Reflections on being a Modernian

Annual Perth Modernian Society Oration 2016

presented by Professor Lesley Parker AM FTSE

Perth Modern School

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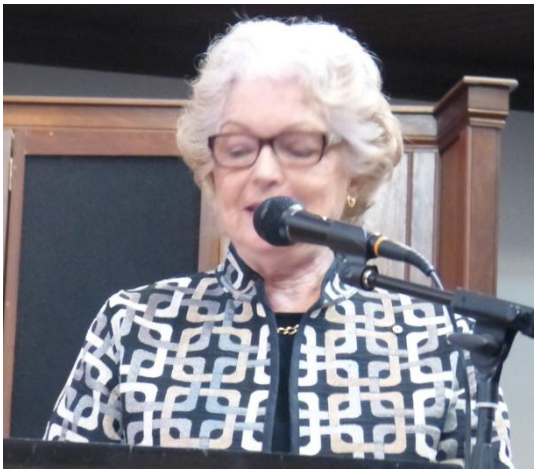


Good morning to you all. I begin with an acknowledgement of the indigenous custodians of the land on which we are meeting today. I also greet our Principal Ms Lois Joll, fellow Modernians from years past and, perhaps most importantly, all of you students here today poised at a very important moment of your educational journey.

It's a great pleasure for me to have the opportunity to talk to you and, later on, also with you. I chose to speak in today about "being a Modernian" because I feel that this is something we can all relate to in our different ways. I'm a Modernian, my parents were both Modernians, my sister and many of my lifelong friends are Modernians. You of course are Modernians – I wonder how much you have thought about this? Perhaps my short talk today will provide you with some food for thought in this regard – I hope so!

As part of my own reflections, I was stimulated by the stories in the book published recently through the initiative of the Perth Modernian Society (*A Celebration of Contribution: Tales of courage, commitment and creativity of Modernians 1911-1963*). I looked at the various generations of Modernians and asked myself how our common heritage was expressed across those generations. Some of my answers I will share with you today, at the same time exploring the situation of my own generation and reflecting on my own journey and values. I'll put before you some of the challenges remaining for your own and future generations and some of the dilemmas and contradictions that need to be resolved. Finally, I'll comment on the potential for you, as Generation Z and for those who follow you in generations alpha and beta and beyond.

The First Modernians

I begin with the first Modernians – those who were students in the school's first decade (1911-1920). Broadly speaking, they were born in the period 1898-1906 and included my own parents (born 1902). Being mortals with a limited life span, they are no longer alive. Their heritage, however, is still alive in the history of our State and our country. They became integral members of the developing new State of WA in an era of very limited secondary education, extraordinarily slow-paced communication and mixed fortunes. Many are remembered for major contributions to various professions (especially caring professions), culture, arts and government (including one Governor General of Australia). My father became an engineer (a profession which he pursued for his whole lifetime – an increasing rarity in today's world) and my mother a teacher (a profession which she pursued until, because of what would now be seen as scandalous conditions of employment, she was forced to resign on marriage). Many of my parents' schoolmates remained their friends for life and I remember these people quite vividly – because of the formality of the time, we children called them auntie and uncle. They had valued their opportunity enormously – they were, after all, members of a very small minority of Western Australians who attended school beyond their primary school years. As I recall it, they retained a healthy dislike of humbug and pretence, a strong respect for intellectual excellence in all endeavours and an unshakable belief in democracy. They came from many different backgrounds and my sense was that they continued to value people irrespective of background.

Their successors for the next 20 or so years continued the Modern School traditions through post WW1 years ("the war to end all wars") the great depression of the early 1930s and the further catastrophe of WWII, which again saw the slaughter of so many young Australians.

The Pre-Baby Boomers

Quite rapidly, this brings us to a group which you might call the pre-Baby Boomers, born between approximately 1924 and 1944. I am one of these, so I have had the opportunity to observe this generation closely. My observations suggest to me that a set of values transcends the mundane, the obvious and the everyday and underpins a varied and significant contribution made by this group to community, to social justice, to equality of access to and success in education and careers, to environmental concerns and to human rights.

