when any of us are poor. Poverty is a national waste as well as individual waste. We are all diminished when any of us are denied proper education. The nation is the poorer – a poorer economy, a poorer civilisation, because of this human and national waste.

For Labor and for Whitlam this meant the realisation of a long held ambition of abolishing fees. Forty years ago, at a little heralded but landmark speech in Blacktown, he made a resounding social, economic and personal case for this course of action, one that, while nation-building in purpose, would have drawn on the lives and experiences of his Werriwa constituents. "We believe", he began

that a student's merit rather than a parent's wealth should decide who should benefit from (p.2) the community's vast financial commitment to tertiary education . . . it's time to strike a blow for the ideal that education should be free . . . We will reassert that principle at the commanding heights of education, at the level of the university itself (1972: 3).

Just as for Menzies, who regarded education as his own major domestic achievement (Freudenberg 1977), Whitlam was later to say that "the most enduring single achievement of my Government was the transformation of education in Australia" (1985: 315).

One of life's revelations for me came as a junior and somewhat accidental adviser to the House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs in the 1970s during its inquiry into Aboriginal health. I discovered that while the most conservative Country Party and left-leaning Labor members parried and postured on the floor of Parliament, they often shared not only a companionable drink but a respect for each other's convictions and common values of fairness, duty and service. The most contested issue at that time was whether to endorse the concept of independent Aboriginal Medical Services. Although the Committee was deeply divided, political pragmatism, courtesy and compromise prevailed, as did a deep shared concern about the chronic disparities in Aboriginal health status and the wish to do and say something meaningful.

So it was for Whitlam and Menzies. The threads of history which connected them were those of social justice. They converged on the role of the State in creating the grounds for equality. They were both driven by a determination to remove barriers to access to university. Both were committed to the underpinning of practical knowledge with intellectual honesty. They championed and exemplified the formation of moral sensibilities. Both leaders saw universities as central in driving economic advancement and social transformation. Those threads spun out through the generations and, though rediscovered and reworked in policy funding reforms every decade or so, can still be traced back to these figures.

The idea that the happenstance of family means, or cultural inheritance, or health, should dictate access to a higher education is still anathema to most of us. Higher education is widely understood today as contributing to a "just, creative and productive society" (Australian Government 2008: 1), fostering the capacity for critical analysis and independent thought, educating a productive and skilled workforce, and simply valuing the pursuit of knowledge as an end in itself (2008: 5). Behind the studied phraseology of the practised oratory of traditionally educated gentlemen, these are the same values and purposes for higher education espoused by Menzies and Whitlam.

Legacy or Loss? A Question of Values

One does not have to be immersed in the world of universities to know that tertiary education has been transformed in the years since Menzies and Whitlam held office. The scale and rate of changes in Australia have been unremitting. The university sector doubled in size following the Dawkins reforms of 1989-90 and has had an unbroken growth trajectory since. We have seen the rise and rise of private providers and the re-introduction of and intermittent increases in course fees. We are all subject to the codification of research performance and formula-driven methods of funding. More recently, we have been adapting to the demands of a new higher education regulator and the lifting of quotas on enrolments. The on-line and open access revolution is bearing down on us so rapidly that its implications are as yet hazy, but they will be profound.

Woven through policy debates about the funding, form and future of higher education institutions are enduring tensions: between the private and public value of a university education (Norton 2012), between autonomy and accountability (to our paymasters and the public) of universities, between universities' social and economic value, between state control and institutional freedom, and between universal access and selectivity.

Even so, Menzies' and Whitlam's proclamations on the centrality of education to national prosperity, personal transformation and equality of life chances resonate today with the charter of every Australian university. These values are thrown into particularly high relief for those universities in relatively disadvantaged and neglected regional and outer metropolitan regions; those institutions that arose as the third wave 25 years ago. More than ever before, these universities, of which mine is one, brought higher education within the reach of communities for whom it had been both unimagined and unimaginable.

UWS was formed in 1989 by a merger of three colleges of advanced education, the oldest of them established in 1891. With six campuses, and today 40,000 students, the University serves a region of almost two million people which was in Whitlam's and Menzies' days the neglected backyard, food bowl and manufacturing heartland of Sydney.

