

Address

On the Occasion of the Installation of the 15th Chancellor of the University of Western Australia, The Hon Robert French AC

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1 February 2018, University of Western Australia

Your Excellency, the Governor, the Minister for Education, the Hon Sue Ellery, Chief Justice Wayne Martin, Vice-Chancellor, Distinguished guests, ladies and gentleman:

The place in which we meet is full of history. As Richard Walley's Welcome to Country has reminded us we stand upon land occupied by the Aboriginal people of the Swan River area for tens of thousands of years before European settlement and before self-government, which led to the creation of this University.

That creative process began in 1901, when the Legislative Council of the newly minted State of Western Australia passed a motion proposed by Richard Haynes, as amended by John Winthrop Hackett, which read:

This House is of the opinion that the advisability of at once establishing a University or University Institute, demands in the best interests of the State, the immediate consideration of the Government.

It wasn't exactly a rousing call to immediate implementation, but it was a necessary beginning.

A few years passed, then in 1909 a Royal Commission was set up to inquire into the creation of a university for Western Australia. The Commission proposed that a university be established and drafted a Bill which formed the basis of the *University of Western Australia Act 1911*. The University of Western Australia came into existence. Its first Chancellor was the chairman of the Royal Commission, John Winthrop Hackett. This hall reflects that history and his name, as do the Hackett Memorial Buildings on campus. Hackett was one of

the great personalities of early Western Australia. He started his professional life as an Irish barrister, practised law in Sydney, taught it at the University of Melbourne, managed a sheep station in the Gascoyne District and then joined Charles Harper as a partner and business manager of the *West Australian Newspaper*. He was one of the West Australian delegation, led by Premier John Forrest, to the 1891 Australasian Constitutional Convention. He served as Chancellor from 1912 to 1916.

The first Warden of Convocation, Archbishop Riley, became the second Chancellor of the University from 1916 to 1922. His chairmanship was described in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* as ‘more aggressive’ than his predecessor but less influential. Other significant figures in the life of the State followed them. They include, of course, my immediate predecessor, Michael Chaney who has given 12 years of dedicated service to the office. It is one small measure of that dedication that he has shaken 55,000 hands in graduation ceremonies between 2005 and 2017.

It is customary for people who receive honours or recognition or appointment to a prestigious office to say that they are humbled by what has happened to them. I have never really understood the logic of such statements. Friends and family who are here this evening would not believe it if I said it anyway. The truth is that I am honoured and delighted to have been appointed as Chancellor of this great Australian University. I thank my colleagues on the Senate for their confidence in appointing me and look forward very much to working with them and with the Vice-Chancellor, Professor Dawn Freshwater.

I have had the opportunity to speak to members of the University Convocation, which is the official body of the University’s alumni, recognised in the *University of Western Australia Act* as part of the University and with the Warden Doug McGhie and the Deputy Warden, Joan Pope. I have also met with the President of the Student Council and the President of the Post-Graduate Students’ Association and have been greatly impressed by the range and sophistication of the facilities and services which the Guild of Undergraduates now provides to its members.

Late last year I attended the final meeting for the year of the committee of the Academic Staff Association which has an important role in bringing to bear the perspectives and concerns of the academic staff of the University upon those responsible for its governance and administration. We had a useful and informative exchange.

Turning back to this occasion, I would like to thank Her Excellency, the Governor, for being part of the ceremony. Under s 7 of the *University of Western Australia Act 1911* Her Excellency is designated as ‘the Visitor of the University’. The section then helpfully explains that in that capacity she ‘has the functions that Visitors usually have.’ The office of ‘Visitor’ originates from the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge in the 12th and 13th centuries. It was an ecclesiastical mechanism for the resolution of grievances and disputes within the universities and appears to have excluded the jurisdiction of the courts and not to have been subject to legal challenge. Things have changed since then and despite the threatening overtones of ‘visitorial jurisdiction’ we are always delighted to see Her Excellency on this campus. I should add that we first met 50 years ago in 1968 when, as a law student, I was making some pocket money using my rather undistinguished science degree by working as a laboratory demonstrator in the Physics Department. Her Excellency was one of the more outstanding students in the laboratory sessions and I suspect was not materially assisted by my contributions to her learning process.

