

FOREWORD

PROFESSOR KATHY LASTER*

Sir Zelman Cowen AK GCMG GCVO QC (1919–2011), legal scholar, university leader and Australian statesman, would have celebrated his 100th birthday in 2019. As the inaugural Chair of the Victoria University Foundation, he gave his name to the Sir Zelman Cowen Centre ('szcc'), which continues his legacy through its work in law and cultural diversity. A series of public events were arranged by the szcc to mark his centenary.¹

The centrepiece of the program was a touring exhibition of the life of Sir Zelman, including a two-week season at the Jewish Museum of Australia. For the exhibition, the szcc created a documentary film² and 20 short interviews with people who were close to Sir Zelman – family, friends, colleagues and former students – including Professor Emeritus Harry Glasbeek, who has written a tribute to Sir Zelman in this issue of the journal.

The 2019 szcc Oration was delivered by the Hon Josh Frydenberg MP, Treasurer of Australia, on the topic 'The Age of Disruption'.³ The Treasurer paid personal tribute to Sir Zelman, as his cherished mentor. We were honoured that the large and distinguished audience included members of Sir Zelman's family, most notably his wife, Anna, Lady Cowen.

A series of public lectures culminated in a symposium on 'The Role of Universities in the 2020s' attended by senior academics from across Australia. A panel session on 'Sir Zelman's Legacy' was presented by five Vice-Chancellors of the universities with which he was closely associated – Griffith, Melbourne, New England, Queensland, Victoria ('vu') and through video link, the Provost of Oriel College (Oxford).

One might ask, why undertake an extensive centenary program for Sir Zelman when so many other important figures of the last century enjoy no such commemoration? For us, Sir Zelman epitomises the university's vision of itself as 'A Life of Opportunity and Success'. Our diverse student body and our heartland

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1 'Centenary of Sir Zelman Cowen', *Victoria University* (Web Page) <<https://www.vu.edu.au/sir-zelman-cowen-centre/about-szcc/centenary-of-sir-zelman-cowen>>

2 Cowen Centre, 'Sir Zelman Cowen: A Life of Opportunity and Success' (YouTube, 20 October 2019) <https://youtu.be/aSDjfnor_AQ>

3 Josh Frydenberg, 'The Age of Disruption' (Speech, Victoria University, 28 August 2019) <<https://joshfrydenberg.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Treasurer-Speech-The-Age-of-Disruption-Sir-Zelman-Cowen-Oration-29-August-2019.pdf>>

constituency in the West of Melbourne deserve to be exposed to role models who demonstrate the possibilities in a multicultural society like Victoria. While few individuals can aspire to become Governor-General of Australia, the fact that the son of immigrants did attain such high office and then contribute to this university's development and mission is an inspiring story for us to retell.

A man of towering intellect, Sir Zelman could have followed any career he chose, such as the Bar or the Bench, but he elected to be a university leader. University leadership was his calling and his passion. He believed that universities, teaching and research really matter. At a time when universities face such enormous, even existential, challenges, it is good to remember a champion of the sector who was never shy about proclaiming the significance of universities for society.

For Sir Zelman, an academic was a public intellectual who freely shared knowledge and expertise with the wider community. For him, as for us at VU, our work is about relevance and impact. For the SZCC that translates into capacity-building work with culturally and linguistically diverse and hard to reach communities about law as well as in assisting the courts and legal institutions engage more effectively with the diverse public they serve.

At the core of Sir Zelman's ethos was a love of learning, a commitment to teaching broadly defined, as well as informed public debate on key issues of the day. His legacy of public service is certainly worth commemorating and emulating. I hope you enjoy reading this issue of the journal.