

NELSON MANDELA

CITATION FOR AN HONORARY DEGREE

Mr Chancellor, it is my privilege to present to you for a degree of this University, Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, former State President of South Africa, Nobel Laureate for Peace, Chancellor of the University of the North, freedom fighter, African National Congress leader, lawyer and statesman.

At one level Nelson Mandela's achievement can be stated simply by saying that he, above all others, helped to bring freedom to South Africa by defeating a brutal, racially exclusive police state. But this does not do justice to someone who stands as one of the pre-eminent statesmen of our time – and of all times. It is impossible to honour him adequately: he honours us by making this long journey to Australia. Let us nevertheless, through the award of this degree, thank Nelson Mandela for the example of his life.

Let us honour him, first, as a fighter for ideals. Nelson Mandela stands as a beacon to the world through his unflagging tenacity in pursuit of a great principle – the self-determination of all peoples of South Africa, irrespective of gender, creed or colour. Born of princely Xhosa stock in the Transkei in 1918, Nelson Mandela has always been a reluctant warrior; he was forced to embrace the imperatives of armed revolution only after exhausting every avenue of legal and non-violent political protest. Gentle and intellectual by nature, Nelson Mandela had to throw all the immense personal discipline and tactical strength he had learned as a boxer into surviving as an outlaw in his own country.

Think of the courage and moral toughness required to defy the likelihood of death by hanging or a covert bullet, the real possibilities of physical and psychological torture, the unremitting interrogations and endless court trials, the twenty seven years of imprisonment. For a man of deep affections, his greatest sacrifice was separation from parents, family, wife and children. We honour Nelson Mandela for the pain he endured in order, as his daughter Zindzi has said, that he might become her father once again and the father to his nation.

We honour Nelson Mandela, secondly, for his compassion – perhaps the rarest and most precious quality in a political leader. By offering reconciliation to his enemies, he enabled all peoples of South Africa to come together as a nation for the first time. As State President from May 1994 to June 1999, Nelson Mandela called on South Africans of all political complexions to acknowledge and

confess the wrongs they had done to each other, yet simultaneously to join in a great movement of national forgiveness. Who else could have had the generosity of spirit to blend a new national anthem out of Bantu, English and Afrikaans freedom songs? How much do we in Australia have still to learn from such profound acts of psychic healing?

Finally, we honour Nelson Mandela as a great educator, whose conduct has ennobled the ideal of a university. As a young BA student, Nelson Mandela was suspended from Fort Hare University for attending a protest and had later to complete his law degree while under political restriction. To him one of the greatest enormities of apartheid was its systematic destruction of the hopes and potential of young blacks by depriving them of the great 'engine of educational opportunity'. While he and his African National Congress associates were serving life sentences on Robben Island, they created what became known simply as "The University". This was surely the most remarkable tertiary institution of the twentieth century. As its vice-chancellor Mandela instilled in his colleagues an unshakeable commitment to the values of collegiality against all efforts to weaken, divide and dehumanize them. Prisoners educated themselves and each other. By night the prison was a study centre; by day there were covert seminars in the prison quarry. Nobody – not even Afrikaaner warders – was barred from the educational process. Above all, Mandela overcame racial sectarianism by educating the militant younger generation of prisoners in the history and principles of the African National Congress. Robben Island became his inter-racial republic in microcosm, a prophecy of the nation to come.

This was the Nelson Mandela university: may we prove worthy of its example.

Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela, we honour you.

Mr Chancellor, it is with great pleasure that I present to you Mr Nelson Mandela, that you may confer on him the degree of Doctor of Laws, *honoris causa*, on the ground of his distinguished creative contributions in the service of society.

Professor R D Terrell
Vice-Chancellor
The Australian National University
6 September 2000

