

Vincent Lingiari Lecture 2007
by Fred Chaney
Director, Reconciliation Australia

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

First I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet this evening. Thank you Mathew for the introduction – it really is a singular honour to deliver a lecture in the name of a strong, moral leader like your grandfather. He was a man who by his actions, the way he lived his life, opened people's eyes to the meaning of land to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

And he won their support.

It is an honour also to be sharing the lectern with another accomplished Gurindji person, Professor Sue Stanton, who has told us a devastating story just now about the impact of colonisation. Sue provided me with an advance copy of the speech and what I read in it, and what I heard just now, is a frustration that screams "We've had enough".

I don't think it's possible for a non-Indigenous person to fully comprehend the deep hurt felt by Indigenous Australians. But what we must do is to listen as hard as we can, and be guided by Indigenous people. If we look back, my sense is that all of the positive changes that have taken place in this area, have been achieved because Aboriginal voices have been heard and acted upon.

This evening, I want to tell you Sue that I've had enough too, of the terrible circumstances too many Aboriginal Australians endure and of our incapacity as a nation to take these problems on as our own. Having read previous Lingiari Lectures, I'm mindful that what I have to say may come across as fairly unpoetic, even blunt. But this is where we're at and I feel I have no choice but to speak clearly and directly this evening, and also to repeat and emphasise things I have said before.

Forty years ago, 90 percent of voters gave very clear support to the idea of equality for Indigenous fellow citizens. Response to the referendum anniversary tells me that Australians of today want no less.

But we do need to acknowledge up-front the very point Sue has been making, that we're in the midst of another crisis in our relationship, a crisis that won't be resolved in the months before a Federal Election, not at the political level anyway. Nobody's listening at this stage of the cycle. People's moral compasses are conveniently put to one side.

Just before the tabling last Tuesday of the *Northern Territory National Emergency Response Bill*, Reconciliation Australia called on the Government to make public its evaluation of the intervention so far and clarify which

aspects of the Bill were needed to protect Indigenous children. We asked that all non-urgent aspects of the legislation be extracted and delayed to allow for respectful consultation and communication with the affected communities.

Our Board is made up of people from different backgrounds. We have different political leanings, I suspect. But there are a great many things on which we agree.

We are in no greater harmony than in our shared abhorrence of racial discrimination. No Australian should accept that racial discrimination is necessary in any context. As a fellow director from Reconciliation Australia Mick Dodson has said this week, this is a principle as sacred as the rule of law itself.

It is not excusable in any situation and is all the more troubling when we know what needs to be done to make children safe and we know it doesn't involve racial discrimination.

I could spend the full half hour buying into an agenda determined by the political cycle. But that would be a distraction from what I see as the very real opportunity we have to move forward.

And the example of history which tells us that we will pass through this crisis and might even make something good come of it if we channel our collective frustration.

I've been in this game for a very long time. I've overseen as many disappointments as every other Minister for Aboriginal Affairs. I do know this is not easy.

But the message I'm in a position to deliver now, and will keep delivering, is that the answers, while complex, are now known.

And they are being repeated by a range of reputable, knowledgeable people who cannot be dismissed as ideological, out of touch or driven by agendas.

They place evidence over passion, hard headedness over experimentation, consistent hard work over silver bullets.

You can read the multitude of reports that underpin the thinking – the most recent and, I think, very convincing and helpful being the report of Pat Anderson and Rex Wild that set the scene for the Government's actions a few weeks ago.

Let me quote a few commonly repeated messages:

The Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory formed to respond to the Government's intervention recommend these guiding principles:

- Relationships with Aboriginal communities must be built on trust and mutual respect. All initiatives must be negotiated with the relevant communities.
- Actions should draw from and strengthen governance and community capacity.
- Build on the knowledge base already there in communities and in Government.
- Flexibility and responsiveness to local needs rather than a 'one size fits all' approach.
- Aboriginal communities are entitled to receive the same benefits and services, and their children to the same protections that are available to other Australians.

Paediatrician Professor Fiona Stanley says '...Measures that exclude the views and involvement of Aborigines will serve only to further diminish their capacity, exacerbate marginalisation and add to the damage in these vulnerable communities.' Fiona emphasises the need to address the complex causes and not just 'the appalling manifestations of disadvantage and dysfunction.'

