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## *Reflections on the Basic Purposes of Schooling*

Address delivered at the  
University of Sydney, Australia  
Tuesday, May 17, 1993

These remarks are offered at the close of a two and a half week visit to much of your quite remarkable country, and following visits to several Australian Universities, in the course of which I visited with academic, governmental, business and educational leaders in Adelaide, Melbourne, Brisbane, Canberra and Sydney. It has been a highly instructive visit--very informative about Australian education, particularly at the university level--and richly rewarding in the depth and breadth of appreciation and knowledge I have come to possess about your nation and its people. I am especially grateful to the Australian Center for American Studies here at your University, and of course to your colleagues at the other universities, and to the others with whom I have had the exceptional pleasure of meeting and sharing ideas, and whose unfailing courtesies and many kindnesses made my visit so uncommonly memorable. I take away only the most favorable and warmest impressions of Australia and a much enlarged perspective and knowledge of it.

Australia, it seems to me is at once modern, alive to its prospects, focused on its future, and struggling with its own sense of self in a world that offers only change, instability, and danger. These of course, are all really opportunities masquerading as problems. When has it ever been otherwise? Last week I was honored to address the graduating class at the University of Queensland, and, in encouraging the students to seek their futures with courage and determination, I called out an example of my point by quoting from the late Lord Ashby, a good friend of Australia's, who was the Master of Clare College and the Vice Chancellor of Cambridge University, and a one time resident of your beautiful and exceptional country. Let me tell it to you in his words:

[Clare College at Cambridge is named after] Elizabeth de Clare, who founded it over 600 years ago. She was the granddaughter of a king. She had a tragic life. At the age of 30 she was three times a widow. Three men dear to her died by violence: her brother was killed in a battle against the Scots, her son was assassinated in Ireland at the age of 20; her third husband died in civil war. Enough to break the spirit of any woman and to harden her heart against the world. But it didn't break the spirit of an Elizabeth de Clare. She spent her long life managing her estates and helping the needy. In the year 1349 an appalling disaster crossed Europe. The great pestilence, it was called. In the summer of that year it reached England and killed one third of the population. Elizabeth de Clare survived the disaster. And her response to it? This is what she wrote:

"...because so many have been carried off by the plague, knowledge is now beginning to be lamentably lacking among men..."

and to remedy this she endowed a college in order (as she put it)

"to advance divine learning and to benefit the State."

This was her act of constructive defiance against the times in which she lived. It still survives.

Here is a standard worthy of any country seeking to confront the world and make its way, whatever its problems or apprehensions. Surely, we would all derive no small benefit in remembering the courageous example of one who transformed personal grief, doubt, and near defeat into a positive and larger force for good, an enduring and noble cause, both in its prospects and in later reality.

It is worth noting that it was to education that Elizabeth De Clare turned in her dark moments to lift herself and the larger society out of their common despair. And it is to education that we must also look today, albeit for different reasons, if our response, in our times, to our problems, holds

any hope of fitting our common future as proximately as did Elizabeth de Clare's.

At the outset, however, it may be worth recalling the winds of change that are blowing across the world and reshaping its economic, political, and social dimensions; for it is to these changes that our schools and universities must repair for help in charting their own future and the education of their students:

- ♦ Ideological commitments that have locked in communist governments for decades are presently giving way to greater political openness, economic development, and the use of technology, all of which are essential to the prosperity and personal freedom people throughout the world are aggressively seeking.
  
- ♦ The past decade has seen the emergence of the Pacific Rim as a potent force in the world economy and world affairs. The rise of Japan and of the newly industrialized states of Asia has challenged assumptions about European and American dominance of the global marketplace. And one can only speculate about the impact on the world's economy of the changes now taking place in Eastern Europe and the former republics of the USSR.
  
- ♦ Today the East and West are struggling less with each other than they are in common struggling with what the Arab philosopher Hichem Djait (Hee-CHEM Jah-EET) has called the forces of "modernity"--the technological revolution, modern science, urbanization and the industrialization of labor--forces that should not be confused with Western Civilization, as is often the case. These forces are changing the world not just at the margin but at the core.

- Ideas blow across political boundaries, even into the most insulated of nations and societies, disquieting, troubling, indeed in some instances overturning even the most ideological and inflexible of established orders. Even the role and place of the military in this equation are coming under intense scrutiny. All of these forces--economic, political, ideological, religious, social, and cultural--are interrelated and global in their significance and effect.

Which will the leading nations be in this dramatically altered economic and political environment?

According to New York investor Felix Rohatyn:

The real power in the world is coming to consist of surplus capital combined with national self-discipline, advanced technology and superior education. The leading nations of tomorrow, by these standards, are likely to be Japan and post 1992 Europe.

Surplus capital, national self-discipline, advanced technology and superior education--an agenda for the future any nation would do well to heed.

Thus, the role of education at all levels will be central to the future of any nation seeking to compete with the world's advanced industrial states, for those states will be increasingly reliant on ever more sophisticated systems of manufacturing and production, communication and information, highways of one kind or another, and transportation networks that integrate modern air, sea, and land travel and trade.

My own country is at present struggling with these forces and seeking to improve its schools.

The 1983 report of the National Commission on Excellence in Education provoked an educational

reform movement of unprecedented scale in the United States, and it even today remains a force for constructive change and improvement. I wish to quote briefly from some of its more salient sections:

History is not kind to idlers. The time is long past when America's destiny was assured simply by an abundance of natural resources and inexhaustible human enthusiasm, and by our relative isolation from the malignant problems of older civilizations. The world is indeed one global village. We live among determined, well educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products, but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood workshops. America's position in the world may once have been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer.

