

PUBLIC LECTURE

UNIVERSITIES IN THE
SERVICE OF THE NATION

GLYN DAVIS AC*

When tertiary leaders reflect on the purpose of a university they reflect not just their educational philosophy, but the spirit and imperatives of their time. Woodrow Wilson and Sir Zelman Cowen were each lawyers and university leaders who became heads of state. Their speeches reveal attitudes and aspirations they would take into public life — Wilson a progressive if rigid agenda, Cowen a more nuanced sense of the limits of authority and the inevitable generational challenge to received wisdom. Wilson helped create a great university but his educational and then political careers ended in disappointment. Cowen remained engaged until the end of a long life, sensitive always to the currents of disagreement, but believing strongly in the power of conversation to find a way to live and work together.

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I INTRODUCTION

My thanks to Professor Michael Crommelin and the organisers of the Zelman Cowen Conference for the undeserved honour of delivering this public lecture.

To mark the 150th anniversary of Princeton University in 1896 one of its distinguished lawyers, Professor Woodrow Wilson, delivered a speech titled

* BA (Hons) (UNSW), PhD (ANU); Professor, Faculty of Arts, The University of Melbourne; Vice-Chancellor, The University of Melbourne.

'Princeton in the Nation's Service'.¹ The university, Wilson argued, was a vital part of America's future, an essential source of those efficient and enlightened young men who would ensure the nation achieved its destiny. 'Princeton in the nation's service' became the informal motto of the University.

More than 70 years later a distinguished Australian academic lawyer spoke about universities and their role in public life. Sir Zelman Cowen could match Wilson in eloquence, but his lecture questioned the confidence in the future expressed by Wilson.² Speaking at a time of uncertainty about knowledge and its use, Sir Zelman instead sought to understand critics of the contemporary university.

Both were renowned scholars, widely acclaimed as leading public intellectuals in their day. Both would go on to become heads of state (or as near to head of state as Australians are permitted).

Woodrow Wilson, first President of Princeton and then President of the United States, remains the only American president with a PhD (Jed Bartlet excepted, of course). Sir Zelman was the only academic to become Australian Governor-General in the first century after Federation, a distinction he shares now with Dame Quentin Bryce.

Sir Zelman and his successor as academic-cum-Governor-General were close. Over many years Dame Quentin Bryce has spoken of Sir Zelman as her mentor in the role of Queen's representative, in a friendship that stretched back to Dame Quentin's experience teaching in the law school at the University of Queensland.

Some time after Sir Zelman arrived at Queensland as Vice-Chancellor, Quentin saw him at a dinner party. What a shame, she suggested, that this famous legal academic had not presented any lectures in the law school. That's because no one had asked him, replied Sir Zelman. So, on the spot, Quentin invited the Vice-Chancellor to address her first year class the following Monday morning. Sir Zelman not only turned up for the class, but gave the best lecture Quentin had ever heard. When he finished, students stood on their seats to applaud.³

¹ Woodrow Wilson, 'Princeton in the Nation's Service' in Arthur S Link (ed), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton University Press, 1971) vol 10, 11.

² Zelman Cowen, *The University in Times of Change* (Adult Education Board of Tasmania, 1974).

³ Quentin Bryce, 'Naming the Zelman Cowen Gallery of Australian Jewish History' (Speech delivered at St Kilda Synagogue, 25 October 2009) <<http://www.gg.gov.au/speech/naming-zelman-cowen-gallery-australian-jewish-history>>.

Woodrow Wilson, too, was an accomplished lecturer; his popular lecture tours on American constitutional history prompted the first speculation about his future in politics. Like Sir Zelman, Wilson saw the lecture as the ideal way to share ideas and influence opinion. Both would carry this scholar's preference for thinking aloud into their later public roles.