Outraged by a suggestion in one forum in western Sydney in 1985 that all the region needed was a few more TAFE trained engineers, Jack Ferguson, the New South Wales State politician and patriarch, responded tartly that "the people of the western suburbs are more than hewers of wood and carriers of water" (Hutchinson 2011: 13). But a university for western Sydney was, in fact, publicly anticipated by Whitlam by 1972, and in 1974 he committed to establish Sydney's fourth university in south-western Sydney, a vision which ended with the Dismissal, and was not revived until the late 1980s.

For many educated in the nineteenth century universities of our capital cities (and I was one) the nature and mandates of the third wave institutions are still seen through a glass darkly. They are a highly diverse institutional cohort, in part because of their locations and the demography of their catchments, in part because of their disciplinary inheritances. This generation of universities is far more diverse than its predecessors, with regional and remote multi-campus institutions such as Charles Sturt, Southern Queensland and Charles Darwin University, outer urban institutions such as UWS, Edith Cowan and Victoria University and the universities of technology such as RMIT and Curtin. (Curtin University gained university status in a tactically prescient move *before* the Dawkins blueprint was promulgated.)

Institutions in this third cohort, like all Australian universities, aspire to be locally relevant, nationally competitive, internationally referenced, and shaped by and shaping their communities. We all seek to enfranchise those historically excluded from post-school education and to foster the values and critical conversations that form the bedrock of an educated, civic-minded, diverse and tolerant populace.

But are universities today succeeding in this quest? We embrace the notions of opportunity and access but the number of students of low socio-economic status going to university has barely shifted over several decades despite a plethora of preparation programs and recruitment strategies. Only in the last three years with the lifting of the caps on undergraduate places has the number of disadvantaged students begun to rise.

Our own analysis of 42,427 New South Wales and ACT 2011 school leaver applicants showed a stark linear relationship between ATAR and the ABS index of socio-economic disadvantage. In other words if you grow up in a disadvantaged suburb, that convenient sorting mechanism, your ATAR, will be on average up to 12.57% lower than for those students from the uppermost socio-economic quartile postcodes. But admitting to university those whose family lives and educational fortunes have masked their real ability brings with it weighty – and costly – remedial obligations. These include the provision of multiple educational pathways, supplementary learning support, and school outreach and enrichment programs.

For many students, university would be a bridge too far were it not for the encouragement and support to cross it. But in the spirit of the dictum that *the best predictor of success at university is success at university*, providing the ways and means to achieve this is a critical part of our mandate. As Andrew Delbanco of Columbia University has written, ". . . it is often students of lesser means for whom college means the most – not just in . . . improving their economic competitiveness, but in the intellectual and imaginative enlargement it makes possible" (2012: 172).

As universities, we formulate the ideal attributes of a graduate and endeavour to embed their development in our teaching. We promote and defend intellectual exploration and the freedom to speak truth to authority. But are our graduates literate, numerate and capable of bringing a critical imagination to their professional worlds? And what of an authentic understanding of the forces that drive inequality, poverty and ill health? What of a commitment to public service, in the old fashioned meaning of the term? More pointedly, what of the values both Menzies and Whitlam espoused?

Questions such as these have seized the public imagination in the U.S.A. which has seen a recent torrent of publications, media commentary and political debate on higher education. Many authors fret eloquently about the state of higher education: about standards, about funding, about purpose, about pedagogy, about the perceived shortcomings of today's students, and about rising student debt. There is a sense that universities have lost their way, that they and the State have abandoned their most needy constituencies and sidestepped their calling. Of particular concern is the impact of debt on individual prospects, social mobility and national prosperity, especially for low income families and students. In the words of educationalist Richard Kahlenberg, "Instead of counteracting the inequalities they inherit, colleges and universities magnify them" (Kahlenberg 2012).

In his recent book *What Are Universities For?* literary critic Stefan Collini writes that

'Funding', 'impact', 'access': these three starting points – taken either singly or, more often, as a trinity signalling the realism and up-to-dateness of one's position – now utterly dominate the political and media discussion of universities in Britain (p.xi).

