

University of South Australia

Occasional Address by The Hon Greg Combet AM

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Acknowledgements:

The Hon John Hill, Pro-Chancellor
Prof David Lloyd, Vice Chancellor and President
Members of the University Council
Doctors, Emeritus Professors, Fellows
Senior Management and Staff of the University
Graduands
Ladies and Gentlemen

When I received notice that the University had determined to offer me this Honorary Award, Doctor of the University, I was both profoundly surprised and profoundly honoured.

My surprise stemmed from the fact that people who have been active in the labour movement in Australia are not often recognised for their contribution to society. And that too was the source of my pride in receiving such an honour.

Many of you today are graduating in the arts, in social science, education, journalism and a range of other fields of study.

My advice to you is to be open to your education taking you in different directions, to make sure that you follow your interests and passions in your working lives, and most of all be true to your values.

What do I mean by this? I will endeavour to explain by reference to my own experience.

I grew up in a disadvantaged area of western Sydney and developed a keen sense of the inequality and power imbalance in society.

The most important opportunity in my life - that of a free university education - was made possible by the Whitlam Labor Government in the 1970s. Prior to that only people from higher socio-economic backgrounds were able to attend University.

I chose to study Mining Engineering and worked as a coalminer and later in minerals exploration in Queensland.

But I quickly realised that a career in mining would not satisfy my passion for social justice. I changed the course of my career and found my way into the trade union movement, studying economics and industrial relations along the way.

About a decade later I became the leader of the trade union movement. From that position I drew on my education, experience and power to prosecute major campaigns and public policy reforms.

My engineering background proved to be extremely useful. Trade union and political campaigns, for example, require disciplined project and financial management - essential engineering skills.

One campaign that I am most proud of was to force James Hardie, an asbestos manufacturer, to contribute to a multibillion dollar compensation fund for victims of its products.

Another was the recovery of almost \$800 million in employee entitlements following the collapse of the airline Ansett.

In 2007 I entered Parliament and became a Minister in the Rudd and Gillard Governments.

My first portfolio in Government involved sorting out multibillion dollar defence contracts that had gone wrong. Engineering skills were once again critical to success.

My engineering background also proved to be enormously beneficial when as Climate Change Minister I legislated a carbon price across the economy to reduce emissions.

I had one funny experience in particular, when the chief executives of coal mining companies, who had not done their homework on my background, tried to pull the wool over my eyes about methane emissions from underground coal mining.

I was able to point to my prior training in methane gas control. They were a bit surprised.

Today I am in a fortunate position to continue to contribute to the society through my roles in overseeing investments on behalf of not-for-profit industry superannuation funds.

My point is that your university education can be the platform from which you may explore many different opportunities in your working life.

At this exciting time as you graduate take a moment to think about the possibilities. Consider carefully the values that are important to you. Do not be afraid to embrace the opportunities about which you feel most passionate.

A university education not only allows you to make choices about your own working life, but it also affords you the opportunity to contribute to society. And this is the most exciting thing in my view.

You can change the world for the better in each of your fields of study: by educating others, by helping others, by improving the built environment, through investigative journalism, through communications and the arts, by working with indigenous Australians, by working in business.

In fact I wish I was sitting down there amongst you with so much ahead.

I congratulate all of you and wish you every success.

And finally, I sincerely thank the University and its leadership for according me this honour.

I am truly grateful.