



SPEECH
PROFESSOR JOHN POLLAERS OAM
CHANCELLOR, SWINBURNE UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Event: Installation Ceremony for Professor John Pollaers OAM
Date: Thursday, 23 May 2019
Location: Melbourne Convention and Exhibition Centre (MCEC)
1 Convention Centre Place, South Wharf

Acknowledgement of country

I would like to also respectfully acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land on which we gather, and pay respects to all Aboriginal Community Elders, past and present, who have resided in the area and have been an integral part of the history of this region.

Acknowledge special guests

- Her Excellency, The Honourable Linda Dessau AC The Governor of Victoria
- Mr Anthony Howard AM QC

- Professor Linda Kristjanson AO, Vice-Chancellor, Swinburne
- Dr Mark Korda, Partner, KordaMentha

- Dr Ziggy Switkowski AO, Chancellor, RMIT
- Professor Helen Bartlett, Vice Chancellor, Federation University

- The Honourable Ted Baillieu, former Premier of Victoria
- Mr John Pesutto, former Member of Hawthorn
- Mr John Kennedy, State Member for Hawthorn, Victorian Government
- Mr Michael Pearce SC, Honorary Consul General of the Federal Republic of Germany in Melbourne

- Mr Graham Goldsmith, Former Chancellor, Swinburne
- Dr Douglas Mitchell, Former Chancellor, Swinburne
- Professor Iain Wallace, Foundation Vice-Chancellor, Swinburne

- Current and former Swinburne Council Members
- Leaders of industry and supporters

It is a privilege to be installed as the fifth Chancellor of Swinburne University.

I am particularly honoured to be taking up this opportunity to work with our staff, partners and donors – all of whom have contributed to the dynamic and important institution that is Swinburne today.

To share in the leadership of a team responsible for the steering of young (and even not-so-young) lives and futures is a tremendous opportunity and a large responsibility.

This special opportunity raises the question of how we can best do this, and leads me to reflect upon the role of a university in those lives.

Our times are complicated and uncertain – and the world around us is confusing and volatile.

Trust in authority is eroded daily. Scepticism and cynicism question the motives of those responsible for piloting our wellbeing as a nation. I have felt this very personally in my roles leading major international and Australian companies, and in reforming aged care and advanced manufacturing.

It is clear that there has been a public loss of faith in politicians, church leaders, community figures and media commentators. The pillars that support our society appear rickety.

Geo-political unrest, the muddying of waters between what is true and what is not, together with a growing social and economic disparity have triggered unease, anxiety and distrust amongst neighbours, friends and nations.

The rise of so-called “fake news” and attacks on evidence-based truth have led to insecurity. Social media is riddled with misinformation, extremism, trolling and deliberate attempts to stoke moral outrage.

And, our familiar practices and social interactions are being dislocated by the pace of change – a pace which, quite frankly, is outstripping the ability of our legal and policy regulators to respond.

In the midst of all this uncertainty, where do you turn for reliability?

Where do you turn for truth, authenticity and substance?

Where do you turn for hope and a way forward?

I strongly believe this is where we, as a university, can step into the light and be a place that our communities can turn to and can trust.

Not because we have all the answers.

But because we encourage and enable questions, and commit to a process of inquiry and search for answers.

We must return to the first principles of higher education; a place where it is safe to question, to discover, to establish truth and to learn – not merely gather information or credentials.

A place where students experience years of formative thinking, light bulb moments and incredible life-changing interactions. A place where the true adventure of life begins.

A place where a thirst for knowledge drives deep inquiry, where our discoveries have a tangible impact on our society and economy.

Swinburne must stand as one of the trusted pillars of balanced thinking, where clarity can be gained – free from propaganda, fear and hearsay.

We must be above the clutter of white noise, standing with integrity and independence, as a place where those who seek knowledge can come, confident they can explore and that they will be welcomed.

It is imperative that we remain an unwavering beacon of trust, dependability and inquiry.

This is consistent with over 100 years ago, when George and Ethel Swinburne had a vision to transform education and serve the community.

Passion, hard work, dedication, commitment and a sense of, and for, community saw that vision crystallise into the world-renowned institution that Swinburne is today.

Swinburne must be at the centre of helping that community form points of view, establish beliefs and values, and enable clarity and confidence through an adventure of discovery, social cohesion and inspired leadership.

Swinburne is known to be the university where people find their way, enjoy the best years of their lives and know that they can continue to return for ongoing education and professional engagement.

University must be an experience that sets passions alight and continues to rekindle inquiry and discovery.

A place that isn't bound by restrictive thinking, expectations and tradition – but rather a place that attracts people who are energised by learning and engagement.

It must be the best place in Australia to find your way.

Universities should not simply be a conveyor belt linking high school to jobs, or a way to add letters behind a name. Nor should it be a prerequisite for a job system that is forgetting to look for character, individuality and talent.

