

## **Karen Andrews MP – Archbishop Sir James Duhig Memorial Lecture**

### **The personal quest to contribute to our great Australian story**

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I am very pleased to be here tonight and humbled to have the great honour and privilege of delivering the 45<sup>th</sup> Archbishop Sir James Duhig Memorial Lecture.

I note the poetic oratory of many of the speakers who have come before me and have provided very expressive arguments... informed by their professional experiences... on the question of Australia's ever-evolving cultural identity.

At the outset I want to promise no such poetic expression.

I'm a student of math and the sciences - an engineer by profession ... so I love the fact that I'm speaking to you in the middle of National Science Week.

I came to my current career as a Parliamentarian not out of a passion for oration or the written word, but because of my very practical and straightforward desire to find a better way of doing things.

I like finding solutions and fixing things.

Unlike many Parliamentarians - eloquence of phrase and delivery is not my strong suit...

Having said that, I believe it's an important discussion that the St Leo's community fosters each year with this lecture.

What is it to be Australian? How does our unique culture contribute to the great human arc of advancement and progress?

What can we observe as individuals and share with each other in our discussions and debates that could steer our society on a path that is forward leaning... but harnesses the endowments of our history and embodies the vision and example of those who came before us?

While I certainly don't claim to have all the answers to these questions...tonight I'll share with you some of my observations and experiences.

And, more importantly, because I am a practical person and I have the gift of an audience that includes people who will be the leaders of tomorrow... I'm going to provide a couple of simple tips for the young Leonians here tonight on how to equip yourself on your own personal quest to contribute to Australian society.

I know I'm making an assumption there.

**So perhaps that's my first tip: be on a quest to contribute to your local community.**

I know it is in many ways contradictory to the YOLO approach that celebrates individual gratification, but I do think it is the duty of every young person to position themselves to contribute to their community....and it should be your local community first before you aim to change the world.

The only way society advances is when individuals care enough to make a contribution. And an individual can truly make a difference.

To illustrate that point I thought I'd start tonight with a story I recounted at the National Press Club as Minister for Industry, Science and Technology in May 2020.

It's a great story about a 92-year-old retiree called Joe Carmody, who at the time lived in a nursing home in Shepparton, Victoria... but his life's endeavours meant he made a remarkable contribution to Australia's response to the COVID pandemic.

Four decades earlier Joe, then an engineer at the Ardmona Cannery, designed and made a machine to produce surgical masks.

A machine of such quality engineering, that two of the three original machines were still operational when the pandemic began.

Joe exported his machines all around the world. He founded his own manufacturing business, Med-Con, still run by his family, and spent decades producing millions of masks - surviving in the Australian market against a flood of cheap imports.

It was Joe's machines that our Army engineers and consultants came to study as we worked with Med-Con to boost their capacity at a time when vital medical supplies were in short supply in Australia and around the world.

As Med-Con moved into 24-hour production, our teams went to work on the third machine, pulling it apart, creating thousands of digital images, modelling parts, and recreating hundreds of plans from original pencil sketches. They got that machine running again.

And then, in the space of less than nine weeks, those plans were transformed into seven brand new machines by another long-standing Australian company FoodMach - located in Echuca also in regional Australia.

FoodMach has a unique story itself as a pioneer of food production machinery, but they pivoted to this vital national task.

**Before I finish this story, I'm going to pivot myself and give you my second tip: spend some time in regional Australia.**

As a person who grew up in Townsville in the 1960s, I know there is something very special about our regions and being outside of our major cities.

In preparing for tonight I took a look at Archbishop Duhig's biography "Crowded Years" which has some absolutely beautiful descriptions of his travels through regional Queensland towns and experiences with the people who pioneered them.

It is a fabulous read, and speaks volumes about his own contribution to the community over many years.

In it he declares: "No one, who has not seen the country, can ever say he knows Australia."

Much of Australia's mythology and culture centres on the outback, yet 72% of our population is concentrated in the major cities. Only, 26% live in inner and outer regional Australia, and just 2% living in remote areas.

To examine and contribute to Australian culture, it's important to understand exactly what it is about regional and country Australia that continues to resonate with all of us.

Perhaps it's the tyranny of distance that can still be felt and experienced out there – albeit to a lesser extent than previous generations of Australians experienced.

