

DONDUNSTAN**FOUNDATION** FOR A BETTER FUTURE



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AUSTRALIA

Rev. Tim Costello AO

Lowitja O'Donoghue Oration

***The Journey is Healing:
How we go forward after 'Sorry'***

Wednesday 28th May 2008



I would like to begin with an acknowledgement of the Kaurna lands, and the first peoples of Australia....

As well, I would like to acknowledge the eponymous Lowitja O'Donoghue, Bill Cossey, Chair of the Don Dunstan Foundation, Vice Chancellor Michael Barber, Deputy Vice Chancellor Fred McDougal, The Hon. John Vondoussa Chancellor of the University of Adelaide, The Hon. Jay Whetherhill, representing the Premier and Robert Lawson, representing Martin Hamilton Smith, leader of the Opposition . . . distinguished guests . . . men and women of Australia.

It is a very great honour to be here tonight, in Reconciliation week, to mark with you the 41st Anniversary of the 1967 Referendum . . . and of course the first Anniversary of the Lowitja O'Donoghue Oration.

I feel great joy that the Don Dunstan Foundation has named an annual oration in the name of Lowitja O'Donoghue. Lowitja said at the first Oration that she would be "much more relaxed during the 2008 Lowitja O'Donoghue Oration [knowing that] someone else will be giving it!"

Well . . . now I am the recipient of this handball, and I will do my best to, as it were, kick some goals for a remarkable duo of Australians: Don Dunstan, one of our most remarkable Premiers who so diligently sought just policy for those on the margins of society; and Lowitja, one of our most inspiring Australians who has enriched both indigenous and mainstream Australia immeasurably with her wisdom, compassion and her commitment to the three policy pillars of justice, respect and social inclusion.

As anyone knows who speaks on indigenous affairs, we are all the poorer for being left with a simplistic spectrum on which one lines up. Either one believes that indigenous rights is the core of dignity on one end or that personal responsibility is at the core on the other end. In this dogmatic

world of varying orthodoxy, once we know where to place someone on the spectrum, we have done our due diligence of box-ticking and placing others within a box. So now we know who is left or right, progressive or regressive, symbolic or practical, pro-dogma or post-dogma.

But I want to look at things differently tonight. The two dimensional spectrum many of us have been using is in fact a multi-coloured prism through which one can use many lenses to appreciate the Indigenous whole. Rights and responsibilities are deeply entwined, and those who seek to separate them are inevitably left with a 'glass half empty', or perhaps worse. Reconciliation produces a wholeness and dignity, and those who think this can be achieved easily or from some simple dogmatic space have impoverished themselves and those whose good they work towards.

For over three decades, World Vision Australia (WVA) has sought to engage with Australia's Indigenous people. Since 1973, when a group of Indigenous Church leaders brought the plight of Indigenous people to the our attention, we have been establishing networks of relationships with individuals and community leaders, seeking their advice on how we can work best with Indigenous communities in Australia.

In recent years, following communities' requests, we have been working across a wide cross-section of Indigenous Australians, from the people of Wetenngerr, a remote community in the Northern Territory, to groups from the urban Armadale Noongar community in Western Australia: from artists across Central Australia to members of the Koori community in metropolitan Sydney. Our programs with these communities have focused around areas such as capacity building, reconciliation, social enterprise, youth, health, governance and leadership.

We are committed to a long-term development approach, working together with communities, using participatory methodologies to identify the issues, repairing or rebuilding a local Indigenous sense of community and leadership and encouraging a greater level of involvement in the development process. But at the same time, with a lack of ambiguity or sentimentality that this

development process is fundamentally about employment, education and empowerment in the mainstream.

As a result of sitting down and listening to Indigenous voices, we found what most of you here tonight already know yourself: that past injustices have impacted heavily on Indigenous families. Much of the dire poverty, poor health, high unemployment, poor education, domestic violence, imprisonment rates and lack of self-esteem can be attributed in a significant part to unjust policies. But we are also continually drawn to the strengths that exist in communities and the leaders who have risen above this history to move through Australian society with dignity and grace.

