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CURTIN UNIVERSITY

THE FORUM, BENTLEY CAMPUS,  
PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

THURSDAY 16 FEBRUARY 2017

VALUES OF CURTIN IN THE AGE OF TWITTER

The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG

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The Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG HON D.LITT\*\*

*WITH THANKS AND PRAISE*

It is a marvellous thing to receive an honorary degree in the company of 350 graduates of Curtin University and 1,500 citizens and visitors.

I thank Curtin University for this honour. In the pecking order of university honours, this is the tops. I thank the Council. I thank the 'gaudy profs in reds and yellows' for permitting me to join the *alumni* of Curtin. I appreciate the tolerance of my fellow graduates. They had to work so hard to receive their degrees. Mine came without the irksome necessity of examinations. The other graduates are special. Recent reports have shown that, about one third of Australia's university students fail to complete their degrees. Many suffer excess rates of drop out.<sup>1</sup> So those who succeed deserve honour and praise.

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\* Address to the graduation ceremony on the conferral of the Hon D.Litt. degree

\*\* Former Justice of the High Court of Australia (1996-2009); Patron of the Curtin Centre for Human Rights Education

<sup>1</sup> S. Martin and S. Fox Koob, "A Third of Students Failing to Complete", *The Australian*, January 18, 2007, 1.

At a moment like this, our minds go back to our first days at school. To those patient teachers who first opened up our minds to the alphabet, to reading, to singing and to living together. We should think of our school teachers with gratitude. And all the teachers who followed at university and in life. So I am specially proud to be here with graduates in the Curtin School of Education.

A society without law disrespects the human rights of its citizens. Law, like everything else, is changing. But at its core law remains the precious promise to render all of us equal before the law. Not to power. Nor to money. Nor to vigilantes. Nor to guns. Not to celebrity. But to the law, that is answerable to justice and human rights. I was proud to participate in the launch of the Curtin Law School. I pay tribute to the exciting way in which it is already carving out a distinctive role and mission. Congratulations to the graduates in Law.

This month is the centenary of a great lawyer and Chief Justice of Australia, Sir Harry Gibbs. He led the High Court in the 1980s and was often quite conservative. Still, on his welcome to the office of the Chief Justice he asserted the responsibility of Australian lawyers “to develop the law in a way that will lead to decisions that are humane, practical and just”.<sup>2</sup> Now, since this month Australia has its first woman Chief Justice: The Honourable Susan Kiefel. Nothing now is beyond the aspiration and attainment of women. Nothing should be beyond the aspiration and attainments of any minority or group in this country.

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<sup>2</sup> Address on the occasion of the swearing in of Gibbs CJ as Chief Justice of the High Court of Australia, 12 February 1981.

Human rights defend minorities, including members of the LGBTI – they gay minority like me. I am proud to be patron of the Curtin Centre for Human Rights Education. It is dedicated to this enduring goal. I congratulate its graduates.

The School of Information Systems beckons us to the realities of our present and our future. The mind of human beings developed informatics in a way that would have been unthinkable when I was at school and university. Human intelligence will press information technology still further - far beyond our present imagination. However, it requires the input of civilised human beings to ensure that human values are upheld. I honour the graduation on Information Systems who understand the link of human rights and technology.

### *CURTIN'S VALUES*

My first day at school in 1944 was at North Strathfield Public Infants' School in Sydney. John Curtin was our Prime Minister. The nation was locked in an existential struggle to survive. Our brave soldiers had been recalled from other theatres of war to defend our interests, closer to home.

Fortunately, in John Curtin, we found a leader of great values. Those who knew him, spoke with rare unanimity, about this Australian politician. He had a strong sense of duty. He was an unusually selfless man. Menzies, his opponent, singled out his 'broad and pragmatic mind' and his 'great human relations'. Menzies said that he had 'received

many wounds from John Curtin but none of them... in the back'.<sup>3</sup> Fadden, also an opponent, described him as 'the best and fairest I have opposed in politics... One of the greatest Australians ever... He gave me his mateship'. Curtin was fighter for the underdog. Though the times were exceptional, Curtin won respect from cynical Australians as few leaders before or since have done. His dignity, simplicity, straightforwardness, absence of vanity and refusal of any personal privilege won admiration. His biographer says 'he sought national consensus not by abandoning [his] policies, but by pushing them to the limits of acceptability and [he] was masterly in gauging those limits'.<sup>4</sup> We need more leaders of this ilk. Not just in wartime. But at every time. We need to instil these values in our own lives, as citizens.

### *THE AGE OF TWITTER*

It should be easier for this generation of graduates to survive and prosper. At our fingertips, literally, is knowledge about the whole world: its challenges and opportunities. We have no excuse to say that we do not know about the sufferings of the poor; the dangers of nuclear weapons; the perils of global warming; the cruelty meted out in those who seek asylum; the commercialised violence to sentient animals and to human beings.

But has it become easier, or more difficult, to sustain the wisdom and character of Curtin in today's world? Does the new technology of our age help to attain truth? Or to spread falsehoods? Do the social networks really enhance our engagement with other human beings (our

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<sup>3</sup> Geoffrey Searle, "Curtin, John (1885-1945) in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 13, 1993, 550 at 558.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

“friends”)? Or do they undermine civic friendship? And render us more impersonal?

