

# The Women's College within the University of Sydney

## Chancellor's Dinner

### Response to Toast

26 March 2007

Acknowledgments:

Mrs Yvonne Rate and Dr Rodney Rate  
Dr Janet McCredie former Chair of Women's College Council  
Lucinda Warren its current Chair, and other members of Council  
Distinguished members of the University both Faculty and Administration  
Fellows of Senate  
Pauline Lyle-Smith – Head of our UK Alumni Association  
and Dr Ferenc and Martha Moritz, distinguished residents of College  
and to you above all, the Women of the College

Truth-telling

“*What is Truth?*” said jesting Pilate; and would not stay for an answer.<sup>1</sup> Francis Bacon's words<sup>1</sup> are my theme tonight; though time permits but a glimpse of the profundity that lies beneath that question.

On a cold and wintry Saturday evening two days ago, Women's College entertained the Master of St John's College Cambridge, Professor Richard Perham and his wife Dr Nancy Lane, herself also a distinguished scientist. At the dinner Richard spoke of the connection between St John's College and several heroes of truth-telling. He referred first to the three Fellows of the College who almost single-handedly brought about the abolition of the slave trade in England 175 years ago. The best known of the three was William Wilberforce whose early life at Cambridge was indolent, dissolute, and utterly hedonistic:

*“Before his conversion to evangelical Christianity, Wilberforce was a ladies' man whose friends included the bewitching Duchess of Gordon, who recruited for the Gordon Highlanders by offering the king's shilling between her lips.”*

Wilberforce started his campaign in 1788, the same year that Captain Arthur Phillip sailed into Sydney Harbour. It took him 45 years of unrelenting effort, probably cost him his life, for he was sickly, before Parliament finally passed the bill to abolish slavery. In terms of self-interest, the historian Simon Schama called it “*an absolutely spectacular act of irrationality*” – but it was morally right. For what the campaigners were purveying was in Al Gore's words (about climate change), an “*inconvenient truth*” – greatly inconvenient for the slave-owners who had enriched themselves from a hideous and vicious practice. Even the father of Gladstone, the Victorian Prime Minister, had benefited from that odious trade, though not Wilberforce whose family owed its fortune to the Baltic trade.<sup>2</sup>

The second truth-teller Richard mentioned was one more recent. Dr Hans Blix is to receive an honorary degree from Cambridge University, for his courage and tenacity in insisting that the truth be told about the state of our knowledge concerning “weapons of mass destruction”. Father Frank

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Bacon “Essays or Counsels – of Truth”, quoted by Sir Owen Dixon in his collection of essays “Jesting Pilate” and who added “*I have not forgotten that when Pilate said this he was about to leave the judgment hall*”.

<sup>2</sup> See article in The Sunday Times, March 25, 2007 “Sickly shrimp of a man who sank the slave ships”.

Brennan observes in his book “Acting on Conscience” that not even Hans Blix knew whether or not the Iraqis had disposed of all their WMD’s before the invasion and certainly could not guarantee there were none. He was happy to adopt Donald Rumsfeld’s line that “*the absence of evidence is not the evidence of absence*”; Rumsfeld, as you know was something of an epistemological expert on “known unknowns” as well as “unknown unknowns”, this being perhaps in both categories! However, Dr Blix knew by the time his inspections were abruptly terminated that the evidence was all one way and **against** there being WMD hidden in Iraq, though we were not in a state of certainty. So the case for invasion was based on a version of the precautionary principle. If you are not sure of the presence of WMD but their consequences are horrendous if present and used, you act accordingly in pre-emptive fashion. But that form of reasoning still requires one to weigh up the consequences of invasion, comparing the risk and effect of competing options.

According to Father Brennan, the real sin against truth with which Hans Blix confronts us was different. First, in what was genuinely a matter of uncertainty, but with evidence mounting strongly against the presence of WMD, was the pretence that this uncertainty did not exist. That in turn led to the second sin against the truth, namely that, as Blix puts it, it was most probable “*that the governments [of the US and UK] were conscious that they were exaggerating the risks they saw in order to get the political support they would not otherwise have had*” to carry out the invasion of Iraq.

Blix summed up his own view in these words:

*“It is understood and accepted that governments must simplify complex international matters in explaining them to the public in democratic states. However, they are not just vendors of merchandise but leaders from whom some integrity should be asked when they exercise their responsibility for war and peace in the world.”*

We often have to make decisions in circumstances of uncertainty. How rare though is it to find someone who makes a decision as best able in circumstances of incomplete knowledge, and then admits error in light of later information. Father Brennan brings out how Bishop Frame uniquely did just this, when on 18 June 2004 he published an opinion piece in the “Age” acknowledging:

*“As the only Anglican bishop to have publicly endorsed the Australian Government’s case for war, I now concede that Iraq did not possess weapons of mass destruction. It did not pose a threat to either its nearer neighbours or the United States and its allies. It did not host or give material support to al-Qaeda or other terrorist groups.”*

That said, the case for war may still rely on the perceived risk and its horrific consequences for Iraq’s neighbours, like Israel, had Saddam Hussein in fact been concealing WMD, or was later to acquire them, though it has shifted to emphasise regime change. It is undoubtedly the fact that his hideous regime was ousted though leaving horrific civil death and destruction in its place. There is now general recognition that planning for post-invasion Iraq may well have suffered from the Pentagon’s virtual exclusion of the State Department with its Middle Eastern experts. No doubt Rumsfeld excluded the State Department lest “*the native hue of resolution be sicklied o’er with the pale cast of thought*”.

