

Leadership in Troubled Times

Keynote Address to Golden Key International Honour Society

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Jake Chan, Alissa O'Neill, Trevor White, Committee Members, Honour Society Members, ladies and gentlemen, thank you for your kind introduction.

Congratulations to the new members of the Golden Key Honour Society. In this part of the world the Society is unique. It has shown us at RMIT how highly our top students and their families value the recognition of achievement. In our culture with its egalitarianism we have a healthy disrespect for ceremony, though I think that is changing. Who can forget the power of ceremony to symbolise our common goals expressed by Sir William Deane when he was Governor-General, and who can fail to be awed by the power of Australian Aboriginal ceremonies to transmit their culture, which, story by story, is becoming part of our culture.

In a like measure we aren't always good at recognising our high achievers, and Society membership is a fine way of doing that.

Make no mistake: through your achievement today you are being recognised as leaders. There are benefits to membership, as you know – acknowledgement

and reward of your academic achievement, scholarships, career assistance, community service initiatives, friendship and events like this.

But responsibility comes with leadership as well, and that's what I want to talk about tonight: leadership in troubled times.

Troubled times?

- But aren't we having a long economic boom? Isn't Australia the miracle performer among the rich countries?
- And isn't globalisation bringing peace and prosperity (relative, say with my parents' times)?
- And don't we benefit from fantastic technical achievements (at RMIT it's the solar car, the superbike, the swine flu vaccine and so on)

The trouble is, many of the old solutions don't work any more. There is a deep uneasiness abroad.

Let's just look at our calendar just this week.

- This is the week of the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg – have we progressed since Rio? RMIT is pledged to sustainable development – how green are we yet as a university? Are we happy with the form of environmental leadership Australia provides?
- This is the time of the parliamentary embryonic stem cell debate: what does leadership in biotechnology and bioethics look like all? In a non-place electronic realm, what does leadership look like there?
- In a fortnight we commemorate S11, with all the security and cultural issues it brings. S11 offers a mixed legacy for leadership. We are all aware that for

Melbourne there are two S11s, one was year 2000's reaction to the World Economic Forum in Melbourne, for which much of the organising – and a good part of the globalisation debate – occurred on RMIT campuses. Who were the leaders of that S11, on either side of the barrier? And as we commemorate the other S11, how do we recognise leadership there?

- This has also been the anniversary week of the Tampa incident, and in two days time the RMIT Refugee Support Group will meet again to find ways the university can support asylum-seekers wherever they might be in the world, through training, education, service provision, campaigns and research, including work to stop the scourge of people-smuggling.

This is the kind of diary, the issues of the day, that a university must face.

Where is the political leadership on issues that matter, what are the universities doing, the public intellectuals, the student leaders?

Where do we look more deeply for direction?

You may say for leadership we look to values, but where do those values come from:

- Religions? – yes, the spirit is strong, and ethics and the spirit have traditionally walked together. But the values leadership of religion can seem weak, overtaken by secularism and the decadence or fundamentalism of religious institutions that have, as it were, crusted over the founding human spirits they try to harness.
- But are secular values too weak? Look at the attack on utilitarianism over stem cell research, on such matters as valuing human lives and euthanasia. But

I defy any of us to live as ethically as Peter Singer would have us do in his book *How Are We To Live?*

- What about the university? Universities must engage deeply with the issues of the day, and RMIT seeks to lead in that – to be engaged in the big issues, partnered with community and regional organisations, innovative in our teaching and research.

This is not always easy, as we find out in our support for asylum-seekers – how do we balance an institutional interest with our duty to harbour public intellectuals and make our internal debate be the public debate? What is right for the university to do – and what is right in the interests of students? This engagement is a hopeful one: in the pitiful absence of any government or indeed major party leadership, RMIT students, staff and management want to make a difference and we are now mobilising locally and internationally. The energy and unity I feel from this now is like the leadership RMIT showed during the mid-90s emergence of Hansenism and campaign against racism.

It was a one-time refugee from Vietnam who suggested RMIT should consider a campus in Vietnam, and today there is a beautiful small campus in Ho Chi Minh City with 500 students and 80 staff leading the way, the first of its kind. There, too, we need to ask, what kind of leadership? How can RMIT International University Vietnam make a difference? How can a university reliant on fees and return on investment also work to alleviate poverty and reach out to the disadvantaged? RMIT Vietnam students and staff are taking leadership on that.

There are common wellsprings of commitment across RMIT's activities – the same Learning Network in Melbourne that started up *whereveruni*, a place

where lost youth, often drug-dependent, may find a way to education, has lessons for learning platform design, and how to bridge the digital divide, that are relevant to the learning resource centres we are building for Vietnamese universities. And vice-versa.

I have not answered the question of where you find leadership in these troubled times. That is a question you must answer for yourself. I wish you the courage to try, including the courage to fail. If you engage with the community issues that are important, if you seek to lead, you will find RMIT with you, and you will find the Golden Key Honour Society with you. I wish you every success.