

# Conferral of an Honorary Doctorate University of Melbourne

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Congratulations to all the graduates here today.

You've reached an important milestone, a moment to spend with family and friends & to be proud of your achievement and excited about the future.

When I finished my degree at the University of Melbourne in 1990, the iPhone was still 17 years away. I remember buying an electric typewriter with money I was given for my 21<sup>st</sup> birthday and was thrilled that I could see three or four words at a time on the tiny screen as I was typing!

Now every global piece of research is only a few clicks away and any global commentator of any political persuasion can be read or watched or translated into another language in seconds.

The overwhelming scale of this global sea of information, without boundaries or constraints, stands in stark contrast to the reality that the bubble we each live in is getting smaller.

Today, Australians have smaller families, yet we live in bigger homes. We are unlikely to share those big houses with our grandparents or grandchildren. More of us work from home, make our coffee at home & get our shopping delivered to our door. Our cities are becoming more divided as house prices escalate, keeping young families and new migrant groups living on the fringes. Our local communities are shrinking too – with fewer kids and adults joining sports clubs or going to church.

Add to this, we only follow people on social media that we like or agree with and read books by writers our friends or children haven't cancelled.

We have more information.

We might even communicate more.

But we talk less.

In short, we live in an era where we increasingly engage with, hear from, live near and socialise with people mostly like ourselves!

I encourage you to resist this – to be curious and open. Push yourself beyond any easy comfort zone and be wary of the narrowing of voices and ideas around you. Enhance your formal education by learning from the world around you and the widest variety of people in it.

My challenge to you is to have “strong opinions, loosely held.”

Strong opinions, loosely held, invites you to care a lot about your world – to be thoughtful and engaged enough to hold strong opinions. Explain them to others, help expand their perspectives.

But it also asks you to remain open and curious enough to reflect and listen, perhaps even occasionally change, your own strong opinions.

In my time in politics this was important to remember. By its very nature, politics is full of people with strong opinions. I was someone who cared passionately about the need to improve and change many things in our society, especially for women.

I remember as Attorney General initially being sceptical about the value of a Royal Commission into child abuse in institutions. I am a feminist and felt strongly that children, mostly girls, had laws stacked against them for too long already, and that this seemed an extremely slow way to tackle a known problem.

Despite my strong opinions and impatience to act, I was open to listening, and was ultimately persuaded, by the voices of survivors of abuse. Their direct experience helped me understand why the power of a Royal Commission was needed to properly expose the conduct of very influential

institutions like churches. They knew that widespread understanding and deeper community change would flow from the Commission exposing entrenched, systemic, long held problems in a way that a quick law change could never have done.

I had held that strong opinion loosely enough to learn from those with important life experience that I did not have. And it made me a better politician because of it.

Similarly, 'strong opinions, loosely held' can be a helpful stance in your professional lives. My degree from this university was in law, but my most impactful work in politics was as Health Minister. I'm being honoured today largely for my work in tobacco control – introducing laws to sell cigarettes in dull green packs plastered with health warnings.

These important changes to our laws could not have been introduced by passionate doctors talking only to themselves – it needed a vast array of people in research, law, psychology, politics, health, behavioural economics and much more to bring about the change. It was the strong opinions of doctors, researchers and public health advocates, along with me as Minister, that were able to persuade others of the need to act.

Trade ministers, intellectual property lawyers, Prime Ministers, even, were convinced to let go of their strong opinions, or of their preconceived ideas, to try something new that was important to the community and to their children's health.

Twenty-five countries around the world have now copied this innovative measure led by Australia.

(By the way, it reminds us, today, of the pressing need to think about new steps to battle the harms from vaping. Seeing their bright colours and kid friendly flavours makes my stomach turn.)

So my invitation is to encourage you to care about the world around you, and form strong opinions about how you will be able to live happily in it, and make it even better. You will need to deliberately lift your eyes up from the benchtop or desktop – to watch and read and listen and talk to people doing different things to you.

All of today's issues, big and small, all the global issues from climate change to religious and regional warfare, to poverty, mass migration, homelessness or discrimination – they all need people with different perspectives to come together and work on solutions.

President Barack Obama said "Cynicism has never won a war, or cured a disease, or started a business, or fed a young mind, or sent men into space. Cynicism is a choice. Hope is a better choice."

And I would add, not just hope – but also openness and curiosity about others' ideas, experience, knowledge and wisdom.

(And – as a feminist aside – I hear the first woman astronaut will be travelling to the moon this year too!)

I encourage you to bring your strong opinions and passions out into the world that needs your energy and fresh ideas. Be determined. Be prepared to explain, persuade or even argue your view, but please stay open to the ideas of others.

I truly believe this will help you enjoy, respect and harness the breadth and variety in our world and achieve a more positive impact.

So – congratulations on your graduation today.

Please keep learning.

Have strong opinions, but hold them loosely.