In *'Instincts to Lead': On Leadership, Peace, and Education*, Donald Markwell recalls standing at the back of the room, watching the new Governor-General Cowen on his return to Mayne Hall at the University of Queensland: 'And so I witnessed first-hand the brilliant, engaging, and tireless speech-making that was at the heart of his healing and, as he put it, of the role of the Governor-General in "interpreting the nation to itself" in a very public way'.⁴

Tonight I will dwell on these two academic leaders, and their visions for a university. There is much on which Woodrow Wilson and Sir Zelman Cowen agreed, but an important difference as well. In thinking about their approach to the university we can glimpse, as well, the approach they would take to national leadership.

II WOODROW WILSON

Woodrow Wilson was a Southerner, born in Staunton, Virginia in 1856 into an Anglo-Irish Presbyterian family. He was not a natural student and struggled through school. He secured a place at Princeton, then sometimes perceived as a college for Southern gentry, when his father began working at the University. Wilson would later attend law school at the University of Virginia,⁵ establish a legal practice, then return to study for a doctoral dissertation at Johns Hopkins University on congressional government. In 1890 he returned to Princeton as Professor of Jurisprudence and Political Economy.

As a scholar, Wilson addressed issues around American history and political life. He found much to admire in British political institutions but was firmly on the side of the Revolution and the *United States Constitution*. And, though deeply proud of Princeton, Wilson judged it falling short. His speech on 'Princeton in the Nation's Service' was also a call for a higher calling, a more ambitious institution.

⁴ Donald Markwell, *'Instincts to Lead': On Leadership, Peace, and Education* (Connor Court Publishing, 2013) 93.

⁵ Although he withdrew from law school after one year and continued his study of law on his own.

Wilson found an opportunity to implement his ideas when appointed President of Princeton in 1902. His inauguration speech was now titled 'Princeton for the Nation's Service', and emphasised that the university serves public, not private, interests.⁶ Princeton must contribute to progress and prosperity. The university should be engaged in the world, producing young men with an understanding of nature, of reason and of the arts required by the modern world. They would benefit from a wide undergraduate education before entering professional schools, so they would bring to technical training a 'largeness of view, judgment, and easy knowledge of men'.⁷ As a place that values breadth of thought, the university stands 'where the roads of thought and knowledge interlace and cross' and must 'command them all'.⁸

Princeton graduates would be professionals, but citizens too, comfortable in the wider world because they commanded both technical knowledge and a wider vision of humanity. Such graduates would enrich American commerce and the nation, for service was, said Wilson, 'the high law of duty'.⁹

There is something of the preacher in this speech, which fuses the ideals of American democracy with an explicitly Christian vision of the university; 'I do not see', said Wilson, 'how any university can afford such an outlook if its teachings be not informed with the spirit of religion, and that the religion of Christ, and with the energy of a positive faith'.¹⁰ A university — much like the American nation — must commit to 'strong and definite moral impulse'.¹¹

The new President moved quickly to implement his plans. Wilson gathered support to reform the tutorial system and introduce science and engineering. New disciplines and a significant expansion of academic staff followed, as Princeton sought to 'transform thoughtless boys performing tasks into thinking men'.¹² Wilson's changes to curriculum and standards echoed the broader progressive political moment in American history, committed to scientific administration.

Wilson was a serious man who believed passionately in his program. He was joking — probably — when he said 'the use of a university is to make

⁶ Woodrow Wilson, 'Princeton for the Nation's Service' in Arthur S Link (ed), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton University Press, 1972) vol 14, 170 (emphasis added).

⁷ *Ibid* 171.

⁸ *Ibid* 174.

⁹ *Ibid* 183.

¹⁰ *Ibid* 184.

¹¹ *Ibid*.

