THE ROLE OF THE PUBLIC UNIVERSITY

Last Sunday I flew to Kuala Lumpur to spend 3 days in Malaysia. The reason for the trip was to give a public lecture on the topic of vaccines and viral immunity and to deliver the Dr Ranjeet Bagwan Singh memorial lecture. This was endowed some years back to honour a respected and well-loved medical scientist. The Australian High Commission hosted a social event, I talked at length with members of the research community and had the opportunity to meet with the Minister of Science. Our conversation left me in no doubt that Malaysia is being very pro-active in higher education, biotechnology and information technology.

Many senior Malaysian scientists trained in Australia under the Colombo plan, and have maintained these contacts by sending their children to be educated here. There was a friendly rivalry between those who had been at universities in Brisbane, Melbourne and Adelaide. The message I heard from several people, including senior members of their Academy of Science, is that they believe the overall standard of the Australian univerities to be higher than those in the USA or Britain. We may lack an Oxford, a Harvard, or a Stanford, but we do not plumb the educational depths found in some countries. This was very familiar, as I had heard the same message when we were in Hong Kong last year. There are, for example, very active chapters of the University of Queensland alumni associaition in many of the neighbouring, Asian states.

The Colombo Plan may be the most successful, single initiative that Australia has ever taken in the area of foreign affairs. It earned us a number of very good friends and a position of real stature in the region. Our universities have been, and should continue to be, among our best ambassadors. We should never forget the Biblical lesson: “cast your bread upon the waters you will get it back many-fold”.

Why do I tell this story? The main point I want to make is that our universities play a complex, varied and often under-appreciated role in the life and affairs of a nation. The second is that investment in higher education pays off on many fronts, often in unexpected ways. Our universities are among Australia’s most powerful social institutions, and should be treated accordingly by government.

The Founding of the University of Queensland

The idea that a university could play a prominent role in establishing Australia’s profile in this part of the world would have been both unfamiliar and, given the racial attitudes of the time, even abhorrent to many of those who were involved in the establishment of the University of Queensland. The daytime flight to KL gave me time to scan through “A Place of Light and Learning”, Malcolm Thomis’s history of this University’s first 75 years. It makes instructive reading, especially as it brings out many of the tensions that existed then and still play a prominent role in the sometimes uncomfortable relationship between democratically elected governments and public universities supported from the tax base.

The debate about whether there should be a university in Queensland went on for more than 30 years. It bogged down repeatedly on the usual issues. Where should it be? The north did not want to be dominated by Brisbane. How would it be supported? There wasn't much money around. For many years, more than 70% of the Queensland budget went into the construction of railways. The modern equivalent is probably the health and welfare budgets, which also have the potential to be all-consuming and leave no money over for anything else.

Would it train the wrong sort of people? A. Rutledge, the Member for Charter's Towers, expressed real concern that a university would produce "kid gloved young men", who would have neither the inclination nor the fortitude to work in the agricultural and pastoral industries. I leave it to you to read Thomis's book if you want to know how this all played out in detail.

The eventual resolution was to develop an institution along the lines of the American Agricultural and Mechanical Universities, the A&M or "aggie" campuses that were established in most US states through the 18th and 19th centuries. Even with this model, however, a need for an arts faculty was recognized from the outset.The Nobel Prize Winner, Sir William Bragg (in Leeds), was involved in the selection of the first faculty, though his advice was not necessarily heeded.

The commitment to a more liberal educational system may also have been reinforced by the first Chancellor, the colonial Governor, Sir William McGregor. The Chancellor remained a very powerful figure in this university through to the 1950's, a situation that recently caused considerable distress in an older, sister institution a little to the south of us. Sir William was an Aberdonian, who had firmly in his mind the situation in the Scottish universities. These, like Aberdeen and Glasgow, had either developed in the ambit of an Episcopal See or, like Edinburgh, had been established as City Universities for the education of worthy, and often poor, young men.

Unlike the Oxford and Cambridge of the 18th and early 19th century, access was not restricted to the wealthy and to adherents of a particular religion (the Church of England). Edinburgh still has a mid-term holiday called "meal day", intended for students to go back to their village so they could replenish their supply of oats and barley. The Scottish model had considerable influence in the establishment of most, if not all, of the older Australian universities.

