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Speech by Adam Graycar, Director,
Australian Institute of Criminology at the
25th Anniversary dinner of the Australian
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Adam Graycar
Speech notes
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25th Anniversary dinner **Australian Institute of Criminology**

The key task in the Institute is to work with abstract concepts of how people behave and live, and turn them into concrete - into practical, tangible principles that prevent crime and make for a better society for all.

Getting to do this has involved the Institute in passing through turbulent times - but I want to look ahead - to a positive and productive future.

Looking back for a moment we seem perpetually to be dogged by the apocryphal Chinese curse - "*may you live in interesting times*" The history of the Institute has married interesting times with turbulence, turmoil and apparent chaos.

When I was appointed in 1994 there had been a monumental upheaval, and people thought I was mad taking on what seemed to be a thankless and impossible task. I was made to feel that I had been handed a poisoned chalice, and people were waiting for me to take a sip, and keel over.

To someone like me, from outside, the Institute had enormously high standing and a colossal reputation for having its finger on the pulse of the big issues. I was, however stunned by the dominant ethos in the organisation - a venomous hostility towards the leadership, and an all pervasive culture of complaint.

It seemed to me that most people thought that the organisation existed for them, rather than seeing their role as working for the Institute.

We had suffered a massive financial cut, and couldn't see our way forward as the money for the agreed redundancies was insufficient, and we couldn't pay the rent. At my first Board meeting I said that we had a dreadful problem and that this was a crisis, and Justice Sally Brown, the then Chair replied laconically that every meeting she had chaired had been a crisis meeting.

It took quite a while to turn things around - we didn't have the right structure, we didn't have any money and we didn't have the capacity to raise much money, and by 1996 we were facing increasing efficiency dividends.

The organisation has gone through a significant renewal. We relaunched the Institute in mid 1995 with the first National Outlook Symposium on Crime in

Australia, which has now become the major event of its sort. We rebuilt the staff - and I'm very proud of the staff we now have.

The week before I started, the 1994 Annual Report was tabled. 58 staff were listed in that Report. As we go into 1999 only 15 of those 58 will still be in the Institute. Some of those who went were a loss to our capacity and activities, and some, to be perfectly frank, the Institute is much better off without.

We now have a tremendously enthusiastic, well qualified staff and highly skilled staff - full of beans, full of good ideas, and full of the ethos of co-operation and teamwork. We have a network of Associates from right around the country - some of whom are here tonight, like Ross Homel, Kate Warner, and Rick Sarre who can help us fill the gaps and provide wise counsel. We have Departments and agencies across Commonwealth, State and Local Government who value our product, and value our processes in achieving it.

We have a catalogue of successful activities. We have large projects like Drug use Monitoring Australia, the National Homicide Monitoring project, and Deaths in Custody monitoring, which are unique, and which will yield data to underpin policy. We have a series of national stocktakes - on fraud, sexual violence, victims' issues, and environmental crime. Our website gets over 1000 hits per day, and our Trends and Issues cover the most diverse range of topics.

We're ready to take on the next millennium, and we're well positioned to do so.

The way ahead will see Criminology as a very important integrating discipline - dealing with the most real of real situations - turning abstract into concrete. You can't do this without good theory, and good, rigorous analytical skills. It's not enough to stay in the abstract, and it's not enough to develop poorly constituted concrete without the right blend of good quality cement, sand gravel and water, mixed carefully and thoughtfully. If we compromise on the ingredients, the structures we build will fall down around our ears, or worse still, suffer from concrete cancer and decay slowly.

The issues we're dealing with are, by and large, not new issues - the two fundamental questions are: how to reduce the supply of motivated offenders, and how to make crime more difficult and less attractive to commit. But, the world in which these potential offenders live keeps on changing, as do opportunities for offending.

The AIC once had a near monopoly position as the nation's only dedicated research centre in this field. In recent years many universities have developed good research capacity in criminal justice, not to mention the State Government crime research agencies, as well as specialist police research and

data agencies, as well as health research agencies in the drugs field. There are also a growing number of non-criminological researchers who see this field as one in which to gain prominence or make a buck.

It is in this competitive environment that the AIC performs well. We have a history, and we have the substantive and integrative skills. We can deliver what most agencies can't - rigorous, evidence-based analyses (though sometimes the appalling level of Australian data limits us!)

The only way to look is to look ahead. I've just returned from overseas where I was convinced that we're ahead of the pack in dealing with tomorrow's issues - electronic crime, new technologies, drugs and crime research, crime against older people, environmental crime, fraud, health care crime, sexual violence, victims' rights - the list goes on and on!

The AIC is well positioned to provide useful, concrete policy relevant research, and add value to Australia's scant data. Our staff are poised for great results, and will build upon carefully poured concrete foundations. I've received some very good support, and while its invidious to name names I would like to acknowledge a couple of people.

Peter Grabosky is the real, enduring strength of the AIC. No Director could hope for a more loyal, smart, visionary, hard working and supportive colleague. The credibility and good standing of the Institute owes a lot to Peter. This time last year we thought we'd be losing him to an important job at the National Institute of Justice, and I often thank the American Government for its stupidity for letting him slip from their grasp.

My Personal Assistant Sylvia Mackellar provides the sort of quality support that Directors only dream of. And finally I want to acknowledge Merril Thompson, who for many years, and with no fuss whatever, has made so much happen!! And of course, John Myrtle keeps everybody informed about everything - continually.

All of you tonight are part of our network - all of you tonight have shown your support, and for this I thank you. When the AIC celebrates its 50th anniversary dinner I hope that many of us will meet again.