¹² Woodrow Wilson, 'President Wilson's Address' (1902) 3 *Princeton Alumni Weekly* 199, 201.

young gentlemen as unlike their fathers as possible'.¹³ As he explained in a speech to the Pittsburgh Young Men's Christian Association in 1914:

I do not say that with the least disrespect for the fathers; but every man who is old enough to have a son in college is old enough to have become very seriously immersed in some particular business and is almost certain to have caught the point of view of that particular business. And it is very useful to his son to be taken out of that narrow circle, conducted to some high place where he may see the general map of the world and of the interests of mankind, and there be shown how big the world is and how much of it his father may happen to have forgotten.¹⁴

Over time this vision for a modern university would place the President in deep conflict with trustees and fellow academics. As the *New-York Evening Post* observed drily of Wilson: 'he has ruined what was universally admitted to be the most agreeable and aristocratic country club in America by transforming it into an institution of learning'.¹⁵ Wilson left Princeton after eight years as President to begin his political career.

'Princeton for the Nation's Service' remains a coherent and inspiring statement of university purpose. It offers ideals with practical implications. Wilson urges an engaged institution, committed to the society in which it works. Students are future leaders, who must experience both the wisdom of the classics and contemporary social issues, taught by skilled scholars who contribute to new knowledge through research. This model for a university has much influenced tertiary education in America and beyond.

III SIR ZELMAN COWEN

It is hard to imagine Sir Zelman Cowen delivering a similar speech. In part this is personality. While Wilson was not overburdened by a sense of humour, Sir Zelman often spoke with a twinkle in the eye, a self-deprecating joke close to hand. He lived, too, in different times. Daughters were now welcome on campus, and universities with a public mission did not see religious faith as their animating spirit.

¹³ Woodrow Wilson, 'An Address to the Pittsburgh YMCA' in Arthur S Link (ed), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton University Press, 1979) vol 31, 220, 221.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See Letter from Ellen Axson Wilson to Anna Harris, 12 February 1907 in Arthur S Link (ed), *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton University Press, 1974) vol 17, 33, 35.

Of course, Sir Zelman knew and liked America. After serving his nation in the Royal Australian Navy during the Second World War, and completing legal education at the University of Melbourne and the University of Oxford, Cowen was a frequent visitor to the United States during his 15 years as Dean of the Melbourne Faculty of Law. He served as a visiting professor at the University of Chicago Law School in 1949, where he became a long-term friend of Edward Levi, Dean of Law, then Provost, then President at the University of Chicago, and later Attorney-General of the United States.

In the 1950s Cowen spent extended periods at Harvard Law School, the University of Illinois and Washington University in St Louis. Later, he would hold appointments at the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, and at the University of Virginia. The ideals, and practical influence, of Wilson's thinking on American universities would have been very familiar.

Yet when Cowen came to reflect on universities, he chose a very different stance from Woodrow Wilson. For Wilson, the university was an institution dedicated to duty, seeking to form 'practical men, whom the world could trust to do its daily work like men of honor'.¹⁶ Cowen did not — could not — share this certainty.

Cowen's chosen audience was not the trustees and faculty of Princeton but the good people of the Adult Education Board of Tasmania, gathered to hear the Sir John Morris Memorial Lecture for 1974. Cowen was not living in Wilson's expansive, prosperous times but amid economic recession and social upheaval. He was not beginning his term of university leadership but musing on already long experience, having served as Vice-Chancellor at the University of New England from 1966 to 1970 and the University of Queensland from 1970.

Cowen titled his lecture 'The University in Times of Change',¹⁷ and after surveying the rapid growth of tertiary education in Australia he turned to his main theme. Students, he observed, were unhappy with the modern university. They disliked the complexity of large, even sprawling, institutions with many and varied missions. They resented the rise of research as the preoccupation of academics, who professed that 'research and teaching within the university should enrich one another'¹⁸ but appeared more interested in discovery than the classroom.

¹⁶ Wilson, 'Princeton in the Nation's Service', above n 1, 21.

¹⁷ Cowen, *The University in Times of Change*, above n 2.

¹⁸ *Ibid* 9.

As a result, argued Cowen, the idea of the university was in crisis — we lived, he said, in a period of ‘undirected revolution’ with the ‘volcanic eruption of student power. Earlier unquestioned assumptions and beliefs now became quite uncertain’.¹⁹ The idea of a university as central to transmitting a common culture and shared standards of civilisation no longer stood unchallenged.

