

Turning the Level of Civilisation Up

A TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CHALLENGE

JULIANNE SCHULTZ

IT IS A GREAT PRIVILEGE to be invited to present this address, the 49th Academy Lecture—who would have thought when the theme was set a year ago that it would be just so timely!

First, though, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, the Gadigal People of the Eora Nation. It is particularly fitting at a conference focussed on civilisations, that we pay tribute to the people who are the custodians of what is arguably the oldest living civilisation on earth.

This is not something to say glibly, but something to savour and interrogate. It is a statement that, quite frankly, when you think about it, takes your breath away. 60,000 years is not geological time—that runs into the hundreds of millions of years—but it is long enough to have seen the physical nature of this place profoundly change. For bays, beaches, cliffs to emerge and disappear and reappear again, and for people to have found a way to survive, struggle, make meaning and flourish together. Contrary to the perspective of those who arrived from the northern hemisphere this was not barbarism in need of civilisation, but a different way of being.

What does it mean, to use the phrase the oldest living civilisation?

What can we learn from those who hold its secrets, especially at a time when the planet is facing at least one existential threat?

How can knowledge of what Stephen Muecke calls the '*cultural confederacy*' of interrelated communities, languages and cultures of the First Australians shape us?¹

Why don't more of us know more about this, and the lessons that can be drawn from such survival?

How can we as moral citizens have been complicit, if not directly and personally, in the historic attempts to wipe it out, but by not succeeding in our lifetimes to find a respectful, meaningful and lasting settlement?

What lessons can we learn from these successes and failures, in trying to find an ethic for our times?

How can this inform the creation of a distinctive, pluralist, best possible Australian civilisation? One that responds to the place and the people who call this land home in a world that is confronting more than the usual number of challenges.

These are, I am sure you would agree, big questions to spin out of a few words of acknowledgement. But that is the business we are in: posing big questions that stretch the brain. And little ones that add complexity on the path, we hope, to greater clarity. Trying to understand how what happened before shapes the now and influences the future, and the challenge of making a future of our own choosing. Simply seeking to define, so we can see things better. Things that others might

like to think are obvious—just common sense, plain as the nose on your face. But there is always more: history, context, language, science, economics, politics, philosophy, culture.

Earlier this year I took long service leave. I was pleased to discover this was one of the enduring benefits of colonial society. A century ago travel ‘home’ would take many weeks and so became a long-anticipated reward for an extended period of work. Now that travel is as simple as a click on a computer screen, the flash of a credit card and a dash to the airport for a twelve- or twenty-hour flight, its rationale has changed.

But, having done my time I took my reward not long after agreeing to deliver this address and drafting an abstract. It is fair to say, I was still wondering what I would say. The starting point Joy Damousi gave me was the reassessment, a couple of decades on, of Samuel Huntington’s ‘Clash of Civilizations’ thesis.² You will recall that at the time this generated heated debate. Huntington provocatively introduced the notion of passionately held difference into a world that was supposed to have reached peak homogeneity, even the end of history. He disputed the notion that a universal civilisation was within reach and that cultural, religious, ethnic and political variation had been smudged into distinctions without difference. Huntington quite wisely cautioned us not to be so hasty. Fault lines still existed at the ‘micro level’ over territory.³ At the ‘macro level’ of military and economic power and the enabling framework of institutions, politics, values, culture and religion. He noted with a prescience that only became really clear to the rest of us on the 9th of September 2001, that cultural and religious differences were still real and defining. He was right, triumphalism was not only unattractive, but actually dangerous.

Over the past two decades we have been distracted by wars and terrorism; by globalisation and technology; by the apparently impossible consequences of climate change; while greedily eyeing the increasing affluence of the region, and watching the rise of illiberal

democracies and authoritarianism. Meanwhile our affluence, casual cruelty towards those with less and calcifying institutions has not revealed our best selves. We have been responding defensively, rarely imagining or arguing for new ways of being that might be more appropriate for the twenty-first century. We have not learnt the right lessons.

So I interpreted the challenge Joy, Bronwen Neil and Catriona Mackenzie gave me to find a way of addressing Huntington’s final entreaty—to ‘identify elements of commonality’—from a somewhat unlikely perspective. The world has problems, but as Huntington argued ‘different civilisations need to learn to co-exist with each other.’⁴

So too in this great south land. How might we draw on ancient, colonial, modern and contemporary traditions to create a sustainable, hybrid civilisation that respects people and place and provides a beacon to others?

So with this brief in my head I reached Singapore. On day one, decompressing by the pool, the *Straits Times* front page on the 1st of June provocatively addressed my challenge: Has the West Lost It?⁵ Local grandee Kishore Mahbubani argued that it was time for the West to seek to influence rather than dominate, to recognise that the rest of the world has taken advantage of the spirit of Western reasoning and been transformed—economically, socially and culturally. That with a little humility, a little more openness and diplomacy, and less military might, a global utopia may be within reach.

