Barry Jones Oration

Good afternoon,

Thank you, Corrie, for that warm welcome.

I would like to acknowledge that we're meeting today on the lands of the Bunurong people, members of the great Kulin Nation, and pay my respects to their elders past and present.

I'm delighted to be here at the Sorrento Writers Festival, and even more delighted to be delivering this year's Barry Jones Oration.

To be invited to speak in honour of my dear friend, mentor and predecessor as the Member for Lalor, the great Barry Jones, is a privilege.

An Australian quiz champion, a teacher, lawyer, talkback radio host, writer, state and federal politician and minister of the crown…there's not many things Barry hasn't achieved in his 92 years.

I know it's a term thrown around a lot these days but, put simply, Barry is an icon.

And it seems the National Trust agrees, declaring Barry an Australian Living Treasure.

Of course, Australians first grew to love Barry en-masse when he appeared on Pick a Box with Bob Dyer, winning considerable money with his mastery of topics from ancient history to modern political philosophy.

But it was the now infamous debate over who was the first Governor-General of India when he really became a household name.

From those early days, it was obvious he was going to be one of the great thinkers of our time.

Barry's genius commands respect, but his nature does not drive him to issue commands. He is gentle, generous and thoughtful in his interactions with everyone.

In my first speech to parliament, I said: "Barry Jones has a unique place in Australian political life. Barry is famed throughout Australia for his intellect and is respected throughout Australia for his genuineness and compassion."

Those words are as true today as they were when I first said them in 1998.

You only have to read his annual Christmas message to family and friends to see his brain and his wit remain just as sharp today as ever… you just have to set aside an entire day to get through it first.

Quite simply, he knows everything…about, well, everything.

It's the kind of restless curiosity that the rest of us could only dream of…The kind where no fact or figure, no topic, is too complex..

A friend tells a story of going to a Prime Minister's Eleven game at Manuka Oval a number of years ago, to discover Barry sitting directly behind him.

At the time, an exhibition of antiquities belonging to Sigmund Freud, the founder of psycho-analysis, was touring Australia.

Whilst everyone else was enthralled in the match unfolding in front of them, Barry spent hours explaining the ins and outs of Freud's personal collection to the person sitting next to him.

The scene was likened to watching the cricket on the TV and accidentally having the radio going in the background, as Barry, seemingly showing very little interest in the match, recited the entire antiquities catalogue in tremendous depth. I guess that photographic memory goes a long way to explaining why he's a quiz champion, and a famously pedantic one, at that.

But jokes aside, it's been a long and distinguished career of public service that hasn't diminished over the years.

In politics, he was ahead of his time, becoming the first Australian parliamentarian to argue that climate change was an existential threat to civilisation, and shaping much of our nation's thinking about the future as Science Minister.

Post politics, he's exactly where he wants to be, supporting the causes he's deeply passionate about.

Helping students as a Professorial Fellow in the Graduate School of Education at the University of Melbourne…fighting for action on climate change on the Climate200 Advisory Council…advocating for a world without the death penalty with the Capital Punishment Justice Project…pushing for improved accountability and transparency in our parliaments on the Accountability Round Table Board…and sponsoring students at the Australian National Academy of Music.

But above and beyond all of these commitments, what brings him the most joy is his family, especially his wife Rachel and the grandchildren.

Barry is the epitome of what a retired parliamentarian should do and be, and our nation is all the richer for his enduring service.

He is and continues to be someone who has always stood up for the importance of facts, reason and civilised discourse.

And, as any one who has accompanied him to the Hill of Content bookshop knows, he is a prolific reader, which brings us to the wonder of being here at a book festival, in the company of friends who care deeply about reading and reflecting.

In that spirit, today, I want to muse on the hope and inspiration we find in books and what we can learn from them as we live through today's troubled times.

Let me start by spiriting you almost 90 years into the future, to the year 2114. In that year, the Norwegian Library of the Future in Oslo will release its first book, written by Margaret Atwood and stored in the library in 2014.

The library exists because of Scottish artist Katie Paterson. She developed the idea of a writer filing a book in the library each year for 100 years with the undertaking being that they would not speak of its contents and no one would read the book until a century had elapsed. To ensure the sustainability of the project, a thousand spruce saplings were planted in 2014. These trees will give the world the paper on which the books will be published.

I am indebted to my friend Elif Shafak, for alerting me to the existence of this special project, in which she has participated. Elif is a wonderful author and public intellectual. If you haven't read her work, you really should. Her latest is a beautiful book called There Are Rivers in the Sky.

If you visit Oslo, you can now sit in the wood panelled beauty of The Silent Room, this archive of untouched texts.