Perhaps it's the connection to nature, in all it's harsh and unforgiving beauty, and therefore the divine.

My National Party colleagues would say: perhaps it because our regions provide virtually all the food and wealth of the nation with our agriculture and mining industries.

In any case – I recommend you spend some time there... it will equip you to better understand it...and to better understand our great Australian story.

But back to my original story, playing out in regional Australia, where Med-Con in Shepparton is gearing up to assist in the shortage of PPE we experienced during the pandemic.

I first called Med-Con in February 2020, before most people had heard of COVID and before our borders were closed to travellers from China.

At the very start of suggestions that a pandemic could be imminent, I remember the Health Minister Greg Hunt calling me as Industry Minister to ask me to assess what our production capacity was for vital medical supplies, especially surgical masks.

So my office got on the phone and tracked down some leads.

Surprisingly, Med-Con were in fact the only Australian manufacturer of face masks and their normal annual production was around 2 million masks a year.

By the end of that year, with ingenuity, commitment and a little government assistance, annual production had been increased to a staggering 160 million masks.

There was overwhelming feedback from healthcare workers about the quality of this great Australian-made product and our stockpiles were replenished. The nation's sovereign capability for this vital product was boosted at a time when we needed it most.

It's easy to see why this achievement is one of the professional highlights of my time as Industry Minister. And I wish I could end the story there.

Sadly, though, I raise this story not in triumph, but as an example of the transient and ever-changing nature of both society and political life.

The pandemic came and went. Cheap imports of surgical masks once again began flowing in. People who were adamant that we must support Australian industries became less strident about the need to buy Australian made.... Less concerned about sovereign capability.

Despite lobbying hard for State governments to support the Australian-made product with more long term hospital contracts, things went back to the way they were. As demand shrank, production at Med-Con went back down to pre-COVID levels.

My attention too was diverted from building manufacturing and encouraging Australian made... when in early 2021 I was promoted to Home Affairs Minister.

I had new policy imperatives to pursue –which included ensuring the safe re-opening of our international border post-COVID .... and securing our critical infrastructure from the prevailing threat of cyber-attack that had become more apparent with people spending even more time online.

It's true that politics is an ever-shifting stage with a myriad of priorities ... and very often the challenges that are right in front of you take precedence over longer term concerns.

Maybe the prevailing positive out of my Med-Con story is that Australia had the capability to rise to the challenge... to get through the crisis ... if not the long-term commitment to permanently improve sovereign capability.

In any case, an election came soon after... and the experience, corporate knowledge and priorities of one side of politics was replaced with the other side.

I'm not complaining about that fact - that's the great democratic process, and free and fair elections are something we should always celebrate.

But it used to be that an incoming government built on the legacy of the last, rather than just bloody-mindedly trashing it and starting over.

Politics is always combative of course, but the driving national interest that brought the colonies together in the 1800's and gave birth to our nation in 1901 ... that national interest as the basis for consensus.... is something we rarely see today.

Politics itself feels much more transient, I think, than it did even 21 years ago when John Howard gave his address in this place.

John Howard was Prime Minister for nearly 12 years – since then we've had 7 Prime Ministers in 15 years. Before Howard, there was just 3 Prime Ministers in 21 years.

It's not just the tenure of our Prime Ministers... it's the capacity to pursue policy debates that seems curtailed by a much shorter and more cramped news cycle, a simplified and sensationalist reporting style, and an overwhelming array of issues, some of which were unheard of just 3 years ago, that now shout for attention.

What has happened to society's capacity to debate complex issues?... to focus on a challenge until solutions are found rather than simply switch to something new?....to discern what is important and should be prioritised?

In the very first of these addresses in 1976, historian Manning Clark described "culture, religion and alcohol" as the three great comforters of mankind.

Today the screen of our mobile phone would surely be top of that list.

If you don't believe me, try to sit in a waiting room or stand at a bus stop for more than a few seconds without reaching for that comforter.

So pervading has the influence of mobile devices been that even people of my generation, who grew up, went to Uni, established our careers, had families and lived many years without one, still feel strangely vulnerable and frustrated if we leave home without it.

This cheap and accessible platform afforded to every individual, activist and lobby group via social media has created a new challenge for parliamentarians and national leaders, including CEOs of companies, Chancellors of Universities, Heads of Charities etc.

