

Fulfilling human potential and saving the planet

By Barry Jones

My context

I was surprised and touched when Corrie Perkin proposed a Barry Jones Oration at the Sorrento Writers' Festival and delighted that the first one is prehumous.

I was born in Geelong on 11th October 1932, in the first third – just – of the 20th Century, barely 14 years after the end of World War I.

I can vividly remember the Great Depression, followed War II closely and anxiously, assumed, correctly, that use of the atomic bomb against Japan would change everything, was shocked by the deaths of Franklin D Roosevelt and John Curtin (both in 1945), even more shocked by the assassination of Mohandas Gandhi (1948), alarmed by the Cold War, watched Mao's victory in China (1949) and the death of Stalin (1953) with obsessive interest.

In 1950, as a seventeen year old student, I had been profoundly influenced by the philosopher Bertrand Russell, and, as a groupie, observed him in Melbourne at close quarters. He said: 'Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind'.

If I am remembered all, I would like it to be for my role in abolishing the death penalty in Australia, promoting the arts, especially

music and film, and for being a prophet without much honour in promoting linkages between science and politics.

I was the first Australian politician, long before I became Minister for Science in 1983, to argue that climate change was an existential threat to civilization, and to campaign about the genetic revolution, the information revolution, post industrialism and a post carbon economy.

I was too political to be a fully accepted intellectual, too intellectual to be regarded as an effective politician in the Australian context, conspicuously in the killer instinct, too individual and idiosyncratic to be a factional player.

Towards complexity – and escaping from Plato’s cave.

The great challenge for us all is to find out what it is to be fully human – to explore a greater range and depth of personal experience: observation, understanding, creativity, imagination, empathy, even for those who are remote.

High culture, with all its complexity and inevitable elitism, can take us to places where we do not expect to go, and has some aura of danger, exploring outer space or the *terra (terror?) incognita* of inner space. It can be life changing, producing ‘the oceanic feeling’ and introducing us to transcendence’ (which I think of as orgasm without the sex).

In *The Republic*, Plato describes a darkened cave, with a long entrance leading to daylight and the natural world. The cave’s inhabitants are there for life, chained, but also conditioned through habit. Shadow plays seen on the walls constitute reality to them and they are unable to explore the world outside.

The cave metaphor seemed eerily prophetic in the era, first, of film, then television, then computing, computer games, smartphones and social media.

Getting out of Plato’s cave involves encouraging people to confront ‘the shock of recognition’ in unfamiliar, challenging phenomena, grasping the range of human diversity, trying to reconcile **depth** of understanding and **breadth** of experience, distinguishing between the **macro** and the **micro**.

‘The shock of recognition’, a coinage by Herman Melville, examines the impact of self-discovery after exposure to, or immersion in, the uncanny, the challenging, the transcendental, relating the specific to the universal, the immediate to the timeless, the individual to all humanity.

I tried to pursue the concept of ‘the abundant life’, rattling the bars of the cage, escaping from a conceptual shoe box, by investing time and concentration, connecting with transcendental creativity, pursuing intellectual and aesthetic engagement, aiming to experience excitement, satisfaction, happiness, and often a sense of awe. This involves taking risks. High culture, with all its complexity, can take us to places where we do not expect to go.

Tackling complexity is not just a matter of taste but an essential evolutionary developmental mechanism, which strengthens brain plasticity and capacity, wards off loss of cognition and the onset of dementia more effectively than computer games, Sudoku, crossword puzzles or jigsaws.

This suggests an analogy with cathedrals, and their two axes, vertical and horizontal.

The vertical pulls our gaze upward, looking through the vault towards the stars, reaching out for the transcendental and numinous, rapture and the unattainable; for some, Heaven. Pursuing the vertical is difficult, complex, dangerous, involving travelling alone, coming to terms with the mysterious, the aspirational, the abstract, the unique.

The horizontal is comfortable, familiar, reassuring, earthbound, physical, less challenging and safer, with no fear of falling.