Numerous examples of such contributions come to mind, including

- several previous presenters of this Oration like the Hon Kevin Parker, who spoke about his major involvement with the International Criminal Tribunal in The Hague and Professor Shirley Randall who talked about Global Citizenship
- presenters of other talks to the Perth Modern School community, like Professor Philip Jennings, whose life has focused so passionately and effectively on science and the environment
- other people whose lives are summarised in the book I spoke of earlier, some of whom are here today and many of whom dedicated their lives (in both paid and unpaid work) to making the world a better place.

My generation has seen enormous changes in society. Many of my cohort have played a role in these changes, having being given (and having taken) the opportunity to ensure that their privileged beginnings at PMS – their lives as "Modernians" – brought enduring benefits to other generations. We've sometimes asked ourselves: What enhanced our commitment, to our various disciplines and to society? What facilitated the lasting contribution many made? Was it, as a distinguished physicist and friend of mine the late Professor John de Laeter, said to me once (very modestly) "there are plenty of people as smart as me – I just work hard at something I love". Or was it something else, less tangible? I believe that the latter may be the case and I want to put before you a number of possibilities in this regard. It will become clear that each of these possibilities carries with it both positive and negative consequences and raises certain dilemmas. Many people thrived in the Modern School environment but inevitably, because no single school environment can suit all students, some did not.

First, I believe that symbols are important and the symbolic value of some features of Modern School should not be ignored. The very creation and existence of PMS was symbolic of the some visionary thinking in the earliest years of the 20th century, in the newly created State of WA, and of the priority being given to harnessing and developing talent amongst its people. Further, one might say that an institution with a school motto in French (a public expression that "knowledge is power" or "to know is to be able") and a school song in Latin, was staking out its territory in the high culture. Not at all a bad thing, but one that carried with it intimations of exclusivity, elitism and "being special", which some have seen as undesirable.

Second, I think that the coeducational structure of the school was important, reflecting what was, when the school was founded, "modern" thinking about the education of young people. For example, within well-defined limits (perhaps as much as the mores of the time would allow), there was certainly an element of gender equity. The rhetoric was that boys and girls had an equal education at Mod. Of course, this was only partly true. The curriculum was highly sex-segregated, with different offerings to boys and girls and the classes, certainly in the first three years and then, for the most part after that, were single-sex. BUT, even in this context, there prevailed an atmosphere which provided the opportunity to challenge the status quo. Indeed, some teachers actively encouraged wider thinking about future roles and careers. Some were Modernians themselves and, especially the women teachers and the male teachers who had daughters, were conscious of the continuing (although loosening) constraints on what was possible for males and females. As I hinted earlier, coeducation was a feature of the school that may not have suited all students. Some may well have done better in a single sex school. It's just possible, of course that the single-sex teaching environment in most of the school during my time provided, inadvertently, the best of both worlds.

Third, the school was, insofar as was possible at the time, meritocratic. Admission was determined through a score in a State-wide examination, conducted in this very hall. It was open to all WA students turning 12 in a particular year and the award of a "Scholarship" was intended to be independent of wealth and family background. Progress was determined through "objective" measures of achievement. The

downside to this was, of course, the possible pressures this created for some students arising from the fiercely competitive environment and the supremacy of tests and examinations.

Fourth, the meritocratic approach led to considerable variety of backgrounds amongst the scholars. Although some historians and commentators like to depict the students as a relatively homogeneous middle-class group, my experience was that there was considerable variety of background and socio-economic status. To be sure, there was a significant group of middle class students who came from a small number of schools, but there were also many others, including students from rural and remote areas of the State.

My fifth feature concerns the culture of the school. It was made very clear to us as students that people held high expectations of us and I must say there were plenty of role models amongst the students who appeared to fulfil these high expectations. It's interesting that our Headmaster of the day (there were no females in these positions except at a few single-sex girls' schools), reminded us, with monotonous regularity of something which we often joked about at the time but which has taken on much more meaning for me as I grow older. Every Assembly he used the expression: "you are the Modern School". As I said a moment ago, we laughed about this at the time, mocking his persistent habit of twitching his academic gown when he spoke. This was actually very unfair of us, because, when you analyse it, his expression has the seeds of a way of thinking that is critical to the success of an organisation in holding the commitment of its human beings. How many times do you hear people talking about the school, for example, as if the school itself is responsible for doing something? How many times do you sing, perhaps mindlessly, *Moderna Schola Te Amamus* (Modern School we love you). Well, of course, "the school" is bricks and mortar. It is people and their activities that do things, and it is people who maintain the status quo or who act as agents of change. I thus recognised in later years that our Headmaster was probably trying to empower us, by conveying (perhaps a little obliquely) a solid democratic principle and one which Hon Michael Kirby, in a previous oration has named as a one of four key attributes of quality public education in Australia, along with secularism, tolerance and excellence.

