Dunstan Oration 2025

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I am honoured and slightly overawed to be giving an address in the name of one of the most courageous and progressive political leaders our country has seen, Don Dunstan.

In this oration I seek to carry on the tradition of Don Dunstan when he said:

> *We have faltered in our quest to provide better lives for all our citizens, rather than just for the talented, lucky groups. To regain our confidence in our power to shape the society in which we live, and to replace fear and just coping with shared joy, optimism and mutual respect, needs new imagining and thinking and learning from what succeeds elsewhere.*[i]

At its heart this speech is about democracy, our democracy, and how we collectively can strengthen it and not allow self-serving bullies to take it away from the people.

The accusation that seems to resonate with many people whose lives have not been all that they might have wished, or who see others prospering while they struggle, is that the elites are running the place for their own purposes, and that what is required is drastic upheaval to allow the voices of the people to be heard. We should take these accusations seriously. They have merit. As the representative of an area with lower socio-economic status than the average, and pockets of deep disadvantage, I daily see that people born with less are treated by the system as deserving less.

Our quest for fairness, our self-styled 'fair-go' and egalitarian country, are under threat, we cannot look away from that. Our social infrastructure is paper thin, at times a carapace masking a hollow core. Our sense of the collective is being undermined by a tide of individualism without compassion, fuelled by so-called social media that is neither social nor ethically governed media. For many people, our social infrastructure appears set up to benefit those who are already

fortunate, with those who were born into disadvantage or misfortune left with barely adequate work-arounds. They have very evidently not been designed with everyone in mind as if everyone were equally of value.

This is perilous for our democracy, and incompatible with its promise of a voice for all and fair outcomes for everyone.

Today I argue that that the best counter to the tide of furious populism is for us in government to honestly question if indeed decision making is too often being done through the lens of, and, albeit often unconsciously, for the benefit of, the decision makers and not for the good of the community as a whole. We need to set aside defensiveness and self-justification and go through this exercise with open minds.

I am not, in this speech, criticising current public servants nor current governments. To interpret it that way would be unfair and inaccurate. I am allowing myself, even as someone who has held significant political authority for more than a decade, to be brave enough to ask if everything is as it should be.

Our democracy needs us to do this.

I want to suggest to you today that it is not harmful for experts to drive policy creation (indeed expertise and facts are essential) but it is catastrophic if we allow decisions to be made within narrow parameters set by those who have one experience in our society to the exclusion of appreciating other views and wider consequences.

You are all involved in public service in a democracy. Your roles and I expect your values impel you to achieve not only a public good in your immediate tasks but to strengthen the system of democratic public service. Yet it is hard not to see this as being under threat. Widening inequality, declining standards of living, technology that appears to be dismantling the labour market, have driven anxiety and frustration with the system. Polarisation, rage and wild inaccuracies, deliberately driven by the accelerant of so-called social media, are the harvest in

public discourse. All of this requires an antidote. And we, my friends, are part of that: politicians who believe in democracy and public servants who believe in public service.

So let us ask ourselves: why do so many people seem to feel that we have failed, and what can we do in the service of the public to avoid the level of disenchantment and fury seen in countries we would previously have seen as similar to our own?

What is at the base of good government, good public policy, good public service and are we doing it as well as we could be?

I'm going to suggest to you all two tests of the effectiveness of a policy or program and how it might support or undermine confidence in our democratic system. And then I'll give two real life examples.

The two tests are: would you be okay with our public services if you didn't know what role you'd be playing in them, and are things going the way they were intended to? The two examples I'll give are our education system and how we treat the natural world.

So first test, is the system designed for everyone? One thought experiment that can guide us is to adopt the approach of John Rawls, to think of the society we would like to live in, not knowing what characteristics, talent, family, culture or location we are to have. This is the idea of the Rawlsian Thinly Constituted Person[ii]. Now I have many objections to Rawls' approach in philosophy, being a bit of a Hegelian, but I won't take you down the byways of my political philosophy classes of the 1980s. Let's say the idea is a good one, as long as you don't take it too far. While we as individuals are inevitably bound to our circumstances, government can and should think more broadly and therefore more blindly. This is what Rawls called the Veil of Ignorance.

What economic distribution mechanism, what school system, what treatment of nature would you think desirable if you didn't know how much money your

parents would earn, what your talents would be nor into which decade or even century you'd be born?

