

The Lionel Murphy Memorial Lecture

Past Scholar's Address by Dr Natasha Cica

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Parliament House, Sydney

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It is a great privilege for me to speak here tonight. First, because this is a rare opportunity to give something back directly to the Foundation that was established in the name of the late Lionel Murphy. The current and coming impact of that Foundation in Australian society should not be underestimated. Since it was established after Lionel's death in 1986, the Foundation has awarded almost sixty scholarships for postgraduate study. As you would all know, those scholarships enable one year's study in law, science and other disciplines where there is opportunity for some common good, in Australia or overseas. Which is really the guts and nuts of the Foundation's mission: to provide opportunity for common good, as expansively defined.

On the face of it, that's not a startlingly different objective from that of other organisations that hand out big-ticket money to Australians for postgraduate education and award it on a highly competitive basis. The Rhodes Trust, for example, seeks to foster 'excellence in qualities of mind and in qualities of person which, in combination, offer the promise of effective service to the world in the decades ahead.' The Menzies Foundation offers scholarships according to the criteria of academic excellence, proven and potential leadership, extracurricular activity, interest in the service of others - and 'ability to contribute to the life of a British university', which is the start of one of the rubs. The Menzies bequest specifies a preference for sending its Australian scholars to Oxford, Cambridge, London or Edinburgh, except

where they go to Harvard. And the Rhodes Scholarship, of course, is all about Oxford. Chevening and Commonwealth Scholarships have a long tradition of taking Australian scholars to the UK, and Fulbrights to the USA - and there's also a decent sprinkling of discipline-and-institution-specific scholarships like the Tapp Studentship in Law offered by Gonville & Caius College at Cambridge, which bankrolled my own doctoral studies.

All these are laudable programmes that provide important opportunities for some of Australia's best and brightest to mature intellectually, get platinum-plated academic credentials, and expand their horizons. But isn't all that enough dollars-for-degrees, without the Lionel Murphy Foundation doling out more? My answer is no. One great thing about the Murphy scholarships has been the combination of onshore and offshore opportunities - and if you are headed overseas you're not strictly stuck in the Anglo-American groove. As it happened I used my Murphy to go to London, but it could just as easily have landed me in Brussels, Beijing, Belgrade or Baghdad - or Brewarrina, Bankstown, Burnie, or even Bollywood for that matter - proposal permitting.

I studied medical law and ethics at King's College London. I was just twenty-three and it was 1991. It was a wonderful year and it changed my life. Our master's course attracted doctors, nurses, priests, philosophers, educators, researchers, bureaucrats, policy wonks and managers - I was one of very few lawyers - and our brief was to talk and think through tough old topics like euthanasia, abortion and medical experimentation, as well as newer ones like assisted reproduction and gene therapy. It was like one long Geoffrey Robertson hypothetical, run by an exceptional teacher and change agent called Ian Kennedy. I remember that year visually, as a series of windows opening to let light shine in from unexpected angles - and this, I think, is the hallmark of any truly great educational experience. (That's also how I remember being taught Australian literature by Trieste-born Livio Dobrez at the Australian National University in Canberra in the 1980s, and about Aboriginal middens by my Grade 4 teacher Mrs Donnelly in the 1970s, at a small country school in Tasmania). I also remember walking to lectures in London past the legal enclave of Lincoln's Inn, stacked with high-end

custodians of justice, and literally stepping over homeless adults and children living and begging out of cardboard boxes, at the sagging end of the Thatcherite 'miracle'. A different kind of illumination.

My Murphy year ended up springboarding me into more postgraduate study, this time at Cambridge. There I also learnt a great deal. One lesson that lingers was my experience in an online group for Cambridge-based Australians, sold as a space for discussion of matters Australian. Quite homesick, and hoping for opportunities to talk about what John Howard might do as our newish Prime Minister, I joined and waited. Lots of notices about Australian sport landed in my inbox, none of which were of any interest to me at all, but I was happy to let them go to the keeper. Then Herbert Cole 'Nugget' Coombs died, it was October 1997. Google now succinctly serves up Nugget, an economist educated at the University of Western Australia and the London School of Economics, whose political views were shaped by the Great Depression, as follows – 'Born in 1906, H.C. Coombs is best known as the governor of [Australia's Reserve Bank], but the extent of his activities and his commitment to public life until his death is unsurpassed.' These activities of course included guiding Australia's post-World War II reconstruction under Ben Chifley; being first chairman of the Australian Council for Aboriginal Affairs and adviser to Labor and Gough Whitlam on indigenous self-determination, which remained a life-long passion, one later joined by environmentalism; and being chairman of the Australian Elizabethan Trust and what is now the Australia Council, and Chancellor of the Australian National University, all of which he had helped establish.

