

The Hon PJ Keating
Occasional Address at Graduation Ceremony for Graduates of the
Faculties of Commerce and Economics
and the conferral of the Honorary Doctorate of Laws on
Hon PJ Keating
University of New South Wales
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Chancellor John Yu, Vice Chancellor Rory Hume

I am very honoured to receive this degree from a great university and I am honoured to be doing so in the company of all of you – no longer students, but graduates.

This ceremony is taking place at a time of large events in the world. Great risks have been taken and the consequences of these risks are quite unknowable. I don't want to talk about those events today. Just to make this one point – and given the centrality of this University's part in the long history of Australia's engagement with Asia, it is, I believe, an appropriate point to make – Australians must never forget, and our governments must never forget, that, in the end, the only place Australia can find its security is in Asia, not from Asia.

You can be sure that throughout your lives, events will continue to unfold in unexpected ways and that unanticipated consequences will be the rule of life. Life will probably be less certain than it used to be. What matters is the framework we have in place to enable us to respond to those events.

You graduates have had more crammed into your heads at your age than my generation ever had. You have been saturated with knowledge. Often a technical knowledge which outstrips that of my generation by a big margin.

But two large questions now face you: what does the knowledge really mean? What does it amount to? And what will you do with it?

I spent most of my career in public life. It seemed to me, at a relatively young age, and it seems to me now, after all I have learned and been through, that public life is a great calling. As I have often said, it is the ultimate high wire act. The stakes are high, the opportunities great but the capacity to get things done is unparalleled.

Political leaders need many talents. But one of those, if you are any good, is to be a skilled harvester of ideas. You are always on the lookout for fresh thinking and original ideas. You quickly learn to value the good generalist, the multi-faceted specialist – that is, someone who is accomplished at what they do, but who can see how the applications and lessons of their chosen work fit into a broader mosaic. Working out what that mosaic is, I believe, one of the central challenges you face. I often used to find myself saying: I know this, but what does it really mean? How does it fit the schematic?

These questions are important because the only way we ever progress is with novelty, with new ideas: the rest is simply a churn in the common stock of knowledge.

And where do such ideas come from? Natural intellect? Inspiration? Analysis? Hard work?

For some tiny fraction among us - the Newtons, the Einsteins and the Mozarts - it is the inheritance. Each of them had a better dip into the gene pool than the rest of us.

But the world is mostly made of more ordinary types – those who depend on inspiration and hard work for their achievements.

Let me tell you one thing you will soon discover, if you don't already know it: most things out there are designed to stop you making a difference. All the biggest bets in life are on the status quo. Plenty of people think they would like to change things but lack the energy or imagination to clamber over, or beat a path through the status quo. Their determination falters. That is not to say that they will not find a fulfilled or a secure existence. Most probably will, but only the few determined and inspired ones will make a real difference.

If you decide you want to challenge the paradigm you need confidence, determination and imagination. Inner confidence and creativity are the core bits. But we know that confidence cannot be conjured up; for it to be in one's head it has to be earned.

Creativity, for its part, can come from within, but we also draw on the creativity of others.

All of us need a dose of inspiration. In my case, it came from various sources. Mine often came from source material, histories etc, but if I had to name one really influential source, it was music. I might have been working on the economy or health policy or something else, but the transcendent experience of listening to the incomparable genius of a great composer would often set problems in a more relevant framework and give me the wherewithal to imagine something more innovative or bigger. Often more bold or grander.

You also need to be sure that what you are doing will not only lead to good results but is being done for good reasons. We are all being judged all of the time. People around us can invariably garner a sense of our motivation. They will give us the scope to do things if they judge that our motives are worthy. In a sense, one's motive and method become central to one's ability to progress. By progress we mean: make a difference.

John Olsen, the artist, once said to me that Australians divide into two kinds of people, lovers and others. He meant a division between those who are open to the world and who are inclusive and who can see the world's potential and want it fulfilled. And those who fear and thwart, who are exclusive and closed and who are all too often, critical and harsh.

In fact the full quote was – 'Australians divide into two kinds of people, lovers and others, and who wants to be one of the others?'

I hope none of you wants to be one of the others.

In fact, it is with faith that you won't, that I wish you well in the world beyond this campus.

I thank the university for this great honour.