Then, because it was just day one of my long service leave, I turned to *The Australian*. There on the front page was one of its ubiquitous exclusives: ‘Fury as ANU dumps study of Western civilisation.’ Accompanying the report was the full text of the ‘at a loss to understand’ letter from the former Prime Minister John Howard, the chair of the Ramsay Centre which had been in discussion with the university for months. The somewhat menacing last line of his letter made it clear that this was political, not a normal commercial negotiation: ‘I intend

► Collection of books.

IMAGE: JULIANNE SCHULTZ

► Head of a goddess, perhaps Aphrodite. Marble copy of a gold and ivory statue of the classical period, 2nd c (EAM 244), Acropolis Museum, Greece.

IMAGE: JULIANNE SCHULTZ



Just a little light reading. And a weeping Aphrodite, a memento from the extraordinary Acropolis Museum, and its moving evocation of the history of myth, civilisation, war, ambition, plunder and restoration.

It seemed appropriate that in these testing times the Greek goddess of love, beauty, pleasure and procreation should be crying. Never mind that what appears to be her tears are the oxidation of what were once bronze eyelashes.

There is a bit to cry about.

Or laugh.

In October 2005 Stephen Colbert was just starting his eponymous show. It is somewhat chilling to realise that this was when he came up with the word *truthiness*: it seems so now, as you will see if you watch it on YouTube. It has taken a while to reach maturity and morphed into the even more menacing *trumpiness*. Truthiness captures the slippery world inhabited by those unencumbered by books, or facts, context or complexity—for those who just know with their heart rather than their heads—where things can just feel truthful.⁶

to release our correspondence.' Signed with the flourish of a hand that had despatched thousands of letters.

Line up, line up, I thought. This is just the sort of stoush they love. They will nurture it: ivory tower versus the real world, with News Corp the white knight demanding that the ivory be honed a certain way. It will run and run. As you know it did, and still does.

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Some weeks later in Greece, after an intense, reading, museuming, sleeping, swimming, eating break I had a couple of dozen books I didn't need to lug around any longer. A local shopkeeper packed them in a Corfu Beer box and I entrusted it to the somewhat idiosyncratic Greek postal service. I watched the postmaster, who had left his key at home that day put the box and 50 euros on the front seat of his beat-up old car. He promised to despatch them after the weekend. I had come to expect trust to beat process in austerity-torn Greece, but I wasn't completely confident. But sure enough a couple of months later the Corfu Beer box arrived. Meanwhile I hung onto a handful of books as I toyed with ideas for this talk and other commitments. When I laid them out, I realised they were as good a snapshot of a civilisation-defining moment as any. There are three worrying tomes about the collapse of democracy, guides to lessons from a fascist past, explorations of the long tail of war and geopolitical uncertainty, and a romp through the imminent threat of cyber catastrophe. Looking at it now, it seems that all that is missing is the IPCC volume on climate change, but at the time that was still a work in progress.

► Stephen Colbert discusses "truthiness" on the debut episode of The Colbert Report, CBS TV.

IMAGE: CC BY-SA 3



Who would have thought that a little more than a decade later the White House would be occupied by a man who makes the Colbert character seem almost reasonable. Quaintly charming. Trumpiness captures something

even more sinister, statements that don't even have to feel truthful, apparently ignorant rough-hewn words, weaponised for effect. Whatever comes out of his mouth—alarming frequently words that sound as though they emanated from the crib sheet of a propaganda handbook.⁷

In defining these words Colbert provided a helpful predictor for a president who according to the *Washington Post* last week, had made 6,420 false or misleading comments in 649 days.⁸ That is industrial-scale deception—small lies told over and over, medium sized lies that have become a new global lingua franca and big lies that take even his most ardent supporters by surprise and sometimes force a retraction or denial—sort of. But only after they have already infiltrated the virtual world and got a life of their own.

This is not normal. It is not the way we have come to expect even a tainted public sphere, distorted by the commercialisation of public attention, to operate. The president's mantra of fake news is as he has admitted a deliberate and determined effort to undermine confidence in what remains of a rigorous public sphere and professional journalism that takes itself seriously. In the unregulated, 'more insidious' domain of the internet this is particularly dangerous.⁹

Such industrial scale deception is at odds with the norms that characterise any flourishing civilisation. If truth is irrelevant to discourse, trust is not merely dented it is destroyed. Other norms of acceptable behaviour cannot be far away. What is happening now, goes well beyond spin or hollow speech. The *New York Times* correspondent Roger Cohen describes it as 'corrosive, corrupting and contagious'.¹⁰

In the shrunken global village this has dangerous implications everywhere, for public and personal behaviour. If the so called, 'leader of the free world' can talk the way he does, without regard to fact or feeling, the level of civilisation is turned down everywhere he is heard. What we are witnessing is behaviour contrary to the long-established moral core of a civilised society, arguably giving succour to evil, and deliberately destroying trust.