It is gratifying to see that the four other Western Australian universities are represented this evening by their Chancellors and/or Vice-Chancellors. Their presence reflects the reality that we are all institutions created to serve the public interest in Western Australia and at a national level. There is a good deal of collaborative activity already in place to ensure that together, as well as separately, we deliver that service in the most effective and efficient way we can — not only within the State but also in our engagement with the region and our efforts to attract international students to our shores. In that engagement and those efforts, we undertake economic activity which is of importance to Western Australia and beyond. More than that, however, we contribute to a long term diaspora of foreign graduates of Australian universities who now live and work and are in a position to influence opinions and perceptions of Australia in the countries of our region. I should add that the Governor has been instrumental in promoting collaboration in this and other areas by establishing twice-yearly dinner meetings of the Chancellors and Vice-Chancellors to discuss matters of common interest and opportunities for cooperation. Her Excellency hosted the last of those meetings for her term of office, last night. It was my first meeting. Our exchanges were substantive and useful. I have no doubt that the Chancellors and Vice-Chancellors of the Western Australian universities will continue to meet after Her Excellency’s term expires in April.

On a personal note, I have enjoyed visiting each of the universities, particularly during my term as Chief Justice, to deliver one-off lectures and, in so doing, to interact with their staff and students. The most recent of those lectures which I delivered was the Curtin University Annual Ethics Lecture. My wife, Valerie, and I are graduates of this University. Our three sons between them have degrees from Murdoch, Edith Cowan and Notre Dame Universities. I had the privilege of serving as the Foundation Chancellor of Edith Cowan University in the 1990s. It has grown into a very fine institution since then. Its long-serving Chancellor, the Honourable Hendy Cowan, who has probably shaken more hands at graduation ceremonies than any of our Western Australian Chancellors, is present this evening along with his Vice-Chancellor, Professor Steven Chapman.

My time at this University in the second half of the 1960s, including as a student member of the Senate for two years, left me with a rich trove of memories. I don't trust all of them. Memory is not a static database but a reconstructive process and every now and again I have been caught out remembering something which didn't actually happen or happened differently from the way in which I recalled it. I can say with confidence however, in common with many of our Alumni, I remember my registration number, 650083. I remember also the many opportunities for personal growth and learning in and around my studies which this place offered.

That said, I don't come to the office of Chancellor because of sentimental feelings about the University of Western Australia or because I owe it some kind of debt. I have accepted the appointment because this institution, like the other universities in this State, does fundamentally important things in the transmission of human knowledge and learning and, through its research and scholarship, in the development of new knowledge. It also demonstrates the possibilities generated by free and independent inquiry and discussion and, as our motto says, by '[t]he seeking of wisdom'.

Australia today, although one of the more successful representative democracies in the world, is not free from the virus of hyper-adversarialism and partisan exchanges in which rational discussion is sometimes drowned out by loud voices which populate our airways and social media. The people who study, teach and research in this place have a particular opportunity and responsibility to demonstrate that important ideas and even important values can collide and engage without the need for their bearers to demonise or censor each other.

This is a university which like all universities, is a place in which the dignity, autonomy and freedom of its people are to be valued and respected. That does not mean it is a place in which staff and students must have some set of approved social attitudes or preferred moral values imposed upon them. In preferred moralities and approved social attitudes we find the end of the search for wisdom which is an ongoing interrogation of our world in all its dimensions.

I thank you all for the honour which you have done the University and me by your attendance here this evening and look forward very much to the interesting and, no doubt occasionally stressful, discharge of my duties as Chancellor.