

In memory of Gavin in his days as Vice-Chancellor

May he rest in peace

John McCarthy QC

PROFESSOR GAVIN BROWN AO

Vice-Chancellor and Principal of the University of Sydney 1996-2008

Vice-Chancellor, we are gathered tonight to honour you and Diana as your term as Vice-Chancellor draws to its conclusion. Our Chancellor has suggested I might speak as the Fellow who has served throughout your Vice-Chancellorship. I am pleased and honoured to be asked. Let me begin where I intend, I hope, to conclude. Sydney University salutes you – you have been a great Vice-Chancellor in a momentous and transitional era of our University's history.

You have served us long and well through twelve pressure-filled years. You leave Sydney University in substance and form, in reputation and standing in a much superior and more excellent condition than that which bespoke our situation when you took office here on 1 July 1996. You have earned our gratitude and affection and your place in our long and storied history is both deep and indelible.

Your fine portrait in the Great Hall will be only one reminder of the further debt this University and this city owe to Scots, who from Macquarie onwards, have done so much to Advance Australia Fair.

Let us recall 1996 and your arrival at Sydney University. I was part of that Vice-Chancellor selection process as was the beloved Professor Margaret Harris also here tonight. You were offered the V-C appointment as the outcome of what I would characterise as a bargain which you in effect offered us, a bargain you intended to keep and have kept in all your days of service here.

Your 1996 bargain with the Senate had three main elements or perspectives. To the selection committee members you presented both a diagnosis and a prognosis about Sydney University and universities in Australia.

You firmly stated firstly that Sydney University had major strengths that were underutilised or unfocused but with changed policy in better direction in the medium term, this could be reversed and reformed. The relative under-performance of the University in national surveys and especially in comparison with UNSW was not permanent and irretrievable. Sydney University may have been far too low in some tables but re-working and re-presentation of key performance indicators could restore this university's position at or near the top of the Australian University table of ratings.

Widespread disquiet amongst faculty and alumni about the University's future was valid only if complacent and uncritical belief in the traditional ways and the university's traditional outlook "we are the best" persisted then the university might become a victim of its own history. You believed, as an

insider in the Australian university system, and as one of the driving forces in UNSW's emergence in the front rank of Australian universities, that you had the vision, skills and commitment to take this university in a new direction and so revive its overall reputation and performance. You asked for the opportunity to serve in this way.

Secondly, you believed that Australian public policy about the organisation and financing of higher education was unsound and in fundamental respects wrongheaded. The real contribution of universities for the wellbeing of Australia was not fully appreciated and the importance of expanding research, except in limited areas, was doubted or given a low priority against other national objectives. The potential of the recently expanded university sector was being impeded by uniform policies. In comparison with other first world countries, our major universities may well fall further behind in research output and teaching performance if these policies were not amended. You undertook to place this university at the forefront of national policy development and to work towards the reordering of national priorities to secure a better future for universities in Australia. You believed that universities must develop a stronger political position to which government must respond. You believed that having a strong university sector with a group of world rated universities should be a national objective. You believed this to be an achievable goal. You said all this within a few weeks after the election of the Howard Coalition government.

Thirdly, you stated that if this goal was not achieved, or was substantially rejected, you feared that the Australian university sector would suffer long term decline, most obviously in the quality of university faculty as, an even larger percentage of the Australian professoriate and research personnel would be recruited to work overseas or in other sections of the community, either in the private or public sector or the professions. As a worthwhile and attractive career path, Australian universities would be uncompetitive for a proper share of the most talented of the next generation and the generation after that in a downwards spiral. You believed you could work within the university and other universities, groups and agencies, to halt this emerging trend.

Your vision for Sydney University and Australia did not emerge out of thin air. You were an outstanding academic and researcher in your chosen field. You were vastly experienced in all levels of university administration in Australia including service as Vice-Chancellor of Adelaide and membership of national grants committees. In temperament – you could be charming and you had worked continually at disguising in various subtle ways that you did not suffer fools gladly even if they were called Dean, Professor or Minister or Education Writer or even Fellow of the Senate. You also came with a well deserved reputation for being someone who can be a dangerous enemy – as well, you were not known to have been gentle on the sporting field. You were a calculated risk taker when you understood the factual situation and potential developments and not just when betting on horses, a favourite pastime.

So there were risks and doubts on all sides but the Faustian bargain was struck and you became Vice-Chancellor. I'd like to say everyone lived happily ever after – but that's not true and we all know it. What did happen is actually more interesting and significant.

