

**REMARKS AT THE TASMANIAN QUALIFICATIONS
AUTHORITY OUTSTANDING ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS BY
THE HONOURABLE PETER UNDERWOOD AC, GOVERNOR
OF TASMANIA, GOVERNMENT HOUSE WEDNESDAY
8TH FEBRUARY 2012.**

The other day I was reading an essay written by Professor A C Grayling when he was Professor of Philosophy at Birkbeck College, the University of London. The essay is entitled “Excellence”.¹ Professor Grayling began his essay by referring to the English poet Matthew Arnold and Arnold’s description that the pursuit of excellence in the fostering of culture was “getting to know” on all the matters that most concern us, the best that has been thought and said in the world, and through this knowledge, turning a stream of free and fresh thought upon our stock notions and habits. And I thought that’s right isn’t it? The pursuit of excellence involves getting to know the best that has been said and thought in the world on all the matters that concern us most. I think it is also right that the value of pursuing excellence is that those who pursue excellence make an enormous contribution to their society and culture by using what they have learned to stimulate free and fresh thought on established notions and habits, thus promoting change and development for the better. That’s why this afternoon we recognise and celebrate your high achievements to-date. You are the people who are likely to go on and pursue excellence at tertiary level and beyond, and it is in the interests of our society that you be encouraged and supported to do

¹ Meditations for the Humanist: Ethics for a secular age; AC Grayling Oxford University Press (USA), 2003 ISBN-13 978-0-19-5-516890-7.

just that because your pursuit of excellence will produce a healthy and vitalizing stream of free and fresh thought upon our stock notions and habits.

In his essay Professor Grayling points out that many countries have, or aspire to have an elite educational stratum aimed at taking the most gifted students and giving them the best intellectual training possible. The aim of course, is to gain the highest quality in the sciences, engineering, the law, administration, the arts and so on.

A hindrance to the encouragement and development of high achievers and the establishment and maintenance of institutions to which entry is gained on the sole basis of merit is the notion that a democratic society is obliged to treat everybody the same. But the plain fact is that we are not all the same and I do not believe that everybody should be treated the same for to do so hinders the pursuit of excellence by those who have the capacity to successfully do so to the ultimate benefit of us all.

I am not saying that some human beings should be valued less or more than others. Far from it; every one of us is of equal worth and value whatever our talents and capacities may be, and that means in a democratic society everyone should be treated *fairly*. But treating everyone fairly is quite different from treating everybody the equally or the same.

It is fair that those who suffer from, or are born with a disability of some kind be provided with treatment, facilities and advice to minimise the impact of their disability and thus narrow the gap, so far as possible, between the able and the disabled. That is a proposition that is well recognised in our society. But is it not equally fair to provide the high achievers with teachers, institutions and support to enable them to pursue excellence? Grayling argues that democracy should not eschew excellence and should not reduce everyone to the same level. He writes, and I quote, “[democracy] should aim to raise them, ambitiously and dramatically, as close as possible to an ideal.”

I am talking about you; you who have achieved excellence in your education so far. I agree with Professor Grayling’s view that our society should recognise your talent, and if you are good enough our society should ensure that your merit is recognised and that you be provided with learning institutions of the best possible kind so that in your chosen field you get to know “on all the matters that most concern us, the best that has been thought and said in the world, and through this knowledge, [turn] a stream of free and fresh thought upon our stock notions and habits.” In that way society will invest in, and benefit from your advancement in the disciplines, the skills and in the arts.

I sometimes think that in this country there is a fairly widespread “tall poppy syndrome” which acts as a dampening agent

on the pursuit of excellence except perhaps in the field of sport where the difference between treating everyone the same and treating everybody fairly seems to be better understood.

This afternoon we celebrate outstanding achievement by Tasmanian senior secondary students across a broad range of skills and interest areas, both academic and vocational. My wife and I congratulate each of you on your success to-date. We hold you up as role models. We encourage you to embrace the pursuit of excellence at, and beyond tertiary level in whatever is your chosen field. You and other high achievers like you are the most valuable asset that our country has today.

With our congratulations we express the hope that our community recognises that an investment in high achievers in the pursuit of excellence will return dividends to everybody.

Now before I present the awards I would like to introduce to you a young man, Melford Lijauco (*Lie jar co*) who is, as you all were until just recently, a Year 12 student and who is, like you a high achiever. Melford is pursuing excellence as a pianist, one of his chosen fields and to celebrate your successes as high achievers Melford is going to play for us Brahms' rhapsody No2 in G minor; ladies and gentlemen, Melford Lijauco from the Hutchins School.