One guardrail to consider. You are in the real world. You would expect the society you are designing to be functional, not one that is a fantasy, but is within the laws of physics and human behaviours. This means that debate about how the market works and how humans make choices is inevitable. You might not mind a system that you are not certain to benefit from as long as you have an equal chance at success, and you would not be devastated by not being a winner. Do I mind that there are lotteries that some people will be enriched by? No. Do I dislike pokies throughout the less well-off areas of Adelaide that are designed to be addictive and transfer money from people to corporations for no exchange of goods? Yes, I do. That is my judgement; others will debate the values of freedom of choice and the employment consequences of money going into pubs. These are legitimate arguments but should be made from the basis that you don't know where you will fit in the system – pokie baron or child of an out-of-work pokie addict.

The second test is the question of the consequences of the policy, a test that should be applied far more frequently and searchingly than it is. Is the policy that is in place delivering what it promised, and does it have any consequences that may not have been obvious before? We sometimes test new policies or programs on performance metrics. I don't believe we nearly often enough ask if the existing way of doing things is causing harm we didn't anticipate and therefore minor policy tweaks may be inadequate. As upholders of good public policy we need to know all of the consequences not just identify those that serve us.

Let me give two examples of what I mean by how both of these tests have not been applied in the way I think they should be. Would you want to be in the system yourself, and are they working as they should?

First, our school system. We have a highly segregated system and we really don't talk about it. We are at the extreme end amongst OECD nations in the segregation of our students into schools based on the socio-economic status of their parents. Chile, Hungary and Mexico are the only countries in the OECD with a higher concentration of disadvantaged students in the same schools than Australia[iii]. This

is shocking to many people who do not realise how out of step with most culturally similar nations we have become.

If you are a child of a disadvantaged family in a school with the children of well-resourced and well-educated parents, you will benefit from greater parental advocacy, greater parental funding, and more educationally useful parental volunteering. If you sit next to a child from an educationally advantaged home, you will hear them use a wider vocabulary, will watch them apply their larger general knowledge and by observing their parents you will be more aware of the kinds of future careers that are possible. You will have access to more academic subjects, if they interest you, because at schools with more advantaged children there tend to be a wider range of subjects offered in senior high school.

Australian disadvantaged young people are disproportionately (and absurdly given their greater needs) in underfunded schools without the performing arts facilities, swimming pools and wellness centres some schools with both public funding and high parental fees can offer. Over the last three years in South Australia the capital spend per student for the lowest SES schools was less than half that of the highest SES schools. Each private school student had nearly four times the amount spent on their buildings than each public student[iv].

Would you design a system like this if you didn't know which social group you or your child were to be born into? Does this pass the Rawlsian test? Clearly, I would suggest no. And I would further suggest that the decision makers who set this system up years ago did not put themselves in the shoes of a child of a disadvantaged family when advancing the policies that led us here. This could be seen as a classic example of decision makers operating from their own perspectives not applying the Veil of Ignorance.

What of the second test: unintended consequences? We chose, over time, to have a school system that rewards family advantage. Has it led us to places we did not anticipate? Presumably we collectively want our education system to improve not go backwards, and we also don't want to create social division that could lead to undermining confidence in the way Australia is governed. How are we doing?

Let's look at our results. Keeping disadvantaged students confined in certain schools has not seen our results as a nation improve – far from it.

About 75 per cent of Australian students finish school (which is not enough) and it is low in comparison to other nations, because only 40 per cent of disadvantaged students graduate[v]. That is not an education system of a country that is serious about enjoying a high standard of living, high productivity and high GDP in an age where wealth is generated by advanced manufacturing and harnessing the power of digitisation, automation and artificial intelligence.

Our results in international testing have been dropping, both against ourselves and against other nations. In the international test PISA, Australian 15-year-olds in 2022 scored at a level that would have been expected of 14-year-olds 20 years earlier[vi]. We've lost a full year.

Is this because we have segregated schools? There are too many reasons to say 'largely yes' for this short talk, but think about this. In Australia, a disadvantaged student loses a year of schooling simply by being in a disadvantaged school as opposed to a socio-educationally average school, and is a further year behind a disadvantaged student in a highly advantaged school[vii]. Two years of school just because they are not in a school with advantaged children, without changing anything about their family background.

How does social cohesion fare in a system that holds back children from already disadvantaged homes, trapping them in a cycle it is hard to get out of? This could not be further from what we like to think is the Australian ethos of a fair go meritocracy. And this goes to the heart of the question of the security of our democracy.

There is evidence in US research by the Brookings Institution that people believing that they or their children have a chance at improving their lives are happier than those who feel trapped in poverty and in locations that are declining in living standards[viii]. Designing our education system without regard to these consequences cannot be good for the health of our democracy.

Because we rarely talk about these consequences they cannot be said to have been accepted by the Australian people, who are largely told that our sliding results internationally and failure to see improvements in Australian standardised testing come from schools not doing a good enough job at teaching.