The tension between control and freedom

Those early politicians were very obsessed withn the idea that the Queensland government must, under all circumstance, maintain direct control of the university. Few of them were university educated, or had any very clear idea of the purpose of higher education beyond vocational training. It would indeed be remarkable if there are not still some in both the local and the federal sphere who share this view. The same statement could be made about legislators in many of the American states.

The truth of the matter is, though, that strong external control is inimical to the proper functioning of a university. The capacity to tolerate, and even applaud, constructictive criticism emanating from the university sector is, in fact, a central hallmark of a sophisticated, modern state. Academics often have the expertise and the time to think things through. They should feel free to suggest ideas and changes that may impact on public policy. A wise administration will use this pool of talent. Those of us who work in the universities should also keep in front of us the importance of collegiality and consultation. The more managerial style that has become a necessary feature of running a modern university sometimes leads to a loss of appreciation within the institution of the talents and insights of its members.

Having the freedom to act as public critics also imposes obligations on members of the academic community. Though we should be able to provide considered opinions in areas where we have real expertise we do not, I believe, have the right to use the prestige and power of our institutions to push private agendas. We can, like everyone else, do this as private citizens. Academic freedom is, I believe, a limited concept.

Vocational and liberal education

The tension between the model that universities exist primarily to provide high quality technological training in areas like engineering and medicine and the idea that a university education is a necessary process for the formation of a well-rounded, educated, thinking person, continues to plague us. The Americans, who take many of their basic ideas from the enlightenment, emphasize that liberal education is an essential pre-requisite, with training for professional skills to come later. At its best, this seems to me to be an optimal model, though it does entail the expense of additional years as a student. Do we need to be in such a hurry? I believe that the move to post-graduate professional schools in Australia is the right way to go.

The balance between more practical, vocational training and university education became hopelessly confused when the Australian higher education sector was vandalized by the Hawke government under the so-called Dawkins reforms of the late 1980's. Since then, both government and the educational institutions themselves have spent a great deal of time trying to cope with the disaster that followed. Many teaching colleges that had a sound, practical mandate suddenly found that they were expected to function as universities. The universities were loaded with responsibilities for areas where they had no real competence.

Part of the result has been a disastrous duplication of essentially under-resourced efforts. How is this to be dealt with? The current idea seems to be that all universities must compete. Compete for what, the rush to the bottom line? One solution might be to copy the American model of a federated, state system. A good example is the University of California. The President's office in Oakland takes overall responsibility for the University of California campuses in San Diego, Irvine, Los Angeles, Santa Barbara, Berkely, San Francisco and Davis/Sacramento. All function essentially as autonomous, high quality institutions, but the President provides a primary oversight role. Adopting

this idea could allow, for example, several weak operations to be combined into a new structure with an effective critical mass. The rationalization would presumably require trade-offs between different institutions.

Perhaps this is wishful thinking, but we need to be bold if we are both to maintain first class opportunities for young people and to provide the sophisticated intellectual capital that will allow us to remain competitive in the future. So we would need to change a few Acts of Parliament. Are they engraved in stone? Recent visits to Boston, Los Angeles and Taiwan leave no room for complacency.

The contemporary challenge

A couple of months back I gave a graduation address at Guelph University in Ontario. My words of wisdom were preceded by an address from the Vice Chancellor. He had been in office for a number of years, and made the point that his university had gone from being publicly “supported” to publicly “assisted” to publicly “bothered”. I suspect that most Australian VCs would echo his sentiments.

The point is that the leaders of Australia’s universities are under tremendous pressure. On the one hand they need to innovate, while on the other they have to deal with many entrenched political and historical realities, some of which were exacerbated by Dawkins. The past 10-20 years have not been easy ones for the higher education system.

Alumni associations can provide a great deal of support. American institutions are extremely aggressive at seeking donations from their alumni, a process that starts from the day of graduation. Individuals endow lectures, fellowships and professorships. It is rare to see a new building in, at least, the private universities that does not bear the name of a prominent alumnus. You can imagine how much that costs! At a different level, most alumni fund-raising depends on the efforts of volunteers and students.

The other way that everyone can help is by being politically active. All us can take steps to ensure that our elected representatives know that we value higher education and excellence, and that we will not tolerate further damage to the Australian system. Queensland has been fortunate in having an enlightened State Government, but the federal sphere has been much less supportive. As always in a democracy, the future is up to us. We have to find a voice, and use that voice.

Peter C. Doherty, Brisbane, 24 August 2001.

Lecture at the Custom’s House, sponsored by the Alumni Association in the year of the 90th anniversary of the University of Queensland