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Jacinda Ardern

Harvard Commencement Speech – Democracy, disinformation and kindness

E oku manukura, nga pou haemata o te ngahere.

e Piko o Te Mahuri, tera te tipu o te rakau.

E tipu, e rea, ka puta, ka ora.

Tena koutou katoa.¹

5 President Bacow,

Provost Garber,

Governing Boards and deans,

And most importantly, graduates.

10 In Te Reo Māori, the language of the indigenous people of New Zealand, I paid tribute to all of the esteemed guests who stand here in this great forest of knowledge. It is a privilege to be here, and I thank you for the honour.

There are some moments in life that make the world feel small and connected.

This is not one of them.

15 I am used to walking into a room in New Zealand and knowing at least someone. It is one of the beautiful and comforting aspects of living in a small country.

And while this moment feels incredibly daunting to me right now, I do take comfort knowing there are around 30 New Zealanders studying here, and statistically at least one of them will be my cousin.

But then there are some moments that serve to remind you, that despite distance, despite vastly different histories and experiences, there are many things that connect us.

20 In June 1989 the Prime Minister of Pakistan stood on this spot and delivered the commencement address titled: “Democratic nations must unite.”

¹ E oku[...]katoa: a greeting to the audience in the Māori language *Te Reo*

She spoke about her journey, the importance of citizenry, representative government, human rights, and democracy.

25 I met Benazir Bhutto² in Geneva³ in June of 2007. We both attended a conference that drew together progressive parties from around the world. Just seven months later she was assassinated.

There will be opinions and differing perspectives written about all of us as political leaders. Two things that history will not contest about Benazir Bhutto. She was the first Muslim female Prime Minister elected in an Islamic country, when a woman in power was a rare thing. She was also the first to give birth in office.

The second and only other leader to have given birth in office almost 30 years later, was me.

30 My daughter, Neve Te Aroha Ardern Gayford, was born on the 21st of June 2018.

Benazir Bhutto's birthday.

The path she carved as a woman feels as relevant today as it was decades ago, and so too is the message she shared here. In this place.

She said part way through her speech in 1989 the following:

35 "We must realise that democracy... can be fragile."

I read those words as I sat in my office in Wellington, New Zealand. A world away from Pakistan. And while the reasons that gave rise for her words then were vastly different, they still ring true.

Democracy can be fragile.

40 This imperfect but precious way that we organise ourselves, that has been created to give equal voice to the weak and to the strong, that is designed to help drive consensus – it is fragile.

For years it feels as though we have assumed that the fragility of democracy was determined by duration. That somehow the strength of your democracy was like a marriage – the longer you'd been in it, the more likely it was to stick.

But that takes so much for granted.

45 It ignores the fact that the foundation of a strong democracy includes trust in institutions, experts and government – and that this can be built up over decades but torn down in mere years.

It ignores that a strong democracy relies on debate and dialogue, and that even the oldest regimes can seek to control these forums, and the youngest can seek to liberate them.

50 It ignores what happens, when regardless of how long your democracy has been tried and tested – when facts are turned into fiction, and fiction turned into fact, you stop debating ideas and you start debating conspiracy.

It ignores the reality of what we are now being confronted by every single day.

Where I come from, we have a parliamentary representative democracy. Without giving you a litany of fun facts on New Zealand you're unlikely to need again – here's the brief version.

² *Benazir Bhutto*: (1953-2007) former Prime Minister of Pakistan

³ city in Switzerland

55 We have a Mixed Member Proportional system, which essentially means every vote counts, and it's ensured our parliament better reflects our communities. Almost 50 percent of our parliament are women, 20 percent are Māori, the indigenous people of New Zealand, and our Deputy Prime Minister is a proud gay man and sits amongst several other rainbow parliamentarians.

In the past ten years we have passed laws that include everything from the introduction of gay marriage and the banning of conversion therapy⁴, right through to embedding a 1.5 degree climate change target into law, banning military style semi-automatics and assault rifles, and the decriminalisation of abortion.

These are significant issues, and they have not been without debate and difference. But they are all examples of where we have navigated times of deep change, without, for the most part, leaving deep rifts.

65 But we have also seen the opposite. Whether it's democratic elections that erupt into violence, or the COVID crisis exposing mistrust of experts, institutions and governments – western democracies are seeing it and experiencing examples and New Zealand is no different.

Now I will admit to some trepidation entering a discussion on how we strengthen our democracies when this issue is so easily and wrongly distorted into being opposed to free speech. But that fear is overshadowed by a greater fear of what will happen to our democracies, if we don't act to firm up their foundations.

If we don't find once again our ability to argue our corners, yes with the passion and fire that conviction brings, but without the vitriol, hate and violence.

75 If we don't find a way to ensure difference, that space where perspectives, experiences and debate give rise to understanding and compromise, doesn't instead become division – the place of entrenchment, where dialogue departs, solutions shatter, and a crevice between us becomes so deep that no one dares cross to the other side.