I think our education system, despite recent efforts to turn it around which I happily applaud, is far from meeting either the Rawlsian test of not minding where in the system I found myself, or the test of the consequences being understood and of social benefit. And because of this I think our education system is a prime example of where public policy has failed the democratic project. When nearly every decision maker in the system sends their children to private school, or at the least to a public school with children from relatively advantaged backgrounds, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that decision makers have been operating as the elites the proto-fascists warn about.

Most nations manage largely to have kids from all backgrounds at school together. I believe it is a fundamental plank in a strong democracy that children of all cultures, abilities and backgrounds get access to quality education and, most importantly, spend time together seeing each other as humans and friends. We used to do this, surely we can again.

Second example: what is going on with nature and climate change. The Rawlsian test and the test of unintended consequences fuse in this case. The consequences of how we have treated nature collectively are evident, as is the trajectory for what those consequences will be. The problems here lie in ignoring the evidence for too long and being unwilling to accept the need to change but instead having a blind faith in future versions of ourselves coming up with the technological solution that makes the whole problem go away.

In the Rawlsian test, would anyone seriously be fine with coming of age in 2070 on the current forecast of climate disruption? The only way we could allow ourselves to not care what decade we were born in is if we assume that things are either not that bad now despite the evidence, or are about to get a whole lot better, which can't happen.

But making that true requires a far more searching understanding of the consequences of our current actions and attitudes than we have had to date. We have collectively been making errors in our understanding of how the earth works, in our prowess in solving problems, and in our responsibility to the future. There probably isn't a greater failure in public policy than that governing climate change and nature.

I could fill a day talking about this. Let me draw a picture to illustrate the larger point, before tying this back to democracy. When the predominately European-culture people arrived to settle in Australia some 240 years ago, we made some gross errors of judgment. Understandable, but terrible in their results. Setting aside our (I say this as a European-culture person) approach to the people already living here, we made two significant miscalculations about the environment. One was that we thought it looked a bit like Europe and with some clearing, planting and introduction of familiar species like deer and rabbits, it soon would resemble home. The other was we thought it was hardy not fragile. So our vegetation clearing, our draining of water sources, our monocultures and our introduced pests made sense, and yet were exactly the wrong approach to live in peace with Australian nature. At the same time, like the rest of the developing and industrialising world, we sought to harness the power of fossil fuels to both use ourselves and sell around the world. We started late, but we have become one of the highest emitting countries per capita, and the country with the highest rate of mammal extinctions.

One poignant example of the time delay between making a mistake and realising the consequences is the story of the shellfish reefs off our own coastline. Two hundred years ago we had coastlines stiff with shellfish reefs – 1500 linear kilometres. They were home to native oysters and other bi-valves, to sponges and underwater plants. They were fish sanctuaries and nurseries. They slowed down waves hitting the shore. We didn't really know all the things they did for the environment, why they might matter, when our culture started settling here.

By the 1840s in ecological terms they were functionally extinct. We trawled the seabeds until they were all gone. We did this because not only were the oysters good eating, but their limestone shells were used to build roads and in constructing our towns[ix].

What we did not contemplate was that oysters are the kidneys of the sea – each one cleaning a bathtub full of water a day.

What we did not anticipate was that an algal bloom, spurred on by climate change, would sweep our coasts in 2025 destroying sea life, wrecking coastal economies and breaking the hearts of all who love the sea. A bloom that either would not have happened at all, or at the least have been greatly moderated, had we still had 1500 linear kilometres of shellfish reefs.

A long time between action and unintended consequence, but now we know, and we should at the least learn the lesson.

In the Rawlsian test, we would not presumably have chosen an approach to nature that had this consequence if we thought we might be the ones collecting the consequence of the decision to take the reefs. We could pause to think that future generations are likely to feel the same way about decisions we are making about climate and nature right now. Just as we might well wish that the inventors behind the fossil fuel driven industrial revolution had immediately turned their minds to replacing coal, knowing even then that carbon was an potent greenhouse gas.

In the test of consequences, we are learning but slowly. There are good signs. We now know much more about this land, and partnerships between land holders, scientists and governments have seen great strides in law and in what happens on the ground. This is all excellent. If we lived in a world where nothing else was changing, we might feel almost enough has been done to identify and respond to the consequences of past actions.

Climate change, population growth expanding our footprint, and the extent to which our ecosystems have been weakened so they cannot easily bounce back from additional pressures, mean staying still is not an option. We must actively embrace more change if the bleak scenarios painted by serious scientists about are to be avoided.

We are going to have to do more to decarbonise and we are going to have to do much more not just to protect but to restore nature.

