"To civilize the City"

A public lecture by
Professor Raimond Gaita

6pm – 7:30pm, Friday, 19 August 2011
The Science Exchange, 55 Exchange Place, Adelaide

"In the early 1980s a philosopher at the University Melbourne said to me that the task of the university is to civilise the city. Though he believed that civilising duty to fall primarily on the humanities, I doubt that he thought it fell only on them. He said this to me at a time when academics still believed that the concept of a university entitled them to say that no institution could rightly call itself a university if it did not have a department of philosophy, or classics, or physics.

The concept of a university is now defunct. In most of the institutions that are called universities a narrow conception of what counts as research discourages, I believe, critical reflectiveness (necessary if, for example, one is seriously to question the assumptions of one’s discipline) and devalues, indeed implicitly disparages, teaching and engagement with cultural institutions outside of the university unless that engagement is narrowly professional - the provision of expertise of one kind or another. Thus while philosophers – to take them as an example - might be encouraged to sit on various kinds of ethics committees and to write for refereed journals of ‘practical philosophy’ they are now discouraged from giving public lectures, speaking at writer’s festivals, publishing in non-refereed journals and even from writing books. At the same time, writer’s festivals and public lecture series are proliferating at an astonishing rate, but, it seems to me, with an increased tendency to dilettantism.

In the first part of the lecture I will try to justify this description of how things stand with universities and many of our cultural institutions. In the second part I will try to show, why that description, fully elaborated, will suggest, to those who accept it, what we should do".