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The 2014 Joan Kirner Social Justice Oration

Communities in Control Conference: The Lucky Country Conference
Melbourne, 26 May, 2014

Presentation by

The Honourable Julia Gillard

Former Prime Minister of Australia
Chair, Global Partnership for Education

Joan Kirner Social Justice Oration

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and in a spirit of reconciliation pay my respects to elders past and present.

I also acknowledge:

- Carol Schwartz, Chair of Our Community
- Denis Moriarty, Group Managing Director of Our Community
- Father Joe Caddy, CEO of CatholicCare
- And all those whose hard work has meant this wonderful event can go ahead.

Tribute to Joan

It is my great pleasure to deliver the Joan Kirner Social Justice Oration. In doing so I follow two women of great talent who are both friends: Sharan Burrow, who just last week was re-elected as the leader of the international trade union movement, and Joan.

It is a great pity that Joan is unable to join us today. We send all our best wishes for her recovery and I hope that hearing about all the good will in this room speeds her return to better health.

And even though we miss her presence, it is absolutely fitting that this lecture is named in Joan's honour. Joan epitomises what it means to campaign for social justice in Australia.

Joan has not only dedicated her life to the pursuit of social inclusion, environmental protection, women's equality and community driven

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development, but to building the language around, and definition of, what a socially inclusive Australia should look like.

This is fundamentally important: we can only be united in our pursuit of a goal if we understand and can articulate the realisation of that goal. When Joan spoke to you in 2012, she defined social justice as fairness. It is to this simple but apt definition that I will speak to you today.

But my first memories of Joan aren't of her elegantly expounding theories of social justice. I actually first met Joan simply because she was Dave's mum. Dave Kirner became a friend of mine through the student movement and we have been mates for a lifetime.

I remember a feisty woman, small in stature but big in impact, telling her university age son exactly what she thought about the cleanliness of his student rental home, his diet, his lifestyle and his friends.

Fortunately, I got the thumbs up and I have been grateful ever since.

I didn't just get to keep my university friend, I was embraced by the whole Kirner family. I shared a house with Kate Kirner, Joan's daughter and met and talked to her wise husband Ron.

And I sat, listened and learned from Joan.

I have never stopped learning from her or being inspired by her.

A keen advocate for education, Joan spearheaded the grassroots campaign for educational reform in Victoria in the 1970s, boosting the most disadvantaged schools and promoting equal access for all students.

Through my own parliamentary career and as Prime Minister, I took up this fight nationally, leading the most significant reforms to school funding and quality in Australia's history.

Like me, Joan was also a first – the first female premier in Victoria. For the pride and the pain that such a first brings, I am sure Joan shares my view that the opportunities far outweighed the challenges.

As a founder of Emily's List, Joan worked to ensure other women with a commitment to social justice and progressive politics had the support they needed to enter Parliament, and to make their own mark in creating a more socially inclusive Australia. I have been proud to work alongside her in that endeavour.

Joan remains one of Australia's great champions of social justice. I am honoured to deliver this lecture in her name to you today.

Own Sense of Social Justice

Like Joan, I have sought to use my own career to defend and advance fairness.

As a university student, I joined my peers in fighting back against Fraser's education cuts, and sought to reform the Australian Union of Students to refocus its advocacy on the needs of students, rather than foreign policy.

I worked for eight years as a lawyer defending the rights of working people, including badly mistreated outworkers exploited by the clothing and textiles manufacturing industry.

During my years in Parliament, I worked to deliver policies that reflected the values of the Labor Party and labour movement, values that centre not only on fairness in the workplace, but on building an Australia that will deliver a better life for our children.

Values focused on education and the social mobility that it brings.

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Like many others, and I'm sure like many of you in this room today, my own understanding of social justice began with a childlike sense of inequality.

The children at school who failed to keep up with their studies, distracted by challenges at home.

The migrant kids who struggled with a new way of life and learning.

Differences amongst us, between those who had plenty, and those who did not have much at all.

Even then, I had my own ideas about how to address this lack of fairness.

It had to be through education.

My parents had both been denied an education, and were determined to ensure that my sister, Alison, and I were not.

I formed the view early that a great education could change a child's life, and that fairness demands that every child receives a great one.

I still believe now, as I did then, that education can unlock social justice.