There is no doubt you have overseen a great change of culture at Sydney University. We are now one of the leading research institutions in the country and our success in grants and awards has become outstanding. The reputation and performance of our major faculties and schools is in world class in many areas. Arguably, on all important issues, Sydney University is the pre-eminent university in New South Wales. We are one of the top three universities in Australia along with ANU and Melbourne University. Three years ago, you proposed and had adopted as the current university plan 1.5.40 there being in your judgment sufficient overall strength and dynamism at Sydney University to sustain such an objective. It will come close to achievement in a few years – already the university is rated (on the TLS table) thirty-fifth (35th) of the top two hundred universities and on a breakdown of these tables, ranks third in Australia and seventh in the Asian region. In 2006 our Arts and Humanities faculties rated fifth in the world. There have been high rankings for science and medicine. Sydney University attracts the highest percentage of the best qualified secondary students in New South Wales and has done so consistently through this decade. Many important university milestones were passed during your Vice-Chancellorship:-

- Undergraduate and Postgraduate students passed 45,000 – an increase of nearly 30% in 12 years;
- The first billion dollar budget;
- The largest building programme since the foundation of the university;
- The strengthening of our offshore campuses and international connections;
- Greater academic and student engagement in universities overseas;
- Record enrolment of overseas students;
- The international reputation of the university and its students in cultural and sporting endeavours.

On national policy there have been major advances especially in the last seven years. On HECS, university grants, research funding and university governance, major developments have come to pass. You have been a major participant and Sydney University's voice has been heard – always persistent and reasonable, not seeking special privileges but claiming a framework to achieve our full potential and the ending of impediments to achieving high international ranking in excellence and research. You have been important and you have made a substantial difference. I doubt if you are satisfied and I know you do not believe your objectives have been achieved. Both of Australia's major political groupings have deeply disappointed you in too many ways and you have not hesitated to say so publicly. A recent former

education minister was described by you as having a policy by which he was turning himself from a prince into a frog. The Howard government was more responsive to university needs in their last five years. But vital time and opportunities were lost at the end of the 1990's. You retire having frequently expressed misgivings about the new Labor government policies, both in the run up to the 2007 elections and subsequently. You regarded as a matter of great regret that Australian universities still do not have political strength commensurate with their objectives and importance. Sadly, you have found that sector-wide groupings were not united and that the universities, collectively, were often their own worst enemies. Many contemporary vice-chancellors, as you saw it, were short sighted and less than helpful.

Is the university sector more competitive in personnel and resources against other sections of Australian society and overseas universities and research institutions? I believe you are not as pessimistic in outlook as you were some years ago. Again, the struggle will continue. You have contributed to significant gains such as federation fellows, increased research expenditure, some general improvement in resources. I believe this is where you will miss continued front-line engagement in the next few years. Your great contribution, analysis, public commentary, forming alliances leave a strong foundation for your successor and other vice-chancellors on these issues.

One part of the bargain with the Senate was unexpected – for the outlay of one vice-chancellor's salary we actually found that we had a whole series of

Gavin Brown resident in the Vice-Chancellor's Office. There was Gavin Brown who was amongst the most articulate spokesmen for the value and content of liberal education and the responsibility of universities to nurture, protecting and proclaiming the value of study and scholarship and teaching of the humanities including the classics, the sciences and the mathematics. Even though you are a Celt, sentiment has never seemed your long suit. We were not alone in detecting both the pride and the tenacity you displayed in defending and enhancing Sydney University's range of course offerings – the most comprehensive in Australia.

First the University

Genuine regret and sadness was your frequent reaction to discontinuing a subject or amalgamating departments. You willingly accepted responsibility and opportunity to advocate that broad educational experience was an essential part of undergraduate education and formation. Numerous papers and lectures by you on these important themes will continue to be read as part of the major contemporary literature on the true purposes of a modern university.

Gavin Brown the journalist -

As the writer of *Obiter Dicta* for Sydney University News you were amongst the best columnists in Australia. Your commentary and insight is profound but delivered with wit and sureness of touch. You would have been a great newspaper editor, if your mathematics and university life had not had stronger

claim on your heart and mind or were regarded by you as more important. As an avid reader, as you well know, of any copy by you on the passing parade or university life, it has seemed to me that these writings were for you a pleasurable exercise and not a chore, a way in which you can make known what was also another essential Gavin Brown trait – you had a point of view, of a scholar and experienced man of affairs therefore always something worthwhile to say or opinion to offer.

You are a political analyst of rare depth. You have always been conscious that you held a statutory office under a parliamentary act which established a public institution acting for other agencies and groups in a national and international setting. The political balance at state, national and international level was critical to your purposes and prospects. You believed that the main contours and personalities should be understood and possible developments anticipated and accounted for. Not only in relation to education policy but also in many related areas. You are always a fund of knowledge about politics and you seem embedded in a network which gave you ready access to the latest political rumours. After some years, I have to say, your prognosis about elections, whether in New South Wales/Australia/Britain and the US was invariably impeccably accurate, much more so than your tips on the Melbourne Cup where I score you no better than fifty percent. You left me dazed by the confidence of your opinion in 2005 that Joseph Ratzinger was a certainty to be elected to succeed John Paul II, when I, like many, had worked out wrongly all of the reasons that that would not happen.

