

“Life, Work and Bridge Building”

Bridgework’s Business Breakfast

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It is easy to say these words, but in real life, the road is hard, work and life are not readily ‘balanced’. In reality they have to be juggled and there is never enough time to build bridges unless it’s built into your duty statement. And that only happens with bishops, hence the term pontifex meaning bridge builder, a rather different meaning that pontificating from in high!

Life is seldom a linear process for most of us. Our existential journey is about ups and downs, highs and lows, joys and sorrows, elation and depression etc, all of which have to be taken on board for the journey of life, dealt with, resolved or at least managed within an overall perception that life is to be lived with as a whole.

We need to acknowledge that ‘life pain’ is a central feature, a part of reality, not a distortion, so pain has to be accepted as part and parcel of material finitude.

The truth is that Australia depends on producing leaders of strong character and requisite skill who will be capable of successfully guiding and directing the nation and its institutions for the good of all Australians.

That of course must be balanced with a belief on the part of all Australians that at some level or another, appropriate to their capacities and their positions, everyone should be encouraged to take leadership initiatives.

Thus, the notion of leadership must permeate every level of society from the grass roots to those who exercise national level institutional responsibility.

I once spoke to a school which placed its central emphasis upon character education through the fostering of the ancient virtues; providing on-going experiences of service to one another and to the wider community. What an exciting experience that was to meet with them.

What attracted me to Redfield College's approach was that it insists upon character education and the fostering of the ancient virtues, together with the need and the opportunity for on-going experiences of service to one another and to the wider community.

So if we want to talk in terms of "social capital", education in the development of character and leadership skills based on the spirit of service has to be a continuing investment that will be required of our nation.

Please permit me to say a little more about the ancient virtues which in time past people always saw as an essential part of the value systems of a civilised world.

If anybody here needs reminding of them (and perhaps you don't) the spirit of leadership in service and responsibility has to be guided by a sense of justice, temperance, fortitude and prudence.

To elaborate briefly, justice involves fair and equal treatment for all.

With each of us born in the image of God we do have an inherent sense that everyone ought to be treated accordingly and though there cannot be absolute equality in any society, there can be an expectation of fair and just treatment.

Then comes the question of temperance which has perhaps been misunderstood by certain practices.

But in reality, temperance is about the mastery and control of oneself and one's baser desires which are critical to leadership. Then comes fortitude which is really the stoic determination to overcome the external difficulties in one's path and to stand firm for what one believes to be right and good and to bear patiently the criticisms often unfair that are directed from without.

Prudence finally refers to right judgement in all things, again it is a word misunderstood in the modern age because it seems to have been associated with being a "prude".

In reality it is to have that capacity of insight and circumspection and even shrewdness in weighing up all the issues and making a judgement which is in the best interests of the majority, if not every person.

These are all issues that mould character and no claimant to genuine leadership can ever do without them.

I also believe that it is right to insist that on their own these things are insufficient because they have to be developed into instrumental skills which can put those virtues or values into operation.

Virtues point the way and steer us along the right path but in order to make progress, we have to take seriously those other instrumental leadership skills involving good communication, effective planning, goal setting, people management and the development of general political awareness.

Now there are plenty of leadership programs around the world which place emphasis upon one or the other of these two factors but not always upon the inter-relationship between the two.

Let me now turn to some comments about the nature of leadership itself and who are the people who might be leaders in the special sense of the word.

They are people who help create a vision for the future and then develop strategies to achieve that vision.

They also communicate the required direction in such a way that the relevant parties understand and believe the message.

Good leaders have strong motivational skills and they are capable of producing change in organisations.

Leadership then is a critical factor in providing direction, mobilising the people and in bringing about the necessary changes in the society or the organisation.

John Kotter once wrote that outstanding leaders are people who are able to do the following things effectively:

- They challenge the existing processes in a constructive way which can engage people, without their feeling unduly defensive.
- They inspire and share a vision of how things might be, encouraging others to think beyond the constraints of the present.
- They enable others to act by empowering them to do so.
- They model the way by personal example in their values and lifestyle.
- They encourage the heart, knowing that the process of motivation and the achievement of change are not purely rational matters relating to the head alone.

Those are the qualities which differentiate leadership from management.

Perhaps I could also put the matter in another way when we try to define the key attributes of leadership.

A colleague of mine with whom I was involved on the Williamson Leadership Program in Victoria identified five modern qualities being ability, courage, empathy, energy and integrity.

The challenging thing about leadership is that you can't just have one of those things – you need all five.

We can probably all think of people who have had one or two of such attributes but have not managed to achieve their full leadership potential.

The truth is that there are plenty of people with ability who have wasted it.

There are courageous people who can sometimes be foolhardy or reckless.

There are people of empathy who can become soft and subjective and fail to take hard decisions when required to do so.

Energy has to be harnessed otherwise it is wasted and is simply dissipated in every direction.

Integrity is the key governing quality in leadership.

If we have integrity in place, we can look back through those other qualities and apply them effectively.

Then when it comes to the issue of ability, this involves the effective development of leadership skills and the ability to analyse situations.

If courage is properly harnessed, it allows the leader to see the plan through to completion and to overcome all the obstacles in the way with courage and determination.

With regard to empathy, we must have that personal humility which leads to what we call "servant leadership" – that is we are not leading for our own sake but for the benefit of all and for the common good.

And finally it is energy which can be applied toward achieving the common good and will keep us focussed on our goal.

So we come back again to integrity because integrity is about faith.

Faith in oneself, yes, but also faith in others and finally faith in some higher reference which will guide our behaviour at all times. It is the task for each of us to discover what that means for us

Mostly, people use the word God and Christians say "through Jesus" Christ who is the Lord.

If anybody feels that all this is getting a bit heavy and earnest, then I would suggest that we could salt it with a sense of humour because a sense of humour can be very important, especially during the difficult times when a joke can diffuse situations and people can be brought back to and reminded of the foibles and frailties of our humanity.

I'd like to conclude that the bringing together of these qualities of character, leadership and the service of others is fundamental to all our endeavours.

If I were to inject an earthy note from a phrase that comes from the backwoods of northern USA, "our duty is to leave the woodheap a little higher than we found it."

None of this guarantees a smooth ride, especially when in positions of leadership or high office. Modern society is littered with casualties. People get trashed, removed at a moment's notice, displaced, made the fall guy for the ills of a body, scapegoated because someone has to wear it or fall on their sword. It can happen when you least expect it, or you just didn't see it coming, or if you did, were powerless to do anything much about it. The big issue is not that it happens, but that it happens with such regularity. What matters is how you deal with it and what you do to rebuild your shattered life. Failure to do so or to remain imbedded in your anger as to the injustice of it all is certain death, if not physically, then spiritually and emotionally.

Picking oneself up, reshaping and starting again on a new track based on service is fundamental to that recovery and renewal of spirit. Having come through these ordeals leaves you able to see the experience of suffering as a privilege which many have shared before you and which offers deep insights that were never available before it happened.

Thank you for the opportunity of speaking to you this morning about the qualities of character, leadership and the service of others that must underpin all our best endeavours.