Murdoch University 10th Anniversary Celebrations
Address by Vice-Chancellor Professor Peter John Boyce

27 February 1985

This speech was the inaugural address of incoming Vice Chancellor Peter J Boyce

Your Excellency, Chancellor, distinguished guests and Murdoch colleagues, I am honoured by the Senate's decision to combine the launching of its 10th Anniversary with a welcome to myself, and I gladly seize the opportunity afforded me by this ceremony to offer a few thoughts, a pot pourri of hopes, fears and predictions if you like, on the course which Murdoch may chart, whether by conscious choice or by submission to external pressures, over the next decade.

Murdoch enters its second decade buoyed by tangible signs of government and public confidence while burdened by tightened budgets, confused or apparently inconsistent government priorities in tertiary education, and ever increasing intrusion into its housekeeping by a remote bureaucracy headquartered in the national capital. This University, like Deakin and Griffith, was born at the end of what Sir Louis Matheson called the 20 year honeymoon relationship between government and Australian tertiary institutions. Murdoch's founding fathers could not have anticipated the very hard times that lay ahead, though perhaps they should have been ready for the public reception that greeted some of their innovations in educational organisation and curriculum, however refreshing and enterprising they might have been at the time.

I hope it will not seem presumptuous of me to share with you a vision of Murdoch's future. It is only one person's vision and necessarily a tentative and conjectural on, but it could provide a basis for discussion or contemplation. By the end of Murdoch's second decade the student community may well number about 8,000, and either the University's planners, or the government agencies which fund it, may have decided by then that 8,000-10,000 is an optimum population. The overwhelming majority of students will be recent school-leavers or young adults, and most will be full-time. Murdoch's highly regarded distance education programme will be maintained and, indeed, will have plugged into an impressive national network of external courses on offer by the five participant universities, but the ratio of attending to non-attending students will have increased substantially.

I would expect Murdoch's student population to include a higher proportion of foreign students by 1995, mostly Asians, here as fee-payers, possibly on the basis of full cost recovery. I would also expect there to be a significantly higher percentage of students drawn from newly developed southern suburbs, because of the likely explosion of school leavers from families in this reasonably affluent catchment area toward the end of the decade. There
may also be some increase from the less affluent southeast and southwest corridors, because of efforts being made to increase the participation rate of students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

By 1995 a couple of additional professional or vocational programmes will have been established. Who knows, but one or two departments may have transferred from the University of WA by then, following a rationalisation agreement. A few specialist chairs and lectureships will have been instituted with State Government or private sector support, possibly in mineral science, horticulture, biotechnology and public administration. And of course I will be bitterly disappointed if a programme of legal studies has not by then been set in place, one which offers, at the very least, a three year Bachelor of Jurisprudence degree.

As for capital development and the provision of basic amenities to staff and students, I would expect the completion of another academic building, this time for the humanities, additional to the $6 million Science Computer Science building already approved, along with a gymnasium, guild amenities building and administration block, well before 1995. Student and staff amenities buildings are unlikely to be funded by the Commonwealth, so alternative sources of funding will have to be explored. I have said it before publicly and I declare it again: Murdoch staff and students are not pampered inhabitants of this campus. Their recreational facilities are minimal, and the preservation of esprit de corps through the past decade, in the absence of such facilities, reflects most creditably on the strength of the Murdoch ethos.

As to that magical Murdoch ethos, which appears to be so vital to the maintenance of esprit de corps and a sense of continuity, my vision for 1995 is somewhat blurred. I do believe that most of its essential ingredients will be retained (though I'm not sure whether I yet understand what all its ingredients are). Sponsorship of cross-disciplinary and joint programmes will probably still be with us; so, I imagine, will trunk courses as part of the structured undergraduate programme. But I foresee the possibility of our having to reduce the number of elective course offerings in some areas, especially where patronage is consistently small, and in humanities/social science disciplines I would welcome the return of formal end-of-semester examinations across the board, as well as a serious attempt to standardize the distribution of grades. More positively, I see no reason why the splendid tradition of relaxed and cooperative staff-student relations should be endangered by growth or diversification over the next ten years. Nor would I seek to discourage the underlying values of responsible, involved, critical citizenship which inform this institution, however misunderstood or unwelcome the public expression of such values may sometimes be.