Finally, for my sixth feature, I come to what one of my heroes Ruth Bader Ginsberg, (a Justice seated on the United States Supreme Court Bench) has termed the "enlistment of talent". If the selection process I referred to earlier is democratic, fair and equitable, we have huge potential for society as a whole. We have in-built opportunities for talented scholars to collaborate, discuss and debate, and to focus their not inconsiderable minds on the issues of the day and of the future. And such interaction continues beyond school. So, I urge you to value your talented schoolmates and to continue to interact with them beyond school.

My own journey

I spent five years at Mod (1950 to 1954) submerged in the environment I've just sketched: rather exclusive, debatably coeducational, academic, meritocratic and with a culture marked by high expectations. I emerged as a rather naïve young woman with a commitment to intellectual excellence and with a passion for science, for music (although not actually taught at school) and for sport. I also rather enjoyed planning and organising things (perhaps being Senior Girl Prefect contributed to this) although it was not particularly fashionable at the time for females to hold ambitions in this direction. I toyed with the ideas of becoming a musician or a scientist and I always had a hankering to be a teacher, perhaps to pass on my passions to coming generations. I had an emerging concern for those who were less well-off in society. I was also aware that, even in places such as Mod, there could be a tendency, to put down those who appeared to be over-achievers. At time I was conscious of an undercurrent of the dreaded Australian "tall Poppy" syndrome which implied that one must not, after all, be too good at anything and I was conscious also that this seemed to be antithetical to excellence. Overall, I realised that I had received a privileged education, but I rather took it for granted and I gave little thought to whether this was actually compatible with my embryonic concerns for fairness and equity in society.

At a personal level (and I've had more than a little bit of luck in my life) my family tried to convey that there were few limits on what girls could achieve. I was actively encouraged to study science and mathematics and in both areas, became well used to being one of a small minority of females in predominantly male areas. In my subsequent education and working life, I was able, through a combination of circumstances, to combine science and education and equity concerns, and, at the same time, exploit my predilection for actually running things. My time as Senior Deputy Vice-Chancellor of Curtin University remains one of the highlights of my career. When I took up the position in 1997, I was the first woman appointed to such a senior role in the university. At work I was mostly the only woman in

a room or a meeting consisting entirely of men. Perhaps my previous experience in science and mathematics classes and my ongoing experience as the mother of four rather assertive sons was helpful in this regard. Whatever the cause, I was very happy and proud when I left this position after eight years, to be able to point out, at my farewell function, that five of the six most senior positions in the university were by that time held by women. I was also proud of other achievements related to my passion for creating the best possible learning and working environment for staff and students and (given that we had students from scores of different nationalities and a vibrant Centre for Aboriginal Studies), to the design of learning and teaching to take account of students' differing backgrounds.

Of course one person alone can never make such changes: the insight and wisdom of the Vice-Chancellor of the time and a social climate more receptive to women in senior positions, were critical to the changes. Further, more widely in an increasingly multicultural society and workforce, there had been an opening up of professions and trades to women and (so-called) minority groups and an increase in their participation in occupation and areas of study formerly seen as the province of white middle-class males, especially in the areas of science and engineering, which remain dear to my heart.

Despite progress, however, there remains much to do and, in some areas, the scenario is still bleak. As Ginsberg has highlighted recently: all over the world, most people in poverty are women and children, women's earnings lag behind those of men with comparable education and experience, workplaces have yet to accommodate adequately the demands of child bearing and child rearing and sexual harassment at work and domestic violence in our homes remain problems to be solved.