And one might add Australia, the U.S.A. and the English speaking world at large.

Collini laments that "the instrumental discourse of modern market democracies is becoming impatient with the traditions of open-ended enquiry which have hitherto been (universities') distinguishing feature" (p.4). He decries the "economistic philistinism of insisting that the activities carried on in universities need to be justified, perhaps can only be justified, by demonstrating their contribution to the economy" (pp.90-91). "What is at stake", he goes on is

whether universities in the future are to be thought of as having a public cultural role partly sustained by public support, or whether we move further towards redefining them in terms of a purely economistic calculation of value and a wholly individualistic conception of 'consumer satisfaction' (p.190).

In other words is there something about universities that goes beyond an instrumental purpose and market transaction that we who champion and defend them can vouch for?

Collini echoes to some extent a dystopian critique by Christopher Newfield in his book *Unmaking the Public University* in which he traces the damage wrought by the 'culture wars' (denoting assaults by the American right) on American colleges, and thereby on the middle class and particularly on those at the margins. These include minority groups, for whom the hope of a college education is a hope for a way out of poverty and exclusion. Among the impacts of this assault is the quasi-privatisation of public universities as public funds are withdrawn and a greater share of the cost is shifted to students and their families. In attempting to justify funding cuts, supporters of this shift deny or downplay the value of universities to citizens' social, cultural and moral development, while trumpeting the personal financial benefits of a higher education (Norton 2012).

The culture wars, writes Newfield, put the public university and the American middle class empowered by it "back in its place, culturally, politically, and economically" (2008: 67). A top quality education at a low cost has become a memory and in an increasingly privatised context the market has become both the medium and the message (p.271).

In the U.S., as in the U.K., the behemoth of graduate debt – a consequence of upwardly spiralling university fees and retreating government appropriations – has seized the attention of even the President, Barack Obama. In his State of the Union address this year he put higher education institutions on notice: "If you can't stop tuition from going up, the funding you get from taxpayers will go down". But the reality is that it already has. The total student debt in the U.S. is now reckoned to be one trillion dollars. As a result of dramatic cuts in funding for Californian universities and colleges, U.C. Berkeley has gone from being 20% State funded in 2005 to 10% today (Corbyn 2012). Similar cuts nationwide have had to be offset by aggressive fundraising, course cancellations, job losses and sharp rises in tuition fees such that fee income in many universities now outstrips state grants. Many young people as a result are, as our Ambassador in Washington, Kim Beazley, observes, "crippled by joblessness and deeply in debt".

As Delbanco writes, ". . . keeping the college idea alive for more than the privileged few is a huge challenge. With costs relentlessly rising, pressure is increasing on the idea of college as a capacious community with socioeconomic diversity as well as intellectual range" (2012: 159-60).

In the United Kingdom, concerns about student debt have risen in volume with the almost trebling of the cap on fees to £9,000. Criticisms touch on the longer-term inflationary effects of higher tuition fees, the risk of future fee increases, and changes to loan conditions. Other concerns include the risk of the sale of the loan book to the private sector or the failure of the market in the absence of robust legislative protection (Burns 2012). American private colleges are starting to make overtures to students and parents in the prestigious British independent schools, recognising that with the U.K.'s fee increases, study in the U.S. with scholarship and grant assistance "is emerging as a more explorable option" (Gibney 2012: 7).

We in Australia would be well-advised to watch carefully the fates of our overseas cousins. Australia has an enlightened loan repayment model, but we are not immune from some future government decision in economically straitened times to securitise this asset (the national HECS debt), that is, to sell it off. An even greater potential threat is the progressive withdrawal by government of its own funds as has happened so starkly in the U.K. and even more in the U.S. where students are "swimming in a sea of debt". There is no long-term guarantee against decisions by government to institute a much more onerous repayment regime or the transfer of defaulters to debt collectors working on a commission, as in the U.S..