David Rowe captured this brilliantly with his *Australian Financial Review* illustration of President Trump failing to note the significance of Armistice in France.¹¹

▲ Fake News
IMAGE: PIXEL2013,
CC0.10, UNIVERSAL,
PIXABAY

So how did it come to this?

It is easy to feel that the world is going to hell in a handbasket—the news of catastrophe and disaster, an inflammatory US president, the distortion of social media, global instability of superpower realignment, the palpable threat of climate change, the rise of authoritarian leaders—and that is for starters.

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Freedom House,¹² the Washington-based NGO, has been monitoring global freedom since 1941, when a very different US President articulated an expansive ethic that has largely prevailed in 'kin countries' and beyond.¹³ With WW2 in full, murderous, destructive fury, President Roosevelt declared that as human beings, all people were entitled to freedom of speech and expression, freedom to worship their god in their own way, freedom from want and freedom from fear. At the time it was ambitious rhetoric, demonstrably at odds

with the wartime experience. But it provided guiding principles for a different future.

Last month in a very different context, Freedom House reported that around the world political and civil rights had sunk to their lowest level for a decade.

For the twelfth year in a row, democratic setbacks outnumbered gains. Democracy is in crisis. Values are under assault and retreat in country after country. Young people are losing faith in politics. Trust has been eroded by commerce and the calcification of institutions. Millions of people are living without the rights we take for granted as a measure of civil, liberal, democratic society. Even nations that like to pride themselves on a deep democratic history are slipping on the scale, as trust in institutions is eroded and checks and balances slip out of equilibrium and technology remakes the way things are done. This is most notable in the United States which fell to 86 out of 100, and United Kingdom which slipped to 94. Australia and NZ scored 98, with the virtuous Scandinavians topping with perfect scores. This trend line is a matter of real concern, because it is contrary to the previous trajectory. Up until relatively recently enhanced civil and political rights were what was expected, giving comfort to those of us who 'hope the arc of history bends towards greater emancipation, equality and freedom'.¹⁴

Taking a wider view of the state of the globe provides a slightly more reassuring message, that that arc may still be bending the right way. But the tension between 'individual rights and popular will' is fertile territory for authoritarian leaders and their shadow puppets.

Survival deep in our epigenetics means we dwell on the negative, alert to threats and dangers, ready to respond to fear. But, as Steven Pinker and Kishore Mahbubani loudly proclaim, the bigger picture is not as bad as we might be inclined to think with one ear cocked to the latest news bulletin and an eye on the real Donald Trump's twitter feed.¹⁵

The United Nations Human Development Index shows that as a species we are living longer and better.¹⁶ Worldwide life expectancy at birth is now 71 years, and 80 in the

developed world, for most of human existence most people died around 30. Global extreme poverty has declined to 9.6 percent of the world's population; still limiting the lives of too many, but 200 years ago, 90 percent lived in extreme poverty. In just the last 30 years, the proportion of the global population living with such deprivation has declined by 75 percent. Equally unappreciated is the fact that 90 percent of the world's population under the age of 25 can read and write, including girls. For most of the history of Europe, no more than 15 percent of the people could read and write, mostly men.

So despite the *truthiness* feeling that things are going wrong, a lot is going right, for a lot of people, in a lot of countries. But this is a moment at risk of being squandered.

Which invites the question of what is at stake, how might the level of civilisation here be turned up, by whom, and to what end.

This was a question addressed by Robert Menzies when in 1959 as Prime Minister he approved the formation of the Humanities Council, the precursor of this Academy which will be celebrating its 50th anniversary next year. At the time, with the Cold War in full swing, and the memory of the hot war still smoking, Menzies declared the Humanities Council would provide 'wisdom, a sense of proportion, sanity of judgement, a faith in the capacity of man to rise to higher mental

► Robert Menzies at the Parthenon, 1955.

IMAGE: WITH PERMISSION FROM THE ROBERT MENZIES COLLECTION, BAILLIEU LIBRARY, THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE



and spiritual levels.' He went on: 'We live dangerously in the world of ideas, just as we do in the world of international conflict. If we are to escape this modern barbarism, humane studies must come back into their own, not as the enemies of science, but as its guides and philosophic friends.'¹⁷

Now we are more often likely to hear prominent politicians pillorying the humanities as esoteric, truth-defying; and humanities scholars as ideologues in cohorts with self-aggrandising scientists who are addressing the existential crisis of climate change for personal gain. To attack the university system at precisely the moment when it reaches more people, when its impact on the social, cultural and economic well-being of the nation has never been higher, seems perverse—a local example maybe of medium sized lies, madness even, from the zone of truthiness.

