



Australian Government

AUSTRALIA'S CHIEF SCIENTIST

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SPEECH TO LAUNCH "*THE DAWKINS PERIOD*"

**UNIVERSITY HOUSE AT THE WOODWARD CENTRE
185 PELHAM STREET, UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE**

OCTOBER 23, 2013

Thank you for the opportunity to launch this book. I was honoured to be invited - and then when I saw the actual book, I was daunted.

How do you do justice to a book of more than 300 pages in the minutes that you have at a launch when it is so rich with information, with chapters covering everything and written by people who know how to tell a story?

Let me begin by saying that I salute them all. They have managed to be carefully analytical and descriptive - without too much reliance on the memories, bitter or sweet, that some of them must have felt at various times during the period we are talking about.

It is a real achievement to write and to edit a book of this type: a perspective on something that started 25 years ago without falling into the hole populated by so many that goes something like - if they knew then what I know now, they wouldn't have done that then. Of course, it was put more elegantly by Dawkins himself when he said in 1989: *the recall of history, the anticipation of the future and the assertion of government motivation are not always accurate.*

So this is a book that carefully documents the start of the 'revolution' and explores the implications of it through to the present day – it is a comprehensive analysis and commentary.

John Dawkins writes that he remembers being told: *the great thing about being the Minister for Education was that it takes 20 years to work out whether your policies resulted in success or failure and by that time, everyone has forgotten who you were.*

Not so, John Dawkins. And we are the proof: here we are continuing a conversation that began all those years ago – and his face is on the front cover.

John Dawkins and the government of the day had an objective - an aspiration - of serious economic reform. The reform program affected many aspects of our lives as Australians.

But the Government knew that the reforms achieved by 1987 would be incomplete, or some even lost, without reform and expansion of the education and training system. Ministers knew that if we did not use the talents and skills of as many of our people as possible we would fall behind as a nation. They knew that we had to increase the skill base of our workforce. They knew that other countries were moving forward, and that we had to change from what we were – relatively happy, certainly pretty lucky and in many ways complacent. We had to get past the notion that a solution would be found to whatever issue we faced because it always had been so – not because we had earned it, but because it just happened that way.

Indeed, JD spelled out the need very clearly indeed, when he said at Fremantle on Australia Day 1990: *More than ever*

before, the reservoir of talent in our people will have to eclipse our great natural resources as the determinant of our success. We will have to use our intelligence and our wit to cement the processes of change and to secure and improve our place in the world. This involves working better and smarter, scuttling mediocrity for quality and distinction. We cannot enter the next century rollicking on the sheep's back or creaking and swaying in some coal truck.

He was talking about the role of education and in particular our universities and the future of Australia. We in the universities were urged, expected, to engage and to engage differently and better. We didn't do it for ourselves; so he did it for us. And our response was to say that the ubiquitous but undefined *they* didn't understand us: *erroneous stereotypes put forward by university-bashers who are either ill-informed or would prefer not to be informed.* Frank Hambly from the AVCC one of the nicest and gentlest people you could meet said that the *universities are very, very cross and if they think we are a mob of wimps, they'd better have another think. We're really stirred up.* Frank was right in the first part, and in the last, I'll leave you to judge the rest.

We were not alone in this country. The world was changing. In a series of lectures given 1988, the then President of Harvard University, Derek Bok, called for change in the ways that

American universities contributed to America's future. He also noted that the *flimsier agenda of critics* who argued that the *worldly pursuits of the modern university caused higher education to fall from some early 'golden age'*... But as he said, they *rarely specify when this favoured period occurred...and advance no facts to demonstrate the existence of such an era.*

Perhaps a hint at a prior 'golden age' can be found in a review by CTEC published in the late '80s which concluded *that the scope for reform was limited because the scale and rate of change (over a decade) coupled with the pressure on resources, had damaged morale and compromised quality.* Clearly there had been a better time – but when? And did we only recognize it with hindsight – or when faced with a challenge to the status quo?

Some of the figures highlighted in the research chapter in this book reveal that there is still gold even in this post- revolution age, and that it still glitters: investment in research since 1992? 4.8 fold increase. Total research income? 6.8 fold increase. Competitive grants? 4.8 fold increase. Compared with a CPI increase of 59% and an increase in AWE of 120% the gold shines brightly. Add substantial capital investment, a 3.8 fold increase in HDR and a 2.7 fold increase in all students and you could say that the sector hasn't done too badly.

And the sector changed, we are reminded in Chapter 2: *the entrepreneurial turn has been complete across all institutions, even ANU...*

I suspect that this will be seen as a *golden age* when somebody looks into the rear vision mirror – notwithstanding the grumps and grumbles of the present day. Sometimes it's hard to be happy, and hard to see opportunities in the moment.