In a secular, technological, materialist and self-absorbed society, there may be risk in even mentioning the cathedral analogy since so many have been deeply alienated, even traumatized, by childhood experience of religion.

When I become preoccupied with a subject, the urge to share experience becomes irresistible, even if my audience shows palpable reluctance.

I often feel like Odysseus on a long voyage of discovery, making a connection between me/ here/ now and everyone/ everywhere/ all time, balancing the sublime and unique with the quotidian, recognising the tension between the unique and the universal. It helps me make sense of my own experience, and reinforces a sense of connectedness ('we are not alone') with the unfamiliar and remote.

It is troubling to observe that so many lack access to, or interest in, the unfamiliar and transcendental. If they knew nothing of Michelangelo, Shakespeare, Bach, Darwin and Einstein they were missing something potentially life changing.

On the dark side of history, if the names of Lenin, Hitler, Stalin and Mao draw a blank then fellow humans, especially the young, are unlikely to grasp the context in which their world has evolved.

Beliefs

Australians often seem deeply uneasy about attempting to examine the range and depth of their beliefs. Like most people, other than fundamentalists, I feel shifty and inconclusive on the subject, because of a deep uncertainty about what I believe. That the universe is mysterious? Yes. That God exists? Possibly. That Jesus was a uniquely powerful and charismatic teacher? Yes. That he had a special or even unique relationship with God? Unanswerable. That the Church is a divine institution? No. That the Bible is infallible? No. That there is a soul, linked to a collective consciousness? Remotely possible. That there is life, as we know it, after death? Unlikely.

If pushed, I generally describe myself as 'Christian fellow-traveller' or sometimes 'a northern hemisphere Christian' because most of my transcendental experiences have been in Europe. I am not confident enough to be an agnostic. I agree with rationality as a principle, but feel uneasy when it turns into dogma or rigid instrumentalism. Habitual mistrust is unattractive and dangerous, especially if linked with fear of difference/fear of the unknown. I am more of an ironist than a rationalist – an isolated position in Australia where irony never took on, except as a form of mockery.

It is hard to be precise about my core beliefs.

Paradoxically, doubt takes me away from materialism and certainty. I cannot be satisfied with simple materialist explanations when too many elements fill me with awe or perplexity. Religious issues and philosophy are constantly boiling around in my head. So, 'Dubito, ergo sum', as René Descartes should have said. I recognise that secularists generally have a commitment to goodness, generosity, truth, justice and courage: they feel no need for a revealed religion.

I want to discuss the major issues that I have been most heavily involved me in recent decades

Increasing political engagement

Most voters are now spectators – not participants – in the political process with in which the real and the virtual have been inverted. Until last year's Federal election it was as if a horror movie on the screen represented the reality, and the audience could not change the outcome.

Party structures are oligarchic and secretive, and their members, in practice, comprise two categories: insiders (small in numbers, and ageing, but powerful) and outsiders (larger numbers, also ageing, but weak).

But the encouraging lesson to be learned from the May 2022 election is that specific issues – effective action on climate change, an anti-Corruption Commission and issues related to gender equity (and exposure of bullying and intimidation) can encourage dismayed voters to become involved, community by community, and reject the nostrums peddled by major parties ('This is the way we do things round here').

This was a major theme in my *What Is To Be Done* (Scribe, 2020).

Climate Change and Saving the Planet

In 1932, the year of my birth, world population was estimated at 2.1 billion. In April 2023 it was estimated at 8.05 billion, an increase of 383%.

But in 1932 life expectancy globally was about 40 years, with high levels of infant mortality, low levels of nutrition and resource consumption generally, and subsistence agriculture the largest work sector.

In 2023, global life expectancy is 73.2 years, urban population comprises 56%, infant mortality has fallen dramatically, levels of nutrition and consumption generally have increased exponentially.

Per capita consumption has increased in 90+ years by probably a factor of 15:1.

There are seven words, all starting with the letter 'C', which determine Australia's No. 1 ranking of greenhouse gas emissions per capita: nearly double that of China (although China is far ahead in absolute numbers).