As fees rise and government allocations recede, the quality of contemporary American higher education is being questioned. A book entitled *Academically Adrift: Limited Learning on College Campuses* by two well-credentialed sociologists, Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa, created much wringing of hands when it was released in the United States a year or so ago. It was based on the testing and retesting of 2,300 students from 24 four-year universities entering in 2005 using the standardised Collegiate Learning Assessment (CLA) test. The CLA is designed to assess critical thinking, analytical reasoning, problem solving and written communication skills. The authors' "gloomy" conclusion was that 45% "did not demonstrate any significant improvement in learning" over two years of college, a third over four years of college and those who did improve only showed "modest" gains. In response to the question, "how much do students learn in contemporary higher education?" the authors' answer is "not much". For this they blame, *inter alia*, a lack of academic rigour and engagement, low expectations of teachers, and "perverse institutional incentives" that value student retention and satisfaction over the pursuit of intellectual growth.

Some methodological criticisms of the CLA and the study notwithstanding, the book became one of the rare pieces of serious scholarship that, as one commentator put it, "jumps the fence and roams free into the larger culture": the *New Yorker*, *Vanity Fair* and even Doonesbury. More arrestingly, the authors subsequently released data on nearly 1,000 of their original cohort which showed that only 3.1% of the students who scored in the top 20% of the CLA were unemployed. Those scoring in the bottom 20% were three times more likely to be unemployed, living at home or receiving financial help from their parents, and burdened by credit-card and college loan debt (Arum et al 2012). In summary, they write, "Our study highlights the strong association between educational experiences and life-course outcomes, particularly labour market outcomes, and financial circumstances and civic engagement" (2012: 15).

The sheer size and diversity of the American system eclipses that in Australia but the quest for resources and recognition, if not on the same scale, is familiar to us all. We in Australia, however, are also habituated by our partisan membership of tiered university groupings, by the tussle for funding and by competition for students to a world view that the anthropologist George Foster famously described 50 years ago in his field study of a Guatemalan village, as a "theory of limited good". He posited that in the villagers' world view, one person's good fortune had logically to be another's misfortune. There was only a finite amount of good in the world and village life was a struggle around its acquisition or loss, mediated by the jealousy and the malign magic of neighbours.

Stretching this metaphor a little further, it is not our village but those over the hill which we should worry about (another anthropological truism). Those clever, disruptive, uncouth tribes with more pigs than us, elaborate sorcery, migratory tendencies and raiding parties. They are the national and international private and for-profit organisations and the educational entrepreneurs who are today in the ascendancy.

Every issue of the U.S. *Chronicle of Higher Education* contains breathless accounts of the inventive inroads of online providers. These include both the hopeful entrepreneurs and emerging education companies who may be inflating the next bubble. Even the blue ribbon universities are not content to sit on the sidelines, making their content freely available on the web (beginning with MIT in 2002) and looking to assess and certify units of study. These are the residents of the villages over the hill. Their prestige – the fame of their professors. Their sorcery – the sophisticated mobilisation of the power of the web. Their migratory tendencies – their international campuses. Their pigs – the equity of educational entrepreneurs and investors. Their raiding parties – the recruiters who will offer a better dowry to our academic staff than we can afford.

We in Australia, however, tend to be more locally focused. We judge our performance and success in terms of a domestic market competition structured, as Simon Marginson, Professor of Higher Education at the University of Melbourne, has said, by government and reinforced by the ubiquitous schemes employed to sort and rank universities. In this context we have become captive to scales of prestige and achievement that we do not afford the same critical eye we would expect of an undergraduate essay on research methods. All are derivative. Some are more faithful to the shortcomings of public databases than others. Some are based on opinion surveys. But many are concocted by the media and disturbingly superficial. Collini (2012: 17) comments that while rankings are cited for publicity and propaganda purposes "the truth is that they are practically worthless", a testament to "the pseudo-objectivity of tabular form" (p.18).

Delbanco (2012: 24) notes that in America many rankings effectively list universities in a hierarchy of prestige that conforms almost exactly to the size of their endowments. Ellen Hazelkorn's study *Rankings and the Reshaping of Higher Education* (2011) is a bracing account of the purposes, uses and sheer number of rankings that we all invoke to fortify our causes. (UWS, for instance, is according to last year's national survey of 22,000 staff, the best university in Australia to work for. Nor are we coy about letting people know!). But are these the measures by which we wish to stand or fall, and what do they really mean about the excellence, strength and competitiveness of the Australian higher education system?