I informed the Aussie list of Nugget's passing, and was told in no uncertain terms that this kind of thing did not belong. The objectors struggled to specify why - but it seemed to have something to do with opposition to any reference to politics, culture (except footy and cricket) and social justice. Which was ironic if not surreal given Nugget's own ability on the football field and its influence on his character and skills as a tactician, advocate and adviser, but there you go. 'Who the f*ck was Nugget Coombs?' was one memorable riposte, and the debate descended from there. That comment came from a

science scholar from Western Australia whose name I have forgotten; and I can't recall which scholarship brought her to Cambridge, or even if she had one.

Je ne regrette rien, as many still sing. But if there's one thing I'd encourage future Lionel Murphy scholars to do it's to explore their options as creatively as possible, including with respect to location. Lionel Murphy was a genuine internationalist and an enthusiastic cross-cultural connector - but even he could not have imagined how flat, hot and brown the world would become in the quarter-century following his death (to pull together Thomas Friedman and Barack Obama – oh yes, I can!). Australia will never be a truly self-determining and self-respecting body politic unless our leaders include a critical mass of educated and experienced men and women, selected on merit, whose perspectives are genuinely global, distinctively local, decidedly less chauvinistic (in all senses of that word) and considerably edgier and more agile. Dare I say it - of course I do - that's the enduring brand advantage, and challenge, and privilege, of being a Lionel Murphy scholar.

While I'm back on privilege, it is a pleasure for me to share the podium tonight with Lionel Murphy's oldest son, Cameron. I last saw Cameron in 2005 at a Senate Committee hearing scrutinizing the Howard government's so-called national security laws – he was there with Muslims, I was there with filmmakers, we were all standing behind flimsy tissues like liberty and civil society. I first met Cameron in 1996, at a dinner in Canberra commemorating the tenth anniversary of his father's death. That night is memorable to me for two reasons. First, I sat next to Malcolm Turnbull, at the time then only a twinkle in someone's mother's eye in terms of his preselection for Wentworth, and of course emphatically republican. We had a lively conversation, the style and substance of which echoed Malcolm's own opening line from the Lionel Murphy Memorial Lecture he had delivered five years earlier: 'There is very little in Lionel Murphy's public life that I have ever had cause to disagree with.' It's not your standard Liberal leader who has that kind of bold statement on his public record, which probably says as much about Lionel as Malcolm, and points to some interesting questions about how you might measure or

mine anyone's legacy.

My second memory of that night is staying up until three o'clock with Cameron and a friend talking about politics, and Cameron urging me to join the Labor Party to make a difference. Eventually I took his advice. But I am not sure that I made a real difference. My crucible was working as a Shadow Ministerial staffer advising Federal Labor on justice issues - including its lamentable asylum seeker policy - before, during and after the Tampa crisis, 9/11 and the 2001 Federal election. I am a hard-wired optimist about change for the better. Every pendulum does eventually swing. But for too much of that time I felt like I was flogging a self-censoring, weakwilled and knobbed horse - and I will suggest that the situation would have been very different had there been that critical mass of people in the leadership tent with the core qualities of the Murphy brand I just identified. Especially after an official visit to Woomera detention centre in mid-2001, which at the time held very many children behind razor wire, I periodically felt shame at being Australian. Labor's failure to step smartly away from its Tampa-time policy stance on refugees after the 2001 election loss, and specifically its inexcusable allegiance to the mandatory detention policy introduced during the Keating era, distressed and angered me greatly.

I'm not the first to say that was a very low point for Australia as a whole and for Australians as a people, despite our then-booming economy. There's no point dwelling there too darkly, but there are important lessons to be learned from the still recent failure of too many people to stand up when it mattered and say I will not let this happen in my name. You don't have to be a Lionel Murphy scholar to do that, nor a person prepared to say there was very little in Lionel Murphy's public life with which you disagreed. You might even be someone who squawks, in all innocence or ignorance, 'Who the f*ck was Lionel Murphy?' All you really have to be is basically decent and brave enough to say and do *something*. Even if – and here's another real rub – you might not get ahead in the way you expect or think you deserve.