They are: Coal, Cities, Cars, Cement, Chain-saws, Cows and Consumption.

Apart from our domestic consumption of coal we are among the world's greatest exporters of it. Every tonne of coal burnt produces 3.67 tonnes of carbon dioxide which stays in the atmosphere for about a century, changing its chemistry and physics.

Australia's pattern of urban development in the wide brown land is almost unique – we have two cities with 5 million people, two with 2 million and a fifth with 1 million. Britain, with a population of 67 million in an area that could fit into Victoria, has only two cities above one million.

Our low-density cities are huge – Melbourne is bigger than London, Paris or Delhi. This leads to a very high level of car dependence, and building freeways makes cities even bigger and more car and truck dependent.

The manufacture of cement is exceptionally high in greenhouse gas emissions and its use is increasing in housing, construction generally and public works.

Only 16 per cent of Australia's land mass is forested, and in many regional communities use of the chain-saw provides economic security – at least in the short term.

What is tactfully described as 'enteric emissions' from beef cattle are very significant. Methane is more damaging than CO², but stays in the atmosphere for relatively short periods.

Our very high – but uneven – levels of consumption leads to prodigious production of waste and this contributes to greenhouse gas emissions.

Latest readings from the North Pole and Antarctica indicate that temperatures are rising at the poles at about seven times the global average. If the Antarctic ice shelf melts, sea levels will rise dramatically, threatening hundreds of millions of people. If the tundra thaws, releasing huge volumes of methane, the prospects for our species may be irreversible

'I have no idea what is in the Australian Constitution, but I don't want anything changed'.

1. The Constitution

Defenders of our existing Constitutional arrangements, say, in effect: 'I oppose any change to the Australian Constitution, although I have never read it and have no idea what is in it.'

The One Big Idea (OBI) that I want to argue for is this: it is a major mistake to address the republic issue in isolation, as if that was all that mattered.

The simplest action – and the national priority – must be to change the Constitution so that it reflects **current practice**, rather than our historic relationship with an absentee monarch, whose distance may actually have led enchantment to the view.

We must come out of the closet.

We should come clean and acknowledge that in practice we have already adopted republican forms, and the Head of State's viceroy, the Governor-General, has become a cypher.

Our view of Australian history was distorted, with many of our leaders – John Howard for example – acting as if it had begun, quite abruptly, on 26th January 1788, that 65,000 years of First Nations occupation was irrelevant or peripheral and that we never had to address issues such as the frontier wars, slavery, racism, class, inequality.

The republic v. monarchy impasse demonstrates a disturbing degree of Australian infantilism – lack of faith in our own institutions and an ingrained pessimism that if we attempted to change the status quo we'd muck it up.

Infantilisation is essentially a reluctance to leave home.

We must explain what is in the Constitution, and what is not. Schools, universities, the media in all forms will have to be involved – also communities.

It's a matter of being honest with ourselves.

The Australian colonies were well in advance of Great Britain in adopting political reform and edging towards democracy. Catholics and Jews were never barred from voting. We had universal manhood suffrage in the 1850s but not in Britain until 1918 – much later than in Germany or Austria. Universal female suffrage for the Commonwealth was in 1902, in Britain in 1928.

We were pioneers of the secret ballot, payment of MPs, an elected upper house (still lacking in Britain) and an independent commission to draw electoral boundaries.

The Australian colonies were innovators, but the Constitution of the Commonwealth had to be negotiated with the British, and represented a reversion.

There was a remarkable paradox at the core of the Commonwealth of Australian Constitution Act. Australia's Constitution is the only one in the world where the text was adopted by direct vote of citizens (overwhelmingly male) in a Referendum. However, the Constitution makes no reference to democracy, democratic practice, or the system of responsible government as we have experienced it for 122 years.

The United States Constitution dates from 1789 and has been amended 27 times since then. It begins with the words, 'We the people...' The US government still operates pretty much as written in the Constitution.

