

**GRADUATION ADDRESS**  
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**BRUCE THOM**

Chancellor, Vice-Chancellor, Members of Senate, Chair Academic Board, staff of this great university, graduates and their families, ladies and gentlemen.

It is a great privilege to be invited here today to provide this address. Graduation ceremonies are joyful and momentous occasions for all who have received their awards and for all those who supported you. Let me commence by congratulating all new graduates and supporters including your academic mentors.

Now I would like to turn your attention to a large statue at the rear of the Great Hall. The one on my right is that of William Charles WENTWORTH, a giant of his time; he was a pillar of society, hot-tempered and arrogant, but determined to establish a free press and offer to some a right to elect members to Parliament. It was Wentworth who provided the impetus to create this marvellous University. He was a man who changed established ways of doing things, and that is the context which provides the theme for this address – HOW TO CHANGE ESTABLISHED WAYS OF DOING THINGS.

Wentworth's name is attached to many places – waterfalls, towns, a dog track, a union building on this campus and a pub. It is the pub that is relevant here. In October last year a group of "concerned" scientists met under the auspices of the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) in the Wentworth Hotel in downtown Sydney. It was typical pub talk: rowdy at times, much at cross-purposes, well lubricated, but finally very purposeful. After many hours we had conceived a BLUEPRINT FOR A LIVING CONTINENT and named ourselves the Wentworth Group. I was very fortunate to be present that night. Over the next 6 months we attempted to "change the established ways of doing things" in the spirit of W.C. Wentworth.

Why was this necessary?

Tim Flannery, a Wentworth Groupie, wrote in the Foreword to our Blueprint:

"European heritage left us appallingly equipped to survive, long-term, in this country. It left many colonial Australians unable to see the subtle beauty and biological richness of the land. What they could not understand they strove to destroy as alien and useless."

In the middle of last year's awful drought, a strong support movement for farmers was initiated by a cabal of high-profile citizens. The cry rang out "we must DROUGHT PROOF AUSTRALIA".

Media personalities took up the call and with great vigour made it clear to the broad spectrum of Australian public that we were wasting water by letting rivers flow to the sea. "Turn them inland"; "turn them from the unused wet north to the parched south". It was an historical message back to the grand

schemes of engineers like Bradfield, of Harbour Bridge fame, seeking simple solutions to a problem which confronts a vast continent beset by ancient weathered soils; by inland plains underlain by salty waters; and by an enormously variable climate.

This media hype was all too much for the Wentworth Group. Collectively the group's experience told us that we cannot drought-proof, let alone fire-proof, the habitable areas of Australia. The first Professor of Geography of Sydney University knew that in the 1920s, and for saying so he had a textbook banned by the state educational authorities in Western Australia.

We recognised that a counter-attack was necessary to reach out to the media, to politicians, to students, to anyone who was prepared to listen to our message:

That message is:

“What we need to do is to start living sustainably in Australia. We need to learn to live in harmony with the landscape, not fight against it.”

For over 200 years farmers and landscape managers have followed practices essentially inherited from Northern Europe. Great wealth was produced and much innovation occurred to supply local and overseas markets with products in demand. Yet the outcome has been

[and I quote from the Blueprint]

“...a landscape in which freshwater rivers are choking with sand, where top soil is being blown into the Tasman Sea; where salt is destroying rivers and land like a cancer, and where many of our native plants and animals are heading for extinction.”

Socially there are communities in decline, some farmers are deserting their homesteads, and, most tragically, committing suicide when confronted with enormous debts and a ruined country with no hope for the land or for their families.

Of course there are those who fight on, adapting to variable conditions, often working with others as part of a Landcare group. But more conservative types think that their accumulated wisdom will prevail, and in the long-run things must turn out OK. But as wise economists know: in the long-run we'll all be dead. So will be the landscape unless some fundamental changes are made. We have to build on the capacity of those farmers and managers who want to change (and direct those who don't) and thus pursue ways of managing OUR lands and OUR waters within their limits.

Established land management practices in Australia are built on traditional common law property rights inherited from Europe. Basically this is expressed as “my home is my castle and I should be able to do with it as I

please”; or “no government, no bureaucrat, no smart-arsed academic can tell me what to do”.