We are at a precipice, and rather than ask what caused it, today I want to talk about how we address it.

80 Now I am not an academic. I acknowledge, the robes on this occasion aren't exactly truth in advertising. Rather, I am a politician from Morrinsville. As a point of geographic reference, it's right next to Hobbiton⁵. I'm not actually joking.

But in that small rural town of 5000 people where I spent most of my formative years and will forever love for what it gave me, I lived in that important space that sits between difference and division.

85 I was raised a Mormon in a town where the dominant religions were Catholic, Anglican and Rugby. I was a woman interested in politics, left wing politics, in a region that had never in its entire democratic history, elected anyone other than a conservative candidate.

These differences were a part of my identity, but never a source of isolation.

But I am old. And unquestionably, things have changed.

In fact, mine is the generation that sat on the cusp of the internet age.

90 I remember the first person in my school who had access to the internet. Her name was Fiona Lindsay and her father was the local accountant. After he had shut the office for the day, we would get the key and log

⁴ *conversion therapy*: therapeutic attempt to change an individual's sexual orientation

⁵ location from the trilogy *The Lord of the Rings* which was filmed in New Zealand

onto his massive desktop computers, with screens so wide that the desks were tiered to fit the whole thing in.

95 It was the 1990s. The interface and even what you used the internet for in those days was different. For a time, it was almost as if the directory for this vast landscape didn't exist. It was a modern ham radio⁶. You would dial in, and talk to someone. Anyone. It was the spontaneity of connection that in some ways mirrored real life.

But as the opportunities to connect expanded, humans did what we have always done. We organised ourselves.

100 Social media platforms were born offering the promise of connection and reconnection. We logged on in our billions, forming tribes and sub tribes. We published our thoughts, feelings and ideas freely. We found a place to share information, facts, fiction dressed up as facts, memes, and more cat videos than you ever thought possible.

We found a place to experience new ways of thinking and to celebrate our difference.

But increasingly, we use it to do neither of those things.

105 I doubt anyone has ever created a group titled "political views I disagree with, but choose to enter into respectful dialogue with to better understand alternative perspectives."

110 As humans, we are naturally predisposed to reinforce our own views, to gather with people like us and avoid the dreaded sense of cognitive dissonance. We seek validation, confirmation, reinforcement. And increasingly with the help of algorithms, what we seek, we are served, sometimes before we even know we're looking.

[...]

And while we cannot change everything about the environment we are in – we can change ourselves.

To build greater strength and resilience, in spite of the headwinds around us.

And I see examples of that every day.

115 Leah Bell and Waimarama Anderson were two young students from a public school in New Zealand called Otorohanga College. They couldn't understand why every young New Zealander didn't learn at school about New Zealand history including the New Zealand Wars, the conflict between British and colonial troops and Māori in the 19th century.

These two students pushed for change, presenting a petition to parliament. And they succeeded. Next year, for the first time, our young people are universally learning about their past, their culture, and their history.

120 But what is important here is not just what our young people learn, but how.

In a disinformation age, we need to learn to analyse and critique information. That doesn't mean teaching 'mistrust', but rather as my old history teacher, Mr Fountain extolled: "to understand the limitations of a single piece of information, and that there is always a range of perspectives on events and decisions."

Our history shows us the importance of this. But so too does our present.

⁶ *ham radio*: amateur radio used for non-commercial communication

125 You are, and will always be surrounded by bias. You will continue to be exposed to disinformation. And over time, the ‘noise’ you are surrounded by will probably only get worse.

And perhaps that is why, when your own constitution was adopted, Benjamin Franklin⁷ was asked what had been created and replied “A republic, if you can keep it.”

If YOU can keep it.

130 Yes, diversity of voice in mainstream media matters. The responsibility of social media matters. Teaching our kids to deal with disinformation and the role we play as leaders all matters.

But so do you.

How you choose to engage with information, deal with conflict, or confront debate, how you choose to address being baited, or hated – it all matters.

135 In the overwhelming challenges that lay in front of us, in our constant efforts to reach into the systems, the structures, the power, don’t overlook the impact of simple steps that are right in front of you.

The impact that we each have as individuals.

To make a choice to treat difference with empathy and kindness.

Those values that exist in the space between difference and division. The very things we teach our children, but then view as weakness in our leaders.

140 The issues we navigate as a society will only intensify. The disinformation will only increase. The pull into the comfort of our tribes will be magnified. But we have it within us to ensure that this doesn’t mean we fracture.

We are the richer for our difference, and poorer for our division.

145 Through genuine debate and dialogue, through rebuilding trust in information and one another, through empathy – let us reclaim the space in between.

After all, there are some things in life that make the world feel small and connected, let kindness be one of them.

(2022)

⁷ Benjamin Franklin: (1706-1790) one of the Founding Fathers of the USA