**CELEBRATING ANU’s 70TH BIRTHDAY**

Address by the Chancellor, Professor the Hon Gareth Evans AC QC FASSA FAIIA, Llewellyn Hall, Australian National University, 1 August 2016

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Reaching your Biblical use-by date can be a rather disconcerting experience for us mortal individuals, as I can personally testify. But for an immortal institution like ANU – with seven decades now behind us of extraordinary achievement – turning 70 really is an occasion for major, unqualified, celebration. And today we are going to enjoy the moment with no holds barred.

We are going to celebrate, for a start, our outstanding *research* achievement over 70 years, across every major discipline. Established initially as a *purely* research university, unique of its kind in Australia – and extremely unusual in the wider world – we rapidly accumulated an unparalleled scholarly reputation, which we have proudly retained ever since

* with the icing on the cake the six Nobel Prizes won by our staff and alumni (four of them for work done directly here on campus) – most recently of course by our new Vice-Chancellor Brian Schmidt – more than any other Australian university, and more than most of them put together.

We are going to celebrate our *teaching and learning* achievement since we opened our doors to undergraduates in 1960 – much to the dismay though that may have been of quite a few of those researchers who had to slum it for the first time in their professional lives with real live students!

We are a university more than any other in this country – certainly more than any of the other Go8 – with a real  *communal* character, with a very high proportion of our students, both graduate and undergraduate, living on campus or close by. And now through the generosity of Graeme and Louise Tuckwell, unprecedented in Australian educational philanthropy, we will be adding whole new dimensions to the quality of that residential experience.

Overall, we’ve had now 90,000 graduates enjoying that totally distinctive ANU campus experience – an experience which that other speakers this morning (Megan Stoyles, Elizabeth Reid, Bruce Chapman, Mick Dodson and Penny Sackett) – are shortly going to relive with us, decade by decade, from the 60s to the noughties. (Whether Megan and the others tell us the *whole* story remains to be seen, but it will be a good one…)

And we are going to be celebrate the extraordinary contributions to the *national public policy debate* made by so many on this campus for so long – on everything from defence and security, to energy and the environment, to Indigenous reconciliation, to law and justice reform, to economic policy across the board, to health policy, science policy, arts policy, education policy: in fact every corner of this nation’s public life.

This is a university which has understood from the outset that the formulation of public policy is a high calling demanding the best available intellectual resources, and justifying a substantial commitment from this university’s best brains – not something beneath our academic dignity, properly left to the professional public servants everywhere else in this town and to all the rather less professional poli-wafflers and megalomaniacs (like me in my former life) in the House across the Lake.

And we are going now from strength to strength in harnessing and focusing that policy-engagement energy, not only through the focal point of the Crawford School of Public Policy, but right across the university.

It is important to remember, as we celebrate now our founding 70 years ago, in 1946, just how much of the driving vision behind the creation of The Australian National University – with our name very directly reflecting it – was the idea, as the greatest visionary of all our founders, Nugget Coombs, later described it, of this new national university as an “*intellectual powerhouse for the rebuilding of society*”, grappling with post-war problems of poverty, unemployment, social and racial justice, and international misunderstanding.

That vision of the ANU as being of enduring significance in the post-war life of the Australian nation, supporting the development of national unity and identity, improving our understanding of ourselves and our neighbours, and contributing to economic development and cohesion, was not very clearly articulated in the language of our founding Act

In the finest legislative drafting tradition of the time that language was relentlessly pedestrian, something which I hope we can remedy in the updated ANU Act we have been negotiating with the government over the last twelve months.

But the vision *was* articulated in the words of the Minister for Post-War Reconstruction in the Chifley Government, John Dedman, introducing the legislation into Parliament:

He spoke of the innumerable problems awaiting solution in Australia and the world if the future was to be made safe, and if people were to benefit from recent developments in physical science, in medicine, and in the understanding of human relationships through the social sciences. He spoke of the significant and unique contribution Australia could make to all these areas, and to Pacific studies in particular.

And above all he spoke of the new national university as an institution which would “bring credit to Australia, advance the cause of learning and research in general, and *take its rightful place amongst the great universities of the world*.”