Over the next few days you will be debating with great erudition and insight the nuances of these questions, in your disciplines, in the context of contemporary life, and at the rich interdisciplinary intersection where they meet. As the debate triggered by the Ramsay intervention has shown, there is a lot at stake. For all the noise in the press, the very fact that there are lots of different ways of approaching the study of civilisations has not been addressed except by snide, often ill-informed or defensive comments about 'relativism'. I am not a scholar of civilisations or a philosopher, so excuse me if I step on your toes—I am aware of some of the complexity of these debates. The need to define civilisation, and to allow the notion of civilisations, has preoccupied fine minds, and led to different conclusions. Are there seven or eight civilisations, as Samuel Huntington suggested remained when he wrote his most famous essay?¹⁸ Or the 26 or 28, not including the civilisation of the first Australians, which Arnold Toynbee had identified a few decades earlier in his monumental work. Some maintain that civilisations are shaped by religion, others by culture, cities, language, ideology, identity or as a response by human beings to nature.¹⁹

Civilisations flower and die. Some leave artefacts, buildings and monuments that endure. Others leave stories, philosophies, language, knowledge and ways of being that echo and resonate long after. Some just disappear. Others grow and respond to interaction, adapting and changing as they go. And we now know, many leave a measurable trail in the polar ice as the recent discovery of the traces of lead from Ancient Rome from 1100 BCE revealed.²⁰



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As Kenneth Clark reputedly said after devoting his life to popularising the study of civilisation, 'I don't know what it is, but I recognise it when I see it.'

I like to think of it as a short hand for the way human beings coexist with each other, the world they have created and the natural environment which makes it possible. While recognising the contestability of values, I like the positive humanity of Clive Bell's notion of 'reason sweetened by values' and R. G. Collingwood's 'mental process toward ideal social relationships of civility'.²¹ For me civilisation is pluralist, contestable, open, polite, robust; buttressed by law, culture and institutions and maintained by sustainable economic and environmental conditions across time and place.

The past 70 or so years provide a petri dish of how this can be made to work and how it can go wrong. However, as Toynbee said with the prescience that comes from deep scholarship, and the Brainy Quotes website retails, sadly civilisations are more likely to die from suicide than murder, because at the moment that is a bit what it feels like.

I am interested in the world as it has been shaped in the post-WW2 period. It seems to me

that that is a useful point to use to try to make sense of the long run of success in the second half of the twentieth century. It is also a useful starting point to reflect on its subsequent erosion by money, rising inequality, regulatory failure and institutional distrust. The seeds of the existential threat we are currently watching in slow motion can be found there.

The title of this talk is drawn from a phrase used by the US Hutchins Commission on Freedom of the Press which commenced during the war years and reported not long after.²² It urged the owners of the American media to accept a social responsibility in the way they conducted their businesses. They could turn the level of civilisation up or down, the report cautioned. Partly for fear of state regulation, partly because the palpable evidence of the power of propaganda and misuse of media power in the ashes of WW2, a socially responsible framework became the norm in the age of the mass media. These days it would be called social license.

The regulatory device which put the steel in the backbone of US media's social responsibility, the Fairness Doctrine, was after a concerted campaign during the Reagan presidency, abolished in August 1987. It had provided the architecture: acknowledged the power of information, the importance of truth, the need to present competing views, and provided a platform for increasing professionalism in journalism. Importantly it withstood legal challenges, infuriating its opponents when the US Supreme Court found the doctrine did not contravene the first amendment or impede freedom of speech. But it was abolished at the behest of media owners with a libertarian bent, and now when it is more needed than ever, and despite attempts to revive it, is a dead letter.

For my purposes, and given my interest in the role of the media as a quasi-institution in the political system, it was a symbolic moment. Its abolition was a real turning point. The next year Rush Limbaugh took to the American airwaves with unmoderated, raging commentary and the era of shock jocks was born. It triggered the cascade of media deregulation in many countries including

here. Money was always in the ascendancy, but after these changes it really took over and freedom of speech was hollowed out and became a commercial commodity. The public sphere became contestable, more than ever a place to buy attention, distract, entertain, and chase niche markets rather than serve a society. It became detached from notions of fairness and fact.²³ It was one the first dominos to fall as neoliberalism eroded the institutional framework that had contributed to the rising standards of living, that Steven Pinker likes to trumpet. It made Fox News possible. It also provided the environment in which the information that fills Facebook and Google could flourish. In its early days social media posed as a community builder and a democratising tool. Remarkably quickly the FAANGs (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google) became corporate behemoths straddling the globe. As Jürgen Habermas recently said, theirs is 'the first media revolution to primarily serve economic rather than cultural ends.'²⁴ Or as Carole Cadwalladr, the *Observer* journalist whose dogged reporting revealed the role of Cambridge Analytica and Facebook in distorting the Brexit vote, put it more bluntly, a business model based on, 'the monetisation of fear and hate'.²⁵

The barbarism of WW2 galvanised the creation of civilising mechanisms and institutions. They varied from country to country, with different impacts,²⁶ but the intention was generally to expand rights and enhance democracy. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which will turn 70 on the 10th of December 2018, was the most remarkable global response: its 30 rights recognise and spell out 'the inherent dignity and equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family'. Its symbolic power exceeds its legal effect, as George Williams has written.²⁷ It forms part of customary international law and is seen as binding on all nations. It has been translated into 500 languages. Australia has ratified two of the most important subsequent conventions which grew under its umbrella to define

political and civil, social, economic and cultural rights—so it is not without effect here.