Leaders face an urgent avalanche of priority issues and must work to discern which issues matter most to the majority of Australians – which is surely the cornerstone of representative democracy.

I am not about to turn this address into a tirade about mobile phone use and social media. That genie isn't about to get back in that bottle.

**But here's my third tip: be discerning, really discerning, in both your mobile phone and social media use.**

It's less than half a generation since these things came into widespread use.

When John Howard stood here, Facebook was still a few years from common use...and it was some years later in 2009 that Twitter exploded in Australia. ... Around the same time the modern merry-go-round of 7 prime ministers in 15 years started.

These platforms... and the mobile and immediate nature of our access to the internet... have had a significant impact on how we communicate, on our ability to concentrate, and therefore on how we consume news and information...as well as on how much of our private lives we willingly share with both friends and randoms.

For Australian culture, the mobile device presents an overflowing smorgasboard that often defies national identity, rather than defines or celebrates it.

The fact we are all citizens of the world, or at least the world-wide-web, offers incredible benefits alongside many potential challenges.

When Justice Ian Callinan delivered his lecture in this place 25 years ago the internet was still pretty much in infancy ...he saw another threat to culture and the great works of literature that underpin it... he said:

“The great cultural medium of today is television, still mightier than the print media, mightier yet than the internet, and bringing into our own living rooms in a few seconds distillation of each complicated set of events as they occur around the world.”

He went on to say:

“Nothing is a threat to television and television is a threat to everything.”

25 years on, our mobile devices and the social media apps on them are absolute beasts compared to the passive nature of television.

With aggressive algorithms they notify us in real time... bringing events not just into our living rooms but into our bedrooms 24/7....demanding the immediate attention of the recipient.

Whether we like it or not, social media is the new town square in democracies. It is the place where news first breaks, contentious issues are debated, consensus is formed and decisions are made.

From a national security perspective, that presents a massive new challenge.

Add in the exponentially growing power of AI and potential for deep fake videos and you have another huge layer of difficulty.

Foreign authoritarian states like China know this is a vulnerability. That's why they're weaponising both Western headquartered social media platforms as well as platforms based in authoritarian countries that they can directly control including TikTok and WeChat.

During my tenure as Minister for Home Affairs, the head of ASIO Mike Burgess, identified foreign interference as the biggest national security threat our nation faces into the future, having overtaken terrorism.

Unlike terrorism, which is more easily identified and violently upfront, foreign interference is frighteningly pervasive....in many cases hidden within our every-changing culture.

Many people in our modern society are what I'd describe as dangerously complacent about the threat of foreign interference from authoritarian countries.

Countries that are not democratic themselves and wish to destroy the democracy that has been persistently built in Australia over hundreds of years.

National Security as a front-of-mind political issue seems to fall further down the list as those Australians with living memory of the last world war pass away.

Perhaps it's the exposure to the world, through our mobile phones, that means we have a diminished fear of a foreign nation?

Perhaps it's a lack of understanding of the true nature of some of these regimes and their attitudes? ...Despite having witnessed in graphic detail through the Russia/Ukraine war the ongoing tragedy of an anti-democratic expansionist nation determined to achieve it's aims.

Perhaps the Australian people just have great confidence in the security apparatus and government of our own country to keep us safe?

I say that last one only slightly tongue in cheek...Australians have always had a healthy scepticism of authority...historically that's been part of what defines us, part of our culture.

But that too seems to be shifting, with a growing acceptance and willingness to rely on governments to solve issues... to tell us what we are allowed to do, think and say.

**That leads me to my fourth tip: Adopt a healthy dose of scepticism.**

Sceptic has become a pejorative. It's become a slur used to make political points against opponents.

But scepticism derives from the Greek skeptomai – which means to search, to think about or look for.

It doesn't mean denying the truth. It doesn't mean being a cynic.

Scepticism is the foundation of the scientific method: searching for truth, looking for proof, questioning what has been presented as fact, testing hypotheses. It's the questioning of theories and testing of ideas for their robustness that helps build a better future.

When I graduated from nearby QUT as one of the first female engineering students, it equipped me with a knowledge of scientific principles that has served me well in my subsequent professions.

We need those principles more than ever before in this AI generated, deep fake, post-truth world.

Not to make us disbelievers. Quite the opposite - to make us discerning consumers of the ideas and concepts that are presented to us as fact.