Thus, significant inequities remain, perhaps for you to address. In Australia, in the area I know best – higher education – despite some reforms of the past, we have demonstrable inequity in universities for several identifiable groups of students, including especially indigenous students, students from rural and regional backgrounds and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds. Again at a personal level, I'm happy to say that, although now officially retired from work (my husband guffaws loudly at this statement) I have been able to take a leadership role in the federally-funded National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education and will be leading a Forum at the end of this month at the National Press Club in Canberra where we will present some of the success stories in addressing these inequities and air some of the issues and situations yet to be addressed adequately.

Whither Generation Z?

I now arrive at your generation, variously referred to as Generation Z, the iGeneration or the millennials. Born between approximately 1995 and 2009 you are the first generation never to have experienced the pre-internet world and the pre-9/11 world. Compared with the miniscule 5% who completed 12 years of schooling in my parents' time, around three quarters of your cohort, State-wide, will achieve this. You are probably the children of Generation X (who were born, broadly speaking between 1963 and the early 1980s), and who, I'm concerned to say, suffer from a rather unflattering and, I believe, inaccurate stereotype as uncommitted and unfocussed.

As a generation, you have already been the subject of a lot of quite well publicised research and conjecture (both in Australia and overseas), typically focused on the challenges which you face and perhaps less often on the strategies you have devised to meet those challenges. I'll mention here a few examples of this research. One of the most recent ones was reported in *Time* magazine in an article entitled *The Kids Are Not All Right*. It pointed out that your generation is experiencing adolescence at a time when technology and social media are transforming society and lamented that, for some post-millennials this has led to a situation which is detrimental to their mental health, because there is no firm line between the real and the online worlds. While this report highlighted some serious problems, it also tended to demonise technology and to focus almost exclusively on mental health issues which have been attributed to pressures created by the ubiquitous and inappropriate use of social media. It provided lots of tips for parents about how to handle this but little about how people your age are actually handling it.

Another piece of research (this time Australian) recently addressed the litany of skills you are alleged to be in need of in order to embark on the world, asserting that, as university graduates you

> will be need to be socially intelligent, subject matter experts, independent learners, highly innovative, creative, and collaborative; [you] will need portable skillsets, a solid CV with relevant work experience and new media literacy. All this, plus [you] will need to be open-minded to have a successful career in a job market that will be dominated by casual employment and short-term contracts.

Quite a tall order, I'm sure you will agree! Again, this kind of report can be useful but perhaps more as a starting point for discussion than as a goal for which all need to aim or as a guide to policy and action. It can also contribute to the very pressures which have been found in investigations like the one I referred to earlier.

Third, we have seen recently in Perth the attempt by *The West Australian* to give voice to your generation. I wonder how many of you read or engaged with the views expressed there by a selection of WA school students. The list of their concerns is impressive: euthanasia, marriage equality, shortage of jobs (and the potential of internships in this regard), the plight of regional youth, e-waste, continuing inequality in the world, organ donation, the under-recognition of women's sport and ways of celebrating Book Week. The students also expressed concerns, most eloquently, about social networking, including its all-consuming nature and the lack of parental understanding of its role in modern communication. Again, I wonder whether these concerns resonate with you and I wonder what you would have put forward if you had been amongst those selected.

I think the wonderful thing about all of this is that there is the opportunity for your voices to be heard, in ways that youth voices, when I was your age, were rarely taken into account. I urge you to make the most of such opportunities.

