

INFLUENCES ON MY POLITICAL CAREER

Gareth Evans*

Melbourne High during my time here — from 1958 to 1961, back in the dark ages before even your parents were born — rivalled the top private schools not only academically, having a fantastic cast of teachers and a lot of very bright students, but in the multi-dimensionality of the educational experience it provided. I learned a lot academically, particularly about history and the history of ideas and the values that have moved the world. But I also learned a lot about myself, my strengths and weaknesses, and what kind of career might be open to me.

I learned for a start, in the school cadets, that whatever other career I might follow, it was not going to be in the military. And I learned that I was never going to cut it in the theatre, the world of music or as a sportsperson, through working and playing alongside — and having to compare myself with them as I did — some student contemporaries who later became legendary in these fields. (Though it's probably only your grandparents who will recognise these names, I'm referring to Max Gillies as an actor, the three boys who started the world-famous band *The Seekers*, and David Parkin as a footballer.) But it was also where I learned to debate, and to make my first-ever television appearance (on a program called 'Parliament of Youth'), and I guess it was that which first made me appreciate I might have a future in politics.

But, interestingly, I can't remember current political issues, either domestic or international, ever really being seriously discussed at Melbourne High School, either inside or outside the classroom,

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even in school and interschool debates. There was certainly then no Political Interest Group, and no subjects at all in the curriculum addressing contemporary politics or other current affairs: Modern History ended with the French Revolution, and British History was about just that.

I guess this was at least partly a function of the general torpor that characterised the public life of the country in the last years of the Menzies era. Domestically, we were very socially conservative, mono-cultural, philistine and provincial, in ways all mercilessly described at the time in Donald Horne's famous book, *The Lucky Country*. And internationally, we were barely conscious of our geographical place and economic future lying in Asia; to the extent we thought about security at all, were very comfortably and uncritically dependent on our great (and powerful) Anglosphere friends, the United Kingdom and the United States.

But things then changed. When the cultural revolution of the 1960s took off right around the West, and very much here in Australia, it was too late for school, but perfectly timed for my university days. In that decade, there really was a revolution in social norms, including religion, morality, music, drugs, clothing (and the lack of it!), accompanied by an explosion of feeling among my generation, coming of age at the time, at the unacceptability of the White Australia policy, our treatment of Indigenous Australians, censorship, capital punishment, draconian anti-abortion laws and, as the '60s wore on, what was seen as America's indefensible war in Vietnam.

It was all this that really stirred my juices and set me on the career path I eventually followed. I was heavily involved in university student political activism around nearly all those issues through the mid-60s. But I really only became involved in active party politics after Gough Whitlam became ALP leader in the late 1960s with a transformational vision for the country that was fantastically energising for most of my generation, and genuinely transforming for the

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country (however flawed in its delivery) when he won government for three heady years in 1972.

I was lucky enough to ride that wave. I'll spare you the boring detail, but in outline it went like this. After I finished my Melbourne University Law and Arts degrees, and spent two years on a scholarship in Oxford studying Philosophy, Politics, and Economics (PPE), I returned to Australia in the early '70s as a Lecturer in the Melbourne Law School, became a consultant on human rights and Indigenous issues to the Whitlam Government, and then, after a few years of actively working the internal ALP party machinery and acquiring a fairly high profile as a civil liberties and constitutional law activist, was fortunate enough to secure preselection for a Senate seat. I entered Parliament in 1978, and remained there for 21 years, serving as a Cabinet Minister in the Hawke-Keating Governments for 13 of them.

But that was then, and now is now. What is intriguing, and somewhat alarming, about the present political environment, both domestically and internationally, is how many of the principles and values for which we fought for in the 1960s — and which we thought had become largely entrenched in the decades which followed — are under siege again, with a different cast of characters, but many of the issues overlapping. Right-wing populist nationalism is on the rise, and with it a resurgence of racial and religious intolerance, gender insensitivity, contempt for human rights protections generally, indifference to intergenerational inequity, and ignorant rejection of climate science.

And internationally, we have seen an almost complete breakdown in respect for international law and multilateral institutions and processes by the great powers; a failure of effective response to mass atrocity crimes; a cruel retreat from willingness to accept refugees and resettle the displaced; a lack of will to seriously contest other serious human rights violations wherever occurring; a Trump-initiated breakdown of the global free trade system; the collapse of

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development assistance funding generally; and serious weakness in the collective response to the great existential risks of our time — climate change, pandemics, nuclear holocaust and now possibly AI.

So, there are a great many issues for the current generation of students to be profoundly concerned about and that really do demand your active engagement. And by students, I certainly mean those still at school like yourselves, not just on university campuses — which seem these days to have lost most of their mojo as the kind of centres of activism they used to be. I was delighted in that context to see so many secondary students leading the recent nationwide demonstrations against the ugliness of Hanson's One Nation movement.

In this fraught environment, the role of the Political Interest Group has never been more important, and I am delighted to see it still thriving. Seriously informing yourselves about the great public policy issues and problems of the day, discussing and debating them, and forming views about how to rationally and productively address them, is indispensable preparation for really being able to make a difference, in a way that many of you will want to as you progress through your lives and careers, whether in leadership positions or just as concerned, supportive citizens.

One of the most useful things the Political Interest Group can do is reinforce the message that active engagement in politics at all levels, from grassroots policy and campaigning activism to standing for parliament, should be seen as honourable, decent and exciting, not least for the younger generation. It has been all too depressingly easy in the Australian political climate of the last few years, as elsewhere in the world, to be consumed by cynicism, scepticism and pessimism about the political process. For your generation in particular, I suspect there is still some disposition to regard those few of their cohort who are actively engaged in politics as either apparatchiks, losers or tragics. As a young one-time assistant of

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mine at the Australian National University put it to me not so long ago: 'The trouble is that the bullshit detectors of my generation are currently on overdrive. The ultimate challenge is to convince them that they can overcome that bullshit by engaging in major party politics themselves.'

The core of the response has to be that participation in politics — and the chance that comes with it to be influential in the government of the country, and the world beyond — offers the possibility of being part of something much bigger than oneself. Only through politics can one shape and influence the whole future course of our nation. That may make it an attractive profession, true, for those who are consumed with the exercise of power for power's sake. But it also makes it a hugely attractive profession for idealists — as I know that most of the younger generation, your generation, instinctively are. So go to it!

**Address by Professor the Hon Gareth Evans AC KC to Melbourne High School Political Interest Group Lunch, 28 August 2026.*