The Universal Declaration may well have faults and limits. Some regard it as ‘human rights imperialism’²⁸ used by the West to run the world in ways that will protect and promote its interests. But when expansively applied, rather than as an embodiment of Western hegemony, it remains the best organising principle for civility that humanity has yet devised. Ask women in Asia, India and the Middle East, democrats in Turkey, Hungary and Poland, activists in China or journalists in Russia. ‘Without it’, as a Turkish born scholar recently wrote, ‘we have few conceptual tools to oppose populism, nationalism, chauvinism and isolationism.’²⁹

Australians played an important role in the creation of the Declaration, but we have been tardy about its application. Ours is the only democratic nation which does not have a bill of rights—the only one. Rather like my opening remarks about this being home to the oldest living civilisation, this is something that demands pause for thought. It is something we need to address if we are to foster an ethic for a distinctive hybrid Australian civilisation.

It is probably worth noting in passing that some of the most strident opponents of an Australian bill of rights³⁰ are also somewhat perversely amongst the most vociferous promoters of a narrowly defined agenda to study Western civilisation. It is easy in this environment to forget that the demographics are with those of us who see the arc of history bending up. Surveys show most Australians would welcome a formalisation of rights.

How did it come to this? Why, as Frank Lowy recently asked, did we become so timid?³¹ What are we afraid of? Surely a clear statement of rights and responsibilities is central to any attempt to define a civilisation and the way we co-exist, respectfully, sustainably, creatively.

After 15 years in the role, I recently stepped away from day-to-day responsibilities as editor of *Griffith Review*. While maintaining the role of publisher I have moved to a new position in Griffith’s Centre for Social and Cultural



Research. To mark this I was asked to present an inaugural address which explored the role of the humanities in answering the question: what do we want to be when we grow up?

This set me thinking about how my own experiences as a child growing up in a manse had shaped my world view, sensitised me to history and place. For the most formative years of my childhood I lived in the western district of Victoria, captured evocatively in the paintings of Eugene von Guerard. At the time I lived there the western district it was one of the wealthiest parts of the country: the wool boom meant that the farmers with the biggest spreads and fleeciest merinos would get huge cheques for their production—at their peak these cheques could be up to a million pounds, tens of millions of dollars in today’s coin.

My father was a minister, and the farmers in his congregation were not the descendants of the squatters with the massive spreads. Yet they still had enough land to ensure that throughout the 1960s the churchyard was full of lairy-coloured cars with big fins—gorgeous petrol guzzling monsters parked under the cypress trees every Sunday.

This area was rich for a reason. The volcanic plains had produced extraordinarily fertile soils. Millions of years after the last volcano had erupted the residue of lava rocks, pock-marked like aero chocolate bars, still littered the country. Many had been formed into fences and foundations. It was windy, wet,

▲ The author with her family.

IMAGE: JULIANNE SCHULTZ

hilly and lush with lakes and streams—the Grampians looming on the horizon and long extinct volcanoes popping out of the plains. The descendants of the squatters had substantial houses, and soldier settlers eked out an existence on plots of land that were too small, except in the very best of times, to produce enough to support a family, even in that relatively poorer period when Australia's economy was still primarily agricultural.

The pattern of life for a minister's family was shaped by church, bible study, hymns and liturgies, and as insider outsiders, always watching, and knowing you were being watched. As a result, we learnt the tools of the humanities early, textual analysis before semiotics, theology before fundamentalism, history and geography when the Empire's pink-coloured maps still prevailed, music as performed in churches and by great orchestras, human relations and morality from parables, psalms and creeds and the genealogical myths and stories in the Old and New Testaments. It was an immersion in the humanities without even knowing that was what it was. A world that would be hard to replicate today, and one which my children found unutterably weird when we visited for the 150th anniversary celebrations.

I was a curious child with the freedom to roam the country roads and lanes on my bike; to take the chance of riding on railway tracks that were rarely used by trains; to explore, pick mushrooms, fruit and wild flowers, watch shearers and harvesters at work; and wonder about what had happened before. At the edge of the pine-enclosed hamlet where we lived, which included two bluestone churches (the older one repurposed as a classroom), a memorial school and hall, manse, teacher's house, footy oval, timber belltower and car park, there was a cemetery where people had been buried since 1861.