The Harvard political philosopher Michael Sandel (2012) in his polemic (in the classical sense) on the moral limits of markets reminds his readers that "some of the good things in life are degraded or corrupted if turned into commodities" (p.10). His reflections are salient in how we think and speak about higher education. When a university education is represented in public discourse as a private good or a bankable service, in a market in which credentials are bought and sold, other voices are not heard. Silent are those voices championing university as a place where students not only study for a gainful career but engage questions of truth, responsibility and justice, learn to make distinctions of value and worry over the ethical dimensions of their fields of study. Lost in the cacophony of metrics are those who see university as opening students' eyes to other ways of seeing and their minds to other ways of thinking, and as laying the intellectual foundations of a fulfilled life and generous spirit.

Our embrace of the market, writes Sandel, has exacted a heavy price, draining public discourse of moral and civic energy. To decide

where the market belongs, and where it should be kept at a distance, we have to decide how to value the goods in question – health, education, family life, nature, art, civic duties, and so on. These are moral and political questions, not merely economic ones (p.10).

It is, perhaps, in recognition of the threats to the moral dimensions of a higher education that more and more universities are organising around the idea of authentic civic engagement, of learning through public service, and of building research partnerships on issues salient to their local communities. Among these groupings of like-minded universities are Engagement Australia, the coalition of 23 public universities, Asia Engage, its south-east Asian equivalent and the Ma'an network in the Middle East. The international Talloires network has a membership of 250 universities in over 60 countries committed by their Vice-Chancellors to the precepts of civic engagement and social responsibility. All attest to a student today "brimming with ideals and energy and hope, . . .a craving for meaningful work" (Delbanco 2012: 175) and staff who share their passion and convictions.

In conclusion, to the extent that we value the integrity and excellence of an Australian *system* of higher education it behoves us to look beyond our own village and the dictums of the market and to recognise that we are in a global field of forces that are sweeping universities along an unchartered path. These forces will profoundly challenge the advantages of incumbency and status, and of the cloak of legislative protection and funding on which public universities rely. The collective good health and prosperity of our large village and its residents – our students and staff – is in the interests of every Australian university. The ideals espoused by Menzies and Whitlam remain irrefutable, even if successive governments seem unable to configure policy frameworks that encourage mutual dependence, neighbourliness and cooperation. The strength of Australia's universities will lie in our collective capacity to forge, project and protect a nationally and internationally respected identity that transcends the interests of old and young, rural and urban, sandstones and red bricks.

Glyn Davis (2010), Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne, has said, "Our universities compete and connect, collaborate and vigorously contend, but each makes Australia a better place" (p.123). I would add that as the international currents of innovation, enterprise and experimentation in higher education eddy around us, our greatest strengths lie in unity, mutuality, and national clarity of purpose. There are some touch points common to us all and they go to a question posed by Menzies in his 1939 speech, namely:

> For, after all, I have touched upon the great problem of Universities, one upon which many a hard-pressed Vice-Chancellor broods long and late – How can my University adequately influence the world? How can the world be brought adequately to influence my University? (p.24).

Our best influence, I suggest, is in our capacity to embed in the lives of our institutions those values which he and Whitlam invoked, however different and distant their times: the duty to use knowledge for social benefit, to strive to remove barriers to equality of opportunity, to create the grounds for productive engagement with our communities and to pass the baton of responsible citizenship to the generations which follow us. This is what makes a higher education higher.

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End Notes

1 Mark Hutchinson, personal communication , June 2012

2 Personal communication, May 2012

3 The National Office moved from Brisbane Avenue to Centenary House in Barton in early 1993. The Party still owns John Curtin House

4 Personal letter, unpublished, Whitlam to Menzies, 15 February 1974

5 The Hon. Kim Beazley, personal communication, August 2012

6 Graham Freudenberg's characterisations, personal communication

7 The Hon. Kim Beazley, personal communication

THE SIR ROBERT MENZIES ORATION ON HIGHER EDUCATION

Sir Robert Menzies considered that his contribution to the development of universities might prove to be amongst the most lasting of his achievements for Australia. In recognition of this vision and in order to strengthen the role of higher education in Australia, the University of Melbourne and the Foundation established in 1991 the Sir Robert Menzies Oration on Higher Education.

