



Keith Murdoch Oration 2019 Speech

Delivered by Robert Thomson, Chief Executive, News Corporation

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That we are honoring Sir Keith Murdoch in this place is pertinent and I am honored to honor him. Sir Keith certainly deserves to be lauded for what he did for our country, and far beyond, and for the tradition in journalism that his family created and has continued with passion and principle and purpose. It is so easy to traduce traditions, to rewrite history for the sake of contemporary political points scoring, and that has certainly happened to the Murdoch family of late. I can't claim to have read and re-read every word religiously of a recent, rancid New York Times hatchet job, that's a technical journalistic term, but the portrait painted in my view was distant from the truth. Smearing Sir Keith, Rupert and Lachlan Murdoch was multi-generational, muck-spreading in which the facts were incidental, if not accidental, and the journalistic jaundice and corporate self-interest were fundamental. More on journalistic jaundice a little later. But let's elevate the discourse and aspire to the lofty goals articulated by Sir Keith: "I believe in the good purpose of life, in the beauty of the universe, and the high destiny of man."

That we live in times in which everything from change to reputation to controversy is digitally amplified, with the volume often turned up to ten, has been obvious for years, or at least should have been obvious. Having been rather vocal, sometimes too vociferously, on this subject for rather a long period, it was surprising that our society's leaders had been so sanguinely supine. As a result, we have institutionally ingrained some seriously bad behavior and have dominant digital companies culturally ill-equipped to cope with the contemporary challenges. In dealing with these companies, the sage words of Maya Angelou have echoed in my head: "Never make someone a priority when all you are to them is an option."

For Big Digital, the line of least compliance should not have been the starting point for our journey into the future. Had fewer politicians, and not just in Australia, not been seduced by net narcissism, we may have cognizant communities better able to cope with the e-existential challenges. That includes, sometimes tragically, the teenagers whose insecurities and vulnerabilities are magnified cruelly in so-called social media - or the seemingly powerful global companies that panic and prevaricate at the first mutterings of the anti-social media mob. There is no doubt that a mob mentality has taken hold in much of the west and among the most pronounced of the mobs are illiberal liberals, who are roaming the landscape in the seemingly endless, insatiable quest for indignation and umbrage. It is vituperation as virtue.

If I could provide but one salient example that should give us all pause....It is the case of Kay Coles James, the president of the Heritage Foundation, who wrote tellingly last week of her experience in the Washington Post. She had been asked by Google to sit on an advisory council to discuss the responsible development of Artificial Intelligence - it's surely efficacious to have thoughtful people and a broad range of views to help us all divine the difference between the artifice of intelligence and artificial intelligence. However, it turned out that a mob of Google employees were not as keen to have a discursive discussion. As she wrote: "They greeted the news of my appointment to the council with name-calling and character assassination." Among other epithets, Kay Coles James noted that she was called a "bigot". Now, let's put that curse into context - she is a 69-year-old black woman, who, at the age of 12, was integrated at an all-white school in Richmond, Virginia. As she tells the story: "White parents jeered me outside the school, and inside, their kids stuck me with pins, shoved me in the halls and pushed me down the stairs." The hostility she felt in contemporary Silicon Valley "was reminiscent of what I felt back then." And how did the immeasurably influential Google respond? It disbanded the AI advisory council. You can easily search for her story on Google News.

So here we are on the cusp of truly extraordinary developments in Artificial Intelligence, and yet collectively, our shared level of Emotional Intelligence is plumbing the depths. The quantum comes

