

Toast to the College on the occasion of the annual Dinner for Past Fellows

11th October 2017

John Phillips, a past Deputy chair of the Reserve Bank, was chair of the Council of St John's College, for not quite a year. His term began in December 2012. Six years later, it is easy to forget what a crisis the college was passing through when he became chair. It is easy to forget that it was he who set in motion the radical transformation which characterizes today's St John's.

In 2012, St John's found itself on the front pages of the daily newspapers. Not to celebrate the achievements for which past Fellows - some of whom we are honoured to have here tonight - were responsible. Not to celebrate the contributions St John's students have made to the professions, to public life and to the lives of people less fortunate than themselves. Not to celebrate the love most students had for the homelike environment they found here. Not to celebrate the life-long friendships they formed here. No, the college was being denounced: and the press reports and public criticism highlighted the need for reform.

The result? An intervention not only from the Visitor, working with the Vice Chancellor, but also from the highest political level of government. It was in those emergency circumstances, that John was asked to chair a new Council. That new Council, meeting for the first time under his leadership in December 2012, set about a process of radical renewal.

At its first meeting, John proposed two key initiatives to the new Council. First, the establishment of a committee to bring together in an organized, regular and courteous way, the Council, the staff of the College and the student leadership. I will return to that committee, now called the Student Relations Committee, later. Second, a Working Party of Council to begin the process of crafting structural reforms to the governance of the College.

Fifteen months later, on 3rd April, 2014, the Vice Chancellor, the then Archbishop and a new Chair of Council, wrote to the Minister of Education, Adrian Piccoli, recommending a set of

reforms to the *St John's College Act*, reforms which had the unanimous support of the Council and of the three signatories to the letter, and which had been drafted after careful consideration and consultation, by the Council, with the College's stakeholders.

The Council recommended these reforms for four reasons:

- 1 They would ensure that future Councils would have an appropriate range of experience and expertise to lead the College in a rapidly changing tertiary environment.
- 2 They would ensure that the College would fulfil its primary purpose of preparing the next generation of young Catholics to contribute to the good of the community at large.
- 3 They would ensure that the College would foster a culture amongst students in which there would be zero tolerance for any humiliation of freshers, violence towards others, vandalism of property, and for the abuse of alcohol.
- 4 They would ensure that, in its governance, the College would maintain its independence, would have appropriate relationships with the University and the Archdiocese, and that these arrangements would meet both community expectations and contemporary practices of good governance. (I will return to that reason later.)

In brief, the three reforms we proposed to Government were:

- 1 That the size of the Council should be reduced from 18 plus the Rector to 12 plus the Rector.
- 2 That it should be composed of four elected members, four members appointed by the University and the Archdiocese (a lay member appointed by the Vice Chancellor and three clerical members appointed by the Archbishop), and four members appointed by the Council itself.
- 3 That the 'reserve power' of the Visitor, added to the Act in 2012, should be retained, so that, if ever there were vacancies in the offices of all 3 clerical members or in the

offices of 8 of the 9 lay members, then the Visitor could remove the remaining Council members and appoint a new Council for up to 3 years with a possible extension of 2 years.

As everyone knows, good people can disagree about the reasonableness of proposals for reform. Members of the original Working Party had vigorous discussions. When their proposals were brought to the full Council, more vigorous discussion. When the views of the alumni were sought, they too had vigorous (sometimes differing) views. But finally, as I've said, by March 2014, a unanimous Council, the Vice Chancellor and the Archbishop recommended those reforms to be enacted by the Parliament.

For one reason or another, and you will hear a variety of explanations, the then Minister chose not to sponsor the reforms to the Act which the Parliament had earlier wanted and which had been proposed to him. A change of Minister, and an increasing political sensitivity about damning media reports of events in the other colleges of the University of Sydney, changed all that. In December 2017, the Minister for Education sent the College the draft of a Bill which, when passed by the Parliament, would, in the Minister's view, bring about the very reforms sought by the Council ever since April 2014: a smaller Board, composed of four members elected by eligible voters, four members appointed by the Vice Chancellor and the Archbishop, and four members appointed by the Council itself. Though the new Bill simplified the language of the old Act, it nonetheless embodied those very reforms sought by the Council for over 4 years.

Two changes were made very late in the piece.