I probably spent more time than would be recommended for children today in that graveyard, wondering about the many lives cut short by the Spanish flu, about the children who died in infancy, the extended families in shared plots, and the old men and women born in faraway places all buried there. But my

favorite pastime was to ride along the roads and across paddocks to find the remnant sites of disused farms and houses, to pace out the stone foundations, to pick what would now be heritage plums and apples from the gnarled fruit trees in long forgotten orchards, to walk around the rusty fences protecting crumbling headstones, to imagine life for the settlers, the religious obsessives who set up the first intentional communities, scrapping tribes whose different theological interpretations of the same text meant they could hardly bring themselves to talk to each other.

What went missing was any sense of anyone being there between the time the volcanoes erupted and the arrival of the squatters in the 1830s. As I say, I was a curious child, I had a feeling for the country, for the plants and wildlife, but despite being vaguely aware of reserves closer to the coastal towns of Portland and Warnambool, I had absolutely no sense of Aboriginal occupation, which is now posited to have been in existence for 120,000 years,³² or of the murderous battles they fought against the encroaching settlers.

As the daughter of the Lutheran church I knew about Aboriginal missions in Hermannsburg and elsewhere in Central Australia and the outer reaches of New South Wales and even Queensland. But I had absolutely no understanding that these fertile lands once known as Gariwerd had been the preserve of the Jardwedjeli and Djab Wurrung peoples for more than 20,000, that they had built sustainable settlements, trapped fish, husbanded the land, caught kangaroo, yabbies and eels, and made cloaks from possum skins to protect from the fierce winter chill.

We now know much more: the richness of the Indigenous cultural heritage in this part of Victoria is what you would expect for such fertile lands. As two great interdisciplinary humanities scholars, Bill Gammage and Bruce Pascoe, have demonstrated in recent years in *The Biggest Estate on Earth* and *Dark Emu*, this was known since earliest European settlement.³³ Some of the uniqueness of the local civilisation was captured by the artists,

the explorers, the anthropologists—those who asked the First Australians and those who looked, curious people deeply grounded in the skills of the humanities. Of course, many just took.

To paraphrase Henry Reynolds, why wasn't I told?³⁴

I recall as a child of about ten going to the South Australian Museum on North Terrace in Adelaide with my grandparents who were conscientious members of the Lutheran community, there with a sense of obligation to the church's central Australian missions. On this day we looked at the Aboriginal collections, and that museum had and still has an extraordinary collection of settlement artefacts. I recall seeing human remains and not knowing how to process them. On the way out we passed an Aboriginal man. He moved, and whether I jumped, took a step sideways or had some other reaction, I don't recall, but I can feel the incident like it was yesterday and remember thinking: how can he be alive, we have just seen the exhibition, they are all dead. They weren't of course, a fact that has shaped political debate in this country with increasing sharpness ever since.

It took a while, but again the legacy of scholars—anthropologists, theologians, linguists, archaeologists, historians and the increasingly important work of Indigenous scholars—meant that the once apparently blank slate of Australian history is now being filled with human beings doing the things that human beings do—making meaning, families, societies, systems for working with the land and climate. This knowledge is now widely shared, and made the response of the Turnbull government to the Uluru Statement from the Heart so inexcusably ignorant and shameful.

This experience of growing up in the 1960s and then going to university in the 1970s meant that just as I was not consciously aware of the humanities education I was absorbing in the manse, I was also unwittingly absorbing new interest in this place as Australian studies took off. At the time this was just a given. I started high school the same year the Universal

Declaration of Rights marked its 20th anniversary. For a child this was just a given, the enormity of its break with history invisible. Likewise, it took me a while to realise that Australian studies was the local manifestation of the decolonisation movement that was shaking the world, as the British Empire gave way to what was supposed to be the American Century with the Soviet Union providing a dialectical counter point.

There was a lot to be done, and the task of making sense of a modern Australia, and understanding its human and physical past was an urgent project. It captured the attention of scholars, journalists, public servants and as the exceptional sales figures for Donald Horne's *Lucky Country* had shown, the broader public, which put wind in the sails of the politicians who heard this plea. So when I landed at the University of Queensland in the mid-1970s I was able to construct a degree in Australian studies—in literature, politics, sociology and journalism (sadly timetable clashes precluded as much history as I should have done). I remain grateful for this opportunity, and for the scholars who had chipped away at creating a new field despite the widely held view that Australia was neither interesting nor important enough to devote much time to.³⁵

My experience was a product of place and time. This meant I also benefited from the opening of new fields of humanities inquiry, subject areas and approaches which pushed traditional disciplines into previously uncharted territory. If I had arrived at St Lucia a decade later my undergraduate studies would have been shaped by post-modern theory and cultural studies; now it would be very hard to find systematic Australian studies courses in any discipline, and certainly not as an interdisciplinary field.

Reflecting on this I am reminded how we are often unwitting products of things beyond our control. But if we remain open to possibility and change, new layers of meaning can be added. It is possible to see the world differently, to listen and learn to become more civilised.

