



OFFICE OF THE GOVERNOR
VICTORIA

**STUDENT VOICE CONFERENCE
HOSTED BY XAVIER COLLEGE
Friday 23 July 2021**

**Teachers and students from the various schools participating in this conference,
and speakers, The Hon Justice Simon Steward and
Lieutenant-General John Frewen DSC AM**

First, I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land upon which I am located, and I pay my respects to their Elders past and present.

Of course I wish we could all be together in the one place today, but I do understand why that's not possible right now, and it is certainly still a pleasure to join you to talk about authentic leadership and voice.

I welcome the brief you have given me, and I congratulate everyone involved in organising this event, and everyone attending, for raising and considering such important topics.

So, let me start with authentic leadership.

And, especially, let me start by being honest: by sharing with you that I don't naturally warm to the term *authentic leadership*.

I know it is sometimes used in management speak but, if it is, as I understand it, to denote leadership that is genuine, self-aware and transparent, well, I think that's just an intrinsic part of *leadership*. Or, at least, good leadership.

I find it hard to imagine such a thing as *inauthentic leadership*. It may be totalitarianism or authoritarianism, but not leadership – definitely not true leadership.

Having cleared that up, (or possibly muddied the waters), I am keen to share a few thoughts as to some of the qualities of a good leader.

In one sense, this is easy. All sorts of definitions and quotes can be found online. But, like anything truly important, it's more complicated than that. More nuanced.

As I see it, there are inherent paradoxes in leadership.

A good leader must listen, but also speak up.

A good leader is decisive, but open to changing their mind.

A good leader must make tough decisions, but be caring.

Now, why do I say that a good leader listens, but also speaks up? It's because listening should be the basis of almost all that you do. How else do you arrive at an informed opinion? People who only want to talk, won't often lead. Or not for long. They won't be followed. And so, they won't succeed.

There are exceptions. There are those who are so brilliant that, thanks to their own innovative and original thinking, can lead by imagining solutions to problems that others have not yet even seen, let alone solved.

Leonardo da Vinci is one good example. It was his original idea to dissect human faces to understand the muscles behind a smile, to draw the Vitruvian Man to prove human proportion or to conceptualise the world's first bicycle, helicopter and robot – just by way of example.

Spoiler alert: most of us are not modern day Leonardo da Vincis!

In any event, back to the point. Generally, a good leader will know when and how to listen. But he or she will also know when to speak up. To set the vision. To chart how to pursue it. To ignite enthusiasm.

No one wants to be led by someone who never takes the reins when required. But timing is everything when it comes to when to listen and when to speak.

I said that a good leader is also decisive, but open to a change of mind.

People need a leader to make decisions but, equally, one capable of changing course. Not flip-flopping on decisions, but changing to meet changing needs, or to *pivot* when new circumstances demand it.

A good leader, as I have said, also must make tough decisions, but be caring.

Leadership requires fortitude. If a leader can't rise to the hard, unpopular or difficult decisions, he or she cannot lead. At the same time, if a leader cannot show empathy or compassion when needed, he or she can't be a good leader.

I have two other observations on the topic of leadership.

The first is that leadership looks different in different contexts.

Let me explain what I mean.

Some years ago, I was trekking with a small group on a mountain in New Zealand, when we met a man. We talked for a few hours while we tackled a long and arduous pass. It was one of those special encounters. Strangers, but with a genuine connection for that time.

We had actually met quite early in the climb. My group had already stopped, heaving to catch our breath and signalling for him to go around us so that he was not disadvantaged by our slow progress. He didn't take us up on the offer, instead starting to walk with us, once we were able to start climbing again. His pace was steady. So was his tone. His conversation and manner were easy.

As we pushed on – SLOWLY – his chat and his quiet patience supported our group up the seemingly never-ending ascent.

That evening, staying in the same hut, he seemed surprised when he heard that we were a group of lawyers and judges. As he put it, he was pleasantly surprised that such community leaders would have given him all that time as we walked, as he was 'only' a labourer by occupation.

To me, the irrelevance of our respective jobs was so obvious. The truth was that he had led. We were grateful, and we had followed. We had literally, but also metaphorically, followed his lead.

I mention that random story as an illustration: as a reflection on how different people step up to lead – in different ways, at different times. And yet, we are often tied to the stereotype of a leader.

I think that such stereotyping is often seen in the course of schooldays.

Quite early, certain students are earmarked as leaders. They may have matured ahead of their peers or be fortunate to be gifted with an early and substantial amount of self-belief. They might stand out in their capacity within specific disciplines or co-curricular activities.

But the 'real world', beyond school, often sees things shaken up. Watch with interest in the future. You are likely to see some amongst you who never led while at school, but have since found their context and their confidence to do so.

And so for my last observation on the topic. It's about curiosity and learning.