The Catholic Bishops say that effective solutions cannot be imposed from above and they've backed the need for long term, adequate funding.

The Anderson/Wild Report concludes: '...there needs to be a radical change in the way government and non-government organisations consult, engage with and support Aboriginal people'.

The chorus of advice from diverse sources reflects the findings of research Reconciliation Australia and the Australian National University have been conducting around the ingredients of effective Indigenous governance. Similar findings to those documented by researchers in the United States and Canada and elsewhere when they've looked deeply for actual evidence of what works in overturning disadvantage in Indigenous communities.

The reality is that we have all the tools we need to be striving for much more than making Aboriginal children safe, important a starting point as that must be.

And at this stage in our history, we also have the prosperity. Australians will tolerate extra spending when they're confident that it will yield results. When stories of despair are balanced with stories of hope and success. When policy is based on evidence of what works.

The Aboriginal communities currently in the frame, desperately needy communities, will work with government if they are provided with this vision of

success. Civil order is a prerequisite for a community to be healthy, happy and successful. But so too is hope.

Which leaves us with a whole lot of things about which there should be no contest:

- A need for urgent action.
- An acceptance that protection of children by itself is not a solution and if that's all we get, we might as well prepare ourselves for the next crisis report, and the next shocked Minister.
- An actual solution involves long term, properly resourced action - across governments and across ministers and across all the interrelated aspects of disadvantage, just as the Anderson/Wild Report identifies, along with every other source of actual evidence.

There is really no contest either about the fundamental importance of Indigenous engagement as a prerequisite for success – this is what reconciliation is all about these days – building the respectful partnerships that underpin every example of success we have at our disposal, locally and around the world.

Let's be upfront and learn from our mistakes - centralised, imposed programs delivered from Canberra or state/territory capitals have not delivered the success we must now expect.

This Government and the next, whichever political persuasion, will be judged on the extent to which the intervention in the Northern Territory is backed by a comprehensive, national commitment to deal with social circumstances which underlie the horrors of sexual violence.

We all need to be coldly realistic about this, the Prime Minister and Minister included, and accept government has limited immediate capacity to even take this first step. And as for the next steps, they are not a separate exercise. The long term planning needs to start now if we are not to recycle this horror story in 2 or 3 years time.

Governments know the way forward. And we know they know because the answers are also presented in reports they have commissioned, in the words their operatives repeat, almost word for word, in every serious address on the subject.

We must not dismiss what we've learned from the last 30 years of largely failed policy in this area, just because it offends someone's ideology. It's time to adopt and stick to evidence based, fact based approaches.

It's easy to pigeonhole some people by suggesting they are part of a failed past and failed ideology, perhaps some of the people I've just quoted. So let's turn to the learnings as expressed by the head of the Prime Minister's Department, Peter Shergold, by Gary Banks from the Productivity Commission, by the Head of the Federal Treasury Ken Henry.

Take the Productivity Commission and COAG's key indicators as a guide or a baseline – there's no ideology there - and laid out for us are all the principles, all the tools, which show us where to from here.

What we have now is a government at the federal level which has taken on the responsibility to get real results. The question is whether in the lead up to an election, and after it, whoever is in government will heed the near unanimous advice on how to go about it – and whether whoever is in Opposition will provide bipartisan support.

Over the past several months, I've been invited to deliver and redeliver in many different settings a speech about the incoherence of government policy in Indigenous affairs.

The two key factors I identify are these:

- A refusal across all governments to face up to the real cost of meeting current and future needs - the invisible gorilla at all the government and agency talkfests which is conveniently hidden behind the (sadly effective) political line that you can't solve these problems by throwing money at them. It is true, you can't solve them by throwing money because you also need sound policy and effective administration to use the necessary extra funding well. But there are big deficits and they cost money to fix.

And

- The “start again” syndrome which affects almost every new government and Minister. Rather than build on areas of success we reorganise. What better way to avoid responsibility now than by damning the past, reorganising, and cherish the thought that continuing failure will not be apparent until you have departed

I've been a Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, and I've known all of the others over nearly 40 years. I, like them, have been disappointed at how little was achieved of the things I set out to do.