The theme for the Oration is higher education policy and practice in Australia both in view of its national importance and also because of Sir Robert's attachment to both the extension of higher education and the wise development of it. The intention is for each Oration to be a contribution to intellectual debate in Australia.

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The Menzies Foundation was established in 1979 as a non-political, not-for-profit organisation to commemorate the life and achievements of Sir Robert Menzies. The Foundation supports prestigious postgraduate scholarships and also provides leadership through workshops and initiatives on matters of national importance.

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- The Menzies School of Health Research, Darwin;

- The Menzies Research Institute of Tasmania, Hobart;

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- The Sir Robert Menzies Oration on Higher Education;

- Grants, seminars and lectures on public health related themes;

- The Menzies Memorial Scholars' Association;

- Restoration and maintenance of "Clarendon Terrace", East Melbourne.

Through its strategic investment in scholarships, research and ideas, the Foundation has achieved substantial leverage and national leadership in promoting Australia's health and well-being.

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Menzies Oration on Higher Education

Year	Speaker	Details
2011	Professor Emeritus Sally Walker AM	Former Vice-Chancellor and President, Deakin University
2010	Professor Glyn Davis AC	Vice-Chancellor and Principal, University of Melbourne *To grow in the esteem of future generations: the Melbourne Model*
2009	Professor Emeritus Richard Larkins, AO, MD, BS, Hon LLD (Melb), PhD(London), FRACP, FRACP, FRACPI, FAMM, FAMS	Former Vice-Chancellor, Monash University *Universities: the Foundation of Civil and Successful Societies*
2008	The Honourable Julia Gillard, MP	Deputy Prime Minister of Australia Minister for Education, Minister for Employment & Workplace Relations Minister for Social Inclusion
2007	Professor K C Li	Former Secretary for Education & Manpower Hong Kong SAR Government *'Education: Vision and Reality'*
2006	Professor James Wilkinson	Director, Derek Bok Centre for Teaching & Learning, Harvard University *'Undergraduate Education: What Good is it? An International Perspective'*
2005	Professor Peter McPhee	Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Academic) University of Melbourne *'Faces in the crowd' - The Melbourne 'Experience' past, present, future*
2004	Professor Stephen Leeder	Professor of Public Health & Community Medicine, The University of Sydney *'Global Health and the Future of Academic Medicine'*
2003	Professor Alan Gilbert	Vice-Chancellor, University of Melbourne *'Some Heretical Ideas about Universities'*
2002	Professor Bernard Shapiro	Principal and Vice-Chancellor, Mc Gill University *'The Research University: An Undergraduate Challenge'*
2001	Dr John Hood	Vice-Chancellor, University of Auckland *'The Research-led University – Reflections from New Zealand'*
2000	Professor Sir Alex Broers	Vice-Chancellor, Cambridge University *'University Partnerships – Sustaining International Competitiveness'*
1999	His Excellency the Hon Sir Guy Green AC	Governor of Tasmania *'Governors, Democracy and the Rule of Law'*
1998	Lord Ronald Dearing	Chancellor, Nottingham University *'A Time of Opportunity'*
1997	Professor Wang Gungwu	Director, East Asia Institute, National University of Singapore
1996	Professor Sir Stewart Sutherland	Vice-Chancellor, University of Edinburgh
1995	Professor Brian G Wilson AO	Vice-Chancellor, The University of Queensland
1994	The Honourable Nick Greiner AC	Former Premier of New South Wales
1993	Professor Henry Rosovsky	Lewis P & Linda L Geyser, University Professor, Harvard University
1992	Professor Peter Karmel AC	Australian National University
1991	Professor David Penington AC	Vice-Chancellor, University of Melbourne