

OCCASIONAL ADDRESS

2008 GRADUATION

DOOKIE CAMPUS, THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE

It is a privilege to be invited to my alma mater to participate in this graduation, and to be among people who seek their future in rural Australia.

I would also like to acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional owners of this country, the Yorta Yorta people, on whose land we are meeting today.

Almost 40 years ago, I sat where you are seated, part of an all male cohort waiting to be admitted to the Diploma of Agricultural Science.

Three years earlier I had come to study at Dookie from a sheep and cattle property where I was raised on the Mornington Peninsula. It was quite an 'out of the way' location in those days. In fact, we didn't get electricity until I was 14 and Melbourne-based relatives and friends generally visited us in the summer when they could also enjoy the excellent beach at Point Leo adjoining the property. Each day we spent an hour and a half each way on the school bus that traversed the Peninsula before depositing us at Rosebud High School, which was then surrounded by paddocks and pine forests. Twice a year we would venture forth in a dilapidated old Ford to the 'big smoke', stopping half way to pour about a litre of oil into the smoking engine and to allow my father to renew his supply of 'roll your own cigarettes', which he lined up on the dashboard and proceeded to consume en route.

It was a truly remote and rural experience and I loved both the land and the sea. It was not surprising that I fell into studying agriculture, partly because I had no idea what other options there were; career counsellors were an unknown resource in that era.

In those days, Dookie was the post secondary training arm of the Department of Agriculture. It was a different place in the late sixties where the focus was on men living in residence and studying agricultural science. If you were found in the company of a woman on the grounds and/or had alcohol in your possession, it was a one-way walk down Main Drive. It was technically a 'walk' as cars were not permitted either.

Dookie offered a single qualification in the late 60s — the Diploma of Agricultural Science. Rostered farm work for all students, including on weekends, was a part of our lives for those three years. The College farm environment certainly fostered the integration of agricultural theory and practice. The different enterprise managers were generous in sharing their knowledge and experience and, as students, we began to appreciate the need for best practice sustainable farming.

Today, I see the progress in both the educational offerings and the College environment. A variety of agriculture, horticulture, viticulture and business qualifications at various levels are now available to both men and women. And I hear that alcohol and cars are also permitted on the grounds.

Through its curriculum and environment, Dookie grounded us in some innovative problem-solving, teamwork and mateship. It provided me, and I hope yourselves, with a safe, rural environment combined with a hands-on, practical approach to learning. My time at Dookie certainly enriched my future in ways I did not appreciate or understand as a new graduate — but I certainly do now. I gained skills and knowledge, which were important in my technical career, but critically, my Dookie experience strengthened important values and beliefs. Some examples include:

- a love of our natural resources and the outdoors
- the importance of rural and regional Australia to our national wellbeing and prosperity
- a willingness to tackle a problem by focusing on a solution
- the capacity to persevere when the problem isn't easily solved
- the importance of building and sustaining relationships and support networks
- a willingness and capacity to keep learning.

Dookie kick-started my career in technical agriculture and resource management work. It set me on the path that would eventually lead me to my current role at the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation, a role that no longer focuses me on how grass grows but how people grow. I have always been a farmer at heart, but these days I farm people's minds, exposing them to their untapped potential and encouraging self-belief.

This evolution from technical expert to people manager to leadership developer has not been a linear process, nor was it obvious early in my career as to where, when and how that process would evolve. Some of the values from my Dookie days — solving difficult problems, perseverance and the willingness to keep learning — have led me to seek out additional training and development, which expanded my horizons, increased depth of understanding and could be applied to my work. Most often, my needs and the development programs turned out to be around people issues, not technical ones.

In one particular management course I attended, at what is now the Mt Eliza Business School, I needed, and indeed expected, to be provided with a set of methods and tools to settle about 70 staff who were going through an organisational re-structure and severe budget cuts — read job losses. Imagine my surprise and then discomfort to learn that the course was focused on me and my self-awareness, learning about my preferences, strengths, weaknesses, blind spots and particular skills as well as about how to work with other people with a different set of preferences, strengths, weaknesses, blind spots and skills. The values and beliefs, which had been honed during my Dookie days, had led me to a watershed moment in my understanding of how and where problems really arose and could be solved.

This was a life-changing experience that accelerated my interest in why people differ in areas like personality and behaviour and how these characteristics can be understood and developed for greater personal effectiveness, particularly with respect to leadership. For those of you who are attracted to management and leadership roles, and many Dookie graduates end up in these positions, I encourage you to undertake further study

in this field. However, be aware that managing others is challenging and, as the saying goes, 'the soft stuff is the hard stuff'. One track you might want to follow is to consider applying for a leadership development program such as the Australian Rural Leadership Program or other purpose-built, preferably multi-session, programs. There are many on offer and, increasingly, rural industries are investing in creating new ones.

Not only will you acquire increased self-awareness and relevant leadership skills, but your networks across a diversity of agricultural and associated sectors will also expand. It is through these new relationships that your capacity to achieve your own goals will be enhanced and you will have a network of diverse talent to draw on to tackle the big issues facing rural Australia. I will now spend a few minutes identifying a few of these challenges and posing some questions.

You have begun, or are about to begin, careers within the Australian agricultural industry, an industry hungry for passionate, energetic men and women with new ideas to shape the future. Sadly, agriculture doesn't seem to register as a critical industry in this country, but we all know that it is one. Just as death and taxes are givens, so too is the reality that the world has more mouths to feed with less land and water available to do it. My understanding is that 40 per cent of food production comes from irrigated agriculture. If we are to maintain this level of supply, what innovative approaches will you contribute to ensure food security is achieved?

