

UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY GRADUATION ADDRESS

The Hon A S Bell

Chief Justice of New South Wales

19 May 2025

The Great Hall, University of Sydney

- 1 Pro-Chancellor, Head of School and Dean, members of the academy, distinguished guests, friends, ladies and gentlemen and, most importantly of all, the graduating class of 2025.
- 2 I join in the acknowledgement of country offered by the Pro-Chancellor and pay my sincere respects to those who have cared for the lands on which this historic institution has existed for some 170 years. I particularly extend my respects to indigenous lawyers who are growing in number with the strong support of tertiary institutions such as Sydney University and the legal profession more generally.
- 3 I also acknowledge the dedicated legal academics and scholars of the Sydney Law School, who play a critical role in educating future members of the legal profession. Amongst that particular cohort, I am delighted that my former teacher, dear friend and erstwhile colleague, the Hon Arthur Emmett AO KC, has joined today's academic procession. He is in his 45th year of teaching Roman Law at this institution, in a totally honorary capacity, and has been responsible for keeping that important subject alive in New South Wales.
- 4 1989, the year in which I finished law school, was politically momentous in global terms. It was the year in which communist regimes in Eastern Europe toppled, the Berlin Wall fell and, in that most beautiful but historically beleaguered of cities, Prague, the so-called Velvet Revolution swept the streets. Mikhail Gorbachev, leader of the USSR, had two principal planks to his philosophy: glasnost (or openness and opening up) and perestroika

(restructuring). In South Africa, Nelson Mandela was released from prison and negotiations started for a post-apartheid democratic South Africa. These matters were a cause for hope and celebration.

- 5 Not everything, however, was positive. 1989 was also the year of the brutal put-down of student protests in Tiananmen Square and the year in which the Exxon Valdez foundered in Alaska's Prince William Sound, causing a major environmental disaster and portending later environmental catastrophes. Climate change was not really on the radar, at least in the popular consciousness, although it was in fact building in its momentum.
- 6 In 1989, the world wide web was launched but the internet was not generally available and its possibilities unknown to and unimaginable by most, there was no email and mobile phones were only just starting to appear, albeit in rudimentary form. They certainly did not resemble the smart phones of today. Facsimile machines were then the most sophisticated means of instantaneous communication and telexes were still in wide usage. I communicated with my then girl friend, now wife, from Oxford by aerogramme.
- 7 How the world has changed in these last 36 years, both geopolitically and technologically. How the world has changed in the much shorter lifetimes of most of this afternoon's graduating cohort, that is to say, in the quarter century since the turn of the millenium and the attack on the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001. Indeed, how the world has changed in the last couple of years with the global pandemic and the advent of Generative AI. And how the world has changed both geopolitically and geoeconomically in just the last 100 or so days.
- 8 Change is, of course, inevitable. Much is exciting; some is confronting. All change is invariably challenging. But with challenges come opportunities, and graduates and academics of this Law School, throughout its history, have responded to great challenges and forged wonderful and meaningful careers, not only within the law but in far broader fields, both internationally and in Australia.

