

Annual Speech Day 2019

Principal's Address

Board Chair Alasdair Sutherland, past and present members of The Hamilton and Alexandra College Board

Member for Lowan, Emma Kealy MP

Deputy Mayor Southern Grampian Shire Council Counsellor Chris Sharples

Special Guests: Rev Angie Griffin, Mr Des Trotter, Ms Tania Newton, Ms Louisa Warnock, Mrs Jan Evans, Mr Bruce Simons, Mr Rob Stewart OAM, Mr John Diporse OAM, Mrs Helen Diporse and Mr Jock & Mrs Jill Whiting

President of P&F Association Ms Keri Ross and fellow Executive members

President of Old Collegians Association Mrs Anna Delaney and Executive

Members of staff, parents, grandparents and friends of the College & most importantly the outstanding student body sitting before me.

I welcome you all to this our 148th Annual Speech Day. Speech Day is a splendid occasion to celebrate all the wonderful things that have gone on this year. So often, I have felt enormous pride in the efforts and achievements of our students. We truly have enjoyed rich success and my personal highlight this year was undoubtedly sharing 7 days with Year 9 through the back end of their China Experience. Spending time with Principal Huang and our good friends at Gaoyou Middle School, visiting Nanjing and its Massacre Museum, visiting the ancient capital city of Xian and discovering the amazing history of the Terracotta Warriors and, while it was rather stressful boarding the overnight train to Beijing, when we arrived we saw another aspect to this marvelous city that I had not been privy to before.

But this is all recorded in our weekly newsletters, in the Annual Report and on our website. So instead let me discuss my deep concern that today society is increasingly over protecting our young and denying them the ability to learn to think deeply. Thankfully it is not happening here to same extent as in larger cities but there remains a widening trend in educational and societal circles and it is a point of concern to me on a number of fronts. Let me explain.

The British educationalist Sir John Jones suggested 'education is a conversation between one generation and the next about what is important.' A wise and logical saying but what happens when the context of the conversation is frequently ignored or the content of the conversation is deemed irrelevant or, even more alarming, when the ability to hold the conversation is discouraged, frowned upon or even banned!

In recent months, my suspicions were heightened when I read Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt's *The Coddling of the American Mind: How good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure*. Much of their research was based on the premise that today our university students are deemed 'fragile'. They believe that American universities have neglected their role in adequately preparing students for the world they face and no longer can students be expected to grow stronger from their encounters. They emphasised 'the playing field is not level and life is not fair' and they question why more is not being done, when university is quite possibly the best environment in which to come face to face with people and ideas that maybe offensive, are even sometimes hostile. They conclude, 'in order to thrive, our children must be exposed to stressors including different perspectives.' Otherwise they fear the consequences of a generation 'unable or disinclined to engage with ideas that make them feel uncomfortable'. Uncomfortable, - a feeling unease or awkwardness.

This validated my concern that increasingly there exists a rising intolerance for opposing viewpoints which is challenging the merits of true liberal education. I remain concerned about the dangers of over protection by parents, government and society alike that amplifies children's fears and makes them less likely to become adults who can manage their own lives. Mental toughness is no longer regarded. Children are being given permission to disengage before they have started learning because the topic does not appeal or interest them, sometimes it offends them. And for me the great irony is that we preach resilience and the value of learning from our mistakes but we quickly discard the practice when we personally disagree or perhaps feel threatened. We seem to have forgotten that "education was never intended to make people comfortable, it was meant to make them think" as Hannah Holborn Gray famously said.

Think, indeed and my fear is that if we stop challenging children to consider their thoughts and beliefs, their principles and moral convictions; we risk making our students more ignorant, fragile, anxious and prone to seeing themselves as victims and that I abhor. Indeed, my key parental advice to my children is be anything you want – a pilot, policeman, gay or Muslim but ‘don’t be a victim’. You take responsibility for the life you live.

Hence, I feel we need inquiring minds now more than ever. Last night, in Mr Drummond’s excellent address he challenged Year 12 ‘what will be your legacy’. My hope is Year 12 students will depart with open minds, not closed, and minds that understand everyone’s opinion matters. Such training has been existent since time immemorial for was it not Socrates, founder of western philosophy, who once said: ‘I cannot teach anybody anything, I can only make them think’.

Of course the reason why is plain and simple - everyone should have the right to feel safe. Discrimination in any form is unacceptable. It jeopardises the safe and supportive school environments that are so central to our mission. It undermines the potential of individuals and the cohesion of communities. We know how damaging discrimination can become when young people in our schools are bullied, excluded and made to feel inferior. We do not want this to occur. The wellbeing and pastoral care of our young people is paramount, as is the wellbeing and pastoral care of our staff, and wider school community. But just as the sporting field has traditionally been the bastion to train character, so must our classes remain the venue for the ultimate mental gymnasium, full of advanced equipment, skilled trainers and therapists standing by just in case. Correspondingly, at our School, and within a community that aspires to be exceptional, everyone has a responsibility to demonstrate tolerance and understanding. Hence we must be ready to meaningfully engage in important topics like climate change and indigenous rights, topics like mental health and LGBTQTI issues, topics like misogyny and domestic violence. I fear too quickly we avoid these conversations, because we feel awkward or uneasy rather being compelled to debate and actively listen to each other. Informed opinions entitle us to ‘agree to disagree’ but senseless Tweets and careless Facebook entries help no-one.