We understand that issues affecting Indigenous communities are complex and that there are no ‘quick-fixes’—but if any of you has discovered some, please see me after this oration. We believe addressing any one issue in isolation is not going to solve the problems; indeed we have learnt to be suspicious of the ubiquitous ‘magic bullets’ of Indigenous affairs policy. Everyone, it seems, has an opinion when it comes to Indigenous affairs, but few are prepared to hang-in there at the local level for the long haul.

The post-Sorry environment

It has been a little over three months since Prime Minister Rudd apologised to the stolen generation, with the words “that this apology be received in the spirit in which it is offered as part of the healing of the nation.” Since the apology, the Government has focussed on the priority of us all to help ‘close the gap’ in health inequality.

I arrived back from the south of Myanmar recently and, apart from the tragedy of the victims of the cyclone becoming pawns in a political play by Burmese generals, a similar shock was that the average male life expectancy in Myanmar is 60 years, while for Indigenous Australian males it is even less at 58 years. To think we have a patch of Myanmar in our backyard brings to me a brutal reality that this simply cannot be tolerated in a developed nation.

As in Myanmar, the way forward for NGOs is through socio-economic development. Education and employment is key, but so too, in our context, is home ownership and governance. Of course, Indigenous people need and want help, but not the type of help that is dogmatic or prescribed from afar. I have found that the door is open to people with the necessary expertise that are prepared to commit for the long haul, and to build the necessary trust and familiarity that has driven effective practice in the past.

Perhaps this may be counterintuitive to some, but this was a key characteristic of the productive relationships that formed during the mission and station times, and they will be fundamental to the journey of healing in the future. NGOs have a crucial role to play in creating this enabling local space, through the stability and relationships that come with long term engagement, as do all of those who are otherwise engaged in the 'business' of Indigenous Affairs.

The national apology has helped immeasurably to create this enabling local space. On February 13 this year, from the crowded galleries of Parliament house and the packed lawns outside, from Federation Square to Martin Place, and from schools and workplaces across the nation, Australians listened to the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd say these words:

“The time has now come for the nation to turn a new page in Australia’s history by righting the wrongs of the past and so moving forward with confidence to the future.”

Prime Minister Rudd’s resolution received tremendous public support: it was greeted with gratitude, pride, relief and tears. And it was so much more than symbolic; it was a day of national historic significance and healing. Prime Minister Rudd captured the spirit of the occasion: “[The] parliament is today here assembled . . . to deal with this unfinished business of the nation, to remove a great stain from the nation’s soul and, in a true spirit of reconciliation, to open a new chapter in the history of this great land, Australia”.

These are bold and momentous words, so it is with some trepidation that I now contemplate this new chapter in the history and healing of our nation.

Closing the Gap

There is growing public awareness of the need to ‘close the gap’ in life expectancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, due largely to an excellent campaign spearheaded by Oxfam and other non-government organisations. When Prime Minister Rudd spoke of “closing of the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians on life expectancy”, he included “educational achievement and employment opportunities” as dimensions to that gap. This is an important distinction to highlight, lest the policy response be dominated by health interventions only, when fundamentally much of the ‘gap’ is beyond their reach.

There is a well established link in the public health literature between health and well-being. Socio-economic conditions are a crude measure of well being, but it the best available from statistics. International development experience has demonstrated to us that you have to view socio-economic status in relative terms.

It’s been more than 10 years now since Richard Wilkinson published his book *Unhealthy Societies - the Afflictions of Inequality*. Through an international comparison of population health, he concluded that life expectancy is higher where differences in income are smaller and where societies are more socially cohesive.

Wilkinson showed that the key is not poverty in absolute terms, but relative terms. Social inclusion is of course an issue that affects all Australians, but the income differentials between Redfern and the eastern suburbs of Sydney, or the Parnpajinya town camp and the adjacent mining town of Newman in the Pilbara, are acute to the extreme.