This seemed to be missing in the overwrought responses to the Ramsay

imbroglio. The most strident advocates of Western civilisation seemed locked in a single world view, happy to talk about the virtues of 'a hybrid toughness, a capacity to adapt and assimilate, to tolerate and include' but unwilling to listen or hear. Surely the point of freedom of speech is not so much the talking, as the listening. With an informed and civil dialogue, perspectives and views develop. Surely the possibility of changing one's mind comes from exploring different traditions and letting them bump up against each other.³⁶

As we have seen in recent years, despite predictions to the contrary as recently as a few years ago, the notion of the nation-state is far from dead. America wants to be great again, Britain wants to be master of its own destiny, China is reviving an empire, and on it goes.

Climate change, digitisation and globalisation provide an urgent moment to re-interrogate this place...

The question of who gets to define a nation is being discussed and often angrily debated everywhere: shaped by money, religion, population, culture, technology, politics, expectations and an increasingly uneasy relationship with nature. Richard Flanagan observed, 'The world is being undone. If we do not reimagine Australia we will be undone too.'³⁷

We need to find a new way to do Australian studies. To revive an interdisciplinary approach that ranges wide, not calcified by past practice. It needs to engage with the world as it is, was and might be. This is what we have tried to do this year in *Griffith Review* with a journey from the legacy of empire, to the urgent need to find a meaningful settlement with the First Australians, to an investigation of what multiculturalism means now, to the cry for equality embedded in the outcome of the same sex marriage plebiscite last year.

Australia is a very different place to what it was even twenty years ago. The country the politicians talk about is not the one that most of us live in. The need to redefine is now

emerging as a real issue—while we should not be afraid to be grounded in our own traditions, we should not be bound by them.³⁸

This is an affluent and successful country—one of the richest on the planet—but one too often beset by wilful blindness and remarkably willing to tolerate casual cruelty. But it is our creation: I think we can do a whole lot better.

It may be time to think again about how we can expansively deal with insights from the rest of the world and from the oldest living civilisation in thinking about this place. Climate change, digitisation and globalisation provide an urgent moment to re-interrogate this place, its land, peoples, law, culture and institutions. As Roderick Ferguson, president of the US American Studies Association, who is leading the resurgence of a very different approach to American studies which aims to keep track of what America is, observed recently, in tragedy there is also the possibility of triumph.³⁹

Perversely, it may be that the national interest test that the Minister for Education has proposed as a new overarching framework for Australian Research Council grants, to solve an embarrassing political problem, could provide such an opportunity. I am not holding my breath on this. Australia and Australians are inextricably linked to the rest of the world, so an expansive interpretation of this proposed test, might open up new fields—as we know, scholarly researchers will always push the boundaries. Some will also reveal transformative and sometimes uncomfortable truths.

When I read the many books about the crisis in democracy in those kin countries we like to compare ourselves with, I am struck by the resilience and robustness of many of the institutions we have nurtured over the past century. As Mike Pezzulo, the secretary of the Department of Home Affairs said last week, 'Institutions anchor our polity and ensure that power is legitimated and wielded with consent'.⁴⁰

We can be proud that our robust and independent electoral system is the envy of the world, our enduring system of compulsory voting makes the obligation to participate

in the political process clear, our judiciary is appointed without undue political interference, executive government is checked by a parliamentary system and an apolitical public service, security and police services are monitored. While we may be uncomfortable about the perverting influence of money in politics we have not plumbed the depths of the distortions that are commonplace in the US and, as were revealed in the Brexit vote, in the UK.

But we are not immune to the global trends and our institutions are not immune from the calcification. Indeed, like a hyper-sensitive child we soak up the tensions that surround us.

So we have seen a debasement of political debate, unstable leadership, reduced transparency, increasing executive decision-making, policy paralysis, polarisation, eroding confidence in political parties, outsourcing of public services, a narrowing economic frame, favoured access to the rich and powerful and the whiff of corrupting money.

Our civil and non-government organisations and institutions have taken a battering as past practices and abuse have come to light, the quasi-institution of the media has been undermined by commercial decisions, technology and uncertainty of purpose, unions no longer have the capacity to represent what they once did, universities are under attack, grappling with competing demands and expectations, the justice system is under intense economic and political strain, under-resourced monitors of deregulation have allowed bad practice to go unchecked, and more than 200 years on we have not reached a settlement with the First Australians.

But there is little urgency in our debate. Our relative affluence has inoculated us and made us complacent. This in turn has begat caution and timidity; it has limited confidence, courage and ambition.

To address this, the time is right for us to take the lead in reevaluating the strengths and weakness of our institutions—to answer again what purpose do they serve. To ensure that they are fit for purpose in a progressive, sophisticated society, to ensure that they help turn the level of civilisation up a notch.