The formative years leading up to the revolution were 1987, 1988, 1989. They were years that John Dawkins described as *both fulfilling and starkly disappointing*. Fulfilling because much happened in a short time; and disappointing because of what he described as the unedifying responses from *many of the brightest and best educated in our country (who) were as capable as anyone else as being narrow-minded, self-interested and, indeed ignorant*.

I was then a newish Deputy Vice Chancellor at Wollongong. They were heady times and I was learning the ropes from a master. I was Deputy to Ken McKinnon, described in the book as *prescient*. He was more than prescient: he was a tactician, a strategist and he knew how to engage with government and with individual politicians on all sides. Sometimes he was lucky. When I arrived at Wollongong, he had far exceeded the enrolment target (or enrolment range as it then was). Many universities at the time got paid for the mid-point of the range

but enrolled at the bottom – a play that irritated officials and politicians alike. And it was one reason (perhaps of many) why specific enrolment targets were set.

Anyway, Wollongong had seriously over-enrolled – it drew students from southern Sydney and in such numbers that the Chemistry 1 laboratory classes, for example, were repeated many times a week. As best I can remember, it was about 15 times – although I could be showing how the recall of history isn't always accurate. When the RFM was introduced, Wollongong's actual enrolments got funded. I remember the day. Ken might say (still) that it was prescience. I might think that luck had a bit to do with it - but there weren't too many complaints from Wollongong! Nor were there too many from the other universities who benefited from the funded growth and that wonder of wonders – funds for capital.

During 1988/1989 I was part of the initial negotiating teams - the profiles meetings. These were when officials met with each and every institution – from Hobart, past Warrnambool to Darwin and from Perth to the Northern Rivers.

We met all sorts of people. Saw all sorts of things and heard all sorts of stories. Most were civil; some were not.

It was not uncommon to be regaled for hours about an institution's poverty and be served a lunch or dinner that was lavish beyond description. It was not unknown to be regaled for

hours about an institution's independence only to be asked to direct them to do something so that they could use the 'instruction' from the Commonwealth to get their way. Or to be asked for PhD places to *kick start* research notwithstanding limited if any capacity to supervise or support.

I remember being told by a group with their backs to the window, but with great flourish and emphasis, that the ANU campus was in flames only to see a brushfire sweep along Black Mountain at that very moment.

We had meetings with State and Territory officials that ranged from the unremarkable to the unbelievable. We had one meeting in the early afternoon. It was clear that the State official had been to a long, long lunch and he ranted at us in a vein-popping rage. Shortly afterwards, a cartoon was published that depicted that State Minister, in armour, on a horse followed by a long line of tired looking and maybe emotional foot soldiers.

John Dawkins comments in the book that *the failure of this independence of thought and action to emerge was the primary source of my disappointment*. I think that comment could apply to a fair number of people – fortunately not to all.

On the other side of the coin, being a Vice-Chancellor was not easy then, just as it is not easy now.

A Vice-Chancellor is employed to work in the interests of their institution, and to be a person who can focus on the bigger picture from time-to-time. As Greg Craven puts it in the last Chapter: *Should a Vice-Chancellor simply seek to vindicate the interests of his or her own university, regardless of how deleterious this may be to the well-being of the sector as a whole? Or is self-interest to be moderated by some consideration of what would be right for universities generally? Divisions on this almost moral issue underlie much civil strife in higher education.*

Back then the sector was susceptible to revolution and didn't see it coming, and the message now really is simple, it could happen again.

Of all the many Chapters I enjoyed, Greg Craven's is one brings together nicely many of the issues and points a path to the future. He highlights with real insight how difficult it is for a *sectoral body* to represent all universities requiring *extraordinary reserves of charm, patience, collegiality and cunning.*

He reminds us that the challenge for bodies like UA *lies in convincing its members that even the greatest of universities has more in common with the least of its self-accrediting brethren than it has differences that separate them.*

Never one to let a sub-editor anguish over a suitable headline by providing them, Greg acknowledges that *it is difficult for a St Bernard to remember that a Chihuahua, too, is a dog.*

But the point he makes is that *without a common understanding, Australia's universities will be doomed in their communications with others to comprise little more than a clanging of discordant bells as a background noise to the real policy making and the real conduct of policy debate.*

And if that happens, another revolution could surprise, dismay and result in fruitless rear guard action.

But as this book amply demonstrates, not all revolutions are bad

THE END

Chapter 1 concludes with the comment: *To this day Australian higher education remains dependent on the same public universities that conduct their teaching and research in a single, unified system. If you seek John Dawkins' monument, look around you.*

Perhaps this was why he was described in the book as the *most important education minister to hold federal office.*

I commend the book to you.