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Speech by Adam Graycar:

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SOUTH AUSTRALIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

GRADUATION ADDRESS

SEPTEMBER 2, 1985

ADAM GRAYCAR

COMMISSIONER FOR THE AGEING

Mr Barrett, President of Council, Professor Mead, Director of the Institute, Members of Council, Members of the Academic Community, Graduands, Ladies and Gentlemen. It is my very great pleasure to be here today, to share with you this important day in your lives, this memorable day, this transitional day. The world around us seems to be in a state of dynamic transition - of capricious transformation, of constant innovation. I am sure that all of us, for as long as we can remember - whether we are twenty-one or eighty-one - have always been told that we live in rapidly changing times - in eras characterised by dramatic, significant and monumental change. Of course that is true. Everybody can tell their story of how tough it was when they were young - you know the stories - 32.2 kilometres (though the old timer would have said 20 miles) to school on horseback, dip-in-pens, homework by candlelight. My own educational story is equally tough and marred by great hardship - no electronic calculators - only mechanical ones or slide rules - no word processors or personal computers - and worst of all, my university didn't have a photocopying machine until I was in third year. And then it cost a shilling a page, when interesting social science paperbacks cost four or five shillings - oh it was tough when I was young!

Technological change has certainly brought enormous benefits. It takes less and less time to get from one side of the world to the other, but more and more time to get from one side of a modern city to the other. The Concorde is a fantastic plane. People who have flown Concorde tell me the trip is now divided into two equal parts - the trans-Atlantic flight, and the

time it takes to find your luggage. Technology changes our language too - I don't know how I'm going to explain the concept anti-clockwise to my daughter who sees the time only as a series of digits - sometimes in LCD and sometimes in LED (at least that's variety!)

We have all seen technical changes of astounding, stunning and overwhelming consequence. We can find technical solutions to many of our problems. We can think the unthinkable and do the undoable - yet are we a lot better off? We can do magic on our computers, land a person on the moon, analyse the gases surrounding Jupiter. We have learned brilliantly the means of accomplishing scientific and technical advance. When we look at our present capacity to solve problems it is apparent that we do our best when the problems involve little or no social context. We're skilled in coping with problems with no human ingredient at all, as in the physical sciences or in the technologies. We can send people to the moon, yet we can't find jobs for our young people; we can build in our big cities, gleaming skyscrapers with computer controlled talking elevators, yet we can't make traffic flow; we can keep people alive for twenty to twenty five years beyond retirement yet we can't ensure that they can live those years in dignity.

I could go on talking about dramatic change in technology but that would be tedious. I want to talk only about two types of change that are of profound and intense significance for most

of you today. First there is the change which we have seen in the structure of our labour force in the past 15 years. In these years we have seen declines in the actual numbers of people in two of our traditional industries - agriculture and manufacturing, and monumental growth in employment numbers in two other industries, community services, in which employment in the past 15 years has grown by 110 per cent, and finance and business where the growth has been 90 per cent. Of considerable interest is that the big growth in both of these areas has been in the number of female workers. Of all the women in the labour force, 27% are in community services (compared with 19% 15 years ago). Of all the men in the labour force, 9% are in community services (compared with 6% 15 years ago). While the proportion of women who work in finance and business has gone up from 8 to 11 percent, the proportion in retailing has dropped slightly (from 25% to 23%), while that in manufacturing has dropped significantly (from 21% to 13%).

As an industry, community services is both the fastest growing and the largest employer of women. It also takes our best educated women. Of all the women with degrees, two thirds go into community services, compared with one third of men with degrees who go into community services.

These interesting figures tell us a lot about our society. Community services may not be the bread and butter of our society, but it is certainly the bricks and mortar. It holds together a flimsy societal fabric. It is an area that requires

great skill. It is an area that attracts highly educated women. It is also an area that, in times of fluctuating and uncertain economic fortunes is vulnerable to freezes and cutbacks. When this happens, it is women who bear the brunt on two fronts - women as service providers, and women as service recipients (most elderly people and most service recipients who find themselves in states of dependency are women). If I had the time I would love to talk at length about changing employment patterns of women and the consequences of this for community services, social structure, family structure, expanding and shrinking occupations, expanding and shrinking industries, and the social, economic, educational and industrial consequences of this.

The second dramatic change I wanted to mention is the change in the structure of our population. The population is ageing slowly and the implications of this for social security and health and social service provision have caused alarm in some government circles. That Australia has been able to achieve, over the last 100 years, an increase in life expectancy at birth from 51 to 71 for males, and 55 to 78 for females, is a notable achievement and not a calamity as suggested by some. We have witnessed, in recent years a significant decline in age specific mortality rates. In other words we have more "old-old" as well as more old people. While our elderly population in South Australia today stands at 11% of the whole population it is projected to rise to around 17% over the next 35 years. This is not a cause for alarm, for a dozen wealthy countries in Europe today

have higher proportions of elderly people than that projected for Australia in 2021 and they manage to support their elderly population with dignity.

The slow rate of ageing of the population will still mean a rise in absolute numbers. In 25 years time there will be in South Australia, approximately 90,000 more elderly people than there are today, but more significantly, there will be a change in the age distribution of elderly people. In that time the population will rise by 27 per cent; the numbers over 65 by 67 per cent; and those over 75 by 117 per cent. Those over 75 who in 1901 comprised less than one quarter of the over 65s, today comprise just over one third, and by the turn of the century, will comprise 47 per cent, just under half of those aged 65 or more.

Most of the "young-old" are of an age where people are usually physically healthy and mentally alert. Their main problems relate to adjusting to retirement, and in most cases their associated income reduction. Income maintenance and preventive health services are of great importance. The "old-old" are of an age where many need more than average levels of support from the community. In addition to economic and social dependencies, physical limitations and disabilities become part of the lives of many people. This is where many of you today come into the picture.

The South Australian Institute of Technology certainly is

preparing people to deal with many of the changes on the horizon, and especially with the ageing of our population. I'm thinking not only of those in the human services, but those in architecture and design, engineering and the various technologies - all are able to make a contribution to the well-being of our elderly population. Some of you have acquired the skills to keep the body functioning, others to keep the mind functioning, others to keep the environment workable and manageable. But all of this works only against a backdrop of change. You have your skills to offer, but they come to full fruition only in a society which recognises the importance of resource allocation and broad flexibility.

Significant technological, labour force, and demographic change mean that many of the organisations in our society have a structure that was designed to solve problems that no longer exist, or that themselves have changed. You have learnt certain techniques, but on their own they may be quite limited. You have to ensure that they are adapted to the community at large. Hard as it may have been to acquire the knowledge you have, to be a success you have to know the society you live in - what sorts of things change and what sorts do not - as they say, "you have to know the ropes in order to pull the strings".

It is important that as we adapt to change and practise our skills, we become not only problem solvers, but problem seekers as well. We must remain vigilant to ensure that we understand how

to apply our skills in changing times. Our professional lives will be enhanced by variety and challenge.

Some will argue that a life of continuous problem-solving bears a depressing resemblance to the life of Sisyphus. In the Greek legend, Sisyphus was condemned to push a great stone to the top of the mountain, and just as he reached the top it would slip from his grasp and roll to the bottom and he would have to push it up again - and so on for all eternity. But one recent commentator pointed out that it was the monotony, not the futility, of the task that made it punishment. If he could have rolled a different stone each time, or the same stone up different mountains, or if he could have experimented with improved ways of rolling it, it might not have been so bad.

(a n e c d o t e)

For the last few years you have learned a lot about things in the abstract. The time has now come to do things in the concrete and I wish you well.