If we are to bridge the gap in life expectancy, we have to bridge the gap in socio-economic status, especially with education and employment levels.

If we look outside our nation, the life expectancy of Indigenous people in Australia is also much lower than that of Native American population of the US (the order of 10 years). While we can explain away the difference in health between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in terms of historical and political disadvantage, the differences in health between Indigenous Australians and Native Americans are less obvious. Both groups are marginalised minorities in their own land, and both have endured a history of dispossession of land, loss of culture, and forced separation of families.

When you compare the statistics between the Native Americans and Indigenous Australians, what stands out is the difference between employment and education. The level of employment among Native Americans in the US is twice as high, and three times as high if CDEP employment is excluded. Three times as many Indigenous people in Australia have either not attended school or have not finished grade 10. The percentage of university graduates is one eighth as great. The level of home ownership is less than one third. Clearly the relative socio-economic disadvantage of Indigenous people in Australia is considerably greater in comparison with the US.

Property rights and home ownership

Lets for now focus on the important socio-economic indicator of home ownership. As you might know, I played a role in the 2020 summit, in the panel titled “strengthening communities, supporting families and social inclusion”. In the lead up to the summit, I spoke publicly about Federal Government assistance to help renters become buyers, motivated largely by the obstacles that my own children face. Home ownership is such a powerful determinant of economic prosperity in this country, but it is also much more. Taken from a perspective of social inclusion

of marginalised groups, the interesting thing about home ownership is the extent to which it determines socio-economic status in the mainstream.

The ‘great Australia dream’ is a powerful thing, especially if you are the first in your family’s history to be included in it.

For instance, Mapoon is located on the West Coast of Cape York Peninsula. It is a discrete Indigenous settlement of approximately 200 people. It was established by Moravian missionaries at the end of the 19th century for the Presbyterian Church. It was at first occupied by people from Indigenous groups from the immediate area, including the Tjungundji people on whose land it is occupied. Later Aboriginal children from across Queensland who had been removed from their parents were brought to Mapoon, as well as some Torres Strait Islander and South Sea Islander people. Mapoon people, including those not presently living in the community, possess a strong collective identity across their traditional, historical and ethnic diversity.

During the first 27 years of the operation of the Mission, the Reverend J.N. Hey adopted an unusual approach to community development. Newlywed couples were encouraged to settle several kilometres south of the mission station along a strip of estuary and river foreshore known as the ‘Outstation’. Small cottages were self-built on plots of about five acres, with subsistence farming lots and plantations of coconuts. ‘Outstation’ was spatially separate from the ‘village’, with its own church and graveyard. Rather than being absorbed into the mission ‘coffers’, wages earned by men working away in the fishing and pastoral industries were used to purchase corrugated iron and other building materials for their house. Reverend Hey went so far as to petition the Queensland Government to grant secure title over the blocks of land to the resident families.

Through the 1950s, the Queensland Government began to question the viability of the Mapoon settlement, for reasons that are highly contested. People were relocated to other settlements,

including New Mapoon on the tip of Cape York, but some refused to leave. In 1963, the Queensland Police removed a small party of people identified as the leaders of 'the resistance' to New Mapoon. Some houses were burnt down during the removal, and all except one were demolished the following year. The removal incident has become well known as a watershed political event in the Indigenous history of Queensland.

Mapoon people were actively discouraged from returning to their lands and thus important spiritual connections which had been continued during the mission were severed for a generation. With the relaxation of government controls through the 1970s, people began to re-establish contact with their country, constructing self-built humpies on their original mission blocks. As the return to Mapoon was not supported by government funding, families relied on their own skills and ingenuity, and on the building materials they could salvage.

