



**May 2012**  
**Sydney Graduation Ceremony**  
**Guest Speech**

Mr Phil Glendenning  
Director, Edmund Rice Centre

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Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, graduands, family and friends.

Congratulations to all of you, it is my honour to be with you tonight.

Let me begin by acknowledging the Dharug peoples, for it is on their lands that we gather tonight. This magnificent complex - which figures so prominently in this city's life and, in particular, its Olympic history - is situated on the land of the Dharug. It always was and always will be, Aboriginal land.

Acknowledging Indigenous people as the owners of the land is not just a simple symbolic act of recognition, although all steps toward reconciliation begin with an act of recognition. As important as symbolism is, this recognition is also about something very substantial - because when we do that we are saying, "History Happened Here!"

The world into which you will take your education is one that needs to know its history - for as the saying goes - those who do not learn from the sins of history are bound to repeat them. And the history I speak of here is made up of thousands of personal stories. Recently, a friend of mine, Linda Burney, who is the only Aboriginal person to ever sit in the NSW Parliament, gave a speech commemorating Edmund Rice. She explained how she grew up in Leeton, NSW in the embrace of a loving white family. However, at the age of 26 she found that just 40 minutes away, she had another family, the one she was born into. She had 10 brothers and sisters she never knew. When she finally met her father, his first words to her were, "I hope I don't disappoint you". Despite all the wonderful gains we have made in this great multi-cultural nation, our first peoples remain the subject of great dispossession. Linda says, growing up in Australia as an Aboriginal person, was to "look deeply into my own country, and not be able to see myself".

So, my first appeal to you new graduates is to know the history of this nation. Acknowledge that history happened here and that Aboriginal people are yet to achieve justice in this country and need people like you, taking their education into the world, to put that historical wrong - right.

So, Congratulations to all who graduate tonight, and Congratulations to all the family and friends who have walked the journey with you. One thing we know for certain is that if you have successfully completed a university degree, you did not get through it on your own.

Congratulations, also, on now being in the 1% of the world's people to have graduated from university. Now, as you take that education into the

world, remember that university is something you complete, but life is something your experience.

The world into which you will take your education is an 80:20 world. It is a very unequal world. This means that the planet's wealth and resources are massively dominated by the 20% of people who live in countries like Australia. It is very clear today that problems of poverty and inequality are simultaneously "amazingly slow and amazingly large". Amazingly small in economic terms – for example, the estimated annual cost of saving the lives of the 529,000 women who die annually and unnecessarily from complications during pregnancy, childbirth or immediately after is \$US1.2 billion, less than the cost of one Stealth Bomber; the yearly cost of scaling up health investments to reduce child mortality rates by 2/3rds is \$US7.5 billion; or the cost of supplying adequate clean water and effective sanitation for all amounts to \$US7 billion as against the \$US12.4 billion spent in 2007 in the US on breast augmentation, liposuction, nose reshaping, eyelid surgery and tummy tucks. Remember, at the end of last year, the world had spent \$US1.29 trillion on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

The point here is that behind these statistics are the real lives of real people. Think of the people you love, the people who brought you here, who support and love you. Imagine what you would do to protect them, to ensure their safety. You know, the rock singer, Sting, was right when he sang at the height of the Cold War, "What if the Russians love their children too?" Well, the Russians did. And so do the Iraqis, and so do the Afghans fleeing their broken country to seek protection.

We need to put names to faces, and faces to names. When I read those 80:20 statistics, I think of Michael Butare, a man who lives in Gikongoro, Rwanda, guarding a school that is now a memorial site for the 50,000 people who were killed there during the Rwandan massacre. In one room, with bodies piled to the roof, he pointed out that his 3 children were among the dead. In the adjoining room, in a simple coffin, he had placed the body of his wife. This place left me with what can only be described as a "smell on the brain". Yet, for Michael, it was about caring for and honouring the humanity of the family stolen from him. He never forgets. I will never forget him. Similarly, in Afghanistan, I was once fortunate to meet a woman called Zahra, a mother of 2 sons who had fled to Australia to escape the Taliban. She had travelled across Kabul in minus 17 degrees temperature to find the 3 "western men". She explained that her sons had been sent back from Australia and that the

people who had killed her husband had come after them. They fled again, this time into Pakistan. She had not heard from them for the two years. She lived with her 2 daughters-in-law and 3 small grand-children. Their only income was to go to the markets and pick off the excess wool that fluffs up on coats and jumpers and darn it into blocks of wool. They would make 3 or 4 of these a week. They sold them for \$US1 each. This was their only income.