Climate change is potentially the biggest threat to agriculture, including where agriculture will or won't be practised successfully in the future. Global mean temperatures are rising at a faster rate now than at any other time since 1850; in fact, the 12 warmest years have occurred since 1990. The science is sound and the body of evidence is increasing, but the reality is that we will not beat global warming if we don't beat poverty. Developing countries are significant contributors to global warming, but don't necessarily have the capacity to fix the problem. Consequently, the solution has to embrace a raft of technical and socio economic challenges. What are the implications for agriculture, catchment management and biodiversity? How will countries like Australia contribute to the reduction of poverty in the developing world?

Globalisation is another international reality. It means real competition from countries like Brazil. During a study tour in 2006, it was evident that Brazil has abundant land and water, cheap labour and a strong desire to acquire knowledge quickly. Their goal is to nudge Australia out of some of our current markets and replace our agricultural products with theirs as they become more attractive in quality and price. What strategies should the beef industry, for example, put in place to ensure they retain preferred market access in Japan? Should new trade alliances be pursued with Brazil?

And, on our own shores, we are faced with the challenge of reconciling Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders with other Australians and ensuring the past is not repeated. According to some Indigenous people, there is scepticism that not a lot will change after the 'sorry' statement. At least now many non-Indigenous people are thinking differently and perhaps your generation will provide the leadership to make up ground on this challenge as well.

As you would be aware, the Australia 2020 Youth Summit was held last weekend. Participants issued a substantial communiqué that captured the ideas and proposals developed by the 100 young Australians present. They discussed a number of issues,

including some previously raised and came up with a list of Top Ten Ideas. I would like to share two of these ideas, in their words, to stimulate your thoughts on how you might also contribute to shaping Australia's future.

Rural Australia — *future directions for rural industries and rural communities*

Idea — Rural futures development bank

The rural fund development bank is a funding strategy aimed at supporting research and development activities into new agricultural technologies. Specifically, the research and development will be directed towards innovative methods of agriculture, including the cultivation of new cropping varieties. Essentially the research and development will produce ways in which traditional agricultural practices can be adapted to maximise the new conditions brought upon Australia by climate change, such as changing temperatures and decreased water availability. Further to this, the initiative will include the extension of existing programs designed to educate growers on sustainable technologies and additional assistance for growers in the take up of these new technologies and the development of more efficient irrigation and water management techniques. Potentially, technology innovations that are new in Australian agriculture will be shared with our neighbours and Australia will remain the global leader in combating climate change.

Indigenous Australia — *options for the future of Indigenous Australia*

Idea - National dialogue towards a treaty

The political and legal recognition of Indigenous Australia should be pursued through the signing of a treaty or similar document between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. The process of negotiation will ensure all Australians can participate in a national dialogue that promotes understanding between individuals and communities. Negotiation can only occur with a strong and united national Indigenous voice and with the participation of young people. A treaty will create a foundation for a new relationship between all Australians, which allows us to make meaningful change in practical policies and programs.

It is refreshing to know that young Australians like yourselves are generating the ideas, energy and action to rewire the future.

The point in citing these challenges is to highlight where you can make a difference. The knowledge, skills and values you have acquired at Dookie position you to contribute to the resolution of these matters at regional, state, national and international levels. Where you make your mark is your choice.

It may be unreasonable to expect that you will aspire to significant leadership roles in the short term. However, across the industries and communities the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation works with, a common message is clear; all organisations are seeking younger leaders to step up to positions that are increasingly being vacated by retiring leaders, the baby boomer generation in particular. Some people are equipped at birth to take on leadership roles; others can be made. It is my view that leaders can be developed and nurtured — indeed, this is the function of the Australian Rural Leadership Foundation. We have the evidence to support this view. An initiative that all of us can

adopt is to model ourselves on the attributes of current leaders that we respect and aspire to emulate. One such champion is the late Professor Peter Cullen. Peter was praised for his courage in speaking out on the state of the rivers and the need for water reform. He was an outstanding scientist who had the ability to engage and communicate with people, as well as to bridge the gap between science and politics. In the words of his Wentworth Group of Concerned Scientists colleague, Peter Cosier, he was “one of the great reformers of Australian environmental management”. I urge you to consider who your champions might be, and what you can learn from them.

It has been said that experience isn't what happens to you; it's what you make of what happens to you that matters. All of you already have a bank of experiences that you will have processed to glean personal learning. I suggest you make space to review future experiences so that, in a way, you can mentor your own growth. In addition, you might want to consider identifying a mentor, someone who will pose the insightful questions that you should reflect on. Through reflection you are better equipped to answer another important question “who am I and where am I going?”

Your lives will be full of choices and decisions. I encourage you, as the future generation of leaders for Australian agriculture, to make ethical choices and decisions. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this is to share Dr Simon Longstaff's (St James Ethics Centre) explanation of what I call “the Ethical Door Test for decision-making”.

Imagine when you leave this hall that the door you pass through has the words “what ought one to do?” (Socrates) inscribed on the lintel. On the left doorjamb are the words “what's good; what's bad” (these are values). On the right hand doorjamb are the words “what's right; what's wrong” (these are principles). The combination of values and principles are the DNA that shape the world. Both Australia and the world are in desperate need of ethical leadership.

My fellow graduates from Dookie, I wish you every success in your careers and satisfaction in your lives. Believe in yourselves and have the courage to speak out about the things that matter to the future of rural Australia.

The future is in your hands.

Good luck.

Rob Patrick
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