

RHODES UNIVERSITY

VICE-CHANCELLOR'S ADDRESS TO NEW STUDENTS (24th FEBRUARY, 1976)

Ladies and Gentlemen, my first and most pleasant task is to welcome you officially as new members of Rhodes University. You became new members by signing Registration forms over the past two days. You were assisted in this process, directly or indirectly, by the people who are sharing this platform with me:- the Vice-Principal, Dr. Twyman; the Acting Registrar, Mr. Smith; the Dean of Students, Mr. Best; and the Deans of the various Faculties:

Arts	Professor Schutte
Science	Professor Baart
Law	Professor Beuthin
Education	Professor Gerber
Commerce	Professor Smith
Social Science	Professor Bunting
Divinity	Professor Cook

We all of us owe them and the unsung heroines who perform the behind-the-scenes work, Miss Elliott, Mrs. Heard, Miss Igglesden and their helpers too numerous to mention, an enormous debt of gratitude. The letters they have had to write, the interviews conducted, the information gathered and disseminated, the midnight oil burnt, have all taken enormous toll of their time and energy. Mention should be made too of all that the Freshers' Reception Committee,

under Kevin Harpur, have done and will do to ease your path. I am going to ask you to indicate your appreciation in the usual way.

I wish to talk to you this afternoon about three things - your country, your university and your selves. To most of you country means South Africa, but to a sizeable minority it means Rhodesia. What I shall be saying about South Africa applies with even more force and urgency about Rhodesia, as those of you from our Northern neighbour will doubtless painfully and acutely agree. I hope that you will take the implications more firmly to heart, for you Rhodesians have a reputation in Grahamstown that at least in the eyes of some takes more living down than that of the general run of our students. You are after all our guests, albeit close relatives, and as such a higher level of decency and consideration can legitimately be demanded of you.

✓A great deal has been written about patriotism, or love of country, all across the spectrum, from the Romans with their "Dulce et decorum est pro patria mori" (Sweet and fitting it is to die for one's country) to the remark by the inimitable 18th Century literary figure, Dr. Samuel Johnson, that "patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel". Those of us who are not scoundrels, or at least not unmitigated scoundrels, are likely to resent this latter concept. Be that as it may, unless we accept, and persuade our compatriots very rapidly to accept, what is becoming daily more obvious, that South Africa must change, and change dramatically, many of us will find ourselves involuntarily doing what the Romans so firmly approved. Those of you returning from National Service, especially on or over our borders, do

not need any strong reminder on this point. The remaining years of the 1970's, years during which most of you will still be at Rhodes, will certainly be the most crucial that Southern Africa will ever be called on to face. Unless White South African attitudes are very different by the time you in this hall have your Degrees or Diplomas, then the chances of South Africa as we know it or even something evolutionarily akin to it, still existing, are simply and preceisely, NIL. The position is as stark and unadorned as that.

Why is it that for so many years we have been so obscurantist and inflexible? It is easy to blame it on our leaders. The difficulty, in my view, lies not so much with our top leadership, either in the public or the private domain. Very often such leadership has been outstanding, comparable with that in any Western country. The problem lies rather in our lack of leadership in depth, as we go down into the lower echelons of government, education, industry and the like.

A major explanation for this dearth of second and lower echelon leadership lies in the relative scarcity of university graduates in this country, which introduces my second topic, that of the universities. It is an alarming and disquieting fact that in the whole of South Africa there are only 80,000 graduates. These 80,000 graduates provide the vast bulk of the trained minds and personnel to run our public utilities, health and education services, transport, mines, industry, commerce and indeed every form of organised

activity vital to a modern state of 25 million people. Of course, there are not nearly enough to go round, and so many of the worthy folk who keep our economy and polity going have to rely more on stout hearts, which are not always an effective substitute for cool and efficiently trained heads. One often wonders, not so much that the country runs badly, but that it runs at all!

Let us consider this figure of 80,000, the vast majority of whom are whites, in its proper context. It means, for example, that only about 4% of mature white adults are graduates, and that less than 1% of all mature adults have had university training. It is generally reckoned that in a modern fully developed country some 10% of the economically active people should have degrees, which means that South Africa should have about 400 000 graduates, five times the present number, if the potential of all its people is to be fully developed. By the year 2000 that number would need to be doubled.

That is indeed a formidable and daunting prospect, and one hardly knows where to begin. One obvious and immediate area in which an improvement could be effected lies in the enormous and largely avoidable wastage that occurs in our present system. I have considered the fresher intake here at Rhodes over the past few years, and correlated it with the number of first degrees and diplomas awarded three years later. From this rather crude analysis one concludes that roughly 60% of past Rhodes students have ultimately been successful in their

studies, a figure which is in line with results at other universities. If this figure could be raised to 90%, then the fresh graduate numbers would improve by 50%, without any increase in new facilities at all.

Let this be a challenge to all of us in this hall to-day, and I have now come to my third topic, yourselves. Well over 90% of you have the capacity to earn your degrees, and there is no earthly reason other than lack of motivation and application why you should not.