The Australian Constitution dates from 1900 and although the product of referenda in the colonies/states, and beginning with the words 'the people... have agreed', it is in form an Act of the United Kingdom Parliament: a gracious gift to a distant child. In practice, it has proved very difficult to amend: only eight referenda have been carried, the last in 1977.

Under the Australian Constitution, there are only two pre-requisites for our head of state, following the British *Act of Settlement* (1701): the King or Queen must be a descendent of the Electress Sophia of Hanover and must not be a Catholic. Until the UK law was changed in 2013 there was a third pre-requisite: must not be married to a Catholic. So far, these conditions have been met. Is that enough for the future?

The Electress Sophia (1630-1714) was a granddaughter of James I, a cousin of the childless Queen Anne, a Protestant and mother of George I.

Robert French, later Chief Justice of the High Court, commented in May 2008:

It is unacceptable in contemporary Australia that the legal head of the Australian state, under present constitutional arrangements, can never be chosen by the people or their representatives, cannot be other than a member of the Anglican Church, can never be other than British and can never be an Indigenous person.

I find it hard to improve on that.

With the Australia Act (1986) the Commonwealth Constitution was 'repatriated' with the UK Parliament graciously giving up its power to legislate for us. However, the Constitution remains cringe making as Governor-General Hurley's multiple secret appointments of Scott Morrison to five Ministries demonstrated.

The last exercise of the Sovereign's power to veto legislation in Great Britain was by Queen Anne in 1707 (even then, on Ministerial advice). But under the Commonwealth Constitution (ss. 58, 59, 60) the veto power is expressly preserved in Australia. Should this be a matter of concern, or just ignored? ('It doesn't mean what it says.')

That's the position that needs to be questioned, challenged, shaken: it will be central to adopting 'The Voice', which will precede, correctly, I think, any substantial move on a Republic.

Aboriginal Reconciliation and the Republic are inextricably linked. The monarchist cause is essentially the last expression of White Australia, its rhetoric, culture, ceremonies, politics, and the habit of deference. It is a static, essentially nostalgic, position in a society that, although dynamic in some ways, is uncertain how to express itself. It is the politics of amnesia.

The republican cause is essentially multicultural, pluralistic, independent, and irreverent – in a word, Australian. However, after two decades of only muffled (even muddled) debate, the cause does not excite mass support, for example in traditional blue-collar Labor electorates.

2. 'The Voice' to Parliament

The introduction of disease, especially smallpox, as early as 1789, decimated indigenous communities. There were 250 massacres that we have some details about in what has been called 'the frontier wars', a hotly contested issue in 'the culture wars'. There may have been about 400. Prof. Lyndall Ryan has estimated 65,000 indigenous killings in Queensland alone, between 1788 and 1930, with many thousands in other colonies/ states.

It is possible that indigenous killings number as many as Australian deaths in action in World Wars I and II combined.

Indigenes were driven off their traditional lands, forbidden to speak indigenous languages, many children removed from their mothers ('the stolen generation') until about 1970, and often tormented, starved, shot or poisoned. The last officially sanctioned

massacre occurred in 1928 in the Northern Territory, near Coniston Station. There were 'unofficial' massacres in the 1930s.

Unlike Canada, New Zealand and the United States, in Australia there was never any attempt to negotiate treaties with 'First Nations' peoples.

In the 19th and much of the 20th Century what was called 'the passing of the Aborigines' was taken for granted. In recent decades authoritarianism was justified by the explanation, 'we are doing it for their own good', a rigidity, harshness, cruelty, even sadism in institutions – armed forces, churches, schools, orphanages.

Our failure to recognise the suffering, dispossession and marginalisation of our First Nations was part of what the anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner, in his important Boyer Lectures in 1968 for the ABC, called 'the great Australian silence.'

