The Honourable Justice Peter Applegarth
BSHS 1971 - 1975

BRISBANE STATE HIGH SCHOOL

The Honourable Justice Peter Applegarth was the guest speaker at the 2012 Graduation Ceremony held at the Brisbane Convention & Exhibition Centre. In 2011, Justice Applegarth wrote 'Reflections on the last third of State High's History'.

Reflections on the last third of State High's History

Seeing the banner for the 90th anniversary made me think about history and my old school. I left State High in 1975. In the early 1970s, our history teachers told us about revolutions: the Industrial Revolution, the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution. Little did we appreciate at the time that we were living through at least two other revolutions.

One was the feminist revolution. A fading line in the parade ground marked the areas in which, until recent years, boys and girls had been directed to congregate separately. Most classes still were divided according to gender. Many of my contemporaries spent their five years at high school in all-boy or all-girl classes. In some ways, a Boys School and a Girls School occupied the same site. The last 35 years have marked a transformation of the role of women in society.

Another revolution was the revolution in the narrative of indigenous Australians. The Australian history we were taught started in 1770, and little was said about the ancestors of the homeless indigenous Australians that we saw in Musgrave Park. At the same time, and thousands of miles away in the Northern Territory, a remarkable group of indigenous Australians, anthropologists and lawyers were explaining to courts and commissions about Aboriginal connection to the land and the complex system of laws that pre-dated European settlement. This narrative culminated in the High Court's *Mabo* decision and the passage of the *Native Title Act.* This official endorsement of the new narrative did more than give rights to native title holders. It altered the way we think about Australian history and indigenous citizens.

In the early 1970s, the Cold War dominated public affairs, the Iron Curtain was a seemingly permanent feature in Europe, and Australian and US forces waged a war against communism in Vietnam. Less than two decades later, the Berlin Wall fell, the Soviet Union disintegrated and the Chinese economy was being transformed. Professors of History, intelligence services and others did not predict these events. The point surely is that some revolutions appear to happen out of the blue.

In 1971, as a Grade 8 student, I became friends with a remarkable group of individuals, whose friendship I have carried into later life. We came from diverse social, economic and cultural backgrounds, and benefited from the opportunity to be taught by devoted and inspiring teachers. Social change was in the air. Massive demonstrations occurred over conscription and Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War. The State government declared a State of Emergency to allow an all-white rugby team from South Africa to play in Brisbane in the face of protests against apartheid. A former State High student, and federal Health Minister, Bill Hayden, introduced a system of universal health care then called Medibank. The federal government abolished university fees to encourage access to universities by gifted students from the working class. A new Australian film industry celebrated Australian values. The rhetoric of the time was one of equality of opportunity, and at State High many opportunities were on offer.

One of my friends, Victor Boyko and his brother Paul, would travel on the Greyhound bus from Browns Plains to school each day. Their working-class parents were refugees from the Soviet Union, who had experienced the tyranny of both Communism and Nazism. Victor was the captain of the school team on the "It's Academic" TV show. He announced that he was going to be a pathologist (a profession that none of us had heard of), later decided to study law and eventually abandoned that idea in favour of Arts. He became a diplomat and served in senior positions in the Department of Immigration. He died tragically young, but he saw much of the world, including travelling with his brother through the former Soviet Union from which his parents and grandparents had fled to find a better life in Australia. State High provided the opportunity for that better life, and Victor took full advantage of that opportunity. His story is a distinctly State High story.

It is an intriguing thought that presently in a refugee camp in Asia, Africa or the Middle East there are the parents of future State High students with the same potential for brilliance as Victor Boyko.

The history that we were taught was about social progress. Nineteenth century reforms had taken child workers out of mines, improved public health and education and extended the right to vote. Government intervention in the economy via Roosevelt's "New Deal" had ended the Great Depression. Democracies had triumphed over dictatorships in World War Two. Post-war reconstruction had built the Snowy Mountains Scheme and post-war migration had staffed new manufacturing industries. New universities were being built. Medical science was eradicating disease. Brains and bravery had put the first man on the Moon a few years earlier. There seemed to be no end to social progress, and government had a large role to play in achieving it.