As Mike Pezzulo said, 'Rather than ignoring our institutions, or allowing them to corrode through indifference, we should see them as sources of strength and stability, and we should rededicate ourselves to passing on their precious wisdom.'⁴¹ And, I would strongly advocate, questioning them and ensuring they are fit for purpose.

The lessons from abroad are clear—when trust is lost, when institutions do not actively rebuild and respond to changing times—freedom is at risk. Every generation must carry this responsibility anew. The demographics show that a much more educated and informed Australian population now expects more. They have absorbed the principles of human rights and are perplexed when they are not meaningfully applied by a neutral state guided by the rule of law, and regulated by self-correcting institutions. They expect to participate and contribute, not simply to defer to experts who seem to be self-serving.

In the late 1980s I was involved in a project at the Research School of Social Sciences at the ANU. It was called Reshaping Australian Institutions, and promised an opportunity for the generational renewal which is so central to producing enduring, reviving, trustworthy institutions. I was a young observer of academic politics as they played out in Coombs and University House meeting rooms. It quickly became clear that the reshaping reflected a rapidly changing political and economic framework: the rise of what we then called economic rationalism, but is now more commonly known by the moniker neoliberalism. Coombs as its name denotes was the spiritual, and physical home, of the men who had played a major role in shaping Australia's post-war institutions. Their legacy was up for grabs. The grand old men and the researcher scholars who accompanied them fought hard to protect what they had helped to create. On the other side were those who favoured a market-led approach, who believed citizens were consumers who would, could and should exercise rational choice in their own interests.



▲ Professor Julianne Schultz FAHA delivering the 49th Academy Lecture in Sydney, November 2018.

IMAGE: THE AUSTRALIAN ACADEMY OF THE HUMANITIES

It was at times a somewhat mystifying environment—I thought maybe I had missed something. I realise now it was one of those periodic step changes that redefine the way things are seen, just as the rise of Australian studies had done a generation before.

This wasn't abstract theory. In Coombs rational choice was personal. This became clear when despite protests, the rules of the tea room changed. Gone was the free morning tea. When we lined up we had to pay for the biscuits, as I recall, 5 cents for a Nice, 10 cents for Monte Carlo and 15 cents for a Tim Tam. It was last century, so there was still a tea lady, but users were paying.

Rational choice prevailed.

There were a lot of enduring outcomes from this project. But in a practical sense it ushered in the dominance of economics as the lingua franca of Australian public policy, something that has survived fundamentally unchallenged ever since. It has delivered a lot, but as the level of inequality and dissatisfaction shows, is no longer sufficient.

What happens in this country often shadows what happens elsewhere. Australians are gifted followers. Now thanks to the work of Nancy McLean in *Democracy in Chains*, Jane Mayer in *Dark Money* and others who have plotted the longer trajectory of this libertarian approach in the United States, I realise this change of frame was no accident.⁴² It was not inevitable, there were lessons to adopt, and others that maybe it would have been better to reject. In the US this was a product of a deliberate movement into the world of ideas. It was driven and funded by those who opposed the framework of rights and freedoms that emerged in the post-war

environment. People who did not want to pay tax, people who were threatened by the civil rights movement, people who thought that if the weak did not survive it was their own fault.

They prevailed. What we are seeing now is this philosophy playing out in shocking ways in American politics, as those living with the gap between expectations and reality seek a bigger share of their American dream.

Our political history and framing ethos are very different. We have a different founding consensus and different challenges. There are inspiring things in our past, and things we need to redress. But I am confident that we have the capacity to face the past and create new and durable worlds that are pluralist, outwardly engaged, inclusive and place a collective value on liberal institutions that include and serve us all.

'Person by person the world does change', Tony Abbott wrote in his essay for *Quadrant* that marked the beginning of the end of the Ramsay program at ANU. In his final paragraph the former prime minister suggested that the 'hundred bright young Australians' who received the proposed scholarships 'might change the world', and begin 'a much more invigorating long march through our institutions!'⁴³

That makes me a little nervous. It sounds a bit like a fifth column, though I doubt that the students would be willing fodder for such a scheme. I suspect that if they were to embark on such a long march, they like me would prefer an open, inclusive, contested, non-ideological journey, with civil and genuinely respectful discussion and debate. Grounded in the unique nature of this place as home to the oldest living civilisations, a product of British colonialism, the creation of people from every continent and our own imagining.

This country has a lot going for it, but we seem stuck in neutral. We need to regain ambition. To foster a remarkable country, one which learns from the mistakes of the past and displaces complacent caution to imagine and create an even more robust, inclusive, generous, rights-based democratic order that will work

well in the very different world of the twenty-first century. It won't come from politicians—it will, if history is a guide, be something that is worked up on the ground, in our universities, in our institutions, in our justice system, in business, community groups and on social media. As it takes shape, the politicians will follow and carry it forward.

There is a lot at stake, person by person we can help to turn the level of civilisation up in this place so that it becomes much more than a pale shadow of the worst of the rest of the world. ¶

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