Once I learned of this magical, and let's face it, hugely frustrating concept for any reader who would love to get their hands on the books, I raised it with the CEO of the Wellcome Trust, who is Norwegian. Just for context, Wellcome is a global philanthropic fund headquartered in London and focussed on funding science as well as running a free public access museum. I have the honour of chairing the Board. Elif is well known to Wellcome, because we published her wonderful essay 'How to Stay Sane in an Age of Division'.

Our CEO, John-Arne Røttingen, was rightly proud of Norway's involvement in such a forward looking project but said, 'I wonder how they motivate the authors when they won't live to see their books read?' A reasonable question, and one any good CEO should be drawn to, given they must think deeply about how to motivate people to give of their best.

And what is the answer?

Surely every author must hope that their works are still read long after they are dead. If there were such a thing as a library and writers' room in the sky, I am sure Jane Austen would be looking down in delight at the

many celebrations of her 250th ‘birthday’. F Scott Fitzgerald would also be smiling at the many 100th anniversary celebrations of The Great Gatsby this year, at which we are all knowingly saying to each other how prescient his book is of the times in which we live.

But isn’t it human to want recognition in your lifetime? And as Jane Austen knew, getting paid matters, writing in one of her letters, ‘*Single women have a dreadful propensity for being poor….”, and “…tho’ I like praise as well as anybody, I like what (my brother) Edward calls pewter, too*”.

Or put another way “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that an author not in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of sufficient royalties”.

Is the Library of The Future most seductive for those authors whose writings have delivered them some kind of financial stability and they now want to ensure that they are read in 100 years?

Or perhaps the guarantee of being read in the future is seductive to all.

For example, F. Scott Fitzgerald may have been drawn to such a project because it would have prevented him from dying with the belief that his work was forgotten.

Even someone like Margaret Atwood, who is so rightly acknowledged in our age, may want the guarantee of future readers. After all, no one can be sure today whether in 2114, the world will be so thoroughly gender equal, that her masterpiece, The Handmaid’s Tale, will have slipped from public consciousness. Or, perhaps, the world will have moved so profoundly in the other direction, The Handmaid’s Tale, might be playing

a central role in society's organisation as a 'how to' manual. Who knows?

We could even ask the question, will books survive or will the works published in contemporary times be viewed by the community then in the same way we view silent movies now. A curiosity of historical interest but no contemporary relevance.

The wonderful Australian comedian Tim Minchin thinks we have already reached this era. In one of his brilliant stand up routines he hilariously works his way through a glossary of terms for young people in the audience so they will get the jokes. He starts by describing a magazine as '*like a large-scale floppy shiny book basically*' and then, fearing incomprehension, goes on to say '*a book is like a tightly bound stack of very thin slices of tree that you entertain yourself with, it's like TikTok but it doesn't make you mentally ill*.'

Tim is a perceptive man and so is David Brooks, a columnist at the New York Times.

He recently authored a sobering piece entitled '*Producing Something This Stupid Is the Achievement of a Lifetime*', in which he laments that tests show that adult numeracy and literacy skills across the globe have been declining since 2017, and the literacy of children in the US started to decline in around 2012. He also notes that, according to the National Center for Education Statistics, in 1984, 35 percent of 13-year-olds read for fun almost every day, but by 2023, that number was down to 14 percent. He cites as the main driver of all these changes passive screen time just spent scrolling.

He goes on to say:

‘*My biggest worry is that behavioral change is leading to cultural change. As we spend time on our screens, we’re abandoning a value that used to be pretty central to our culture — the idea that you should work hard to improve your capacity for wisdom and judgment all the days of your life. . . . . Reading a book puts you inside another person’s mind in a way that a Facebook post just doesn’t. Writing is the discipline that teaches you to take a jumble of thoughts and cohere them into a compelling point of view. Back in Homer’s day, people lived within an oral culture, then humans slowly developed a literate culture. Now we seem to be moving to a screen culture. Civilization was fun while it lasted*.’

David is urging us to recognise we are at an inflection point where the degradation of our attention spans and shared cultural capital has led to a degradation of our civic lives and political systems.

And, of course, he’s just one of the many doing so. Take the book Careless People by New Zealander Sarah Wynn Williams, a Facebook whistleblower.

She details the amorality of Facebook’s approach to the world and its sole focus on profits, which she saw from her vantage point as part of Facebook’s leadership team. The title of the book is a nod to the famous quote from The Great Gatsby:

‘*They were careless people, Tom and Daisy – they smashed up things and creatures and then retreated back into their money or their vast carelessness, or whatever it was that kept them together, and let other people clean up the mess they had made*’.

These words so aptly describe the ethos of the tech-bros who sat behind Donald Trump at his inauguration.

And while I writhe with anger about their self-absorption and cavalier attitudes to the future of our shared world, it's not the only thing that causes me to grimace.

