

Occasional Address to University of South Australia Graduation Ceremony on 27th March, 2017

Schools of Management and Economics

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INSIGHTS FROM AN UNEXPECTED CAREER

Firstly, let me express my gratitude to the Chancellor and Council of the university for this honour, which is made all the greater by the respect and affection I hold for the institution. Its rapidly rising reputation and close historical and current links to industry and business and training of their professionals are indeed praiseworthy.

This address is occasional in two senses, one being its infrequency, but much more importantly in that it is a special event celebrating achievement and recognition. Whilst for me, the occasion is more about the past, for you it is all about the future, enabled by education and propelled by your status as professionals. It is not into a future of gloom and doom, as some like to project, but one of continued improvement in many spheres, where change is the only constant.

Today you have heard a generous description of my unintended and diverse career, which commenced with geology. From this, it may seem to you that knowing little about them does not appear to be an impediment to achieving high office in unrelated fields.

How is it so? My experience is that a broad and diverse career is not always about planning and proactivity, but often about reactivity and opportunism. Opportunism now has negative connotations, but also means "give it a go", as in "opportunity knocks". To create and to take advantage of opportunities in new fields, that often arise unexpectedly, there are some attitudes you will find helpful.

Above all, you will need the support of others, especially your family and friends, and you will need "backers", who have the confidence to "give you a go" or perhaps "throw you in the deep end". These will also include mentors, but you need to choose the right mentors and exemplars, not only those who are appointed for you. I have been very fortunate in this regard.

You will need to listen to others with expertise and a good way of introduction into unfamiliar fields is to volunteer for well managed charitable organisations. Seek out examples of best practice in these areas, so you will know what real success and good leadership look like. You will be able to identify where your existing skill sets and aptitudes are transferable. As your experience broadens, the opportunities in other fields will multiply, because breadth begets wisdom and the ability to see consequences of decisions, which is a rare commodity. Considered and insightful contributions are valued in new fields, but hyperbole, exaggeration and alarmism are ultimately not productive, albeit seemingly valued in contemporary politics.

There are a few philosophical proverbs, which apply across all professional fields. These include the application of the Three P's, which are perspective, probability and proportionality. One needs to know where other stakeholders are coming from (very few will actually be irrational from their particular positions of self interest). Issues of low probability and overall consequence should not be accorded high priority, and it is important to identify these realities in your new field - except perhaps if you are entering politics.

The next proverb is "what's right, not who's right", which is especially relevant in matters of ethics and governance. It is the antidote to tribalism, which is good for following football, but unbecoming to professionalism and brings with it predictability of response, no matter what is the question.

The third proverb, is that expressed by the famous economist, Maynard Keynes, suggesting that when the circumstances change, it is logical for one to change their opinion. New information is ongoing in making decisions and those involved in narrow established fields are often the least likely to change their positions, which is an opportunity for the wise outsider.

Now I would like to take my own last piece of advice, which is for you to be concise in all your communications, and so conclude. You are now like someone with a wheelbarrow - the job is all in front of you. UniSA has provided you with a sturdy barrow to push along your career path.