The risk is not only that the Japanese make automobiles more efficiently than Americans and have government subsidies for development and export. It is not just that the South Koreans recently built the world's most efficient steel mill, or that American machine tools, once the pride of the world, are being displaced by German products. It is also that these developments signify a redistribution of trained capability throughout the globe. Knowledge, learning, information, and skilled intelligence are the new raw materials of international commerce and are today spreading throughout the world as vigorously as miracle drugs, synthetic fertilizers, and blue jeans did earlier. If only to keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still retain in world markets, we must dedicate ourselves to the reform of our educational system for the benefit of all--old and young alike, affluent and poor, majority and minority. Learning is the indispensable investment

required for success in the "information age" we are entering.

Our concern, however, goes well beyond matters such as industry and commerce. It also includes the intellectual, moral and spiritual strengths of our people which knit together the very fabric of our society. The people of the United States need to know that individuals in our society who do not possess the levels of skill, literacy, and training essential to this new era will be effectively disenfranchised, not simply from the material rewards that accompany competent performance, but also from the chance to participate fully in our national life. A high level of shared education is essential to a free, democratic society and to the fostering of a common culture, especially in a country that prides itself on pluralism and individual freedom.

What has happened since this report was issued a decade ago? As reported by the New York times, on April 28, 1993:

- ♦ Forty-two states since 1983 have toughened high school graduation requirements, a third have strengthened teacher certification programs, and teacher salaries have jumped 22% over the rate of inflation, rising from \$22,000 to a national average of \$36,000.
- ♦ Twenty-seven percent of high schools, according to one study, have toughened their curriculums and are assigning more homework, two recommendations from "A Nation at Risk".
- ♦ In addition, 40 percent of schools have lengthened their school years, according to

a study by the Education testing service, an educational research firm. And 70 percent of high schools--double the number 10 years ago--have adopted policies that keep failing students out of extracurricular activities. Forty-seven states have introduced improved testing programs for students, while 39 states have introduced some form of teacher evaluation, according to a study by the Education Commission of the States.

But whatever the gains there is more unfinished than finished business in this matter, partly because--at least in the United States--society and its educational institutions seem to have lost sight of the basic purposes of schooling and of the high expectations and discipline effort needed to attain them. In the United States, our nations schools and colleges are routinely called on to provide solutions to personal, social, and political problems, that the home and other institutions either will not or cannot resolve. These demands exact an educational cost as well as a financial one, e.g., as the National Commission described it, our school curricula became "homogenized, diluted, and diffused, to the point that they no longer have a central purpose. In effect we have a cafeteria style curriculum, in which the appetizers and deserts can easily be mistaken for the main courses".

Over the last ten years, some progress has been made in this area of school reform, as noted earlier. But we remain well short of the goals proposed by the Commission, and still not quite able to acknowledge that the overriding and principal purpose of the school is to lay the foundation for success in the after-school years, and that the modern curriculum should embody those subjects and intellectual demands that equip students to cope with and contribute to the mind and spirit of our culture and society. What are the essentials of such a curriculum, as described by the National Commission?



- ♦ The teaching of *English* should equip students to: (a) comprehend, interpret, evaluate and use what they read; (b) write well organized, effective papers; (c) listen effectively and discuss ideas intelligently; and (d) know our literary heritage and how it enhances imagination and ethical understanding, and how it relates to the customs, ideas and values of today's life and culture.
- ♦ The teaching of *mathematics* should equip students to: (a) understand geometric and algebraic concepts; (b) understand elementary probability and statistics; (c) apply mathematics in everyday situations; and (d) estimate, approximate, measure, and test the accuracy of their calculations.
- ♦ The teaching of *science* should provide students with an introduction to: (a) the concepts, laws, and processes of the physical and biological sciences; (b) the methods of scientific inquiry and reasoning; (c) the application of scientific knowledge to everyday life; and (d) the social and environmental implications of scientific and technological development.
- ♦ The teaching of *social science* should be designed to: (a) enable students to fix their places and possibilities within the larger social and cultural structure; (b) understand the broad sweep of both ancient and contemporary ideas that have shaped our world; (c) understand the fundamentals of how our economic system works and how our political system functions; and (d) grasp the difference between free and repressive societies.
- ♦ The teaching of *computer science* should equip students to: (a) understand the computer as an information, computation and communication device; (b) use the computer in the study of the other Basics and for personal and work-related purposes; and (c) understand the world of

computers, electronics, and related technologies.

- ♦ We believe it is desirable that students achieve proficiency in a foreign language because study of a foreign language introduces students to non-English speaking cultures, heightens awareness and comprehension of one's native tongue, and serves the Nation's needs in commerce, diplomacy, defense, and education.
- ♦ The high school curriculum should also provide students with programs requiring rigorous effort in subjects that advance students' personal, educational, and occupational goals, such as the fine and performing arts and vocational education.

These then, at least in my view, are the basic purposes of schooling: essentially all else should be subordinate to them. I am keenly aware, of course, that the schools do much more than this in helping to socialize children and young people to the norms of civility, public discourse, manners, customs, and values of the larger society, and to the collective expectations and standards by which the community and the country will tend to measure and judge their maturity, behavior, and worthiness. I am also aware that we do not have an even playing field here, either in terms of the socio-economic, racial, ethnic, and other factors that bear so significantly on the individual circumstances of our students, or in terms of mental and intellectual capabilities. Nevertheless, we must not allow the secondary considerations to overwhelm the primary ones, and--at least in the U.S.--we have done so in no small measure.

I earnestly hope that my remarks will be regarded by you as having been mostly deserving of your time and consideration. It has in any event, been an honor and a most memorable opportunity for me to have joined you here tonight, and to have spent two and one half wonderful weeks as a guest in your country. Thank you.