It's notable that totalitarian regimes that don't have functioning democracies keep an extremely tight reign on what information their people have access to – not just the internet and apps, but books and newspapers as well.

One of the symbols of totalitarianism we have rightly rejected in western nations is the abhorrent concept of book burning.

However, as celebrated 20th-century American writer Ray Bradbury said:

“You don't have to burn books to destroy a culture. Just get people to stop reading them.”

Now, it could be argued that the internet, in making the great ideas of classical literature accessible to all, has greatly expanded access to and discussions about the concepts that have shaped both mankind and our nation.

However, the mobile phone and social media, with it's emphasis on brevity and visual stimulation, and it's ever-increasing capacity to demand our attention... is indeed posing a genuine threat to literature.

The greatest literature and ideas may be available online for free, but if no one is reading them...or we are being discouraged from reading them as we impose 2023 values on works from the past... then culture is certainly threatened.

And if we are talking threats, well I could probably go on for another hour dissecting the impact of AI through ChatGPT on literacy and literature, on education, on our perception of truth...

But that is a topic worthy of much greater discussion than I have time for this evening.



**So for my final suggestion of how you can equip yourself to contribute to our culture: Read books.**

Not just for relaxation or entertainment – though they are the perfect way to quarantine some mindful minutes in our busy world - but history books, the classics, tomes that challenge and inspire.

There is nothing to make you feel more connected to the arc of human history than learning that an ancient philosopher or a Roman Emperor from thousands of years ago suffered the same worldly concerns and anxieties, pondered the same questions, as you.

Fortunately, Australians are avid readers. The 2021 National Reading Survey found 75% of the general Australian population read or listen to at least one book once a year....but only 28% are frequent readers.

We can do better than a novel once a year while we are on holidays by the beach.

So much of culture stems from an understanding of those who went before us....and books provide that in unfiltered detail.

They provide us with a reflection of the accepted culture of the time...which doesn't always fit with ours. I am not a fan of the trend to rewrite books from the past that contain concepts we don't agree with today. How do we understand history or gauge our progress if we refuse to allow it to exist?

We must always remember that one day people in the future others will look back on the things we do and say now through a contemporary lens of disbelief. It will be their right to hold that viewpoint – but not to edit our words as they were committed to at this time.

For a great historical read, start with Archbishop Duhig's autobiography – it will give you a unique insight into the foundations of our nation, particularly here in Queensland, and the inspiring individuals who contributed...into the challenges they faced and the determination with which they met them.

James Duhig was someone who built, who saw problems and worked to fixed them, who believed in the strength of small units of society... communities that knew and supported each other...his pastoral practice was one of individuality, where closeness to others mattered.

While I know tonight I've spoken about some broad-ranging topics ...sovereign capability, national security, foreign interference and the issues we face in the use of technology...these practical concerns will shape our society into the future and therefore our culture as well.

I was initially going to speak more generally about political culture and some of the deficiencies we've seen in political practice... again...that could take all night!

...But ultimately, politics and political culture are largely a reflection of broader Australian culture.

If we improve society, one unit at a time, so too will our politics be more constructive and positive.

As always, our challenges will be shared.

And everyone's lived experience of culture will be different – especially in such a wonderfully harmonious multi-cultural community as ours.

It's the collective efforts of individuals that shape who we are, and the coming together of the small units of our communities....families, church, friendship groups, community organisations, schools, service groups, sporting clubs. This is where Australia is forged.

Despite the challenges, I am by no means despairing of society or of our political culture.

I have seen far too much that inspires and uplifts in my time as a Federal MP – from the quiet achievers who spend decades helping others by running local community organisations and charities... to the amazing scientists who find new solutions to great challenges ... to the small businesses who found innovative ways to thrive during the pandemic ... to the brave men and women of our law enforcement and national security agencies who work tirelessly to keep us safe....the list could go on.

To the Leonian residents here tonight – in the coming years, my generation gets to hand the baton to you, so:

- Be on a quest to contribute to your community.
- Spend time in regional Australia.
- Be discerning in your mobile phone and social media use.
- Adopt a healthy dose of scepticism.
- And, Read as many books as you can.

That's practical advice from an Engineer who is proud to have been the first woman from Queensland to serve our nation in Federal Cabinet.

Thank you for the opportunity to speak to you this evening and all the best for the future.

*END. (Check against Delivery)*