

Sovereign Hill: President's Dinner 25 July 2014

Guest Speaker: Professor Kwong Lee Dow

Board President Emeritus Professor Terry Lloyd, present and former members of the Board, all who are associated with and are friends of Sovereign Hill, distinguished guests all

Thank you for the honour of inviting me to join you at this annual evening of celebration and to speak. I do appreciate your confidence and I am greatly enjoying being among you.

Sovereign Hill is etched in the hearts and minds of the greater Ballarat community, in many from the rest of Victoria, and indeed also from other Australians and international visitors, especially those from China. It is unique: a vast open-air museum, a historical park which offers far more than interesting exhibits and reminders- it has re-created Ballarat's goldfields past, simulating in full the environment of the period.

Conceptualised in the late 1960s, Sovereign Hill is approaching 50 years of innovative on-going development, and this evening is an opportunity to acknowledge the unwavering commitment and achievements of people who have made that concept a reality. I am pleased to express my admiration and gratitude to people in this room tonight, particularly the Life Governors. Sovereign Hill, along with the earlier South Street music competitions, the Begonia festivals, and other community initiatives, make Ballarat an exemplar of a strong and connected regional city.

For Chinese Australians, the narrative of the trek from Robe to the diggings around Ballarat is an emblematic part of our history. My forbears, characterized as aliens at the time, faced privations and ongoing difficulties of many kinds. It is good that this has been honestly acknowledged at Sovereign Hill, and through sensitive handling by the current generation, Chinese visitors today, from China, from across Australia and from elsewhere now feel they are among friends. I was delighted to learn of the scale of visits here from Chinese tourists, and of the connections through staff from Sovereign Hill who operate on a permanent basis in Shanghai.

My own family came to Australia four decades after the gold rushes of the early 1850s. Three of my grandparents, who were born in the See Yap province of Canton (now Guangzhou), came here in their youth intending to return home, but stayed and settled. My maternal grandfather practiced traditional Chinese medicine in Melbourne and in country Victoria. His young family came to Ballarat from Hamilton in the early 1920s, and for a year my mother attended Ballarat High School before the family finally settled in Shepparton. Ballarat and Shepparton each had one of the first of the government secondary schools- an Agricultural High School.

Until her death last year at 104, my mother had clear recall of her time at Ballarat High School. She remembered not only the motto, but also the school War Cry which she

could call with gusto. Education institutions of that era adopted war cries which they created through contact and influence from Maori communities.)

Ballarat has been known for the quality and achievements of its educational institutions. We might immediately think of the excellent VCE results from some private schools, where year after year, one Ballarat school leads the state across all of the schools outside of metropolitan Melbourne.

Let me mention as a different example, State School 1436 Mount Pleasant, where in 1906 Albert Coates emerged, age 11 with his Merit Certificate. Mount Pleasant school goes back to 1855, as a 'tent school' later opened in its long term building in 1874 with 551 pupils. Classes were run before and after school hours for the few who sought to qualify for University or to enter teaching or the civil service. Before state secondary schools were established, it is interesting to record that over 100 students from Mount Pleasant had matriculated and entered the professions. They included judges of the County Court, of the Supreme Court, and also one from the High Court of Australia. They included Bernard O'Dowd, poet and parliamentary draughtsman, famed wartime surgeon Sir Albert Coates, and Lieutenant-General Sir Leslie Morshead, described as the Australian Army's greatest field commander, leading the Ninth Division in the defence of Tobruk and in pivotal battles at El Alemein.

There is a common thread between the achievements of community minded people who have secured Sovereign Hill and the committed professionals who secure the best possible education opportunities for the region's students.

I'd like now to speak of a major current issue that confronts leaders and advocates of regional tertiary education- how best to provide both higher education and vocational education and training in communities that lack the size and scale of big capital cities. Big capital cities like Melbourne and Sydney and their counterparts around the world can support a range of diverse institutions which between them cover certificate courses through to doctoral degrees, in an ever increasing and differentiated range of fields of study, and they provide high level professional training and work related experience in very specialized areas.

The first point to make is that the difficulty for regional universities is not so much getting acknowledgement in principle of the needs of smaller and more distant communities. That is often admitted though perhaps imperfectly understood. People mean well. They say that additional support is warranted, deserved, and 'fair'. The hard part is turning that in principle acknowledgement into reality, where support is sustained rather than spasmodic, and where it is not dissipated and disappeared through unintended consequences arising from other policy decisions.

The second big generalization is that it is not practical to address regional and rural needs across Australia through a 'one size fits all approach'.

I have been struck by the different circumstances of Central Queensland University based in Rockhampton, Mackay and Gladstone, from the issues which face Charles Sturt

University in Bathurst, Wagga Wagga, Albury, Orange and Dubbo, contrasted with our concerns here in Ballarat, north western Victoria and Gippsland. Different again is the University of Tasmania, where the entire island is a component of regional Australia. While common characteristics do connect these communities, the diversity between them is equally critical. Believe me, it is hard for people of goodwill in Canberra to gain an ongoing appreciation of the factors involved and their relative importance, while at the same time their energy necessarily is directed towards the complex interplay of institutions in each of the national capitals where most students, staff and institutions are found.