Cowen was describing a general movement through western nations, but local political issues seemed clearly in his mind. An important moment of his Vice-Chancellorship in Queensland was the student protests during the 1971 state of emergency declared by Premier Joh Bjelke-Petersen. When Cowen learned students had been injured in clashes with police during the Springbok tour, he visited local hospitals that night to ensure those affected were receiving treatment. The state government expressed displeasure at this action, but Cowen made clear that as Vice-Chancellor his responsibility was to his students.

Protests continued, culminating in a student strike at the University of Queensland. Invited to address students gathered in the Great Court at the St Lucia campus, Sir Zelman delivered what he would later call ‘the speech of [his] life’.²⁰ In a 7500-word address written that morning, Cowen expressed a commitment to ‘a self-critical, liberal, self-reforming campus which insists upon and asserts the value of free and searching enquiry and freedom of speech’.²¹

Speaking to the Adult Education Board of Tasmania, Cowen returned to those themes. Self-reflection, he suggested, must remain an essential part of the university, even when it seemed to consume most of the time and energy of those on campus.

‘Never in the past’, he suggested, ‘has an older generation been so disconcerted by the onslaught of the young’.²² Yet those in high office must accept the right of students, staff and society to question the university.

That older generation, suggested Cowen, was ‘more certain of its position, its traditions and values’.²³ By 1974, ‘today’s generation of parents, teachers,

¹⁹ Ibid 10.

²⁰ Sir Zelman Cowen, *A Public Life: The Memoirs of Zelman Cowen* (Miegunyah Press, 2006) 288.

²¹ Ibid. While this quote comes from his orientation address in 1970, Cowen states that ‘[t]hese were the values that [he] did [his] best to maintain during the troubles’: at 288–9.

²² Cowen, *The University in Times of Change*, above n 2, 11.

²³ Ibid.

citizens, feels itself in no comparable position of certainty'.²⁴ There was little agreement on an appropriate curriculum or acceptable ways to govern a university. Rationality was under challenge from 'spontaneous unstructured self expression'.²⁵ Amid this outburst of 'romantic utopianism' the university found its position 'appallingly difficult'.²⁶

Sir Zelman listed older forms of university life made impossible by dissent — the notion of the university as *in loco parentis*, even the practice of university statutes providing for the disciplining of students who failed to conform with published rules.²⁷ There were no longer agreed forms of authority amid demands for democratic university structures.²⁸ Cowen noted, too, the rise of collective bargaining among staff, and the challenges this posed to norms of professional behaviour.²⁹

His conclusion is radical and surprising. Perhaps, suggested Cowen, it was time to question the ancient practice of young people spending time on campus. When we take young people away from the world, he concluded, 'educational captivity' can become a wellspring of rebellion.³⁰ Instead, let young people move more quickly through tertiary education and return to learning throughout their careers. Let universities work with libraries, museums and art galleries to provide continuing education. Perhaps there is room in Australia, he mused, for an open university along British lines, making university curricula available to a much wider community.³¹

In short, where Woodrow Wilson saw a unique, positive and unambiguous role for the university as an institution for shaping young minds for the ideals of public service, Zelman Cowen described a world irreversibly changed. A new generation did not want the style of education Wilson advocated. They would not accept without question the authority of the speaker.

It would have been easy for Cowen to reject this challenge as inconsistent with the university as independent of both the state and the current generation of students or staff. He could have mocked the protestors for the inconsistent demands that afflict any broad social movement. He chose neither

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ *Ibid.* 12.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.* 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.* 14.

²⁹ *Ibid.* 14–15.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 20.

³¹ *Ibid.*

approach, but strove instead to understand the objections to received models of a university. He looked for ways to bridge divides. He strove to heal.

There is melancholy in Cowen's speech, a sense of the familiar world lost amid radical epistemological doubt. Yet there is also an openness to change. If earlier models of tertiary education no longer persuade, we must construct an institution that can be self-reforming. Tradition is important, but the world changes. Free speech and academic freedoms are the best guarantee of continued relevance — even when such speech is turned against its host.