We, sadly, were able to discover that one of her sons had been killed in Pakistan, and the other was missing.

After 4 hours talking to her, she got up to leave for a very risky journey back across the city. I rushed outside to try and give her \$US20. She did not want it and, instead, gave me a powerful message I will never forget. She spun around and said to me:

“When you are poor, and someone offers you money it can just make it worse. You are a guest in this country. I should be offering you a cup of tea.

Just because you live in oppression doesn't mean you live without dignity.”

The reason I share these stories with you tonight is simple. Behind the statistics, the numbers, the headlines, lie real people, heroic people. For me, both Michael and Zahra prove that it is still possible to live on this planet like a human being. That, in spite of very difficult and crippling oppressive circumstances, they have not surrendered their humanity.

Yet, too often in this very lucky country, we have too many of our people living quiet lives of suburban disappointment. Don't get sucked into this. In this city we hear shock jocks asking when faced with youth unemployment, congested traffic on the F3, rising costs of living – who is to blame? Afghan boat people of course! There is a mantra increasing in our country that compassion for people is a form of weakness. I believe, however, that compassion is our greatest civilising strength. We need educated graduates to stand up for these civilising humanising values.

For we live in a society, not an economy. We are citizens before we are consumers. When I fly to Melbourne, I like to be regarded as a passenger not a customer. I go to my bank for services, not to be sold products. And all of us have rights and responsibilities in society, well before we have choices about what to purchase based on how much money we may

or may not have. Once we reduce every human relationship to an economic one, we diminish ourselves, our society and your education.

The greatest danger we face in this is INDIFFERENCE. A time comes when silence is betrayal. As Martin Luther King once said, "Our lives begin to end the day we are silent about the things that matter". So please, graduates, do not succumb to a quiet life of disappointment.

The Irish poet, Seamus Heaney, once said that there comes a time when "hope and history rhyme". It is very easy to say that change is too hard, to take a cynical view. It has, however, always been my view that cynicism is just an elegant form of surrender.

Recent history tells us this. Just go back 25 years – if I had told you 25 years' ago that Nelson Mandela would be released from prison, would lead a peaceful process to end apartheid and would be President of South Africa – you would not have believed me. If I had told you we would have a Federal Environment Department and that the lead singer of Midnight Oil would have at some stage been a Minister, you would tell me to keep dreaming and hug a tree! If I had told you Soviet Communism would end peacefully, that the Marcos regime in the Philippines would end through a peaceful uprising led by nuns holding flowers in front of tanks, or that a black man would be in the White House, no one would believe me. Yet it all happened. Change for the good happens. We just need people to believe it. Hope and history rhyme.

So, I ask you graduates a simple question – what side of history do you want to be on? On the side of the status quo or on the side of those working for change?

On this night, as we celebrate your great achievements, I ask you to cast your mind forward, and I encourage you to take the steps necessary to develop the skills so you will be part of the time when hope and history rhyme again.

Travel. Take risks. Take the road less travelled. 20 years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do, than the things you did.

The great thing about life, post-study, is that there is no core curriculum. The whole place is an elective. Love what you do. Get good at it.

Remember to stay in touch with your friends, because no distance of place or lapse of time can lessen the friendship of those who fully understand each other's worth.

Courage will be needed at times. Life is often about not knowing, having to change, taking the moment and making the best of it, without knowing what's going to happen next. John Lennon was right; life is often about what happens while you make other plans.

So, join us in seeking a world where the needs of the poor take priority over the wants of the rich; where the freedom of the weak takes priority over the liberty of the powerful; and where the access of marginalised groups in society takes priority over the maintenance of an order which excludes them.

Our view of the world is formed by where we stand and who we stand with. Brother Philip Pinto, the Indian leader of the Christian Brothers (who originally are from Ireland) puts it this way:

"It is futile for earthbound humanity to cling to the dark and poisoning superstition that the world ends at the nearest hill, is enclosed by the river shore, and is limited to the tight circle of those who share our town, our views and the colour of our skin".

It is the task of our young people, our educators – and I say our graduates from the University of Southern Queensland – to work together to strip the last remnants of that cruel ancient belief from the fabric of humanity.

So, in congratulating you tonight, this is my invitation. Good Luck. It is possible to live on this planet like a human being. History awaits you.