

Academic Excellence Assembly

Address by Special Guest, Mr. Bradley Smith (ON' 2011)

Wednesday, 15 February 2017

Headmaster, Teachers, Parents and Guests, Fellow Men of Newington,

It is a privilege and a pleasure to return to Centenary Hall for the first time since this same assembly 5 years ago. Quite fittingly, today we come together to celebrate the finest academic achievements of the past year, and hopefully to foreshadow those yet to come. Much water has passed under the bridge since I sat where today's award recipients do now, and I want to share a few thoughts on both the College and life more generally which are addressed as much to our academic achievers as they are to the year 7s who have just embarked upon a new and exciting adventure.

I think there are two things which make Newington a brilliant place in which to grow into a young man. The first is what might be called a positive form of Tall Poppy Syndrome. Certainly in my day, the most common form of banter was cutting anyone down to size who dared boast a bit too brashly, or talk about themselves for a moment too long. Whilst the practice of cutting one's mates down to size might be regarded as commonplace in Australian life, I think this form of mutually enforced modesty is vital in forming well-rounded men. And that, after all, is the end goal of a place like this. Certainly in my experience, the extent to which Newington boys keep their feet on the ground, and don't take themselves too seriously, sets the College apart from some of our GPS and CAS competitors. I don't think that culture is an accident, either. It is due in large measure to the unique variety of ethnic, religious and geographic backgrounds that make up the student body here. This is a precious, precious asset which, again, sets this place apart from others. There can be no doubt that single-sex, private school environments run the risk of being unreflective of life in the "real world". The extent to which attending Newington fosters inclusivity and tolerance amongst its boys is something very special. Quite incredibly, one of the candidates to be the first headmaster of Newington expressed similar thoughts in July 1863. Well ahead of his time, Reverend Stephen Rabone wrote that Newington:

Would be open to the public who chose to render its advantage available, but no attempt would be made to proselytize or induce those of other denominations who entered it to leave the church of their parents and become Wesleyans.

That sentiment remains as pertinent today as it was in the founding year of the College. The fact that the school has remained true to this founding vision is testament to its uniqueness. Long may the tradition of tolerance of all faiths and cultures continue.

The second great strength of this place is that Newington instils a drive to achieve which spurs its old boys on to success in a wide, wide array of endeavours. The point is not that Newington boys all go down the pathway of university and into the professions, but rather that they are instilled with a drive to achieve in whatever field they choose. I think that desire comes, first, from being surrounded by people talented in a variety of ways. Boys from my year have gone on to own and run a construction business, play for the Brumbies, become president of the University of Sydney Union, amidst a myriad of other talents and skills. But not only will the boys sitting around you today motivate you to achieve through their individual strengths, your teachers will too. They are, without a doubt, the College's most valuable asset. The presence of figures such as Mr O'Rourke, Mr Corcoran and Mr Chambers rubs off on you over time. It is only once you have finally left the sandstone gates that you realise what an impact they have had in motivating you to, first and foremost, be a decent person, but also to keep pushing toward the next success. On top of that, the extent to which Newington allows you to pursue your interests must be almost unrivalled. To each and every boy, I urge you to seize upon the wide range of experiences here and harness the culture which instils that drive to achieve. If I had to choose one reason to send a boy to Newington, it would be the fact that it instils that drive.

Notwithstanding those great strengths of this place, let me offer a word of counsel, particularly to the award winners who are already beginning the transition into real life. I remember when I was in year 12 – Metcalfe Vice-Captain, Captain of the 3rds cricket, CUO, 1sts debating, Rugby Refereeing. I figured if I was doing all of those things I must be ready for the “real world”. I would scoff when my mum told me that the “real world” was very different to the life I was leading. As is always the case, mum was right. The range of activities available here helps you to mature and develop qualities necessary once you leave. But by its nature the College is a very structured environment which, despite its great diversity, is very different to life once you leave. The transition from school to university life was not straightforward for me. Apart from not knowing how to talk to girls (which I still have no idea about), I soon discovered that you really need to make things happen for yourself, rather than the timetable and the rules determining your day for you. If you want to play cricket, you have to join a cricket club. If you want a particular job, you have to talk to the people who are already there, even if they are complete strangers. So especially to those of you who have just started year 12, cherish this final year as you will create lasting memories – Still now my mates and I reflect on our last cadet camp together as CUOs, or when we beat Joeys 51-7 in 2010 to win the rugby premiership for the first time since 1979 – But know at the same time that it really is all up to you when you leave. To the award recipients, I’m sure you have already experienced what I’ve been talking about. Life is very different in the “real world”; exciting, but, as I recall it, daunting. The experiences you have had here will serve you well, but there is a long way to go. To recognise that before you leave is the best advice I could give you.

The process of learning who you are, and learning the life lessons we all need, is an ongoing one. This has been particularly apparent to me since returning from living in Dublin on university exchange last year. The temptation for some of you might be to stay in Sydney and study and work towards your career goal. Certainly, I took that view for the first few years of university. But having just spent 5 months overseas, I urge you all to travel as soon as you can, and to travel alone for at least part of it. Few experiences have taught me as much about myself, nor opened my eyes to the world in the same way.

To close, the quote of a mysterious ‘J.R. of Surry Hills’ in the *Wesleyan Newspaper* of 1860 seems fitting. He asked, lamenting the absence of an appropriate school for his boy:

Where, at present, in New South Wales, have we a school to which parents desirous of obtaining a superior education for their sons can send them without feeling great anxiety as to the effect association will have on their moral and religious principles?

The answer then was Newington College, and the answer remains the same today. This school is a great place, and I trust that for many years to come it will recognise the things that make it great and preserve them. Congratulations to today’s award recipients, and *Floreat Newingtonia*. Thankyou.