Hence the staff and I remain determined to challenge our children in the classroom, through their texts and round table discussions, through our pastoral programme and mentor groups, through our outdoor education programme, through their sport, their music, their drama, their oratory pursuits. Through the Yr 9 Experience and our new pilgrimage to Central Australia. In my mind, it remains vitally important that our culture stands up for what is right: we will not be silent when something is wrong, even if in the moment it feels as though we are standing alone. For me inquiring minds, kind hearts and strong character remain the supreme virtues of a true independent education.

Interestingly, another respected colleague Mr Sholto Bowen feels the same way. This year Sholto retires after 47 years in education. In his opinion, the proliferation of new educational strategies have alone done little for the children he attempted to educate. He trialled direct instruction and project-based learning, Solo Taxonomy to Brain Theory and from big classes to small classes but concluded no single strategy made a lasting difference. However, the most important gift he could give his students was to ensure they were loved, valued and made to feel worthy. These beliefs, he reflected, would keep them safe and confident in a rapidly changing world.

Critical to this process are our teachers. They seek the best for and from every student. Our teachers are tasked with lighting the fire of curiosity, imagination, and goodness. They avoid teaching simple solutions to complex issues. Their influence as role models is immeasurable. I sincerely thank all our teaching staff for their efforts and for working with every family to ensure 'confident futures' for all our graduates.

Sadly, earlier this year we farewelled Mrs Ory Wilson from Music, Mrs Janine Cotterill and Mrs Leonie Hand from Boarding and our MPAC cleaner Mrs Jo Davies and today we must farewell three colleagues Mr Rob Drummond, Mrs Anli Zhou and Mr Ralph Carolan. Importantly, I asked Mr MacLean who were the best teachers he had seen at College in his 40 plus years; without hesitation, he named Rob Drummond. A special tribute indeed! So to Rob, Anli and Ralph thank you for your service, thank you for your humour, thank you for your commitment, thank you for your example that has inspired staff and students alike. I would ask all three colleagues to stand and invite

Anli and most especially Rob to come to the stage to receive a token of our immense appreciation.

I also want to pay special tribute to our amazing non-teaching staff for their warmth and service. In past years, I have acknowledged the important contribution of many support staff. This year, I wish to commend our Business Office team Mrs Ann Sutherland, Mrs Nichole Atchison and Mrs Susie Holcombe. These ladies are very much the unsung heroes of our school who graciously go about their work, never making a fuss but always there to provide meaningful support and assistance. They know our families well and I ask you to acknowledge their important contribution.

I thank my loyal Executive: Mr MacLean, Mr Bourke, Ms Waldron, Mr Carolan, Mr Nelson, Mrs Winter Cooke, Mr Monk, Mrs Bonnett and most especially Mrs Archer. They all work alongside a 'restless' principal determined to lift our impressive standards. Thank you all for your efforts and I very much look forward to the next stage of our journey.

I thank the P&F for their continuing support and honest feedback. Their decision to re-launch the cookbook was a herculean task and I thank the P&F Executive and Mrs Rosie Mercer, for their drive and vision. I thank the Old Collegian's Association for exploring new avenues to ensure all students be deemed alumni whenever their journey should end at College and I thank the Foundation for their wise investment in 'securing our future'. I thank our highly efficient Chair Alasdair Sutherland and The Hamilton and Alexandra College Board for their enormous time and wisdom. The decision to commence a new masterplan is a significant one and we look forward to their announcements round our next physical developments. The P&F, Old Collegians Association, Foundation and Board are all volunteers, yet all are united by their commitment to a 'connected community'.

Finally, to the class of 2019 I hope this school will always hold a special place in your heart. You have been well led by Bella, James, Kate and Reagan and I thank you all for your trust, loyalty and friendship. You took your theme 'we must overcome to become' and in the spirit of today's address I hope that you will continue to embrace inquiring minds. Always remember the world needs people like you. My advice is don't

be too quick to judge others but rather demonstrate respect giving due regard for the feelings, wishes and rights of others. Embrace responsibility and run with it but remember for much of your life you will stand alone and you will have to 'overcome' a world filled with mediocrity and uncertainty before you 'become' the successful employee, husband/wife and/or parent we know you will be. Stand strong in the knowledge that your family and school have prepared you well.

In conclusion, a measure of the quality and maturity of a community is how it responds to difficult chapters. So to the Year 7s below me and the audience abroad - here's to an 'uncomfortable' future, an 'inconvenient future'; confident in the knowledge that we are building vital skills that will serve us well into the future ahead. For only together, can we make a positive difference towards shaping a better world.