Sir Zelman would later say the troubles of the early 1970s 'cast a long shadow over my view of the world'.³² He was still working through their practical implications for the University of Queensland when the nation divided over the dismissal of the Whitlam government.

Perhaps it was this capacity to hear the voices of opponents, and the courage to face their criticisms in person, that commended Sir Zelman to Malcolm Fraser as Australia's next Governor-General. Sir Zelman had already 'thought deeply about the issues of division and fragile consensus'.³³ Certainly, his time as the Queen's representative would be characterised by the same invitation to conversation, and desire to heal, that marked the Vice-Chancellor who addressed those students in the Great Court.

IV WILSON AND SIR ZELMAN COMPARED

It is rare for scholars to become political leaders, but both Woodrow Wilson and Sir Zelman Cowen made the transition from campus to national office. In their new roles, each used speeches as their preferred mode of communication, reasoning and persuading as they addressed the nation.

As scholars, Wilson and Sir Zelman shared much in common about the purpose of a university. Both commended the aim of a general education alongside specialist training. The need for a broad and liberal education was a key theme of 'Princeton for the Nation's Service', and it informed Sir Zelman's vision of education. Breadth must not be seen, said Sir Zelman, as 'a kind of "add on" luxury, [or] a genteel relic of a time when specialisation was not all-important'.³⁴

Yet there is an important difference, one that resonates still through debates about higher education. Wilson commended breadth, but not the

³² Cowen, *A Public Life: The Memoirs of Zelman Cowen*, above n 20, 300.

³³ Markwell, *Instincts to Lead*, above n 4, 100.

³⁴ Sir Zelman Cowen, 'Where To? Questions for Australians' (2003) 22(2) *Dialogue* 4, 6.

sovereignty of students. They must study widely, but within a program determined by their teachers. As Wilson said in 1902: 'the choice that we make must be the chief choice, the choice the pupil makes the subordinate choice'.³⁵

Sir Zelman also wanted students to think beyond professional boundaries. But Wilson and Sir Zelman differed on the purpose of such an education. For Wilson, the university and its graduates alike serve the nation. Students must be educated into a moral purpose, reminded constantly about duty. Shaping character becomes part of the university mission.

Sir Zelman did not share this aspiration. He would likely agree with John Henry Newman, who argued in *The Idea of a University* that shaping good moral character is a task beyond university education.³⁶ You cannot bring out the moral quality in people as you would quarry granite, said Newman. Knowledge is only a silken thread, a keen and delicate instrument with which to hold your students.³⁷ For Sir Zelman, a broad education was a virtue in itself. It was not a means to some other end.

The ideals of a university Woodrow Wilson and Sir Zelman each expressed reflected their temperament and times. Wilson was a progressive, convinced that new ways of thinking could combine the best of tradition with the needs of the future. He expressed this by broadening curricula, building new scientific facilities and imbuing the daily routines of Princeton with a sense of importance and destiny: every graduate would help build a modern America.

Time in the United States would make Sir Zelman sympathetic to the aspirations of the great American universities. Yet this pragmatic Australian, with a keen sense of individual rights, would not embrace the soaring rhetoric of duty and destiny. Students have many reasons to spend time on campus, and each should find their own path. The troubles of the 1970s were a caution against arrogance, against assuming one generation already holds all the answers.

Sir Zelman and Lady Anna Cowen faced the times of trouble with wisdom and courage. By 1977 Sir Zelman was Chair of the peak sector body, the Australian Vice-Chancellor's Committee. He promoted a series of quiet reforms, unremarkable in themselves but important in re-establishing legitimacy for universities. The sector would take seriously student complaints, particularly about the quality of teaching. The ceaseless surveying of

³⁵ Wilson, 'Princeton for the Nation's Service', above n 6, 181.

³⁶ See John Henry Newman, *The Idea of a University* (Yale University Press, first published 1899, 1996 ed).