Whatever the reservations we have about social networks, they are galloping forward and seemingly gathering everyone, gobbling up their time. Demanding attention in an addictive way.

Donald Trump the new President of the United States has the codes to launch a nuclear armagedon. Probably so, more frighteningly, does Kim Jong-un of North Korea. Would either of these leaders have the reflection of a Curtin? The empathy for other human beings? The nobility, humanity and sensitive kindness? The understanding of compromise? The capacity to contest strongly with opponents and yet to win their trust?

So what is the future that this new technology promises to us who graduate tonight? A recent report in the *New York Times*, on a Pew Survey conducted in September 2016, found that US internet users regularly log onto at least two social networks daily, up from 42% in 2013 to 62% last year. The percentage of adults using *Facebook*, the most general social network, is now 71% of the online population. There have been significant increases in the numbers using *Instagram*, *Pinterest*, *LinkedIn*. And then there is Donald Trump’s very favourite, *Twitter* – the micro blogging service with “news” of variable quality.<sup>5</sup>

Yet if one leaps from Mr Trump’s generation (he is 70) to those of most of today’s graduates (20s and 30s) and back to 13 year olds, there are

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<sup>5</sup> V. Goel, “Americans use more online social networks”, *New York Times*, January 9, 2015.

even more drastic changes coming along. Changes that may make my fellow graduates today feel positively old.

The most astonishing discovery about the use of social media by 13 year olds today is not that they check their social media more than 100 times a day, often during school hours. Nor that many of them express, or are victims of, crude bullying. Nor even that many of them engage in sexting they may live to regret.<sup>6</sup>

More worrying is that the average time used by 13 year olds on *Facebook* is 50 minutes a day. Allowing for the dinosaurs and busy oldies who disdain any such activity, this suggests the huge and ever growing expenditure of time and the rise of an “internet addiction disorder”.<sup>7</sup> I’ll bet a few of our graduates have this disease.

## *CONCLUSION TO THE WORLD OF LETTERS*

One of the cruellest blows suffered by a retired federal judge like me, is the loss of the Commonwealth car. Those white Comcars easily become as addictive as *Facebook*. But then suddenly they completely disappear.

Now I travel to and from my office, in a Sydney train. At 6am everyone in my carriage, literally everyone, is staring at a mechanical device. Most are texting, tweeting or otherwise communicating in written text. No one looks up. No one looks around. Absolutely no one dreams of interrupting others in their solitary pursuits. No one is thinking to

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<sup>6</sup> Chuck Hadad, “Why 13 Year Olds Check Social Media 100 Times A Day”, CNN (0355hkt), October 13, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> *New York Times*, above n.5.

themselves of the problems of the day. Few are considering the problems of our world. Their problem is 140 characters. Stimulus, gratification and counter-stimulus are the name of the game. In restaurants young lovers are doing it. In lecture halls anxious students are doing it. Oral communication – talking - is on the wane. Textual communication is on the rise. Yet for millennia, humans have communicated by voice, by sounds, by singing, by handshakes, by body language.

I see the body language of my fellow commuters on the Sydney trains by day and by night. Young men sit, taking up the space of two with legs wide apart, looking at the tiny screen. Indifferent to fellow passengers mostly too embarrassed or frightened to interrupt their reveries. Young women often sit with their bags on the seat beside them – a kind of distance marker. Many indifferent to their fellows. We are breeding a generation that is increasingly self-absorbed, with diminishing interests in the world of flesh and blood around them. With only highly specific, and not necessarily accurate, information about the world at large filling their thoughts. This is a worry.

The internet is a wondrous invention. It will get more amazing with voice controlled artificial intelligence – available in a store near you before next Christmas.<sup>8</sup> In due course apps will probably be implanted. Digital information will go straight to our brains by *Brainbook*. You heard it here first.

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<sup>8</sup> F. Allison, “Talk to Me: Voice control is taking off, but it’s not taking over yet”, *The Conversation*, January 24, 2017, 9.28am AEST.



So this is the challenge for us the graduates, including myself, on this special night at Curtin University. To remember and preserve the emphatic values of people like John Curtin. To take advantage of the extraordinary technology of the age we live in. To be engaged, beyond momentary pop ups, with deep questions, great music, fine literature and love of one another. And to lift our eyes from the screen to the beauty of the world and to the living reality of the people who bring us to magical moments like this graduation.

Special people are our witness tonight. They are real and they are human. They are actual, not virtual images in a recorded drama. They are flesh and blood that is mortal. They will not last forever. On an occasion like this, just for a moment, we should set aside the selfies. We should look these special people in the eyes. We should note their lovely features, their blemishes, their wrinkles and even grey hair. We should grasp and hug them and say those old fashioned very human words. "Thank you. Couldn't have done it without you. You are precious. I love you. I will never forget that I did not do this by myself. I did it with you and others". Companions on the journey to life

To my fellow graduates, to our partners and families and loved ones and to each other, I say: seize the moment. Savour this reality. Put those mobile phones away for a few minutes. Let them vibrate as much as they please. Imbibe the precious ambiance of this event. And congratulations to all who join us on our special day!

Years from now and far away we will think of tonight: the debt we all owe to Curtin University; the exhilaration of our achievement; and the love of those who matter most.