Largely in the context of the 2014 Budget, the present federal government has put forward a range of structural and related changes for the organization and conduct of Australian higher education, much of it to begin in 2016. I shall comment briefly on some of these initiatives, in a wider context of time and place, with an eye to how all this might affect regional communities.

In coming to office in October 2013, the new government dealt with two major items of unfinished business from the previous Labor period.

First, the new government received advice on regulating, registering and accrediting higher education institutions and courses within the stated policy of 'reducing red tape'. Changes have been effected which have largely bi-partisan support and which I am confident will enable efficient yet proper consideration of the roles of all institutions - established universities, public TAFE providers offering some higher education degree and related courses, and private providers which encompass a big range of institutions from small specialist established institutions (theological colleges, performing arts institutions, for example), through newer small niche institutions that may be expanding from VET provision into some higher education programs, to large multi-site private colleges and universities, some of which are multi-national.

Second, a review was completed of 'demand-driven higher education' which the previous government had adopted following a major enquiry in 2009. The key idea is that institutions themselves judge the numbers and types of students they enroll, rather than the past practice where this was determined by government itself, taking account of costs and equitable distributions across competing institutions. The demand driven approach was endorsed again, but at Budget time it was taken a big step further, by proposing that institutions also decide on fee levels for courses, which at present is set, by course, for all government supported places in public universities.

The argument for this so-called deregulation is that the real costs of courses vary according to the circumstances of particular institutions and if the institutions determine the balance and mix of student places, they should logically determine the appropriate cost levels (fees) needed to meet those numbers. Moreover, the argument runs, institutions compete for students and this fact should control costs and cost increases as

students seek to maximize their education benefit at lower cost where possible. That is, market forces should prevail.

Against this is a fear that preferred institutions and sought after courses will invoke cost premiums, charging students far more than is presently charged to domestic Australian students. If, as now, international students pay much higher fees, why not move towards equalization of two disparate costs for the same course. The argument then runs that if high fees are commanded by preferred institutions and preferred courses, to show their status some others will move towards these higher charges to position themselves in the market. In poorer communities, including regional and rural communities, families will not be able to meet these higher fees, so the institutions will have less funding and so become less competitive over time.

Into this mix, through the budget, the government has announced two further elements which worry both students and institutions. One is the decision to give a smaller government component towards the cost of most courses. It is said that overall there will be a reduction of 20 percent from present funding levels. This is complicated because it will not be 20 percent across every course- it will be a lesser reduction in some cases (mainly where government contributions presently are minimal- such as law and business) and a higher reduction in other cases (examples of note include engineering, agriculture and some areas in the visual and performing arts). If the government contributes less, students and their families can be expected to contribute more- and indeed considerably more than 20 percent overall and on average, due to complexities in the cost structuring and the bases from which percentages are quoted.

The second decision is even more contentious. It increases the interest levels to be paid on the loans provided to students through what is widely known as the HECS system. From the current arrangement, described as effectively interest free (actually a rate of just over 3 percent), the rate can rise to up to 6 percent, and when the magic of compound interest works against you rather than for you, this can get to be alarming. Particularly if the time needed to repay becomes extended through lower rates of repayment for those on relatively low incomes and for those experiencing periods on no income, through temporary departure from the workforce. Many women graduates will be so affected.

Rather than further complicate this story by pointing to yet further elements in what might be called 'the fine print', let's simply say that whatever finally emerges from the political machinations with the Senate, students will be paying significantly more, and rural and regional students will be disproportionately affected. Remember too the challenge for students and their families of the actual costs of daily living, especially if living away from home, and the seemingly lengthening years needed to complete professional qualifications. Having undertaken a national review of student income support arrangements for Minister Chris Evans in 2011, I am acutely aware of the cost for rural families with two, three or four children living away from home during years of university study.

I am glad that, in such uncertain and challenging times, Federation University of Australia has solidified its commitment to the communities around Ballarat, across north western Victoria and throughout Gippsland, by providing comprehensive programs in many fields, at undergraduate and postgraduate levels, and in vocational education and training. The recent agreement to link with the amalgamated two TAFE institutions which cover the entire Gippsland region shows commendable leadership towards communities in need. Unlike the circumstances of some other regional communities in our state, Ballarat, north- western Victoria and Gippsland are in charge of their own destinies. This is a much preferred position, as I read the tea leaves, to being simply a small part of a big city university, especially if there is no seamless transition between the different sectors making up the overall tertiary education scene.

With difficult negotiations and bargaining ahead, we should wish the University and its people good luck and godspeed.

The people of Ballarat are endowed with a great resource in Sovereign Hill and tonight we thank those who have made it so. As one pleased to claim a link with some of the educational institutions of the city I add my thanks to the people who daily ensure their quality too. Thank you again for having me with you tonight.