We live in an era in which autocracy is prospering. If you are in any doubt about that proposition read Anne Applebaum's carefully reasoned work Autocracy Inc and then follow that up by reading the news.

An era in which profound global challenges like climate change and the downside impacts of artificial intelligence go unaddressed.

An era of trade wars, wealth inequality and hard power conflict.

An era of celebration of cruelty. Witness the social media output of the Trump government agencies involved in deportations or Elon Musk's glorying in the large-scale destruction of the US Agency for International Development.

And the list goes on.

At this point Barry you may be thinking to yourself why on earth did we invite this woman to give such a thoroughly depressing speech.

I promise you there is a but coming.

But, I think, in meeting the challenges of this age we have three strong advantages.

First, we won't be fooled again. As a global community, we stumbled into this era with wide eyed naivety allowing ourselves to believe:

- that liberal democracy had established itself as the desired norm,

- that open trading economies and markets would lift all boats,

- that the world could address shared challenges and be driven by global goals, like the millennium development goals and those on sustainable development,

- that Putin was a man with whom we could do business,

- that China's economic rise would fuel internal demands for democracy,

- that the success in many parts of the world of movements like that of marriage equality meant there was a community openness to more change,

and the list goes on.

You may be shaking your head as you hear that list noting that you never shared some of the beliefs listed. I too can do the same. But there can be no doubt that there was a growing sense of orthodoxy around these kinds of conclusions in many foreign policy establishments, political parties and progressive organisations.

And there was certainly a great deal of enthusiasm, even excitement around the proposition that new technology, the so-called information age, with powerful computers at our fingertips and the ability to be connected instantly with everyone and everywhere on the planet, would foster a deep sense of shared understanding.

But it is now so blindingly obvious that we confused information with wisdom, immediacy with knowledge.

None of us are wiser because we google what we then accept as facts. None of us is truly more attached to strangers because we can use social media to snap ill-thought through views back and forth. Instead we are all at risk of just being more distracted and agitated; and potentially

more arrogant because instead of confessing ignorance any longer, we quickly type a question into our phone, scan the results and then we think we know.

But having lived through these head spins, we face our circumstances today more clear-eyed about the dimensions of the challenges and the profound need to rethink how our world should work.

Second, as Australians, we enter this phase with many national economic and societal advantages, including our functioning democracy with the boundaries of seats fairly drawn, public funding for elections, compulsory voting and the routine peaceful transfer of power, with non-politicised courts able to adjudicate any disputes. Think where the US could be if it shared these advantages.

And I would also like to stress that one of our current advantages is good national political leadership and that coming up quickly we have the opportunity to decide as a nation to continue that leadership.

I am well aware that in many progressive audiences it is routine to decry the merits of contemporary political leadership and to contrast the current crop disapprovingly with leaders in the past.

In many ways, I'm the last person who should be standing out against this trend. After all, I personally get to benefit from it.

But I think it is an unfair trend. Who knows how the political legends who dominated early eras would actually fare in today's world where social media fuels fever and fragmentation, while at the same time enormous policy conundrums flow from the breaking down of the architecture of the post World War II world.

In this environment, the Albanese Government is to be applauded for keeping on course and delivering significant policies that have strengthened our nation. Close to my heart is the full delivery of the school reforms I initiated which will ensure a needs based funding model is used to drive better learning outcomes for all, with a particular focus on those children who are most disadvantaged. I also warmly welcome and admire the courage it takes to stand up to the tech giants and protect our kids from social media. For these and so many other reasons, I am hoping to celebrate a Labor victory on May 3.

Third, we rise to meet the challenges of this world, enriched by our storytellers, by the people who enable us to visit the world of their imagination and come back with insights about our own.

I have learned more about the trauma of our colonial history and the way it drives contemporary alienation and dispossession from reading Fiona McFarlane's The Sun Walks Down and Alexis Wright's Praiseworthy.

I more clearly see and feel the impacts of climate change because of Charlotte McConaghy's Wild Dark Shore.

I am wiser about what it means to live through an era that is an inflection point in human history as a result of re-reading George Elliot's Middlemarch.

You will have your own contemporary list, your own lifetime list, of the books that shaped you and sharpened your insight and deepened your empathy.

Let me conclude by saying, even in today's troubled times, there is hope. Hope because of our hard won wisdom, our nation's strengths, our ability to learn, grow and connect through books.

These are the blessings and benefits that will aid us as we strive to shape a better future for our communities, nation and world.

Now is a time for action which simply means each of us, doing what we can, where we are. We have the tools for change in our hands.

And right here we can summon inspiration, from a life of learning, a life well lived, a life of connection and friendship - the life of our friend Barry Jones.