³⁷ *Ibid* 90.

student views on each course and lecturer, and the publication of the results, dates from this period. So does the introduction of students onto governing bodies and the creation of faculty consultation boards.

Even continuous assessment was a student demand carefully and systematically implemented across Australia — to the detriment of student activism, perhaps, as regular assignments replaced the earlier single exam, and so forced more sustained participation in classroom work. Be careful what you wish for.

Some student activism continues, I am pleased to say. At lunchtime today, students from across the city gathered to protest against cuts to university funding. It was interesting to note the posters promoting the rally used pictures from an earlier period — in fact, from the time Cowen was mulling the future of universities. Nostalgia turns troubles into times worth emulating.

Donald Markwell described Sir Zelman as ‘Australia’s most honoured Vice-Chancellor’ and as someone who led ‘a career committed to the classical liberal values of the western university’.³⁸ I would expand this apt description only slightly. Sir Zelman indeed cherished liberal values. He described himself as happiest on campus, because his mind could roam. But he knew that institutions must change, that new voices must be accommodated. He was willing to reach out to those who did not share his values, and to contemplate overturning parts of the tradition that no longer spoke to contemporary needs.

Thus Sir Zelman could be both conservative and radical, a man who upheld the Australian *Constitution* as Governor-General yet later joined Quentin Bryce in contemplating a republic.³⁹ As he showed in 1974, and again at Yarralumla, Sir Zelman believed in progress through consensus, through persuasion.

Woodrow Wilson knew the answers. His vision was singular and uncompromising. His tenure at Princeton ended in deep conflict and personal unhappiness, just as his term as President of the United States saw him defeated in Congress, unable to lead the United States into the League of Nations he helped call into being.

By contrast, Sir Zelman Cowen ended his formal career, as he had begun, happy as an academic. After retirement from Oriel College at Oxford he spent

³⁸ Don Markwell, ‘Broadening the Culture of Educational Philanthropy in Australia’ (Speech delivered at the Business/Higher Education Round Table and *Campus Review* Summit on Philanthropy, Sydney, 17 May 2006) <<http://www.bhert.com/events/2006-05-17/DonMarkwell.pdf>>.

³⁹ See Cowen, *A Public Life: The Memoirs of Zelman Cowen*, above n 20, 378–81.

the next twenty years as mentor, a public intellectual still, continuing to address the issues of the day. His 90th birthday party I recall still as an extraordinary celebration among friends of a life well lived.

Indeed, the index to *A Public Life: The Memoirs of Zelman Cowen* carries more entries under ‘friendships’ than any other feature of his life — except possibly ‘travel abroad’.⁴⁰

In their time as university leaders, Woodrow Wilson and Sir Zelman Cowen each showed the characteristics they would take into national office. They shared an intellectual heritage as lawyers, and a common view about the benefits of a broad, engaged education. That vision influences universities still across the world, including the University of Melbourne.

Yet these formidable scholars might disagree about how to describe the aims of this broad education. When people assert that universities must be practical, must train graduates to be job relevant, they express a contemporary version of the Wilsonian preference for shaping the destiny of students.

And conversely, when others argue that universities must avoid being career-focused and avoid vocational outcomes in favour of a classical curriculum, they too are expressing a preference for the institution to shape students in very particular ways.

Called to the stand, I suspect Sir Zelman Cowen would instead recommend modesty — we cannot know, and should not decide, the animating purpose of others. A university serves the nation when it encourages students to engage with the best in thought, ancient and modern, and then invites its graduates to choose the life they have reason to value.

The life Sir Zelman chose, as Dean of the Melbourne Faculty of Law, Vice-Chancellor of the University of New England and the University of Queensland, Governor-General and Provost of Oriel College, Oxford, seems very much the life of service Woodrow Wilson would recommend. Yet it was a life chosen, not forced, and an education applied in ways few could predict but all today can celebrate.

⁴⁰ Ibid 383–4.