Inevitably, not everyone in the Parliament at the time had such an exalted and optimistic view of what the new university could achieve, or liked the idea of having “national” anywhere near its name, or liked what they thought it might get up to.

One Opposition senator from Victoria, thought it would be a “synthetic, provincial university”. The member for the Northern Territory feared that “ratbag” views would infest the University through the inclusion of the Research School of Social Sciences.

And the then Leader of Her Majesty’s Opposition, Mr Robert Menzies, was one of those many who thought we should be called the “University of Canberra”, going so far as to confess “to a mild feeling of horror” at the “National University” label – although it’s fair to say that in later years, as Prime Minister, he became one of our greatest supporters, as he was indeed of the development of the whole university sector.

It is important today, as we look back over all that we have achieved over the last 70 years, that we acknowledge in full the enormous debt of gratitude we owe to our founding fathers in those early post-war years. (I should say that in using the word “fathers” here I’m *not* being what our student reps on Council would no doubt describe as my normally hopelessly-out-of-date-gender-insensitive self. The unhappy reality is that in those days they *were all men* – and it really makes quite uncomfortable viewing now to look at the photos of all those preparatory meetings, with sometimes 50 or 60 people in the room, and not one of them ever a woman.)

But that acknowledged, what an absolutely extraordinary group they were! There were those like Howard Florey, Mark Oliphant, and Keith Hancock who lent so much of their already huge international prestige in medicine, physics and the humanities to getting the project off the ground. There were the early Vice-Chancellors – Douglas Copland, Leslie Melville and above all John Crawford – who steered and shaped the development of the university from empty paddocks into the thriving institution we have today, and who, certainly in the case of Crawford, made a towering intellectual and policy contribution to the life of the nation.

And towering above all of them – in every way except for his physical size, which was famously diminutive, but no less combative for that – was Dr HC Coombs (who much preferred to be called “Nugget”, understandable enough when you’ve been baptized “Herbert Cole”). Recruited from the Commonwealth Bank to Treasury by the Menzies Government after the outbreak of war, Ben Chifley appointed him to head the Department of Post-War Reconstruction

- and in that role it was Nugget Coombs’s vision, determination and relentless energy that – more than anything or anyone else – was responsible for bringing the ANU into being.

He was the de facto Chancellor during the tenure of the first three of my predecessors – Stanley Melbourne Bruce, John Cockcroft and Howard Florey, who all stayed based in the UK – and then became Chancellor himself from 1968-76, overlapping for most of that time with Sir John Crawford as Vice-Chancellor, where they made a stellar combination (with Crawford then going on to succeed Coombs as Chancellor through to the mid-80s).

A brilliant Keynesian economist, central banker, and all-round public servant; an enormously influential supporter of the arts; and above all a passionate advocate for the rights, including land rights, of the Indigenous people of this country, Nugget Coombs remains one of our greatest-ever Australians, and it’s right on this occasion that we recognize his absolutely central place in the ANU pantheon.

Of course there are quite a few others in the subsequent history of ANU who also unequivocally deserve a place in that Pantheon – among them (and I’ll name just one, because it will confirm all his views about Chancellors if I don’t) the longest serving of all our Vice-Chancellors, Ian Chubb.

Great universities depend above all else on great people, and ANU has been blessed from the outset, and continues to be blessed, with the extraordinary quality of our people – our founders, our executive leadership, our academic and professional staff, and our students. How we continue to attract extraordinary people in the future, and rise to ever greater heights of excellence in the years ahead, will be the subject of Brian Schmidt’s looking-forward talk to us a little later.

Let me conclude my own looking-back remarks by saying just this. To create a new national university in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War needed enormous optimism about what this reborn country was capable of becoming.  It required great vision in 1946 to see Australia, as so many still then did, not as an intellectual backwater from which anyone of any intellectual ambition had to escape, but a nation able and willing to create a world-class powerhouse of analysis and ideas, of discovery and delivery.

On our 70th birthday, we rejoice that those who founded and nurtured The Australian National University had that vision and confidence, and proudly celebrate the seven decades we have now spent justifying their optimism.  Happy Birthday to us!