



SENATOR THE HON. ARTHUR SINODINOS AO
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E&OE

I won't keep you too long, and I won't reminisce too much. The first thing I will say, though, is that I can't conceive of the Hunter without the University of Newcastle. It's so integral to the identity of the Hunter today; and what Kim [Carr] said before and Simon [Birmingham] alluded to is that you are now at the heart of helping to drive regional economic growth and development.

When I went there in the mid-seventies, it was a young university just finding its feet. It had been a university college; it had been more of a technical college, in a way, because it was built on servicing BHP and the surrounding industries. But it was adding on Arts faculties, Science faculties, other faculties; so it was starting to become what it is today: a place which expands the mind of native Novocastrians and all others who come to the region to get a world-class education.

For me, it opened my mind in a lot of ways. I met people from other parts of the world, probably for the first time in my life. It was a wonderful bush environment, and I just wish every student had the opportunity to go to a university which really puts you at ease, just by its physical nature.

I got to meet some very strange people! Godfrey Tanner, the Classics professor, some of you may remember: a classic individual after whom I think various facilities in the university are named. Wonderful character. I suspected he was gay, but I wasn't quite sure, because I hadn't grown up being taught about such things – but I was to learn other things later!

But the important thing was: it expanded my mind. I went to uni to do Law because my parents didn't want me to go to Sydney to do Law – they preferred me to stay in Newcastle, at least for my first degree – because I had qualified to go to Sydney uni. So I sort of compromised by doing Economics and Commerce; but then once I got into Economics, I felt it helped explain how the world worked, so I really got into it.

But the part of economics I really enjoyed was economic history – about how things had come about. And what it taught me was that theories, equations – that’s all great; but history is a living thing, and things happen in history which you can’t just explain with models.

So, for me, when I came out of university, I came out with a belief in markets, but I also came out of it with a belief that governments have an important role to play in catalysing communities. And I’ve seen over the last few years the way Newcastle – under your leadership, Caroline [McMillen] and Paul [Jeans] – has become a catalyst for all sorts of new developments in the Hunter.

I’ve had the odd searing experience there when I was working in John Howard’s office in the mid-nineties. That’s when the steel industry was going into decline and we’d worked out all these adjustment packages; and we thought, you know, we’d go up there, we’ll make a big thing of this. We’d been working with some of the unions up there, the AWMU and others – so we thought, ‘This is going to be great!’

We got up there, we announced the package in a building in the centre of Newcastle, and then the word came back from security that the building was surrounded!

And we said, ‘Who’s it surrounded by?’ And they said, ‘All these unionists.’ I said, ‘They’re baying for blood;’ I said, ‘Well, we’ve just offered them this big package’. He said ‘Well, they’re still after you, you and Howard will have to get out’. So they arranged for us to leave by the back door, and we were literally run out of Newcastle!

And I remember the next day, the Newcastle Herald had this big headline, *You’ve given us X million, what about the other 999 jobs?* And I said to the PM, ‘Look, you’ve got to understand: people in the Hunter are very proud people, and they want to stand up on their own feet. They’ll take what you’ve given them, but they want to stand up on their own feet.’

And what I’ve found after that period, from the late nineties to a few years ago, that all of a sudden attitudes in Newcastle changed. It was like a lightbulb moment; we’d hit rock bottom, and then people decided: we are going to determine our future. We are going to build on the things we are strong on, and we will go to Government with a vision of what we want to be.

And what’s been integral to that vision? It’s the University of Newcastle and the support you’ve provided.

So now you’re a world class university. I have friendships that go back fifty years – well, forty years, I should say, from the mid-seventies – because of the university. I’ve got a chief of staff in my office, Nigel Bailey, who’s from Newcastle as well; and we conspire to get back there because I’ve purloined the role of Patron Senator of Newcastle and the Hunter for myself. We conspire to get back there as soon as we can, and as often as we can. And while I will never do anything to distort the priorities of Government in favour of one region over another, the thing

is, I've always encouraged people in the Hunter to unite, as they are doing – for the various business organisations, and in concert with the uni – to get things done on behalf of The Hunter.

My view is that Newcastle can be a global city. It's got all that it needs to be a global city; and we, at a Federal level, working with State and Local, we can help you do that. But the vision has got to come from you; and it is coming from you! And for me, there's nothing more encouraging than to see people from home coming to Canberra and putting the case for that great part of Australia.

So, thank you, those of you who have made the effort to come to Canberra for this. Thank you to the alumni working in the public service who have taken time off to be here. Thank you to my parliamentary colleagues for showing your support.

It's a great part of the world. I always feel far more relaxed when I go home, and so thank you for having me – I feel really relaxed today. I hope it's mellowed, Kim, for Question Time! Thank you.