

# Sancta Sophia College – Address for Academic Dinner

## 22 May 2006

Chairman of Council Josephine Heesh  
Principal Dr Elizabeth Hepburn  
Chair and Members of Council  
Women of the College

And may I make special mention of John Sheldon, who continues the Sheldon family's deep connection with Sancta

### Some Reflections on Tolerance and Conviction.

At an earlier Sancta Dinner, I spoke of Dr Hepburn's distinguished predecessor Mother Swift who joined Sancta as its Principal in 1958. I first recall her as a mature-aged Articled Clerk at the then firm of Freehill, Hollingdale & Page. That was the law firm founded over a century ago by Francis Bede Freehill. His wife was referred to as Countess E M Freehill because Frank was a Papal Count. She donated the Italian Prizes at Sydney University and he St Johns College's tower. Frank Freehill was admitted as a solicitor in 1877. He helped found not only Toohey's Brewery but also the Citizens Life Assurance Company subsequently called MLC. Frank Freehill was known as "One Gun Freehill". As an Honorary Consul he was entitled to a one-gun salute as he entered Port Jackson Heads!

The firm founded by Frank Freehill was joined by the Hollingdales. When I joined it in 1961 as an Articled Clerk, it was led by an individual of remarkable character, Brian Page, now in his 90's, his intellect and memory still formidable. The very same Page who, before Mother Swift dedicated her life to the Church, was her early boyfriend when she was twelve and he thirteen at Xavier College. History does not relate whether that drove her to taking Holy Orders. But she was the first nun taking an active part in university life. She cast off her habit after Vatican II and wore a red wig in a no longer enclosed order. She attended, with young John Sheldon, lectures in Latin and Greek as well as Hebrew.

This intersection between Sancta and Freehills, the law firm with which I spent thirty years of my professional life before joining the Bench, prompts me to talk about tolerance, religious and racial. For that was a cardinal feature of that law firm. Yet few today recall the sectarian prejudice that even in the 1950's still existed in Sydney. The then partners were determined it would find no place at Freehills in any form.

Much of that sectarian prejudice was directed against Irish Catholics; indeed it was the lightning rod that partially deflected it from the Jews, though not entirely. There were still in the 50's some law firms that would not give Articles to a Roman Catholic or a Jew. Successive New South Wales Premiers tended to favour, successively, Catholics or non-Catholics for judicial appointment, depending on their own religion. No Catholic could obtain a seat on the Stock Exchange. This was until a courageous New South Wales Attorney-General, Reg Downing, hearing of the exclusion of Bernard Curran from a seat on the Stock Exchange, told the then committee of the Exchange that he would legislate them out of existence unless they opened the Stock Exchange to all, no matter what their religion.

Mercifully, Sydney University was utterly free from sectarian prejudice from its very start. So too schools like Sydney Grammar, which shared much of Sydney University's early history and ethos, sharing a common group of founders and a home in College Street. Likewise the then named University Club (now the University and Schools Club) which admitted members of all faiths and was a pioneer in admitting women.

It was of that sectarian prejudice that our Chief Justice Murray Gleeson spoke when nearly twenty years ago judges of our Court invited back to the Supreme Court our aboriginal hosts. They had earlier welcomed us judges when we visited them as part of an indigenous awareness program for the Supreme Court. As a country boy from Wingham Chief Justice Gleeson would have seen many aboriginals and their disadvantage. To that gathering of aboriginal men and women, some who had lost children or siblings in the circumstances described in the report “Bringing Them Home”, he said, as I recall, something like this. For those of you who are tempted at despair that reconciliation will never come, consider the experience I had as a young Catholic. In the 1950’s not only were Articles in a law firm not always available to a Catholic but there were other professional barriers. Yet by the 1960’s, but a decade later, they had essentially gone.

When I came to Freehills as a young Articled Law Clerk it was that openness to people of all religions or none that so appealed to me. I was greatly attracted to the fact that this was a dynamic, progressive firm smaller than the dominant establishment firms. It had needed to break through sectarian prejudice in the 1950’s to rival them, doing so under Brian Page’s inspirational and always robust leadership. As a result of that experience all that mattered to the leaders of the firm was whether those working there had integrity and ability. Women were welcomed – it was the first of the larger city firms to appoint a woman partner. Another barrier later surmounted was to provide a workplace where you could give birth to children while coping with the demands of partnership. No-one asked me what school I had gone to or whether I had been a prefect though they probably knew the former from my application and the latter from its absence from my CV.

Among the firm’s memorable characters in the 1950’s and beyond was Rod McLeod, a Changi survivor. He died only a few years ago. He was not strong on technology. He used to dictate on an early version of the dictaphone, reluctantly, by shouting at his Articled Clerk, Jim Graham. Jim Graham in turn would murmur at the dictaphone. Fortunately that was not how Freehills moved into the technological era.

But the purpose of this is not just reminiscence. It is to bring home the importance of tolerance in a conflicted world. I do not mean by that tolerance of vicious fanaticism, but of difference. All of you will at some time encounter prejudice, more likely directed at someone else. Yesterday it was those of Asian extraction, now largely abated. Before that it was of the waves of European refugees and the later Greeks and Italians. To-day, the vulnerable in our society tend to be the next wave of migration, typically though not only those of Islamic background. Tolerance is not helped by those on both sides, ideologues, who seek to portray relations between the West and the Islamic world as a “*clash of civilizations*”.

In France, so strongly secular is the State, that neither the head-scarf nor yarmulke may be worn at school; Sikhs must conform too. It is no accident that race riots have disfigured Parisian streets. But recent conflict on our own Sydney beaches leaves no room for complacency.

What can each of us do as individuals and in our institutions? The first lesson is to welcome the alien; the stranger at our gates. Recently, Sydney University gave an honorary degree to Dorothy Hoddinott, alumna of Sydney University and Principal of a Sydney high school that has given outstanding support for children from refugee families. Their response has in turn been to embrace the educational opportunities she helped them find. Sydney University has a refugee English language program, instigated by our Vice-Chancellor who wanted to see us do something worthwhile and practical. He was strongly backed by our Senate, with Thalia Anthony, playing an especially prominent part. (Thalia by the way, graduated in law with first class honours last Friday, to add to her doctorate in history.)

That kind of practical welcome is very important to those who arrive on our doorstep. It is the reason why earlier generations of migrants like my father, felt such gratitude to the country that took them in giving their children opportunities denied their parents. How do we ensure that today’s refugees who

finally succeed in settling here have a similar sense of gratitude, despite the trauma they have experienced?

To be tolerant of others does not mean that you weaken your own convictions. Rather, it is because you are unthreatened by the kind of conviction which is not fanaticism, that you can respect the convictions of others. While no-one wants bland conformance a welcoming tolerance and friendship is the best assurance for successful integration. It means those who begin by cleaving to their own will want to widen their horizons, joining our community so it is their's too. And, incidentally, enriching us all in the process. The consequences of failure are all too apparent; an entrenched fanaticism that leads to assaults on our society and a violent response.

This College and each of you can do much to bring this about. I have already encountered how successfully you are achieving this, valuing the diversity of backgrounds amongst the College women.

**G F K Santow**  
*Chancellor*  
University of Sydney