For one of them, we are indebted to the Minister himself. To ensure continuity, the existing Council had proposed that it would appoint four people to the new Council. But when the Minister pointed out that this was not in line with contemporary best practice, we immediately accepted that those four should be appointed by nine people: the four who are elected, the four who are appointed by the Vice Chancellor and the Archbishop, together with the Rector.

For the other change, we are indebted to the Vice Chancellor and the Archbishop. The new Act needed to retain a 'reserve power' of the Visitor (one which, it was hoped, would never need to be used). But there were various views as to how that power should be exercised. (Some suggestions so hedged it about with qualifications that they seemed almost designed to make it practically unworkable.) In the end a suggestion, proposed by the Vice Chancellor and accepted by the Archbishop and the College Council, was adopted: the new Act would say that the reserve power may be exercised, given certain vacancies on the Council, *by the Visitor with the concurrence of the Vice Chancellor*. This suggestion satisfied the last of the four reasons these specific reforms had been proposed by this Council to the Government: that they would ensure that, in its governance, the College would maintain its independence, would have appropriate relationships with the University and the Archdiocese, and that these arrangements would meet both community expectations and contemporary practices of good governance.

We were then extremely fortunate that the Government and the Opposition worked together to ensure the passing of the Bill into law. It was passed unanimously. The new Act commenced on 2nd July 2018, 160 years to the day, in 1858, when the college was incorporated. We are now in transition to the new Council. And it seems that we are ahead of the game: similar changes are now being considered to the governing Councils of other colleges. St John's has emerged from the crisis of 2012 as a leader and champion of reforms in the University colleges.

Building on what was good in the past, much has been achieved in the last 6 years. The achievements go to the governance of the college, its management, the student culture, its relations with external bodies, its finances and its capital works and facilities programs.

Let me mention just three things: about the leadership of the College, the student culture and the finances and infrastructure:

First: There has been established a highly successful and harmonious relationship between the Rector and the rest of the Council. Each understands and respects the scope and limits of his and its respective authority.

Second: There has been brought about a radical transformation in student culture, the high point of which was reached when, a month or so ago, the Student Club voted to change its constitution to enable and require two House Presidents, a man and a woman.

Third. There has been brought about a genuine improvement in the college finances and infrastructure. In the last four years, revenue has grown over 40%, EBITDA has increased 77%, and the net surplus is up by 146%.

That said, achievements bring with them further challenges:

With respect to the leadership of the College: The preservation and enhancement of the autonomy of the Rector, working in harmony with, but not under the thumb of, Council is essential. In the 21st century, this is a mark of the best CEOs and boards in both the corporate world and the world of educational institutions. And in Adrian, no college could have a better Rector.

With respect to the student culture: The creation of a new culture which has ensured the inclusion of young women in all aspects of student life now needs to ensure the inclusion of students, from other countries and cultures, in every part of student life. And this must be fostered by Council in a manner which respects the scope and limits of its authority, the autonomy of the Rector and the recent improvements in students' expectations of each other which now characterize the policies of the House Committee and the Equality Committee. Key to this is the regular, orderly, genuinely consultative working of the Student Relations Committee. For, in the end, the change in College culture can be effected only by the students themselves.

With respect to college finances and infrastructure: Now that the Philosophy Room is restored, and the new Library is ready to be opened, the Council needs to turn its attention to modern methods of fund raising. The College needs to build up its resources so that the privilege of being a resident here at St John's is available to promising young people who lack the means to pay for it. And it should aim to be able to support all students so that they do

not need to work to support themselves as they study. These years should be entirely given over to the challenges and the pleasures of intellectual and professional development, to say nothing of the development of an adult faith.

And that's another challenge for St John's. To become known, as other colleges around Australia are known, for providing an atmosphere in which young Catholics can come to know and understand the great teachings of Christianity in a truly adult way.

As I look around this room tonight, I'm aware that we are in the company of individuals who have made significant contributions to the College. Indeed, there are people in this room, past Fellows and alumni, who have enthusiastically supported the reforms introduced by the current Council. They will join me, I am sure, in saying: there is no going back.

Since the death of John Phillips, much has changed in the cultural context in which residential University colleges exist. But, in the processes of reform and renewal he set in motion here at St John's, processes which have been adopted and developed not only here but also in other colleges, in particular those two key initiatives I mentioned at the outset, John seems to have had extra-ordinary foresight. May this college continue to live up to his expectations!