I am pleased that Swinburne's ground-breaking initiatives and partnerships with industry are creating clear pathways and exciting career outcomes.

Through constant, real-time conversations with industries, Swinburne is responding to immediate workforce needs across Australia. The future of work is unpredictable, and the needs of industry today warrant attention.

But I think we can go even further in this regard.

Working with industry can and should also be about providing industry with genuine thought leadership, igniting in them new ideas, new perspectives and game changing views.

We must be more than connected.

We must be a place industry seeks out and is passionate to be involved with.

This is about more than placements and co-operation. This is taking our rightful place in society as leaders and guides to the real world of commerce and industry, through strong points of view, relevant research and ground breaking, commercially significant programs.

In years to come we want people talking to and about Swinburne graduates with respect and envy because they know the students break ground, lead thinking and have a certain 'x' factor where humanity meets technology. We want people to see every interaction with Swinburne as an investment in the future.

So, it might be a century on, but George and Ethel's vision of Swinburne as an engaged university is as much alive in 2019 as it was in the early 20th century.

Engagement is seen in the way our academics work hand-in-hand with global organisations. It is clear in our commitment to an inclusive and diverse society. And it is evident through the exceptional strides made in our research programs, cementing our reputation for delivering research outcomes that achieve social and economic impact.

As Linda mentioned, Swinburne has achieved notable successes in the most recent Excellence in Research (ERA) assessment, with 98% of all assessed disciplines at world level or above, 63% above world standard and 28% well above world standard (in other words: world leading). Swinburne is placed 3rd in Victoria and 15th in Australia, achieving an improvement of 50% compared to last round in 2015.

We are enabled by a unique culture that is based on a pledge of excellence and a sense of respect and caring for each other.

And we are creating a place where staff, alumni and partners as well as students love to be.

We stand apart as a place where people value the years spent here – we never merely shuffle people through.

It's clear to me that Australia's higher education sector is due to face the same industrial, technological and digital disruption that has turned other industries on their heads.

We are at the beginning of this journey.

In the past, universities would approach industry and government bodies and ask what "can you do for us?". Swinburne has always asked what "can we do for you?".

Swinburne's "can-do" attitude and its remarkable farsightedness in deciding early on to engage with industry, government and community - with all the relationships and trust that entails - have left us well placed to navigate the changing landscape on behalf of, and with, our students.

For me, this is also very personal.

My three sons took very different paths when it came to their lives after school. One did not find university engaging, but created his own learning pathway to complete his degree. Another tried more than one university, didn't love any,

and eventually pursued a practical learning journey overseas that enabled him to establish his career in the craft brewing industry.

My third son achieved a very high ATAR and is studying at a top international university. However, his engagement with university came not through its academic program, but through its theatre and opera productions.

The word here is engagement.

Not one of my very different children fully engaged with university and I say, with hand on heart, that their university experiences did not form who they are now.

And while each one ultimately found their life path, I'm not so sure they would look back and count their university years as life changing, inspiring or their best years yet.

For all three, their university experience was a necessary pathway to life and, if I'm honest, their breakthrough moments probably came elsewhere.

For me, this is what Swinburne is setting out to change.

We need to be a place where the university years are the years of adventure, discovery of purpose and formation of beliefs.

A place where students experience those crucial lessons of life – romance, friendship, eye opening clarity, challenging views.

It must be a place where we teach how to question, not just how to gather information.

And that's what we need to offer our students. A broad range of supportive life experiences, opportunities to create their own vision for their lives and a path to the future that they can explore with confidence.

We must recall where modern education was formed, in the philosophical generations of Greek culture.

Take Socrates for example.

He challenged the ideas and status of the elite class.

Socrates influenced a number of later writers and philosophers, including Plato and Aristotle. He believed that without education, society would have no order or real justice.

He said that education comes about when a person accepts what they do not know and then seeks self-knowledge or understanding.

That's an interesting thought.

We need to encourage the desire of learning and in addition to providing education, we must surely advocate the value of understanding, not just acquiring information.

Most importantly, Socrates taught that truth, including self-awareness, comes through questioning.

He taught us that learning is about fine tuning and clarifying beliefs and statements. In the end, it's about gained insight - thoughts, beliefs, and an ability to defend one's views based upon known evidence. Moreover, we know that the quest for learning and truth is never ending - where ongoing research and inquiry inform understanding and help us to remain open and curious.

This is what the world needs us to be.

A place where students, young (and not so young), can find who they are through questioning, through inspired guidance and through establishing points of view.

This will ultimately ready them for the world we find ourselves in.

To be able to do this as Chancellor of such a vibrant institution, one that you – our staff, partners and donors -- have worked so hard to build, one that has already established a world-leading standard with a culture of excellence and a focus on creativity and innovation, is nothing short of dream come true.

Thank you.