Former US President, John F. Kennedy, once said that leadership and learning are indispensable to each other. I agree, and would add that curiosity and a continuing interest in learning are great tools in the armoury of any leader. As in all other aspects of life, being open to learning more, generally makes you better and better at what you do.

All this leads me to sharing a few thoughts about *voice*.

We know how much voice matters. Think of all the expressions that nod to that. *He felt voiceless. She has found her voice. Your voice makes a difference. The voice of reason. He's in love with the sound of his own voice. Theirs was a lone voice. They spoke with one voice.* And so on.

I am in awe of how strongly your generation uses its voice.

You are a long way from the generations who were only *seen but not heard*. You have been gifted with the trifecta of unlimited information at the click of a button, connectivity that could never have been imagined even just one generation before you and infinite confidence with which to speak.

But does that truly give you a voice? Or, better put, does it give you a TRUE voice? Although it's apparent that I am not keen on the concept of **authentic** leadership, I am particularly keen on **authentic** voice.

It's definitely not who says the most or who says it the loudest. Or just talking for talking's sake. Abraham Lincoln gave sage advice when he said:

Better to remain silent and be thought of a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt.

Homer Simpson was, I think, making the same point when he said:

It's so simple to be wise... just think of something stupid to say and then don't say it.

The point is that anyone can talk out, or talk most or the loudest. So, what do I mean by authentic voice?

Well, first, it is that to exercise voice – real voice, meaningful voice – depends on first doing some groundwork. It depends on knowing about the topic and to whom you are talking. It is – again – about listening.

Some decades ago now, the fantastic social commentator, Fran Lebowitz, said it perfectly when she said:

'Think before you speak. Read before you think. This will give you something to think about that you didn't make up yourself.'

I would not usually continue her quote. What I just read out sufficiently makes the point I was trying to make. But in fact what she continued to say about reading before you think was that it

is: *'...a wise move at any age, but most especially at seventeen, when you are in the greatest danger of coming to annoying conclusions.'*

You can see why today I just couldn't resist the quote in its entirety!

So, just do the work. Real advocacy, skilful advocacy, depends on doing the groundwork. An informed view is, after all, a view based on that.

I wondered, for example, how many of the coiffed and preened actors dressed in glamorous black gowns really understood endemic sexism when they refused to wear colourful dresses to the Golden Globes in 2018. How many could have talked about the pay disparity for women according to the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report figures, the widespread nature and nuance of family violence or forced underage marriage?

If not, then they were certainly not **leading** a movement or contributing to the public discourse.

That brings me to discourse, and to the second thing I want to say about voice. It is about respectful discussion.

I see, or more aptly, I 'hear' lots of voices. Voices representing different ideas, and differences of opinion. I welcome such difference.

I come from a background in the courts as a solicitor, barrister and then across a total of 28 years on the bench as a magistrate, coroner and a judge for the last 18 years of my legal career.

I'm not sure what the Hon. Justice Steward will say, but I think that the adversary setting of the courtroom not only equips you to cope with differences of opinion, it also demonstrates that better results come from hearing two – or sometimes, more – sides to a story.

My experience around many board tables has taught me the same thing. Nothing is more likely to guarantee a good result, and protect against bad ones, than an informed and robust debate.

Often when I read or listen to public debate on important matters, I lament the binary and simplistic manner in which they proceed. Not to mention the disrespectful, sometimes downright ugly manner. Forgive me a footy expression, but, unfortunately there is a tendency to 'play the man, not the issue'.

If you are to exercise your voice, and I urge you to do so, do it with respect. It's not usually as simple as 'either/or'. Deal with the nuance. See other points of view in developing your own.

And a great starting point is that: *'It's important to make sure that we're talking with each other in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds.'*

Those are not my own words. They belong to President Barak Obama.

On another occasion, during an interview about youth activism, the former President addressed the related issue of action as opposed to words. He spoke of certain young people using social media to make change by being as judgmental as possible about others, saying:

'Like, if I tweet or hashtag about how you didn't do something right or used the wrong verb,' he said, 'then I can sit back and feel pretty good about myself, cause, 'Man, you see how woke I was, I called you out.'"

Then he pretended to sit back and press the remote to turn on a television.

'That's not activism. That's not bringing about change,' he said. 'If all you're doing is casting stones, you're probably not going to get that far. That's easy to do.'

I recently watched the documentary *'Greta Thunberg: A Year to Change the World'*, and I noticed that she prompted much the same thought when she said:

'Hope doesn't come from words. Hope only comes from action.'

Amongst you today will be natural leaders. Those who will grow into leadership roles. And those who will lead in a particular setting.

But you will all have a voice.

I urge you to use your voice. Our community – our world – will be a better place for your informed and respectful engagement and, of course, your participation and action.

The fact that you have arranged and attended this meeting gives me great faith in the future that you will create.