Let me remind you that at the beginning of this talk I addressed you as Ladies and Gentlemen rather than Girls and Boys (you are no longer at school) or even Inks and Inkettes. I did so because as young adults I regard you as Ladies and Gentlemen, from whom I expect certain norms of behaviour, maturity and responsibility that these titles imply. A gentleman, for example, knows how to hold his liquor, does not damage other people's property and does not press unwelcome attentions on members of the opposite sex. A lady does not openly flaunt her sexuality. Both place ~~and~~ a certain value on good taste and propriety in matters of dress and personal hygiene. Ladies and Gentlemen accept obligations freely entered into and observe the terms of contracts that they have signed.

"What faintly archaic language is the Vice-Chancellor trying to put across?" some of you might be wondering. "Doesn't he realise this is 1976, not 1946?" Not a bit of it. All that is best and honourable in the

human spirit is timeless. We do not hear very often to-day such expressions as "A gentleman's word is his bond" or "she is a real lady", but that does not mean that we are any the better for it.

What I am trying to say in simple unadorned language is that if you fully accept the responsibilities and obligations of being a member of this university you are likely to put a great deal more into it and consequently gain a great deal more from it, including the advantages of knowledge and a trained mind, with which to benefit your fellow men in this or any other country you choose to live in.

The university in its turn must accept fully its responsibilities and obligations to you, and this, let us admit it frankly, we have not done as well as we might. Some of our lecturers are inexperienced and not as skilful as they might be, and I am hoping that we shall soon be able to devise means to improve this situation. Some of our residences need improvement to their fabric. Residence rules and social customs need a thorough airing and analysis. To this end an Ad hoc committee, with Council, Senate and Student representation has already been set up, and I am confident that its recommendations will be available before the middle of the year. I urge you therefore to exercise a little patience and to await the outcome of the committee's deliberations. By all means send me any thoughts you have in

this regard, and do not be swayed by any who might urge more precipitate action. A properly functioning university is a delicately balanced community of the teachers and the taught, of the learning and the learned members. Any lack of trust in its carefully established procedures can do incalculable harm.

In welcoming you I am also very conscious of my own status as a Freshman Vice-Chancellor, facing the beginning of my first new academic year in that capacity. I have, of course, one advantage over you in that I have already been through the process of registering as a new student here, the first Vice-Chancellor to have done so. It happened more years ago than I care to contemplate, and you may well retort, as my own daughters frequently do, that Rhodes, Grahamstown and the world have changed immeasurably since then. And yet, I travelled by train, as many of you also have done, waited for what seemed an eternity at Alicedale, participated in an unseemly scramble for taxis or other more dubious forms of transport, looked with some apprehension at my new residence, and listened to a speech by the then Principal (or Master as he was called in those far-off days). As the French say "Plus ca change, plus ca la meme chose" - the more things change the more they are the same thing.

You are then the first freshman group during my tenure of office, and as such I identify very closely with you. No other freshman group will mean so much to me as you will do, and I await your exploits with keen anticipation. Students have one thing in common with wines : there quite

definitely are vintage years, and all the signs are that this is going to be such a year. A much bigger proportion than usual has already completed military service, experiencing in many cases more than you bargained for. One can anticipate a high level of maturity and seriousness of purpose.

The position of a University Vice-Chancellor is often much misunderstood. He tends to be regarded as a remote and all-powerful figure, much like a medieval king (perhaps these robes contribute to that illusion), whose word is law. Nothing could be further from the truth. True, he is Chairman of the Senate and an influential member of the Council, the ultimate repository of authority in the university. As such he is in a strong position to advise, and to suggest and take the initiative. In the last analysis he has the obligation to implement the policies and directives of those two bodies, within their spheres of competence. In his dealings with students too he achieves far more by persuasion and communication than by compulsion or command. It has always been my policy to make myself as freely available as possible to students, individually or in groups. You have every right to write to me on any subject you choose, in confidence or otherwise. If the former, you may rest assured that the confidentiality will be respected. Come to my secretary, Miss Guest, to arrange an interview, if you feel that this will serve your purpose better. In this case I do make two requests,

First, please give her an indication of the nature of the problem, so that the necessary information can be retrieved, and second, be prepared to wait a day or two. A Vice-Chancellor has impossible demands placed on his time and he cannot always deal with everybody immediately. Indeed, I sometimes wish that I could be cloned into three equal triplets, one to talk to students, one to talk to staff and one to deal with the more mundane business affairs of the university. Alternatively, one could attempt to work 24 hours a day and eliminate sleep altogether.

As I reminded you earlier, ^{as} ~~we~~ we go into the 1976 academic year we are all freshmen together. I am confident that we are going to achieve a great deal together. I had also expressed the hope that this was going to be a vintage year for students. Perhaps you will forgive me the impropriety of hoping that it will also be a vintage year for Vice-Chancellors.