with quackery, and 5G will allow instantaneous uploading, downloading and connectivity, but will self-censorship and censoriousness be significant circuit breakers? There is no doubt that our technical ability to create, to distribute and share information and images and much more, will be exponentially enhanced over the coming five years. But that is the contradiction - while we are creating that capability, we are challenging our capacity for empathy. One example of that trend is the seething secularism that portrays any person of faith, whether an evanescent evangelical or occasional attendee at mass or synagogue or mosque or temple as a nutter, a fruitcake, touched, a devotee of the deviant. It's still enduringly fashionable to quote selectively, eclectically from Asian mystics, the ascetic aesthetic, but please don't take that stuff seriously, don't let philosophy cross the border into the badlands of actual spirituality. And there surely are religious texts that, if you are literal, are a tad apocalyptic, a bit bizarre. Job's endless sufferings and travails resonate across the faiths...in our time, surely a trial lawyer could have monetized his trials, his agonies. And there certainly have been egregious abuses in the Catholic and other churches for which the offenders must be held to account, but to focus solely, obsessively on the sins is to caricature all those who have faith. That fact Kay Cole James discovered to her cost, but also to our cost and the cost of a raised collective consciousness.

We are going through a strange phase in seeking affirmation through alienation, virtue in victimhood. Like many trends in

business, it is a confluence of the personal, the sectoral and the cyclical. Where are the shared experiences in the contemporary West? Why has the village square shrunk and been subdivided? The verticals in digital run deep and some clearly have the ability to radicalize, whether the neo-fascistic or the jihadist. Mao Zedong said a fair few inane things, including notably that a revolution is not embroidery, but he did make an interesting point about vertical vision: "We think too small, like the frog at the bottom of the well, who thinks the sky is only as big as the top of the well. If the frog surfaced, he would have an entirely different view." There are too many frogs at the bottom of digital wells, whose personal parameters are as limited as they are self-reinforcing. At least there is a more vigorous debate on these subjects, and it's clear that there will be more regulation of companies who have sought to defy definition and avoid a reckoning. Laws should not be rushed or reactionary - I wrote a book on the Australian judiciary three decades ago, imaginatively titled *The Judges*, and it was clear then that even a good judge will have much difficulty ameliorating a bad law. That we in the West are clumsily grappling with these issues as "developed" nations makes one wonder what the impact will be on countries, like China, India and Indonesia, that are combining their industrial revolution with a digital revolution, coping with mass rural-to-urban mobility in the age of the mobile.

Having had the opportunity to experience life in various capitals since 1985, it is amusing to overhear the local debates about which is the most important bilateral relationship globally. Obviously the

parochial can come into play when wondering whether it is between London and Washington or Brussels and anywhere, but there is one relationship which far exceeds the rest in importance, Beijing and Washington, and we are in the midst of a crucial shift in that axis. Just over seven years ago, as editor of the Wall Street Journal, I spent a significant amount of time one afternoon discussing China with President Barack Obama in the Oval Office. Having lived in Beijing in the mid 1980s and since been a regular visitor for both professional and personal reasons, watching China's economic transformation has been a privilege and provocative. I witnessed the journey from the humiliating, grinding poverty of socialist central planning to market-driven economic emancipation for, probably, 700 or 800 million people - it's hard to be particularly precise when you are dealing with hundreds of millions. It did always seem naive to presume that the Chinese Communist Party would match economic with political reform, and so it has proven.

President Obama clearly appreciated China's importance and patently understood that Beijing was still defining what it meant to have influence - China will continue to define itself, in part, by how other countries define it. My only and rather obvious suggestion to the President was that he should meet the Chinese leadership as often as possible and establish a different, more dynamic level of dialogue. He indicated that he would do so after his re-election, which was an understandable strategy. Unfortunately, that more intense dialogue never happened - engaging with China inevitably means burning personal political capital and President Obama

must have been reluctant to put his remarkable reputation on the line. Perhaps the individual inactivity was part of the Administration's approach to the Korean Peninsula which was officially known as "strategic patience". If I have to confront an awkward, prickly business issue and am uncertain how to proceed, I will encourage News Corp investors to understand, to respect my "strategic patience".