- 9 Thus, this University's Law School produced, in Dr HV Evatt, a President of the General Assembly of the United Nations in its third session at which the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was proclaimed, Sir James Wolfensen, President of the World Bank for a decade in the 1980s and 90s, and two permanent judges of the International Court of Justice, Sir Percy Spender and Professor James Crawford, a quite outstanding teacher and constitutional and international lawyer whom I was most fortunate to have as my Dean.
- 10 This Law School has also produced some six Prime Ministers, numerous federal and state Cabinet Ministers (including two senior federal ministers from my cohort of 1989), Premiers, four Chief Justices and 19 Justices of the High Court of Australia, 12 Chief Justices of New South Wales and one of Tasmania, the foundation Chief Justices of the Federal and Family Courts of Australia, a judge of the Constitutional Court of South Africa, and pathbreaking female judges such as the Hon Mary Gaudron KC, the first female Solicitor General of New South Wales and first female Justice of the High Court of Australia, the late Hon Jane Matthews AO, the first female justice of the Supreme Court of New South Wales, Her Excellency, the Governor of New South Wales, Margaret Beazley AC KC, the first President of the New South Wales Court of Appeal, and the Hon Justice Julie Ward, the current President of the New South Wales Court of Appeal, and a former university medallist at the Sydney Law School.
- 11 The Law School has also produced internationally recognised humanitarians such as the Hon. Michael Kirby AC CMG and Geoffrey Robertson AO KC, senior diplomats and public servants, bankers, leading business men and women, authors, playwrights, film directors, journalists and many other notable public figures who have distinguished themselves both in and beyond the law.
- 12 Many graduates of this law school have also gone on to play important roles in local government and community organisations, using the skills of critical analysis, technical legal knowledge and ability, drafting and dispute resolution they have picked up at law school to serve the community. All of that service contributes mightily to the fabric of our society.

- 13 Although a law degree may and will take many of you along many different career paths, for most, it will lead to a career in the law, at least initially. That is no narrow or unimportant calling. A career in the law may entail:
- work as a government lawyer, shaping laws and public policy in government departments, with the Australian Government Solicitor or the Crown Solicitor in New South Wales, or with a federal or state regulator, such as ASIC, the ACCC or APRA;
 - work in the criminal justice system, as a prosecutor or on the defence side, for Legal Aid and the public defender and through community legal centres;
 - work in the family law sector which generates hugely difficult personal issues frequently involving children and not infrequently with an overlay of domestic violence;
 - work with the Aboriginal Legal Service or in the area of native title;
 - work with a union or in the military or as a general counsel in a corporation;
 - work in private practice, at the Bar or in a law firm, and of course, private practice may involve a large, medium or small firm, a city, suburban or regional firm; and, of course,
 - work in academia and law reform.
- 14 Many of these opportunities also arise internationally, and Sydney University Law School graduates work all around the world in a range of these and other areas, including international environmental law.
- 15 It is clear that a law degree from Sydney University provides a sound footing for embarking on a wonderful and rewarding career, and I personally am most grateful for the rigorous intellectual foundations I obtained during my years at

Sydney University as well, of course, for the great honour the University has done me today.

- 16 In a world of great and inevitable change, the stability that is provided by the legal system and well educated lawyers is of central importance. Clear and certain rules, applicable across the gamut of human endeavour, but underpinned by due process and faithfully applied by independent judges, assisted by an honest and honourable legal profession, supply the foundation by which our society can function in a predictable and coherent way that reflects underlying conceptions of fairness, equity and moral decency.
- 17 While stability in our legal system is of seminal importance, values which I grew up believing were immutable – freedom of speech, freedom of ideas, freedom from fear, freedom of movement and the rule of law - are under attack in many countries abroad, and we are witnessing this in real time.
- 18 As graduates of one of the leading law schools in the country, and whether you go on to practice law or not, I hope that, throughout your careers, you will espouse and stand up for fundamental elements of a democratic and civil society. In addition to the four freedoms, these include:
 - the rule of law including equality before the law;
 - the independence of the judiciary, which is also part of the rule of law;
 - respect for the public service and embrace of public service;
 - tolerance of ideas and openness of debate; and
 - access to justice.
- 19 Such advocacy may require moral courage but moral courage is a virtue which many lawyers possess and is something to which all should aspire.
- 20 Study of the law also yields the ability to think critically. I cannot emphasise enough how important that skill is and will be as you each embark on your careers in an era in which artificial intelligence is developing with great rapidity. Notwithstanding its rise, I am confident that the practice and teaching of the law

will continue to require human and emotional intelligence. I should add, in the spirit of candour, that it will also require hard work, but that is part of what makes a career in the law so stimulating and rewarding.

- 21 I congratulate you all on your great achievement, recognised today. Cherish the value of your education, and strive to contribute to our community with the great skills and tools I know you all possess.
- 22 Congratulations to you all.