The 'sweat' of building their homes during the mission period, and their subsequent demolition by the Queensland Government, is remembered with a mixture of both pride and resentment. With the return to Mapoon in the 1970s, people immediately camped on the same block where their homes were located during the mission, before building new dwellings from bush timbers and second-hand materials, often salvaged from the Comalco dump in Weipa (and I have it on good authority that rubber conveyor belts make good flooring material). The humpies were often elaborate in their construction and they dominated housing in Mapoon until the mid-1990s, when people gradually moved into new rental houses.

Recent policy moves towards home ownership in remote settlements have captured the attention of media and the Australia public, but home ownership has long been a reality for Mapoon people, and this occurred with the active facilitation of the Church.

We do not propose homeownership as a blanket policy solution, and we doubt that it will be feasible in many communities, especially for many traditional communities found in Central

Australia. But in Mapoon, there is a strong history and existing aspiration by people to own their own homes and this deserves support. The level of home ownership on communal title lands on reservations in the USA are of the order of 70 per cent. It is hard to understand why homeownership should be so readily available elsewhere in Australia and overseas, but not available to the people of Mapoon. Whatever the tenure and bureaucratic obstacles, they should be overcome.

Less complexity, more stability

We have been served another reminder recently on the state of deplorable state of child welfare in remote settlements, this time on the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara Lands by Commissioner Ted Mulighan. In the preface to the report, he asserts that:

. . . prior to the mid-1970s, the life of Anangu on the Lands was generally healthy, peaceful, safe and content. There was an effective system of social order, law and governance and mutual responsibility. During the 1980s and 1990s, life changed drastically for the people and sadly for the children.

Mulighan thereby states that life was better during the mission period, prior to self-determination policies in the 1970s. This statement has recently been publicly supported by my learned colleague Lowitja O'Donoghue. This is remarkable commentary of the lack of progress in governance over the past 30 years of good intentions and massive investments from the State and Federal Governments.

For the past 15 years, a member of the WVA team has been working and visiting the remote settlement of Doomadgee, in the Gulf of Carpentaria. Many people in Doomadgee echo the views of Lowitja, that life was better during the mission time. This is a major shift from the 1990s, when the mission was the blame for all ills. Life under the mission was not necessarily good, just better. Of all of the mission regimes in Australia, none was stricter than the one that occurred at

Doomadgee. The Christian Brethren deployed a particularly strict doctrine, symbolic in the ankle length frocks worn by women. But also important during this time, was the links that operated with the outside world through the pastoral industry.

The mission was established considerably later than other missions in Queensland and by this time Doomadgee people had long contact with the region's cattle stations and towns. The mission was quick to capitalise on this pre-existing local expertise, and Doomadgee became a labour pool to the pastoral industry. In 1965, close to 300 employment agreements were signed for Doomadgee workers in 74 pastoral properties across Queensland.

The Doomadgee Mission itself was divided into a number of fenced paddocks which were stocked with small herds of cattle, mainly for self-sufficiency purposes, but also to provide a useful training opportunity for young men before being sent out to work. When people talk about this time of the mission and stations, two common elements emerge: a daily routine and structure around meaningful work, and important long-term relationships they formed with 'trusted outsiders', who were mostly non-Indigenous workers employed by the mission and stations. Thus employment and governance relationships provided important entry points for people to participate with dignity into the Australian society.

Contrast this to the current situation found on remote settlements, with high levels of unemployment, the meaninglessness of many CDEP activities, the high turnover of outside staff, and the fly-in fly-out visits of government workers.

Trusted outsiders are essential to the workings of local governance in remote Indigenous settlements, much more so than in international development settings, because the external system which collectively constitutes Indigenous affairs is exceedingly complex.

It is not uncommon for 20 different bureaucrats from 20 different government departments to visit a remote Indigenous settlement in one week – believe me, there is nothing like this occurring in villages in Myanmar. Pragmatically, in order to deal with this quantity of administration in practice you need to employ outsiders with the knowledge and networks to navigate the complexities and externalities involved. The nature of the problems faced in local governance are such that neither Indigenous nor non-Indigenous groups can fundamentally find solutions on their own. WVA understands this first hand, because we are brokering this space in multiple places across Australia.