Getting ahead, pretty much whenever you can and whatever it takes, most

unfortunately has been the dominant mantra of the times of much of my adult life as an Australian. (Here I won't blame the baby boomers. Well maybe just a bit, because so many of them have had their hands so tightly on so many levers of political, economic and cultural power throughout the period in question; and because sins of omission can matter as much as sins of commission; and because you can't blame John Howard for everything). As one result Australians are collectively more materially affluent than at any time in living memory. We are also more nakedly greedy, and greed is pretty gross, just as unsustainable debt is pretty dumb, and that last message deserves considerably clearer transmission. (So does this one – No, you're not doing it tough if you're falling into a category identified by George Megalogenis in last weekend's *Weekend Australian*, as those 'putting their beach houses up for sale in a depressed market and reacquainting themselves with the main dining room in the principal residence'.) We are also correspondingly ill-prepared to address the consequences when some big fat bubbles burst in our faces like so much overstretched soap. That's not just an Australian problem of course, but we've got it pretty bad - no matter what fiscal rabbits Kevin Rudd, the Reserve Bank and the G20 might manage to pull out of their hats for a while yet.

Whether or not we ultimately crash and burn or negotiate a relatively soft economic landing from today's unfolding credit crisis, that journey must bring more of us back to social justice. For some long time now, social justice has been approximately as fashionable as an orange skivvy left over from an 'It's Time' rally. Recently it's been revived and rebadged under some now-sounding umbrellas like 'social inclusion'. If only in response to the potential push-factor of many more materially poor or poorer Australians, it's probably safe to predict some overdue blossoming of reformist initiatives in what used to be called 'the social welfare sector', but is now often styled 'the community services industry' or 'human services' - these labels being 'better and nicer', as cultural doyenne Leo Schofield might say. Whatever it takes, perhaps, to get the lightbulb to want to turn.

And there's yet another rub. If social justice is to amount to more than a

marketing pitch or promotion platform, it has to be a whole lot more than an exercise in better management and snazzier spreadsheets. It must be an attitude. Not one of complaint or entitlement - both are the kissing cousins of greed - but one that's about how you think it's ok to treat other people. A real-deal social justice agenda is never just about 'me' getting ahead - nor is it ever just about 'my' family, 'my' job, 'my' investments, nor even (oh sacrilege) 'my' nation or tribe. And delivering social justice demands some sense of service – characterised by a knee-jerk instinct in favour of generosity and humanity. That's why Barack Obama just got his people-power hopeslide – not Hilary Clinton, and not Sarah Palin. It wasn't just the economy, stupid, and it certainly wasn't about affirmative action, in the degraded sense of that term. Like Lionel Murphy, and paraphrasing the late Australian historian Manning Clark, Obama is a child of the Enlightenment, is an enlarger not a straitener. And that's what Americans knew they really needed next. Even if he makes mistakes along the way and there is harping and there is criticism, as there surely will be.

So where does all that leave Australians? I'd like to end at my beginning, which was a message about the importance, the advantage, the challenge and the privilege of good education, that opens windows in our hearts as much as our minds. I'd like to see a lot more of all of that. I'd like to see more resources going into it, wisely deployed, and much more change we can believe in coming back at the other end. And I'd like this audience, this community of interest, to think very hard about how we can get even more of Lionel Murphy's legacy coming alive in more corners of Australia and the wider world - because social justice should never be an afterthought, an accessory or a plaything. It is our core business.

Natasha Cica was born and raised in Tasmania. She holds a BA LLB (Hons) from the Australian National University, which she attended as a National Undergraduate Scholar. She was awarded a Lionel Murphy Overseas Postgraduate Scholarship in 1991, leading to an MA (Distinction) in Medical Law and Ethics at King's College London. Subsequently she completed a PhD in Law at Cambridge University as a Tapp Scholar, and a postdoctorate fellowship at the School of Public Policy,

University College London.

Natasha has worked in commercial legal practice, as an academic, and as a researcher and adviser in the Department of the Parliamentary Library in Canberra. This included secondments to the staff of Petro Georgio MP in 2000 and Duncan Kerr MP in 2001.

Currently Natasha works for the University of Tasmania developing collaborative research projects across disciplines, and with industry and government. She is also the director of Hobart-based management and communications consultancy Periwinkle Projects.

Natasha has commented and published widely on Australian politics, culture and social justice. Natasha helped establish online venture *newmatilda.com* in 2004 as its founding editor, and in 2005 she assisted a coalition of arts organizations with their lobbying efforts against the Howard government's sedition laws. In 2006 she was chosen to participate in the Australian Future Directions young leaders' forum. She is a member of the management board of homeless men's shelter Bethlehem House, and in 2007-08 was part of the steering committee for Arts Tasmania's Design Island programme.