

Graduation Ceremony  
Faculty of Social and Behavioural Sciences  
University of Queensland  
20<sup>th</sup> July 2004

Kevin P Clements

Chancellor, (Doff Cap) Vice Chancellor, members of Senate, members of staff, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen; graduates most particularly the graduates. This is your night..

As a sociologist and political scientist I am proud and privileged to be addressing a graduating class of social and behavioural scientists . You are part of my own academic tribe. From my totally unbiased perspective, therefore, I can say unequivocally that this tribe is intelligent, fun to be with, curious about the human condition and generally willing to embrace social and political change. Being married to a political scientist I am duty bound to add that social scientists make much better lovers and partners than graduates from the other faculties as well! So, to the SBS graduating class of 2004, congratulations again and welcome to the community of social science scholar and practitioners. You and your families have worked hard for these qualifications and all of you deserve the recognition that is yours tonight.

The American satirist Russell Baker at a Graduation Ceremony in 1995 told the audience that graduation ceremonies were all about telling students to go forth into the world, and giving them advice on what to do when they got out there. He concluded, however, that this was a ridiculous waste of time as the graduates rarely if ever took the advice. He concluded that the best advice he could give anybody about going out into the world was not to do it.

As he said “I have been out there. It is a mess”.

In 2004 I feel pretty much the same way. The world is in a bit of a mess at the moment. Some of the mess is of our own making, some of it is a consequence of forces beyond our control. Whatever we determine to be the root or proximate causes of the mess, however, we as social scientists have no alternative but to engage it, analyse and understand its component parts and see if there are ways in which we can turn the crises

that confront us into creative opportunities. As my Yorkshire ancestors used to say “Where there’s muck, there’s brass”. So what is the brass that lies beneath the muck of the current crises?

There are too many dimensions to the current mess to deal with all of them in ten minutes. So important though they are, I will draw a veil over things like truth telling in politics and the political justifications for wars of choice; or corporate greed and corruption and what these do to the integrity of markets; or the growing gaps between rich and poor all around the world. These issues while important deflect me from a major focus of the Australian Centre for Peace and Conflict Studies which is how to analyse, understand and delegitimise violence as an acceptable means of communicating needs and protecting or promoting individual, social, economic and political interests.

I can think of no more important or challenging task than this. There are 70 countries (out of 194 member states of the United Nations) that are either on the verge of, or experiencing significant violent conflict at the present time. Eighteen of these countries are moving rapidly towards a significant escalation of violent conflict. While Iraq figures in this list of 18 the casualties there pale into insignificance compared to those being killed in the Eastern Congo where over 3 million people have been killed in the last 10 years. [Nearly the whole population of New Zealand]. We don’t hear too much about these deaths in the Western media because the major news channels don’t have imbedded journalists in Goma and Bukavu since most of them are sitting in Baghdad or Jerusalem.

War is organised killing between groups. We mustn’t forget, however, the growth in individual violence throughout the world. There are, for example, some very sobering statistics in the July issue of *Le Monde Diplomatique*.

“In Europe right now the statistics of male violence against female partners are shocking. For European women aged between 16 and 44 violence in the home is the primary cause of injury and death, more lethal than road accidents and cancer. Between 25% and 50% of women in Europe are victims of violence. In Portugal, for example, 52.8% of women say that they have been violently treated by their husbands or partners. In Germany almost 300 women a year or three women every

four days are killed by men with whom they used to live. In Britain one woman dies in similar circumstances every three days.”

The figures for Australia and New Zealand are comparable.

When these figures are added to the millions being killed in political and military violence or as a result of both bottom up and top down terrorism it is clear that there is a big mess out there and violence is at the heart of it.

There are two ways of responding to individual and collective violence. The first is denial. This violence is not our violence and therefore not our problem. We are neither responsible nor culpable. The second is engagement. The problem, with this, however, is how to engage with violent actors and violent behaviour in ways which will transform them and generate virtuous rather than vicious cycles?

Security specialists, police and military professionals are concerned with coercive responses to violence. Peace and Conflict Studies programmes like ours at UQ are (among other things) aimed at expanding the range of non-violent options available for breaking cycles of violence.

We were told by a visiting American academic yesterday that non-violence was no longer a politically acceptable option for the United States. This is a very sobering assessment given how blunt and ineffective the use of overwhelming force coercion and power has been in Iraq. It is also worrying that the most powerful military in the world sees little place for non-violent soft power in pursuit of its foreign policy and security objectives.