Therefore, to increase governance capacity, there is a need to reduce the administrative workload, and for less complexity and more stability in the external service system. In the words of one Aboriginal leader: “we are climbing the ladder, but the ladder’s growing faster than we can climb”. We would, therefore, contend that participation in governance is also an important socio-economic indicator, which like home ownership, is an important and undervalued means to ‘close the gap’.

We have to challenge the status quo in Indigenous affairs, and from our experience, that is largely about the way that problems are conceptualised and solutions proffered. There have always been many experts in Indigenous Affairs, but the solutions they offer inevitably lead to another program which in turn exacerbates this complexity. Whatever the pro and cons of different policy solutions, the reality is that in remote Indigenous settlements, meanings take shape through relationships that form locally. It is important to start with the practical realities at the coalface of Indigenous affairs, otherwise policy solutions are fired into administrative vacuums: ideas without the capacity to implement them, and with little engagement of intended beneficiaries, are dumb ideas.

If we can go beyond blaming individuals, religion, politics, culture, and so on, then maybe it is time to say that there is no solution, the system has become so overwhelmingly and hopelessly

complex in its pursuit of finding the solution that it itself has become the problem. To the extent that the system is workable, it is in the capacity, innovation and adaptations that exist locally.

Yet trusted outsiders are universally dismissed as gatekeepers, and Aboriginal leaders as corrupt elites; the guardians of a culture that must change. If policy makers ignore the local practitioners of their policy, then on what basis can they hope to measure the efficacy of intended outcomes? There is an urgent need to understand the conditions of successful practice at the implementation coalface. This is the engine room of Indigenous affairs, not the rooms full of well-meaning people in Alice Springs and Canberra.

Stolen Wages

While I have gone to some lengths to emphasise the need for socio-economic development, I do not wish to gloss over the injustices of the past. These are real and must be addressed.

Between 1909 and the 1940s the Commonwealth introduced a range of benefits including the invalid and old age pension, maternity allowance, war veterans' pension, child endowment, widow's pension and unemployment and sickness benefits.

Initially Aborigines were excluded from such benefits unless they were 'exempt' (deemed to be honorary whites by the issuing of a certificate often referred to as the 'dog licence') or considered to be of 'good character' and having 'an acceptable standard of intelligence'. However, even when they *were* eligible, the Queensland Government had such benefits paid to itself using the funds for the 'general welfare of Aborigines'. There is also evidence that Indigenous servicemen who returned from WWII, had their war service pensions confiscated by the government.

At a time when there are loud voices calling for Aboriginal people to be more responsible and to abandon the 'victimhood' mentality of the past and become less welfare dependent, it is

instructive to reflect on how *irresponsible* governments were in the past in denying Indigenous people their wages. Archival records show that even when young Aboriginal men applied for their own wages in order to be independent of the government, such requests were invariably refused. One can only speculate how much less dependency there might be today if Indigenous workers had been able to be part of the 'real' economy.

It is a matter of justice and significant healing for the Indigenous community that the issue of stolen wages is treated as the theft that it was.

Time for a Treaty

Australia is the only major former British colony in the world never to have negotiated a treaty with its Indigenous inhabitants. As a result, Indigenous Australians have never had a binding legal document to fall back on in order to assert their rights or to challenge the actions of governments.

I believe that:

- a treaty between the Federal Government and Indigenous Australians needs to be negotiated to prevent Indigenous rights being eroded;
- a treaty would bring Australia into line with other countries such as New Zealand, Canada and the United States;
- the process would encourage open and honest debate that would lead to a better understanding of the need for a treaty between Indigenous Australians and the Federal Government;
- a treaty would succeed under circumstances where a basic framework agreement is proposed by a broad section of Indigenous Australians and where Australians see it as a natural flow-on from the apology.