Although it will not be a question for Murdoch's governing body to resolve by itself, unaided by government, the University will some day need to choose between the conflicting claims of elitism and egalitarianism in its admission policies and plans for growth. It may have to decide whether smallness, as a surer guarantee of academic excellence, is to be preferred to growth and diversity. The stark choice is not yet upon us because enrolment growth has been accompanied by a dramatic increase in the listing of first and second preferences for Murdoch by well qualified school-leavers and because we have not yet reached an optimum size.
During the next decade, difficult choices on research priorities will also have to be made. Universities are now expected to attract funds from the private sector in the pursuit of research, the exploration of new teaching fields and the expansion of their physical plant. In this exercise a shift of emphasis from pure to applied research has already started, with government revising the criteria for research fund allocations and with benefactors in industry and commerce expecting direct and profitable returns from their subsidies. Murdoch has already taken some promising initiatives in collaboration with the private sector, including the establishment of a limited liability company (ANUMIN) and participation in a venture capital company (WESTINTEC), a product innovation centre and (through members of the board) a biotechnology company.

In addition to subsidized research and joint ventures with us, I am hoping that corporations and professional bodies will think it worth their while to assist Murdoch with the provision of scholarships, the endowment of chairs, or the construction of buildings. Despite the massive generation of wealth in this State during the past quarter century, much of it derived from mining ventures, lamentably little of it has found its way into our halls of learning. How different it would have been in the United States, Canada or even the United Kingdom! One might have thought that even if our tycoons had no personal enthusiasm for higher education, it would have occurred to more of them that a permanent and tangible memorial on a university or college campus offered them an honourable ticket to respectability, even immortality. To those companies and philanthropic persons who have assisted Murdoch in recent years we are eternally grateful. May many more follow your splendid examples!

In the quest for students of quality and funds from government, tertiary institutions are inevitably pitted against each other. For most of the time, in this State at least, the competition, seems to be played out honourably enough, but Murdoch cannot afford to adopt too low a profile in the market place, the board rooms or the corridors of political power, distasteful and time consuming though such aggressive gamesmanship may be. Sir Louis Matheson found himself caught up in vigorous competition with Melbourne University in his fifteen years as foundation Vice-Chancellor of Monash. “It may be thought that my concern with the competitive position of Monash vis-à-vis Melbourne ill befits the high minded attitude that should inform operators in the world of tertiary education,” Matheson wrote in his memoirs. “But the hard fact is that Monash, in spite of the desperate need for more university capacity, had to claw its way into an unsympathetic world.”

I read recently a vivid account of the administration of Harvard University's longest serving and best known President, Charles W. Eliot. Harvard had been in existence for more than 200 years when Eliot was appointed President in 1869, but it may be of some interest to members and friends of Murdoch University that two fundamental questions which exercised the young Harvard President very early in his tenure of office will also be exercising this not so young Vice-Chancellor more than a century later. Indeed Eliot addressed these questions at his inauguration. The first concerns what should be taught, and the second concerns the utility or relevance of research. Eliot's answer to the first question would have been deemed radical even by Murdoch's standards of 1975, for he averred that “no subject of human inquiry can be out of place in the program of a real university”, provided it is taught at a higher plane than elsewhere. I don't agree with Eliot, and he changed his own mind eventually. But with
regard to the difficult choice between pure and applied search, his answer is one which I would share a century after Eliot proffered it. He rejected a simplistic practicalism in education which ignored humane and scientific values, and warned that nobody could tell which of the research contributions of his day would be the most important for industrial or social purposes fifty or 100 years hence. I think I recall Professor Bob Street having said much the same thing to a journalist a few days ago.

As we press into the second decade, structures of decision making will need to be reviewed, with particular attention paid to the machinery for academic planning, both short-term and long-term planning. Within our present structures there seems to be too little coordination between those responsible for planning and those responsible for resource allocation, and the collective role of the Deans probably needs clearer definition vis-à-vis that of the formally constituted bodies.

Furthermore, the role of the Vice-Chancellor in all three of these key groupings needs to be reviewed. Chief executives of Australian universities are these days in an unemovable predicament because they are expected to take painful decisions on issues of growth and economic in a non-hierarchical, decentralized assortment of academic dukedoms, in each of which sluggish bouts of consultation and cross-referencing among representative committees are meant to occur, with eventual outcomes often reflecting the lowest common denominator of agreement. Sir Louis Matheson writes of his difficulties in the 1960s, when collective decision making was very much in vogue, but pressures are greater now. Matheson noted that Premiers and newspaper editors alike are apt to hold the vice-chancellor personally responsible when things go wrong, even though the wretched man may have been going against his better judgement in trying to implement a resolution passed by some august campus body. Sir Zelman Cowen has told in like vein of his troubles at the University of Queensland in the early 1970s, but the troubles and pressures to which both former Vice-Chancellors refer were political and ideological in origin rather than economic. Those pressures didn't threaten the life blood of an academic discipline or research enterprise.