In the film *One night the moon* the European farmer striding across his farm sings

“This is my land”

“I own this land”

But the Aborigine on being evicted cries

“This is my land”

“This land owns me”

We know that Aboriginal concepts of “care for country” are not constrained by European property law.

Last year at a small town meeting in southern Queensland shown on ABC TV, a sign was held up stating:

My land

My water

My trees

My decision

No, this cannot be just “my decision”.

Australians clear about 500,000 hectares of native vegetation each year. This fact, and comparison with countries like Brazil was made in the SOE Report 2001. The Australian newspaper on release of the report produced a headline “The league of shame” with Australia No.5.

All this highlights an attitude by many on the land to clear today just like their forefathers. There is little or no concern for consequences now or in the future as the economic imperative, the need for cash and to service the cursed debt, drives more land clearance, more water extraction, and the ploughing of soil in very marginal areas. There are those who deny the obvious negative effects of such practices, and those who give water away even when it is not really available. And then there are those who don’t care about impacts on native biota, the fundamental ecosystem providers to life on Earth:

A grazier last year at Longreach made the comment: “If you clear the trees it makes more room for the birds to fly.” He was serious!

Before saying how we might change these ways of doing things, I must not leave you with the impression that it’s all the farmers fault. Far from it. On the coast our passion for development is spreading another cancer: *urban sprawl*. This process is also destroying vegetation, washing soil and pollutants into estuaries, alienating foreshores from the public, and threatening beaches with rock walls. Protection of private property from wave erosion is expressing a property right made at the expense of environmental values such as a clean public beach.

What can we do to better live in harmony with the conditions of the Australian landscape? Five points:

*First*, there is the need to challenge the unrestrained exercise of property rights as currently used in Australia where such rights are the antithesis of sustainability. It should be more a right to exercise “stewardship” recognising the limits of the land *and* the consequences of one’s actions on neighbours and on future generations. The family of the current Federal Parliamentary Secretary for the Environment is the fourth generation of farmers on the lower Murray. Their family ethic is to leave the land in better shape from one generation to the next – this is now not possible as the impact of vegetation clearance in the catchment by farmers well away from their property years ago is progressively salinizing their soil (and it can only get worse!) The lesson from such a history is we can longer permit such unrestrained use of property because we know now the consequences.

*Second*, the concept of stewardship must embrace principles such as the Aboriginal “care for country”. This concept can extend to the whole biophysical unit such as a catchment integrating vegetation, soil and water management over a time period which covers cycles of flood and drought. ALL landholders within this unit must agree as to how their properties can best provide for not only production outcomes, but also environmental outcomes including the wise use and reuse of water on the land and in our homes. Failure to agree to such outcomes should bring penalties; acceptance of the plan should bring rewards and a sustainable future.

*Third*, there is a need for property management plans, set within the context of a regional plan, to be based on best scientific understanding of the limits of the area to environmental stress. Along the coast such plans would incorporate a new development district as a property “master plan”. In both rural and urban cases there needs then to be (i) an incentive to make a plan; (ii) there needs to be guidance as to how to plan; and (iii) there needs to be a mechanism to accredit and hence reward those who plan. NSW Government is investigating these needs.

*Fourth*, governments at all 3 levels, as well as financial institutions, should facilitate farm property, urban master plans and regional plans. *Incentives* can come from participation in the process with both financial and technical inputs. Banks must fall into line and only provide loans to those with accredited plans. Such loans should offer sufficient security to help farmers through cycles of drought and flood.

*Finally*, all plans and actions require a technical base which can inform land users of best practices. Global warming is upon us and will generate new environmental limits. These must be understood so plans can evolve and adapt to different conditions. Land use may be likened to a grand scientific experiment. Those skilled in science should be able to “read” the changes and advise on best uses for sustaining the quality of life on earth.

Here then is the challenge for all of new graduates like yourselves, in fact for all Australians, to direct our passion for a better Australia by being engaged in applying improved knowledge to designing new ways of doing business. You as new graduates can help build sustainability into land and water management so we are better able to adapt to the special qualities of our land and to the variability of our climate.

In the spirit of W.C. Wentworth we must continue to commit ourselves to look for better ways of doing things. The environment is everyone's business; the key to Australia's sustainable future lies in ourselves, with you – go to it.