**SPEECH BY HE GEOFF TOOTH,
AUSTRALIAN HIGH COMMISSIONER,
TO THE GRADUATION DINNER OF THE
ADVANCED ALUMNI DIPLOMACY TRAINING COURSE
NAIROBI, 14 NOVEMBER 2013**

Ambassador Simon Nabukwesi

Ambassador Mwanzia

Your excellencies, my friends from across East Africa

Professor Morada, Dr Hunt and all involved from the University of Queensland

Diplomats, Course participants

I won’t spend too long talking tonight. I know that graduation speeches are meant to inspire the graduats, but it is much harder to do that when you are speaking to a crowd that has been listening a lot for two weeks and even worse just before their final dinner.

But I do very much hope this course has helped you better understand and respond to the many challenges you face today in your work and in the years ahead. The plan of course was to build on the training provided to alumni of previous Australian diplomatic training courses. Our hope is that it has been less about listening to instruction, and more about sharing lessons and perspectives amongst yourselves.

The design of this course thus reflects the reality of modern diplomacy – every interaction (whether a cocktail function or a formal meeting) is an opportunity to better understand one another and learn from one another. You are part of a generation of diplomats which has to live with unprecedented paradoxes. Technology brings us much closer together but the larger environment is one where the ties of community are fraying. Information is so much more accessible but you are also often more alone in having to put so much more of it all together and make sense of it. And in making sense of it all, you will face the additional challenge of living in an era where the rest of the world will intrude more into your peripheral vision than ever before.

As diplomats you are very much in the public eye, and you have to tread a fine line between value adding and not getting into trouble. You can be too careful though. There is one famous story about a British Ambassador who was asked by a radio station what he would like for Christmas with his answer to be broadcast with those of others on Christmas day. The Ambassador thought long and hard – he didn’t want to sound greedy or pretentious or too high brow by asking for something grand like Opera tickets or books no one had heard of. He decided instead that a box of chocolates would strike the right balance. So on Xmas day he heard the announcer on the radio show say that the French Ambassador had hoped for world peace for Christmas, the Canadian Ambassador was praying for a cure for cancer and the UK Ambassador, well he wanted a box of chocolates.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The delivery of this course is very much a partnership. I’d like to thank the Kenyan Foreign Service Institute and the University of Queensland for their extraordinary efforts over the last two weeks. I hope that this strong partnership you have forged will continue long into the future

My staff have very much enjoyed being part of sessions with you. I keep hearing from them what a vibrant group this is, how constructive the sessions have been. May I encourage you all to stay in touch. I am just a bit biased but let me assure you that Australian diplomats are great people passionately committed to building strong partnerships with your countries. Personal connections are a very important and useful part of the practice of diplomacy. They help build strong mutually beneficial diplomatic, commercial, development and other relations.

Let me add that diplomatic friendships have often saved my bacon. A New Zealand diplomat once lent me her notes from an important meeting involving my Foreign Minister when in a moment of madness I shredded my own. There have been times when diplomatic friends have even given me their briefings for meetings when my own government has forgotten about me – I won’t give you names or countries for those.

But let me give you one last anecdote. Way back in 1962, which I hasten to add that in spite of all my grey hair was before even I joined Foreign Affairs, a particularly contentious issue was coming up for the first time in the General Assembly. Our Permanent Representative, one of Australia’s most famous diplomats Sir James Plimsoll was trying to get a read from Canberra on how he should proceed. The helpful people in Canberra told him to ask Australia’s Prime Minister Menzies who was just about to arrive in New York. But during the Prime Minister’s visit Plimsoll found it very hard to draw the Prime Minister on the issue. Several times, he tried to pin the Prime Minister down only to be told to discuss it later or distracted to other things. Finally, at the end of the visit, when Plimsoll was seeing Menzies onto the plane, he asked him once again for some advice, some guidance.

Prime Minister Menzies patted Plimsoll on the back and said: "My boy, I'm glad it's you, not me, making that speech." And then he climbed aboard the plane without looking back.

Ladies and gentelmen,

Plimsoll never explained what he did next but what I’m sure happened was that he talked to his friends in the diplomatic community and got very useful advice on what to do.

Enough anecdotes. Congratulations to you all on what you’ve achieved over the last two weeks – all the strong connections, the innovative ideas you came up with, the arguments you refined, the new knowledge you gained. Thank you again to the Foreign Service Institute and the University of Queensland. The Australian Government, and particularly the part of it located in Nairobi, looks forward to working closely with all in this room closely over coming years.

Asanti sana.