Now we are in a different, rather complicated phase with more at stake for both countries and the world. But, when you speak privately with Chinese officials, they are almost surprised that they haven't been called out years ago for dodgy trade practices. China still has a binary approach to trade and, on those monochromatic terms, the country recognizes that it has obviously had the better of the bilateral deal. We are fortunate that China's economic czar, Liu He, is a thoughtful, empathetic individual who shares a guilty pleasure with me - he has a fondness for Arsenal. Those who know me are fully aware that I am an Essendon Tragic, but having spent more than three decades out of the country, I have occasionally cheated on Essendon - with Arsenal - it is sadly true that staying faithful, staying chaste while in a long-distance relationship is difficult. Anyway, the knowing Liu He understands that we are in a defining moment in world affairs and that not only a trade deal with the US is crucial, but also a resetting of the bilateral sensibility. Agreement will surely only come after a final theatric summit between Presidents Xi and Trump, with both leaders ready to hype the histrionics to reinforce their respective positions. But the

phrasing of the agreement will be as important as the parsing of the clauses on soya beans and IP and tech compliance. There will likely be a preamble that could have historic significance as a geopolitical GPS, in part, because it may well be a signal to the Chinese people by Xi Jinping that the country has graduated into a new realm of responsibility. Watch those words.

So we have the cross-border, and we have the crass-border, the seamless spread of witless nonsense, delivered digitally, globally, endlessly, daily. So what is the provenance of digital drivel and why it was so successfully spawned in the early days of internet "idealism"? In essence, it was because the anarchic architects believed that open-source code 010101 should be complemented by open-source content - the only problem is that there actually is a hierarchy of content and of news, the fact-based and the fantasy-based, the profound and the profane, the veracious and the vacuous. In this e-emptiness, there is a craving for credibility and a quotidian questioning. There should be skepticism about elites, and a healthy skepticism is I presume, I hope, still part of the Australian character. But the question we must ask is who are the elites, who is the establishment? It is no longer a few tired, half-sozzled, ruddy-faced inbred gents in walnut-paneled rooms chuffing on cigars and divvying up dividends. It's far more complicated than that. Australia famously dealt with a tyranny of distance, now the world has a tyranny of the distinguished, a smug, sneering elite that derides popular concerns as "populism", and

whose self-image is fueled by an abiding sense of absolute superiority.

In media, one sees that sense of supercilious superiority in some of the Washington press corps...it's fair to say that a significant majority of DC reporters are liberal, and that they fall into two categories, liberals who are professional and professional liberals. The latter category has expanded as the numbers who have failed the Donald Trump-stress test have grown. Average Americans sense that Trumpian distinction. These Americans don't like his trashier tweets or the unseemly self-indulgence or the errant egotism, but they do see that the President is challenging a contemporary establishment which regards Middle America as a louche lumpenproletariat, as despicably deplorable - this is the same Middle America that came to the world's rescue twice last century. These are decent, thoughtful people - and not the doltish troglodytes that much of the media mocks ceaselessly. In the midst of this media miasma, there's a reason why the Wall Street Journal is the most trusted paper in America...the reporters report and the columnists columnise and the difference between the two is obvious to readers not oblivious to the sin of reporters opining and failing to have the objective of being objective.

Let me be loud and clear - The Wall Street Journal would not be as trusted without the investment in its journalism made by Rupert Murdoch, and The Times, the most trusted paper in the UK, may not even exist without his continuing commitment. And The Australian would simply never have been created. These inconvenient truths

tend to be ignored but they are immutable facts. This is the Keith Murdoch Oration but it would be remiss to ignore what Rupert has done for the media and for our country and for many other countries with what was an exceedingly modest inheritance - no offense to Adelaide. I once caused an unintended stir by jesting, by joshing that it was called the City of Churches because it was interesting for about an hour each week. To see Rupert up close each day, to witness the restless curiosity, the endless energy, and a genuine humility is in such stark and breathtaking contrast to the ill-informed institutional critiques.

This evening is indeed about inheritance. About the inherited responsibilities we all have, to our land, our place, our people, our planet. We are custodians and as custodians we must be conscious of consequence and context. We in this room are, almost without exception, people of privilege and so what will we do with that prestige, that position, that power, that possibility? Yasunari Kawabata, the first Japanese to win a Nobel Prize for literature, wrote: "Time flows in the same way for all human beings; every human being flows through time in a different way." How will we flow through time? How will we make the most of our time??

ENDS