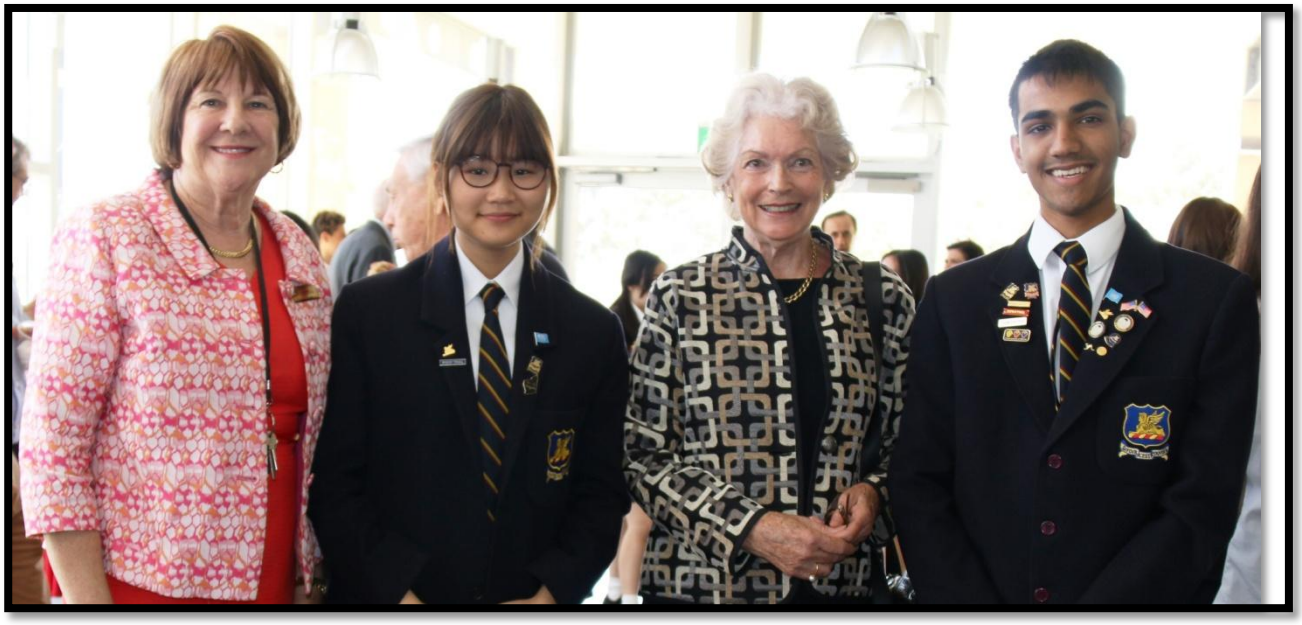
In drawing this oration to a conclusion, I wonder also how you are going to recognise, confront and resolve possible contradictions and dilemmas such as those I have raised this morning:

- between selective education and fairness to all
- between the tall poppy syndrome and valuing everyone equally
- between meritocratic principles and the pressure created by tests and examinations
- between the good and the evil of social networking
- between the plethora of opportunities available to you and the pressure of selecting from amongst these opportunities.

I am confident that you will succeed in this. I recall that one of the pleasanter duties of my professional career was to sit for many years on the WA Rhodes Scholarship Selection Committee. Every year, my optimism and awe at the achievements and commitment of young people were renewed and I rejoiced in this. I remain hopeful that your experience as beneficiaries of Ginsberg's "enlistment of talent" and your heritage as Modernians will stand you in good stead. That heritage is marked the four characteristics identified by Kirby: secularism, tolerance, democracy and excellence, and by the opportunity to learn from the wisdom of others and to appreciate and celebrate the enormous variety of "being human". My hope is that we will all come to understand that contributions can be made in many different ways and success can be achieved across a whole variety of activities – each, in its own way, valuable to our society and collectively making up a rich tapestry from which we can all benefit.

I finish by sharing with you a reference from the Book of Tobit from the Apocrypha, which I've always found very moving. This is my take on a blessing given by a parent when farewelling a youth: "Go in peace my children. I hope to hear nothing but good of you, as long as I live".

Morning Tea Photos



Principal Lois Joll and **Professor Lesley Parker** pictured with **Naomi Cha** (2017 Head Girl) and **Sagar Badve** (2017 Head Boy)

Professor Lesley Parker enjoying morning tea with **Principal Lois Joll** and Year 11 students **Naomi Cha** and **Sanchita Gera**

Perth Modernian Society President **Peter Farr** with **Abigail Campbell-Young** and **Thomas Morrison** (Sphinx Scholarship winners in 2013 and 2015 respectively)

Chair of the PMS Board, **Prof. Michael Henderson** and **Hon. Kevin Parker** chatting with Year 11 students **ivy kim and Belinda luu**

Deputy Principal **Steve Jurilj** and Chair of the PMS Board, **Prof. Michael Henderson**