You have served three Chancellors, more Deputy-Chancellors and sixty-one Fellows. You have attended over ninety Senate meetings and retreats and even more committee meetings. You have almost invariably had your policy proposals endorsed, on occasion, after lengthy and acrimonious debate. Besides Senate meetings, your other main Senate related commitment has been regular, largely weekly, conference with the Chancellor. Influence would have moved both ways but a vale of silence precludes comment. With other Fellows, you have been courteous and civil. Sometimes, Senate had good proposals which you felt able to accept but not always and you always said so. Some Senate criticism of the administration of the university, you found uninformed, ill-conceived, or too general and you usually said so. The proper relationship in terms of responsibility and accountability between the Senate and administration are, I think in your mind, unstable and complex – the fine line at times between policy and operational matters was not clear cut.

Vice-Chancellor and the Senate

Where are we left after nearly 12 years? It is fair to say that we probably stood highest in your opinion when you persuaded the Senate that you should come to Sydney University as Vice-Chancellor. All of us were happy and excited. Alas, I cannot say that we all lived happily ever after. I suspect that the Senate is not your favourite university institution, say as compared, to the school of mathematics or the rugby first XV. But we are your statutory family and you have to take us in. I think that when contemplating the Senate, you

sometimes felt like the Duke of Wellington who said on one occasion while watching a Scottish regiment marching towards him *“I don’t know if they frighten the French but they surely frighten me.”*

You did not flinch from taking personal responsibility for presenting policy directions and administrative directives. I think you believe there are no easy or final answers and tensions must be endured. You were not prepared to let Senate, as a governing body, dangerously ossify and decay with its processes and paperwork. Senate committees have been reviewed and restructured at your instigation and with your support on a fairly regular basis. The presentation of university accounts and other budgetary documents has been transformed towards greater clarity, precision and comprehensiveness. The Senate, in your view, should at least have facts and figures relating to its decision making. You have also encouraged interaction between senior administration and the deans through Senate retreats and special conferences. Senate works better in 2008 than was the case in 1996. This should be regarded as one of your achievements.

Personally, we shared your sadness’s and mourned with you at the untimely death of Barbara. Later we rejoiced at your marriage to Diana and have appreciated the happy ambience always present when she is with you. She is very proud of you and she has every right to be.

There is one special area I believe should be underlined about your leadership, especially in recent years. You have always believed that university education was more than the classroom and the library, central and critical as they must always be. You have considered that the wider experience of university life included the interaction of students and staff, through clubs and societies, concern with a wide range of cultural, recreational and sporting activities. You also saw these activities as central to the formation of Sydney University graduates and as a contribution towards responsible and rounded community leaders and professionals. During your Vice-Chancellorship, the sports including Olympic representation, national and world championships and competition premierships. All of the university sporting scholarships have expanded and you have been an enthusiastic and close follower of all our teams. Many of your happiest hours at the university have been spent watching our sporting teams in action. Similarly, with debaters and drama students, every young champion or student with outstanding potential, you wanted to enrol at our university for what the university could provide for them and what they could provide to the university. We have many outstanding facilities and coaches, again with the union and its clubs and its societies and the SRC. You have been a wholehearted supporter of the great variety of activities that have made our university one of the most vibrant at student level in the world.

You are and remain an unflinching supporter of special service fees to support all these activities and no one was a greater opponent of the VSU

regime. In this you had the full support of the Senate and the student body. As significantly, when this blight on university life came to pass in 2006/2007, you were positive and open about where Sydney University should go. For marginal finance, you were not prepared to endanger, let alone destroy, student life and the wider student experience at Sydney University. You knew how fragile is the nature of student organisations and how the destruction of their customs and traditions would flatten university life to such an extent that Sydney University would not be Sydney University – it was that serious. You directed much work with main student organisations under joint Senate and administration committees. David Hoare reported your saying that in a budget of over a million dollars you were not prepared to undermine a whole student culture for eighteen million dollars per annum. Sydney University has been the most generous of all Australian universities in financially protecting student life. For this we have been acclaimed and you may rightly take a significant part of credit to that result and to the policies that were behind it.

As you prepare to take your leave of the University of Sydney, you depart as an embodiment to us all of Theodore Roosevelt's tribute to the "Man in the arena"

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again,

because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat.

You and Diana will always have an honoured welcome here – may you both return often in the future. We wish you every happiness and fulfilment and hope that Sydney University has a special place in your affections as you have in ours. With gratitude and affection, we salute you for your enduring service as our Vice-Chancellor 1996-2008.

John McCarthy QC 2008.