

Australian Academy of the Humanities

**Speech at the launch of *The Power of the Humanities***

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The Honourable Christopher Pyne, Minister for Education and Training, Professor Fitzgerald, Professor Johnson, Fellows of the Academy, Kathy Marks, Gillian Cosgrove, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you, Mr Pyne, for your strong endorsement of this publication and your thoughtful and passionate words about the value of the humanities. I'm honoured to have this opportunity to respond.

Working as a humanities scholar and teacher in Australia is an awesome responsibility and an exhilarating adventure. We live in a country of a size, culture and democratic character where one can really make a difference. In humanities research, engaging with the public is not just where your work possibly ends; it is also where it starts. We are in dialogue with people of the present and the past at every stage of our enquiries; we are constantly tuned in to social expressions and needs; we are trained to be sensitive listeners and observers. Being a good scholar also means being an active citizen. This book, *The Power of the Humanities*, makes that case very strongly – not in an abstract way, but vividly, with real, inspiring stories of scholarship in action.

Humanities scholars rarely try to hide behind jargon or intimidate the public. They aim instead to give voice to common experience and seek to communicate with the widest audience. Ironically, it is this very inclusiveness that can expose their authority to challenge.

The humanities are so important, so ubiquitous, so integrated with our public and personal lives – with the very substance and art of living – that it is possible to take them for granted and to overlook their power. Humanities scholarship so seamlessly underpins everything we do that it can be hard, sometimes, to detect its daily revolutionary influence.

A crucial part of the influence of humanities scholars is that we don't just write for our academic peers; we also write books for the general public, give lectures on radio, make films, write plays. If your book gets on someone's bedside table, they are probably reading it for some time and possibly deeply; or at least they are reading it when their minds are more tender, open and receptive. There aren't many policy papers on bedside tables.

A couple of years ago, the then Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia, Her Excellency the Honourable Quentin Bryce, delivered the ABC Boyer Lectures. Her theme was the power of stories. The mechanisms of storytelling, she said, 'are our best hope of building a more inclusive and a more responsible citizenship.' Storytelling, she said, 'is in all of us; it is a natural human response to the experience of living and witnessing; it's how we talk to one another; it's how we feel like we belong to something bigger and wiser than ourselves; it is instinctive and powerful and foolishly under-rated.'

Quentin Bryce was right to say that the tight discipline and high-wire art of storytelling can be 'foolishly under-rated'. Sometimes politicians, policy analysts, scientists and bureaucrats misjudge the difficulty of telling true stories well, and they underestimate the effectiveness of stories in changing people's minds and behaviour. When administrative departments work with human communities, stories sometimes come last, instead of first; they are used to sell policy instead of to develop it; the stories are invented instead of being fully researched or imagined. Leaders often talk longingly about 'narratives' and wonder where to find them. Well, we in the humanities have them in abundance! And the narratives and stories we generate are true and grounded and connected to the people. The work of humanities scholars discovers the organic links between people and policy, as this book shows.

Let me finish with an example from my own work which has recently concerned the history and experience of bushfire in Australia. Following the Black Saturday firestorm in Victoria in February 2009, when 173 people died, the residents of one of the suffering communities turned to humanities scholars for help. Residents explained that they didn't need any more infrastructure, material things or soft toys, and they certainly didn't want any more hugs; but they did very much want to make sense of what happened. They had a deep hunger for history, both recent and long-term; they yearned for meaning, explanation and story. We – the historians who were invited into their community – worked with survivors and produced two books and a film, all released within five years of the firestorm, and all shared with

community members and then made available to fire authorities, the government and the general public.

We helped people and made a difference; our work had a significant role to play in people's lives. But our research also led to very practical policy advice. In our fire histories, we showed why the authorised bushfire safety book was dangerous in that bioregion; why the edifice of research underpinning the recommended survival strategy was flawed; why fire refuges are so important to safety in the mountain ranges of Victoria; how to identify a potentially fatal fire day; what path a firestorm is likely to take and how it is likely to behave; what aspects of community tend to work in a crisis and what don't; how the lives of humans and trees are interdependent; and why local fire history is your best survival guide.

And here's something else pertinent to our concerns. In both America and Australia, the overwhelming majority of research funding into fire goes to further investigating its physical behaviour, which is something we already understand pretty well. A small proportion of funding goes to researching the biological dimensions of fire, and only a tiny amount to the cultural dimensions of fire. And this is despite the fact that most experts acknowledge that the greatest challenge in fire research is cultural! As the Black Saturday Royal Commission recognised, the neglected question is not how fire behaves but how people do. This example reminds us of how hard it can be to change the patterns of funding, which too often come to the humanities late rather than first. This powerful book will help our advocacy, for it makes clear that humanities scholarship not only enriches every aspect of our lives, it also *changes* lives for the better with practical wisdom, organic policy and effective action.