The 2021 Australian Census recorded an indigenous population of 812,000.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders number 3.3% of Australia's population, 28% of all prisoners, 13% of homicide victims and 11% of those charged with homicide. Adult prisoners as a proportion of all incarcerations range from 9% in Victoria (691 prisoners) to 84% (1,477) in the Northern Territory.

'Blinding trachoma' ended in Europe and the United States in the 1950s

but remains in some remote Australian indigenous communities. (I have had some involvement in the campaign to end it.)

Indigenous issues remain highly sensitive with much of the Coalition's base, demonstrated by failure to endorse the 'Uluru Statement from the Heart' (May 2017).

Peter Dutton has explained his reluctance to support the Referendum on inserting 'A Voice to Parliament' in the Constitution is that far more detail must be provided because that the proposed 'Voice' might cripple how Government works. The charges are wrong, hypocritical and dishonest.

In Australian Referenda, the question posed is almost always very simple, sometimes even obscure, leaving detail to be worked out by the Parliament in legislation if it is carried. The questions **expand** the role of Parliament – they never contract it.

Kenneth Hayne, an eminent former Justice of the High Court, commented: 'The Constitution sets out principles. It does not set out machinery. Machinery can and should change as times change. And it's Parliament that will do that, not the Referendum. So I think that asking for details is a distraction'.

The advice of the Solicitor-General is essentially the same. So is that of Robert French, former Chief Justice.

In 1946 a Referendum was carried giving Parliament the capacity to make laws on social services. The question asked was:

Do you approve of the proposed law for the alteration of the Constitution entitled 'Constitution Alteration (Social Services) 1946'?

Note that there was no detail provided: not one word referring to maternity allowances, widow's pensions, child endowment, unemployment, pharmaceutical, sickness and hospital benefits, medical and dental services.

But the Voice to Parliament, however constructed, has the potential to stimulate informed debate, set priorities and lead to practical outcomes.

Is it symbolic? You bet. Don't underrate the significance of symbols.

But we must act now. Timing is, if not everything, always a central element in whether taking action will work.

I remember with some bitterness that in 1999, with the other Referendum, on a republic, there were zealots who said, 'The model set out in the Referendum question doesn't go far enough. If we vote it down now, a better model will quickly emerge that we can all agree on.'

Twenty three years later, this has not yet happened.

It is now 235 years after 26 January 1788, with 'terra nullius' as the law of the land for 205 of them. Our Commonwealth Constitution, dating from 1901, made only two references to our First Nations people – both negative: that they were not to be counted in the Census and the Commonwealth could make no laws for their benefit.

The 1967 Referendum was a valuable first step, the Mabo judgment of 1992 was a second, the 'Apology to the Stolen Generation' in 2008 a third – but we must now complete the journey.

This is not just for the benefit of First Nations people, it is an essential element of being honest with ourselves, to fulfil the human potential of all of us.

It's time.

Do it now.

Famous last words

Our species is infinitely complex, infinitely precious, infinitely vulnerable, infinitely destructive, but also infinitely capable of the sublime and transcendent. We must continue to aspire to the universal, to explore the galaxy, to explain mysteries, of which humans are the most perplexing.

Australia, and my Party too, must make a commitment to restoring the primacy of reason, rejecting a paranoid view of history and 'telling truth to power'.

As he lay dying, Tolstoy reaffirmed his commitment to rationality: 'Even in the valley of the shadow of death two plus two does not make six'. When Primo Levi was a prisoner in Auschwitz, he broke off an icicle and sucked it to relieve his thirst, until a guard knocked it out of his hand. 'Why?' ('Warum?'), he asked. The guard replied, 'Here is no why'. ('Hier is kein warum'.) In too many of our public acts, there is no 'Why?' Our blind adoption of irrational policies, supine and unquestioning acquiescence to anything the United States proposes is potentially destructive.

Our democratic society depends on insisting on answers to the 'Why?' questions.

I live in the spirit of Samuel Beckett's words in *The Unnamable*:

It will be I? It will be the silence, where I am? I don't know.
I'll never know, in the silence you don't know. You must
go on. I can't go on. I'll go on.