It was Mahatma Gandhi who said  
“I object to all violence because when it appears to do good, the good is always only temporary but the evil it does is permanent.”

The challenge, however, is discovering what non-violent methods are both practical, and effective in relation to imminent and probable threats of violence.

In the first place we must reiterate the central importance of Human Dignity as a guiding principle for all of our work. We accord persons

dignity by assuming that they are good and that they share the human qualities we ascribe to ourselves. This is a pre-requisite for opening conversations and deeper exchanges with others –including those who are not of our tribe. If we do not make this assumption the possibility for positive change is very slight indeed.

In relation to personal violence, however, there can be no excuse or justification for male/female violence of the sort that afflicts Europe and most other parts of the world. It needs to be roundly condemned and delegitimated by all of us.

But what about terrorist violence? How do we deal with that non-violently? My old colleague Rich Rubenstein asserts that

“Terrorism is violence by small groups claiming to represent massive constituencies and seeking by “heroic” provocative attacks to awaken the masses, redeem their honour, and generate an enemy over reaction that will intensify and expand the struggle”.

If we deny terrorists this pleasure and act fearlessly and without over reaction we will certainly create conditions more conducive to non-violent problem solving. But even then we have to ask what next? What can and must we do to rehumanise the terrorist and meet his/her deeper needs of recognition, security and welfare? How can we individually and collectively respond to centuries of humiliation, fear and marginalisation? This is where ethics and sound social science start converging. But its also where we must begin. As Oscar Wilde, said 'The basis for optimism is sheer terror.’

In relation to non-violent techniques here are some starting points. We need to develop programmes that are mutually empowering; which build resilient relationships/solidarity between peoples.[Israel will never be secure behind its wall]; we have to develop programmes that demonstrate a willingness to suffer rather than inflict suffering and which promote changes which advance the interests and needs of the poorest, weakest and most vulnerable; As Nelson Mandela put it in his last speech to the Sth African parliament “The common good ultimately translates in to a deep concern for those that suffer want and deprivation of any kind”.

In all of this work we need to speak truth without fear in order to promote a mutuality of respect across all class, gender and ethnic divisions.

All of this is a tall order I know but from my own research and practice these principles do generate conditions and communicative patterns that make peace possible.

There are many other institutional changes that need to occur so that economic, political and social institutions create environments within which violence is delegitimated and individuals become habituated to non-violent problem solving but these personal steps are a good start.

I hope I have said enough, however, to persuade you that violence is one of the major challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. If this century is to become one of maturity it is absolutely vital that this issue be engaged by everyone. The violent and avoidable death of anyone anywhere in this inter-connected world diminishes all of us. The management and transformation of violent processes into non-violent ones therefore, requires the most powerful intellects and the highest levels of compassionate and empathetic imagination that we can muster.

If we leave the problems to the security professionals almost certainly we will have more messes like those in Iraq. Violence is an issue that concerns all of us as national citizens and as global citizens. We all have a right to security and a right to be defended in ways that will generate positive rather than negative outcomes. This is why the Presidential election in the US is so critical this year. The world should have a say in who gets to lead the most powerful military in the world. In particular, there should never be any annihilation without representation or at the very least consultation!

If these current crises generate momentum for non-violent solutions to complex political, social and economic problems this will be the brass that emerges from the current muck and my Yorkshire ancestors would pronounce themselves well pleased with the outcome.

I would like to finish with a poem by Irish Poet Seamus Heaney from his translation of Sophocle's Philoctetes, The Cure at Troy.

Human beings suffer,  
They torture one another,  
They get hurt and get hard.  
No poem or play or song  
Can fully right a wrong  
Inflicted and endured.

The innocent in gaols  
Beat on their bars together.  
A hunger striker's father  
Stands in the graveyard dumb.  
The police widow in veils  
Faints at the funeral home.

History says, Don't hope  
On this side of the grave  
But then, once in a lifetime  
The longed for tidal wave  
Of Justice can rise up  
And hope and history rhyme

So hope for a great sea change  
On the far side of revenge  
Believe that a further shore  
Is reachable from here  
Believe in miracles  
And cures and healing wells

Thanks and once again hearty congratulations to all of you....