For me, a great public education opened up a path that ultimately led to my becoming the 27th Prime Minister of Australia.

But as great a testimony as this is to our country, we are still letting children down.

Children with disability, children from poorer homes, indigenous kids, are all more likely to miss out on the great education that I received.

What I did

As both Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister, I knew that to create social justice, to fairly distribute opportunity, we first had to ensure that every single child received a great education.

As a government, we designed and started to roll out a needs based funding model to ensure every school had the ability to deliver a high quality education.

We focused on quality, tying new funding to an improvement agenda for schools.

Better teaching.

Greater investment in delivering literacy and numeracy, the building blocks of a good education.

Empowered principals.

More computers.

A national curriculum written by experts, not politicians.

We prioritised transparency, delivering the MySchool website so we could better understand which schools and methods were getting results and how we could improve, particularly for disadvantaged children.

We reformed our universities, ensuring more students from disadvantaged backgrounds could earn a university education, and expanded apprenticeship numbers.

We worked hard to improve access to affordable, high quality early childhood education and care.

Over the last twenty-five years, research has shown that the best opportunity we have to influence a child's life chances is through their early education.

We know that the children who struggle most at school and then later in life are those living in the most socio-economically disadvantaged and very remote areas of Australia.

If this disadvantage is not addressed early, it permeates throughout life.

Through better care and attention, we can stop children from falling behind before they reach school.

We can ensure that they have the best chance to excel in their cognitive and social development.

We can give them a head start to achieve throughout the rest of their lives.

Our National Quality Agenda sought to do just that.

By improving staff to child ratios, we ensured that children receive the attention they need.

And by boosting staff qualification requirements, we have helped our hardworking and dedicated early childhood staff to develop the skills they need to deliver a great early education.

I am deeply proud of the work we did to improve children's access to a quality education in Australia.

And I am very proud that the primary author of the landmark blueprint to lift the quality of our schools stands by the work he led, and the commitments we need to keep to our children and their success in life in the years ahead.

I am proud, too, of what my Government did to unlock fairness for those Australians who needed our support most.

We launched Disability Care to support around 460,000 Australians with disability, their families and carers.

How we cared for those with disability in Australia had become an equality issue.

460,000 Australians who we had let down for far too long.

Through our investment in the National Broadband Network, we made a commitment to unlock the opportunities that greater connectivity and togetherness can bring to our communities.

We delivered health reform, pouring thousands of new doctors and nurses into the system and delivering record levels of access to bulk billing.

We invested in the long term disadvantaged to bring them back into work, and the dignity and pride that comes with it.

As part of creating a system of fairness of work, we supported the Australian Services Union's equal pay case for women working in the social and community services sector, the women who assist families and children in crisis, staff our women's refuges, look after our sick and others in need.

We launched the Royal Commission into child abuse in institutional settings, finally providing an avenue for those who had been denied the most basic form of justice for so long an opportunity to speak out.

We enhanced our efforts to support gender equity globally, by investing \$48.5 million over four years in UN women and \$320 million over ten years to empower women in the Pacific. We also appointed Australia's first Global Ambassador for Women and Girls.

I am deeply honoured to have had the opportunity, as Prime Minister, to deliver on the social goals I have been fighting for my whole life.

And I am deeply honoured to have built on the work of so many social justice campaigners that came before me.

What's at stake now

Social justice is not a given.

It does not just happen.

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It has to be defined.

Fought for.

Defended.

It is fragile.

The fragility of some of what we have built and what we still must achieve, has become so evident over recent months.

We have seen the recommendations of the Commission of Audit and the response of the Government in the Budget that was handed down earlier this month.

Budgets are made up of choices. They make us – all of us, no matter what side of politics we are on – think about what we care most about – what we want valued in our society.

What we want to create and reward, preserve and defend.

And that is why we are here today. We understand those choices, which ones are right and which ones are wrong.

Social justice is formed from the decisions we take, as governments, as individuals and as communities, to prioritise fairness.

These decisions must be made and remade, every day.

The arguments that underpin them must be prosecuted and re-prosecuted, every day.

We need to be clear on what kind of country we want to be for the next century. Who will we care for? What will we value? How will we maximise and share opportunity?

In answering these questions we define our purpose, our dedication to fairness.

We need to deliver on this purpose, no matter the opposition we face or the difficulties we encounter.