These ideas have been eclipsed in the last 35 years by the ideology of neo-liberalism, and the role of the state has been re-defined. The brilliant historian Tony Judt wrote in his essay "Ill Fares the Land":

> *"Something is profoundly wrong with the way we live today. For thirty years we have made a virtue out of the pursuit of material self-interest: indeed, this very pursuit now constitutes whatever remains of our sense of collective purpose. We know what things cost but have no idea what they are worth. We no longer ask of a judicial ruling or a legislative act: Is it good? Is it fair? Is it just? Is it right? Will it help bring about a better society or a better world? Those used to be the political questions, even if they invited no easy answers. We must learn once again to pose them.*
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> *The materialistic and selfish quality of contemporary life is not inherent in the human condition. Much of what appears "natural" today dates from the 1980s: the obsession with wealth creation, the cult of privatization and the private sector, the growing disparities of rich and poor. And above all, the rhetoric that accompanies these: uncritical admiration for unfettered markets, disdain for the public sector, the delusion of endless growth.*
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> *We cannot go on living like this. The little crash of 2008 was a reminder that unregulated capitalism is its own worst enemy: sooner or later it must fall prey to its own excesses and turn again to the state for rescue."*

Judt and other scholars have analysed the social and economic cost of growing income inequality. They examine the relationship between inequality in income and health outcomes, life expectancy, crime and economic insecurity. They note that societies with a narrow gap separating their richest from their poorest citizens consistently lead the world in indices of measurable well-being. Judt observes:

> *Inequality is corrosive. It rots societies from within. The impact of material differences takes a while to show up: but in due course competition for status and goods increases; people feel a growing sense of superiority (or inferiority) based on their possessions; prejudice toward those on the lower rungs of the social ladder hardens; crime spikes and the pathologies of social disadvantage become ever more marked. The legacy of unregulated wealth creation is bitter indeed.*

He concludes:

> *How should we begin to make amends for raising a generation obsessed with the pursuit of material wealth and indifferent to so much else? Perhaps we might start by reminding ourselves and our children that it wasn't always thus. Thinking "economistically," as we have done now for thirty years, is not intrinsic to humans. There was a time when we ordered our lives differently.*

No one suggests that it is possible to return to the social and economic arrangements that applied when my generation attended State High thirty years ago, let alone when my father was a student at State High in the 1940s. However, occasions like a school's 90th anniversary make us reflect on the values that a school embodies and the benefits that it gives to individuals and a community. Former students of State High like me have had the benefit of a free, secular education from devoted teachers. Our education was not confined to the general gas law, calculus, *Macbeth* or the causes of World War One. It extended to seeing how inspiring and gifted teachers could get the best out of a diverse group of individuals in a classroom, on a sporting field or in an orchestra. We were inspired to strive to reach our potential not from the promise of personal reward in later life, but because this was the ethos of the school. We had the privilege to attend a public school that offered high educational standards, and we understood that we had a corresponding responsibility to take advantage of the opportunities that we had been given.

In such an environment, people were not judged on the wealth, class, religion or ethnicity of their parents. They were judged on the quality of their contribution to the values the school embraced. My school experience was during an era in which equality of opportunity was highly valued and there was less emphasis on the pursuit of individual material wealth than there is today. I suspect and hope that the values that infused my State High experience were not transitory. They certainly were not invented in the 1970s. Our teachers included former State High students, and they imparted these values to us.

Later, when studying law, I came across the writings of the great legal scholar Ronald Dworkin, who identified two principles that citizens should share. The first is that every human life is intrinsically and equally valuable. The second is that each person has an inalienable personal responsibility for realising his or her own potential. As to that second point, Dworkin wrote: "Each person must take his own life seriously: he must accept that it is a matter of importance that his life be a successful performance rather than a wasted opportunity." This was the lesson drummed into us by State High teachers in the 1970s.

In the 35 year since I finished school, society has undergone many revolutions. In 1975 there was no computer in the school. Our devoted Maths teacher, Bill Simpson, would take cardboard cards through which we had pushed holes with paper clips to the University where they would be run through a computer. We used Slide Rules, not calculators, to solve complex maths problems. In the last 35 years there have been revolutions in technology and access to information that even our brightest teachers could not have imagined. The changes over a 90 year history are even more profound. The school has witnessed a series of social and economic revolutions.

Throughout these changes some things endure, and hopefully they include the values that my generation were taught at State High. One is the pursuit of truth. Another is that knowledge is a virtue. In other words, you cannot have too much education. The values that hopefully endure are those of the Enlightenment: that truth is exposed by inquiry and reason. They also include the values of the French Revolution: liberty, equality and fraternity. These values are not simply words extracted from a history textbook. They are values that brought families like that of Victor Boyko to our country, seeking a good education for their children. In confronting the challenges of the future, it is worth recognising the values that built a school like State High, and re-affirming our commitment to them.

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