But over those years, a great deal has been learned about what works in delivering better outcomes on the ground, in education, employment, health and housing.

If we don't start to apply those learnings, we'll continue starting from scratch with every new Minister.

Put simply last month by Gary Banks in a speech to the OECD, every serious analysis of what works has four factors in common:

1. Cooperative approaches between Indigenous people, government and the private sector.

2. Community involvement in program design and decision making – a bottom up rather than top down approach.
3. Good governance, and
4. Ongoing government support – human as well as financial.

So let's take those points one at a time – and remember these same points are made if you care to look up Ken Henry's speech from the recent Cape York Institute conference, they're in the Anderson/Wild Report, Tom Calma's Social Justice Report and they're explained at some length in the latest report of Reconciliation Australia's Indigenous Community Governance Research Program.

On the point about partnerships between Indigenous people, governments and others – the first big challenge is building trust. If the wider community is cynical about governments' sincerity, it's not hard to understand the doubt and fear, even anger, expressed by Indigenous people.

To allay those fears, and deliver on Gary Banks' formula, the new way of doing things has to be better than the old way. Trust is only built through consistency and commitment.

The same radical change is needed to deliver on his second point about giving communities real decision-making power. That doesn't mean, as has so often happened in the past, flying into communities to tell them what's going to happen.

The point Gary makes about good governance is significant because what it means is that governments actually need to support communities to develop the kind of leadership and structures needed if those communities are to engage with government in the way government, and others, require. For example, to negotiate shared responsibility arrangements.

And then we come to the invisible gorilla – the resources, human and financial. Delivering results on the basis of what we know actually works will cost more money – education results require more teachers, in some cases better teachers, healthy families require government to address a huge deficit in housing and endless reliance on fly-in fly-out services for quite large communities. It means the right facilities and the right personnel on the ground.

But how can we say Australia is well-governed if we don't provide adequate housing and adequate education to our children.

The critical message in all of the reports we need to be informed by now is this:

All progress is local. Important as such initiatives are in assisting a limited number of Indigenous children, there's no use romancing that we can educate all of these children at private boarding schools when the reality is that the

vast majority will be educated in local state schools. The quality of those schools and the support they receive from government is critical.

Real jobs must be available in substantial Aboriginal communities. We need to stop using a work for the dole scheme to deliver services, and start offering people full time employment to provide basic services as is the case in every other Australian community.

It's time we stopped complaining about people not joining the real economy if we don't extend to their town the real jobs paid for by government everywhere else.

What we need to see from government is the commitment to develop, fund and maintain a national framework which provides long term support for locally driven solutions, cross party, cross minister, cross government.

The framework for a top-down, bottom-up knit.

This framework must see the construction of centrally located government machinery comprising well supported, well resourced, talented public servants from both the Federal and State bureaucracies. It must include private sector expertise around Indigenous enterprise development and academic input that keeps the work grounded in a strong evidence base.

The Combined Aboriginal Organisations of the Northern Territory have laid out specific objectives and timeframes for developing a national plan in partnership with government. Gone are the days any government can balk on setting targets in this area. A national plan MUST have targets, short term and long term, and it must be publicly accountable for reporting on progress in achieving these targets along the way.

No single government or Minister, no matter how long they last, can carry this on their own. But what this Government and this Opposition can do is confirm it as national objective and set the framework for it to receive the requisite national support over decades.

And nothing keeps politicians honest like having significant Australians, recognised experts of independent status and stature taking responsibility for driving this plan, including some private sector surveillance.

Alongside Sue Gordon's taskforce, we need to draw together the best and brightest of people to build and lay out this framework. People from business, from mining and banking, and importantly Indigenous people who have the skill and the relationships to make an essential contribution to this effort.

Indigenous men and women who provide role models to their people and a stark lesson to anyone who believes, let alone perpetuates, devastating stereotypes.

We've used this taskforce model to craft solutions in other complex policy areas like taxation, financial systems reform and most recently the emissions trading scheme. It can work if the political will is there, and the money.

This is the time, a time of unprecedented prosperity when we have tens of billions of dollars of Government surpluses and the sale of public assets.

Surely we can commit to dealing with this matter once and for all.