Which brings me to one of my favourite topics: the role of Christians and churches in the abolition of slavery. What has this to do with a treaty? Well, William Wilberforce and what became known as the Clapham Sect were a devoted and very optimistic group of Christians. And their efforts at reform in society didn't stop with the slave trade. Wilberforce was also a founding member of the Church Missionary Society, as well as the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and the Sect championed other causes such as prison and child labour reform among many others.

The Clapham Sect comprised clergy and business men, Christian politicians and governors. Those from the group elected to Parliament were known as the Saints. And their name stuck from the suburb of Clapham where they met regularly for fellowship. One of the group was the barrister James Stephen. Wilberforce had rescued him from suicidal depression, and Stephen's son, also called James, became the Permanent Under-Secretary for the Colonies from 1836 to 1847. He was possibly the greatest civil servant of the 19th century. In fact it was he who drafted the legislation

outlawing the slave trade. He was so influential that he was referred to as 'Mr Over-Secretary Stephen', 'King Stephen' and 'Mr Mother Country'.

In the English Colonies, he decreed that the indigenous people were to be protected and the principle of racial equality maintained. Stephen's ideas on the protection of the Maori of New Zealand were incorporated in the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840. And one is forced to wonder what would have happened were a man of the calibre of James Stephen to have served in the Civil Service a generation earlier, when Australia was determined to be terra nullius?.

Ideally, whatever framework agreement is reached would need to be enshrined in a legal instrument to ensure its safety. It could be in a Bill of Rights, or a Constitutional amendment. Either way it is likely that a referendum or plebiscite would be required. Given the failure of most past referenda, it could be lengthy process. A major obstacle to public support for a treaty was the insistence of the previous government that treaties can only be negotiated between 'nations'. But it is obvious that Indigenous gains made overseas – whether in relation to land rights, or reparations for 'stolen children' and 'stolen wages' – has most often been a result of treaties.

When delivering the inaugural 2005 Mabo Oration in Brisbane, Noel Pearson said the principles established by Mabo were "the best opportunity for resolution of the colonial grievance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians." He declared it the "cornerstone for reconciliation - legally, politically, historically and morally" not "simply a legal doctrine relating to real estate." Mabo, he said, established an "over-arching moral framework for reconciliation."

While I agree that native title is critical to reconciliation and economic development, the processes in place to resolve outstanding native title claims are overly complex and exceedingly slow. However, a treaty could build on this and potentially codify and enshrine property rights and the rights of Australia's first peoples.

Addressing the past injustices of stolen wages and the signing of a treaty are important aspects to creating an enabling framework for socio-economic development to occur, but we are under no disillusionment that the ‘hard yards’ will continue to occur at the ‘coalface’ of communities, largely on the strength of relationships between leaders and trusted outsiders. Such long-term relationships were critical during the days of the early missionaries and station workers, and they continue to be with the present-day employees of Indigenous organisations, NGOs and government departments.

In the 1960s, Aboriginal stockmen went on strike at the NT Wave Hill station, led by Gurindji man Vincent Lingiari, they walked off the job and set up a camp at a place called Wattie Creek. The dispute over wages and conditions turned into a demand for land rights. The words “from little things, big things grow” are now immortalised in a Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody song, and for the purposes of today, I use them to remind us what can happen in small ways from grass roots innovation. And if we are to close the gap in health inequality, then we have to tackle the gap in education, employment, home ownership and governance capacity, and there are no easy policy solutions here, just what gets worked out locally in practice.

As you can all see, there is much to be done post the apology. But the apology has turned the rudder on the ship of state, and given Australians a desire to bind up the wounds which the apology was in part responding to. It is as if we have started out afresh on a journey of healing and I commend us all to take that journey in so much as we can. Even if we start with the “little things”, some of the “big” challenges I have outlined will be sure to follow.

Thank You

End of Transcript