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Our future: future scientists

Comments from the Chief Scientist to the
2009 Australian Academy of Science Annual
Awards Dinner

Speech at the Parliament House Great Hall

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Good evening fellow scientists, ladies and gentleman. My thanks to Professor Kurt Lambeck, President of the Australian Academy of Science, for that kind introduction.

We are here part of the Academy's annual celebration of Australian achievements and contributions to science. That achievement was recognised in part by the recent induction of 16 new members into the Academy.

But tonight, we honour several eminent Australian scientists who have been at the international forefront of their fields over long and quite influential careers.

May I take this opportunity to congratulate, in advance, each and every one of the career award winners tonight.

Your contributions to physics, chemistry, mathematics and earth sciences have been instrumental in continuing to weave the tapestry of human understanding about the world that shapes us and, increasingly, is being shaped by us.

Science, in its broadest sense, plays a fundamental role in finding global solutions to the global challenges, and opportunities, that we face.

More than ever, we need the youth of today to become the scientists of tomorrow.

Particularly so as we are presented with the opportunity and necessity to transform the world into a sustainable one --- a transformation that will require changes as profound and sweeping as those witnessed at the dawn of the Industrial Age.

That is why, as remarkable as the achievements of those we honour tonight are, it may be that their greatest and most long-lived contributions lie in the training and inspiration of the next generation of scientists . . .

. . . scientists who are just beginning their scientific journeys into the uncharted.

Today's youngest scientists undertake their professions in a changing and complex world.

A world in which family structures are more diverse.

A world in which discoveries are made as much at the intersection of scientific disciplines as solely within them.

A world in which scientists are increasingly called upon to engage in public debate and public learning on issues that affect ethics, health, and prosperity of future generations.

A world in which international standards are the established norm, and international scientific dialogue and reputation a requirement.

A world in which – for both male and female professionals -- doing science often takes place simultaneously with raising a family with a working partner, or no partner at all.

A world in which early career scientists are expected to compete for opportunities with their more senior peers, job uncertainty is prevalent, and many, perhaps even most, research posts are fixed term only.

But as young scientists like those honoured earlier today at the Academy's presentation of Early Career Awards remind us, even in that world, Australia's newest generation of scientists are capable of, and achieving, remarkable results.

They deserve our support.

For even as our achievements are built on the shoulders of others, including those we honour tonight, so one day will the achievements of Australia's newest scientists expand the horizons of those who nurtured them.

I am informed that a Chinese proverb reminds us that "One generation plants the trees under which another takes its ease."

We cannot promise tomorrow's scientists ease, but we can help to ease their path, paths that will

necessarily differ from those that most of today's scientists have travelled.

Let us resolve to do that together, so that each and every year the Academy can celebrate an award evening dedicated to career scientists as distinguished and influential as those we honour tonight.

Thank you and may you enjoy the rest of what the evening holds.