Despite the call by government for tough decisions on resource allocation in universities or colleges, a university of all places must be governed by consent, and, like Matheson, I think this is probably best achieved if the chief executive is heavily involved in decision making, possibly as chairman of the key committees.

In any event, I will be relying heavily on the professional advice and personal goodwill of my academic colleagues as the steps towards tough decisions are taken, bearing in mind that not all of our tough decisions will involve economies or closures. Some of them will herald innovation, expansion and construction.

And what of the Vice-Chancellor himself? (There are no females of the species yet).

Two distinguished American academics-cum-administrators, California's former president, Clark Kerr, and Harvard's David Riesman, were recently commissioned to review the quality of presidential leadership on American campuses, and one of their preliminary findings was that many college presidents are so consumed by logistics that they have no time to pursue a
larger vision. They found that the ever-increasing role of outside agencies in campus matters is gradually wearing down the men and women who handle the governance of American colleges and universities. I quote: “As leadership is diminished, power and initiative flow ever more rapidly to outside bureaucracies. Under such circumstances, administration too often means simply responding to an impersonal system, flowing along on a ceaseless tide of forms, reports and computer print-outs.” As one President remarked in a moment of exasperation, “I could once say, decisively, the buck stops here. Now it never stops.”

Australian vice-chancellors and college principals experience similar frustrations, made worse perhaps by their nearly total dependence on Commonwealth government funds and by the requirement to satisfy two sets of political masters, federal and state, even though directives from the latter are seldom accompanied by funds, personnel or any form of material support. The Australian federal system is a mixed blessing for the world of tertiary education, though academics who recollect salary levels and general conditions in the poorer state universities prior to 1955, before Sir Robert Menzies’ acceptance of the Murray Report, may feel that it would be unwise to return the responsibility for funding universities to state governments. My own preference would probably be for the Commonwealth to disburse funds for education to the states on a formula related to aggregate income tax earnings, but such an arrangement would be fraught with the risk of destabilizing education policy and making it even more subject to the vagaries of ministerial power play than it is already.

However eager to consult his colleagues the chief executive of an Australian university may be, or however much the victim of elaborate committee structures and participatory democracy he might find himself, he is bound to attract the enmity or scorn of some of his colleagues for some of the time. That prospect does not appeal to me, and I hope to find my pessimism unfounded, but Sir Walter Murdoch himself sends me the message to be brave and cheerful in the face of unpopularity. In a whimsical essay he wrote over 40 years ago, entitled “On having enemies,” he offered these thoughts:

“To say that a man had had no enemies is as much as to say that he has consistently shirked his duty. It is to accuse him of all sorts of cowardly compromises and mean capitulations. Mistrust popularity, the rock on which many a good man has wrecked his soul! Every night, before falling asleep, count your enemies, and make sure that the number is sufficient to earn for you a night's repose.” Murdoch agreed with Edmund Burke, the political philosopher of conservatism, that “it is our business to cultivate friendships and incur enmities,” though it was Burke rather than Murdoch who practised what he preached, not neglecting either half of life's business.

In closing may I draw briefly again on President Eliot of Harvard and his inaugural address. He stressed that a university must grow from seed, that it cannot be transplanted in full leaf and bearing, that it could not be run up like a cotton mill, in six months, to meet a quick demand, that numbers alone cannot constitute it, nor money make it before its time. Universities can be created to meet a demand and acquire an enviable reputation in rather quick time these days, as the twenty-five year history of Monash University attests. I believe that Murdoch only ten years down the track is capable of acquiring a similar reputation in quick time. Eliot believed that a worthy university suited its own environment, and Murdoch,
more quickly than most new universities I suspect, has identified positively with its environment.

I pledge myself to work unstintingly for the welfare of this University, hopeful that Murdoch itself will become a highly valued instrument of national purpose, with its members free to be fearless critics of that national purpose. I move toward this assignment in the knowledge that I may draw freely on the experience and commonsense of a genial Deputy and the wisdom and charity of a supportive Chancellor and Senate. I am fortunate, too, in the promise of cheerful collaboration and loyalty from a wide range of dedicated academic and administrative colleagues.

May sound learning flourish in this place, whatever its material circumstances, throughout Murdoch's second decade and far beyond!

PJ BOYCE