

The Future of Rationality in a Post-Truth World

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Abstract

This is the opening address given by His Excellency General The Honourable David Hurley AC DSC (Ret'd), Governor of New South Wales, to the *Royal Society of New South Wales and Four Academies Forum* on *The Future of Rationality in a Post-Truth World* on Wednesday, 29th November 2017.

Ladies and Gentlemen, I am delighted to welcome you for this third annual Royal Society and Four Academies Forum, “The Future of Rationality in a Post-Truth World.”

Before we commence, let me acknowledge the ancestral knowledge systems of our traditional custodians, who have sustained this land for tens of thousands of years. I pay my respects to Gadigal Elders, past, present and future, and to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples.

I would like to acknowledge Professor Brynn Hibbert, Professor Mary O’Kane, distinguished Law Society and Academy Fellows and their representatives, and presenters and members.

I began this series of forums three years ago when I first became Governor of New South Wales.

Upon my appointment as Governor, I found that there were three “Cs” to the role of Governor—which relate to the Constitutional, Ceremonial and Community engagement roles of the appointment. Constitutional and ceremonial duties took about 10 per cent of my time.

Ninety per cent of my time was involved in engaging with the people of New South Wales. It was clear to me that I needed a

strategic direction and a business plan for both my role and Government House. In the area of community engagement, I wanted to value-add to the role.

When looking at my predecessors, I considered the role of Governor Brisbane in the establishment of the Philosophical Society of Australasia. Why was that link in place? Obviously, the roles and functions, the authorities of Governors have changed since Brisbane’s days. The role of the Governor—then—was to try to help the development of the early community, including its intellectual life, and see the great potential that existed in Australia. Why should that not be the role of the Governor now? I thought I should follow in those footsteps.

I considered that one of the things I could do as Patron of the Royal Society would be to provide an opportunity to have a “think-tank” here at Government House where we could look at some of the bigger and more difficult issues that are facing us today in a political sense, in a neutral academic environment. That’s the course we have undertaken.

It’s often hard to have discourse and discussion in public life these days without divisiveness being drawn to people’s attention. If you have two views, then there must be

division, and division creates conflict; conflict creates news. That seems to be the way of our media and news channels. This Forum is not about that: it's about examining issues of importance to our society.

The topic we'll look at today is not new, but there are aspects of it that have changed. For example, if we take the American journalist, critic and theorist H.L. Mencken, we may have different views about him as a person, but he's very rich in comments about democracy.

"Democracy is a pathetic belief in the collective wisdom of individual ignorance" was a comment written in 1926, or thereabouts. He had a view that our right to individual speech—and our right to have an opinion—does not necessarily make that opinion, in itself, "right." Therefore, how do we engage with the community, with people, with institutions, with policy makers?

We now have transient "fake news," "alternative facts," and "post-truth" discourse—these are not new ideas but, perhaps, different titles. Of course, "post-truth" was the word of the year for 2016 in the *Oxford Dictionary*. It has now created an industry and many books are written on "post-truth."

So, is the topic we are about to discuss something *new*—or something *old* with a new title? Is it an old or a new phenomenon? Is it the result of today's staggering growth in information data and social media which has brought it to the surface?

Or is something more concerning in play?

If we look at the history and development of our civilisation, primarily western civilisation, rationality has been one of its foundation stones.

A number of years ago I did a post-graduate course at Deakin University. I had to

write a paper on rational decision-making and a proposed plan to have a second airport in Sydney. This was in 1993. I came to the conclusion that we were far removed from the point of being able to make that decision, because if you looked at the process we were going through at that time, we were not making a rational decision about a second airport. I claim no position on any decision that's been made recently.

But what are the alternatives to rationality? Of course, subjective belief, faith, selective opinions, stand on this ground. What do they mean for science, for society, for democracies as we know it—and, therefore, for our future? Are these really threats or are they impacts that new technology, new ways of doing business have introduced to the society that we have? Is democracy on the decline? Is there a threat to democracy that will increase that decline or are we going through a growth spurt in democracy, where it is just a different type of democracy that is emerging that has challenged us as never before?

If we believe this, why do we wring our hands instead of girding our loins? If we believe in it, we defend it, we promote it; we take it forward. I reference George Orwell through a quotation from a letter he wrote in 1944:¹

(I fear) the horrors of emotional nationalism and a tendency to disbelieve in the existence of objective truth because all the facts have to fit in with the words and the prophecies of some infallible fuhrer.

Already history has, in a sense, ceased to exist. That is, there is no such thing as a history of our own times which can be

¹ <https://www.thedailybeast.com/george-orwells-letter-on-why-he-wrote-1984>

universally accepted, and the exact sciences are endangered as soon as military necessity ceases to keep people up to the mark.

But if the sort of world that I'm afraid of arrives, the world of two or three great superstates which are unable to conquer one another, two and two could become five, if the fuhrer wished it.

I would like to remind you of when these words were written: 1944.

I could quote from Orwell's novel—*Nineteen Eighty-Four*—about the falsification of history:

I know, of course, that the past is falsified but it would never be possible for me to prove it even when I did the falsification myself. After the thing is done, no evidence ever remains. The only evidence is inside my own mind.

Is this “falsification” another aspect of the issue that we will discuss today? What is “truth”? What is “post-truth”? How do we deal with it as a democracy and a society? More importantly, how do we assist decision-makers in performing their duties? And that's what we should be aiming towards—to assist, to enable, to take our society forward.

The “big plus” from today is bringing together four Academies, which may not, on a daily basis, come together. That's one of the purposes of this forum: collaboration.

Today is a day for some very intriguing presentations. At the end of it, I hope we will come out of this Forum more engaged and enlightened on these issues.

It is my honour to now introduce the third Royal Society of New South Wales and Four Academies Forum: *The Future of Rationality in a Post-Truth World*.