We are not alone in these challenges.

Progressive values and the fairness they seek to uphold are under threat across the globe.

In the United States, notwithstanding the heroic efforts of President Obama, the American middle class is still struggling to find a firmer measure of economic security. Income growth is stagnant. Income inequality is growing. And Washington is gridlocked.

More desperately, in places like sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, we see the most basic tenants of social justice under attack in the most extreme ways.

Right now, the world is shocked and rightly outraged at the kidnapping of over 200 school girls in Nigeria.

That is 200 young women denied their basic right to an education and instead destined for a life of slavery.

But while they focus our resolve, we must not be fooled into believing that these abuses are isolated events.

Attacks on basic human rights and social justice are disgustingly common. Consider these statistics for just a moment:

- According to estimates from the International Labor Organisation, at least 980,000 children are in forced labour as a result of trafficking (2005).
- 35% of women aged 20 to 24 years old globally were married as children (2010).

- In 2011, 6.9 million children aged under five died, mostly from diseases that could have been prevented.
- 57 million school aged children are currently not receiving an education, and around 250 million children in the world either fail to make it to grade 4 or do not reach the minimum level of reading, writing, and doing math.

This is our world, the one we share. If we want to change it, education for every child is the key.

What I will do about it

It is that mission, of education for all, to which I am dedicating my personal energies to now.

Through my role as Chair of the Global Partnership for Education, I am working to ensure that all girls and boys, no matter where they grow up or what their parents do for a living, have access to a high quality education.

In June we will be holding the Second Replenishment Pledging Conference in Brussels, where we are asking for a commitment of \$3.5 billion US dollars from our donors.

This is a difficult task.

But these investments are worth making.

We can lift 171 million people out of poverty, by ensuring every student in low income countries acquires basic reading skills.

We can boost agricultural output in sub-Saharan Africa by up to 25 per cent through investing in girls' education.

If we can teach a child's mother to read, that child will be 50% more likely to live beyond the age of five.

With \$3.5 billion, the Global Partnership can support the schooling of 29 million children in 66 countries, and increase the quality of education provided.

A quality education amplifies and sustains human, economic and social development.

It lifts children out of poverty.

It brings their families with them.

It empowers and it emboldens.

It is essential to creating socially just, equitable communities.

The world I want to see globally is one where all children, no matter who they are or where they live, get a great education.

And of course, this includes Australia.

At home, I want a world class education to be the norm, not the exception.

I want us to be invigorated by measuring our performance and use such measurements to enhance equity, not be scared by it.

I want kids to get great jobs.

To keep learning.

To constantly train and reskill to meet the new and complex needs of the Asian Century.

I want to see an educated country, a compassionate country, and a country that holds social justice and fairness at the core of its identity.

I want our country to take these values to the world – to constantly serve as a model for, and be an advocate of, social justice globally.

Conclusion

Friends.

Social justice is under threat on multiple fronts.

It is under threat in Australia and the fight for it globally is as hard as ever.

It has taken those before us over a century to build universal access to health care, a more equitable and quality education system, a safety net and real support for our parents and grandparents.

As a nation, our foreign aid program has invested billions of dollars into developing countries, to ensure that the social justice that we have sought to create for ourselves is shared globally.

When we don't have a political leadership willing to fight for social justice, the responsibility will inevitably weigh heavy on our communities.

It will weigh heavy on the third sector, on our charities and volunteers.

It will weigh heavy on our student movements, on the press and on our public servants.

It will weigh heavy on our communities and both you and me in this room today.

From this great weight, we must grow stronger.

We must be clear about our purpose.

We must speak with conviction.

What I learned from Joan is something that has driven me every waking day in public life:

That to succeed in shaping our world, you have to have a sense of purpose about the goals and values you want to serve.

Joan epitomises purpose in public life.

This is why she is one of the greats amongst us.

And why we respect her, and care for her, and love her, very much.

What Joan taught me, what she teaches us every day, is that we must never stop striving to create the socially just Australia, and socially just world, that the children who will follow us deserve.

I have complete faith that the conviction to do so is here in this room, and I hope that through the course of this conference, you will find that conviction burning stronger.

I wish you all the very best as you take the skills and ideas you have learned at this conference and translate them into your sense of purpose, so that you can build your own socially just communities.

Joan expects no less from each of us.