The truth is, there no way through climate change without nature: to take carbon out of the atmosphere, to achieve net emissions reduction while still growing the economy, and to help us absorb at least some of the impacts of a warming and increasingly chaotic climate through resilient ecosystems.

It is time we understood nature as being the most important infrastructure underpinning our economy and a prosperous society, and protect and resource it accordingly. We cannot survive without it, and nature should be given commensurate respect and priority. And the good news about the shellfish reefs is they can be re-established, albeit at a price, and can start doing their work for our marine ecosystem again. This infrastructure is as worthy of being repaired as any road or hospital.

But how does it tie to democracy? Where it is easy to argue that all kids having a good start in life is going to help social cohesion and trust in how our nation works, is this as relevant when we look at the environment?

I can see it is harder to immediately understand this as democratic issue. And yet I believe it is more urgent than any other policy approach because not doing anything will lead to disruption and distress and that will fall disproportionately on those who have not had the easiest life already. Think of the algal bloom again as a small example. The family business fishers who have not fished since May, the small shop in a coastal town that has halved its customers, the family in a small apartment with the beach as their recreational space, all affected this year by a bloom that came from a warming atmosphere and the degradation of an ecosystem. Magnify that experience and think about the cost to government managing a series of simultaneous such crises, as they become not rare but commonplace. Since 2020 SA has experienced devastating bushfires, a global pandemic, floods, a drought and an algal bloom. All in five years. All caused by, worsened by, made more frequent by, climate change and ecosystem vulnerability. Think about a small state managing all that and more over the next few decades and consider the consequences on our social fabric.

So where do I want to leave you in this at times confronting oration? With some hope, much of which rests on those in this room.

We are fortunate in Australia to have safeguards for our version of representative democracy: free and fair elections overseen by genuinely independent electoral commissions, compulsory and preferential voting to name a few. Yet deeper than those essential protections, lies the contract with Australians that by being part of this country they are entitled to a fair chance at success in life, access to a home, a health system that will care for them regardless of their means, and confidence that their children will all have an education that prepares them for the future. Australians are entitled to be in a country that keeps pace with international changes, modernising the economy so that well paid and productive jobs are available and workers' share of growing national wealth will at least match that of the owners. An economy not utterly dependent on raw commodities, with the wild variation in prices they attract, and less dependent on carbon intensity given the trajectory of the world economy decarbonising. An economy that does not miss the digital revolution and thereby relegates Australians to the role of consumer rather than producer. A country that is not caught in the grip of endless and accelerating climate disasters causing immediate harm to life, wealth creation and property, and distracting government from its normal responsibilities.

All of these promises that a democratic, meritocratic, egalitarian society should be able to offer are weakening and I fear alongside this, that our grip on a sensible moderate and thoughtful democracy is at risk in the medium term. If the social contract of a prosperous, tolerant and compassionate society is broken, democracy will not last long.

The antidote, perhaps boringly, is doing public policy and public service better. Not only in the construction and testing of policy as I have described here today, but in how we conduct ourselves. It is allowing doubt and debate not seeking to dismiss other views unconsidered. It is bringing everyone in not keeping them out. And above all, it is allowing truth to guide us, not self-serving invention. Science is our ally in our democracy. All facts are friendly even if they are inconvenient. Evidence has weight where prejudice should not. Social media shaped by AI, driven by algorithms of companies that have no interest in us as

humans only as consumers must not be allowed to compromise all that we have in this precious democracy.

It is in the combined efforts of politicians, public servants and civil society that we will find the remedy. That is, for me, the spirit of Don Dunstan.

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[i] https://dunstan.org.au/about/don-dunstan/

[ii] Rawls, J. (1971). *A theory of justice.* Belknap Press/Harvard University Press.

[iii] OECD, **Equity in Education: Breaking Down Barriers to Social Mobility, PISA** , OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264073234-en., 2018 p.122 Data from PISA 2015

[iv] As yet unpublished data by author, taken from My School website. Home | My School

[v] Lamb S, Huo S, Counting the Costs of Lost Opportunity in Australian Education, The Mitchell Institute, 2017, p.15

[vi] https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/pisa-2022-results-volume-i-and-ii-country-notes_ed6fbcc5-en/australia_e9346d47-en.html

[vii] Thomson S, DeBortoli L, Underwood C, PISA 2015: Reporting Australia's Results, Australian Council for Educational Research, 2017, p.218

[viii] https://www.brookings.edu/articles/monitoring-well-being-as-a-warning-indicator/

[ix] https://www.indailysa.com.au/news/just-in/2025/12/08/dredged-out-of-existence-why-shellfish-reefs-are-vital-to-fighting-algal-bloom