In all of this, truth, here about comparative risk, challenges dogmatic answers. There may, I am not sure, be a parallel with Vietnam and the notion that Saddam Hussein was making common cause with others intent on the west’s destruction. At the time of the Vietnam war there was a fear of monolithic communism imposing its domino effect throughout Asia. Yet the reality in Vietnam was a form of nationalistic local communism having little to do with communism elsewhere. Post-invasion Saudi Arabia now fears a Shiite hegemony in the Middle East. Who is right?

What we now do about attempting to restore stability in Iraq generates a whole set of further issues. About these there are conflicting opinions passionately held where you must bring to bear your own cool and properly informed reason.

Though not so 200 years ago, today the kind of truth that lay behind the abolitionist's case against slavery appears a morally overwhelming one. This is despite the fact that we still have slavery today, women and children being so frequently its victims. That harrowing film "The Last Days of Sophie Scholl", which many of you will have seen, shows how the perspective of time and distance can lead to radically different judgments.

Sophie Scholl, her brother Hans, and Christoph Propst were part of a small group of Munich students. They were almost the only protestors in 1943 who had the suicidal courage to speak out, not only against the Nazi regime, but also against the moral indolence and numbness of the German people. Under the name "White Rose" they issued appeals and painted slogans on walls calling for an uprising against Hitler. They established ties with a few like-minded students in Berlin, Stuttgart, Hamburg and Vienna. Hans and Sophie Scholl were arrested while throwing hundreds of leaflets from the gallery of the atrium at Ludwig-Maximilian University of Munich. Their motives, as Joachim Fest brings out in his book "The German Resistance to Hitler" were among the simplest and, sadly, the rarest of all: a sense of right and wrong and a determination to take action.

In a trial lasting less than 3½ hours Hans and Sophie Scholl and Christoph Propst were sentenced to death and pitilessly guillotined the same day. Others to be executed included their mentor, the philosopher of music, Kurt Huber. Let me quote from Fest:

*"Although Hans and Sophie Scholl could easily have fled after dropping their leaflets, they submitted without resistance to the university porter who came after them shouting. "You're under arrest!" Apparently they hoped to set an example of self-sacrifice that would inspire others. "What does my death matter if by our action thousands of people are awakened and stirred to action?" Sophie Scholl asked after reading the indictment. The only visible result, however, was a demonstration of loyalty to the regime staged right in front of the university just two hours after her execution. Three days later, in the university's main auditorium, hundreds of students cheered a speech by a Nazi student leader deriding their former classmates. They stamped their feet in applause for the porter, Jakob Schmied, who "received the ovation standing up with his arms outstretched."*

While after the Nuremberg trials, the truth these martyrs told came to be recognised, wartime Germany was purblind to these truths when they mattered. The hardest thing is to recognise a moral issue immediately it happens upon us; yet a reflex based on strong moral intuition is a vital part of what you take from Women's College.

The other lesson to be learned is that we are all creatures of our time, in the moral and other judgments we draw. We can be proud that Sydney University was ahead of its time in admitting women students; but with hindsight we were not early on as welcoming, for example to women medical students seeking hospital residency, as we might have been. As the article in last week's London Times points out, Wilberforce himself did not share the same sense of outrage about the repression of British workers. As an MP he played a part in outlawing unions, introducing imprisonment without trial and reducing freedom of speech.

In all of this I do not pretend to be able to draw indubitable moral or historical judgments or discern any self-evident truth, though that does not mean one should become a moral neuter. What I do say is that as thinking students of this College, you must grapple with history and what it can teach us about contemporary events. This is so, whether you are studying the Vietnam War for the lessons it may carry to-day or even whether you follow Mel Gibson. Mel Gibson has recently set himself up now as an expert on Mayan civilisation with an on-campus screening of his latest film "Apocalypto". Alice Estrada, an Assistant Professor of Central American Studies at California State University, accused Gibson of misrepresenting Mayan culture in the movie, featuring as it did rulers slitting throats and

ripping the still beating hearts from the chests of their enemies. Apparently Gibson directed the f-word at Professor Estrada on Friday and told her she should “*get a history book and read*”.

So my reply to Sophie Gulliver’s toast – another Sophie – despite its serious note – is to affirm all you have absorbed and learnt at Women’s College. Willingly suspend judgment till you can make at least a provisional one. But then do not shirk from making it, even if the consequences are against your self-interest. Likewise do not be afraid to withdraw, qualify or refine that judgment if further information compels this, whatever your investment in the original opinion. The truth remains the truth however inconvenient. Above all do not be like jesting Pilate – stay always for an answer. All of you who have excelled in your studies or contributed to the College community in other ways epitomise that enquiring and thoughtful attitude based on concern for others.

**G F K Santow**  
*Chancellor*