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2010 LOWITJA O'DONOGHUE ORATION – 2 June 2010

Mr Ray Martin AM

Thank you Dr. Arnold for that warm welcome and introduction.

Thank you Lowitja. As always.

May I take the opportunity to thank Mr. Buckskin for generously welcoming us to 'his country' tonight.

We all know what a rich and beautiful...and bountiful...country it is, too. (When the rivers run.)

I acknowledge the Traditional owners – the KAURNA peoples – and pay my deep respects to their Elders...along with their ancestors and their dream - time stories.

'Walking Together on the Journey of Healing'. That's the topic of this, the third Lowitja O'Donoghue Oration - for the Don Dunstan Foundation.

I have to say I'm deeply honored to be invited to be here with you.

Don Dunstan was an old, treasured friend of mine whom I admired- as did everyone who met him. I got to interview him many times over the years - for both the ABC and Channel 9. I can't tell you the number of times that I'd come to Adelaide to do a story – for A Current Affair or Sixty Minutes - we'd catch the last plane in from Sydney & go straight to the restaurant that he shared with Stephen, his partner. There, we'd get to share some of his latest favorite cheese and wine. Always the best - South Australian, of course.

And I'd also seek some wise words or inspiration – which Don gave freely just about every time he spoke.

I fell into Lowitja's 'circle of wisdom' more than 20 years ago, when she was the Chairperson of ATSIC and also Deputy Chair of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation - of which I was a member for ten, rollicking years.

As the Council moved it's sessions around the country I'd always try and stay in Lowitja's 'slip-stream'. Close at hand, in the bus, at dinner...community meetings...whatever.

I long ago learnt that if you stand next to compassionate, wise, smart people – and nod a lot – you can get away with anything!

So, 'Walking Together On the Journey of Healing'. that's what I want you to think about tonight. It's called an 'Oration'. But, I'm a story-teller. That's what journalists really are.

So, I'm going to tell you some stories... about some of my experiences over the last 45 years...I hope that, like pieces in a colorful jigsaw puzzle, they'll all come together in a bigger picture...of 'Walking Together On the Journey of Healing'.

Of course, to visualize where we're going on this journey we must always have a glimpse in the rear vision mirror - at where we've been. Briefly.

As Anton Checkov, the great Russian dramatist, once said "To begin to live in the present, we must first atone for our past & be finished with it."

(Mind you, I think it was the American poet CARL SANDBERG who wrote - 'the past is just a bucket of ashes'.)

Either way... I was thinking, flying over here today, that the Don Dunstan Institute couldn't have chosen this topic during the John Howard era. Because the Howard era wasn't "A journey of healing".

I don't want to get into party politics tonight, but it simply wasn't!

It was a time when 'an apology' was categorically rejected. When Government Ministers almost choked at the thought of acknowledging the Traditional Owners of this great land. When the "Bringing Them Home" Report was summarily dismissed. And "victims" of the Stolen Generation policies were insulted inside court by Government lawyers. When ATSIC was encouraged to self-implode. When Pauline Hanson was allowed to speak her divisive ramblings and go unchallenged by the Federal Government. And finally - for some inexplicable, political reason in the last weeks of the 2007 Federal Election - the army intervened in the Northern Territory.

I happen to believe that it was a justifiable intervention - but it was too late and too heavy-handed... It was misdirected and mismanaged.

Ten years ago last Friday - with Lowitja and others - I walked across the Sydney Harbour Bridge. (And, probably with a few people who are here tonight.)

One of the reasons that walk...that happy march...that political event... was so successful was that it was 'a genuine people's movement' - as we'd never seen before.

It was a 'special' walk for me, because I'd been given the task - as a member of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation - of organizing that grand, symbolic walk ...'bridging' black and white Australians!!

That was my job, for the best part of a year.

Still, coming forward ten years to tonight... I believe THAT historic walk - with about 300 thousand mostly white fella's - was almost as momentous as the 1967 Referendum. Symbolically.

Of course, it didn't change the Constitution or the legal status of aboriginal people. But, it marked the climax of 10 years' work by the reconciliation Council. And, it started to change attitudes. And that's important.

In some cases, it helped change entrenched, racist attitudes.

It certainly made Australians think again about what 'a fair go' really means – where our indigenous people are concerned.

Over the last few days, some reviews and public comments on radio and TV have even suggested that the Bridge Walk 'kick-started' this new phase that we're talking about tonight ...A new beginning – which now embraces big business, banks, mining conglomerates, sporting organizations and the best high schools...beyond governments. And, it embraces ordinary Australians – especially school kids and young people.

That bridge walk kick-started this 'Walk Together, on the Journey of Healing' that I truly believe is underway. Certainly amongst white Australians. For indigenous Australians it may still be, as somebody suggested to me here earlier tonight, still 'A Journey of Hurting'.

I certainly hope not.

Ken Rudd's deeply-moving "Apology" on February 13th, 2007 was not just long-overdue. It was another essential step in our 'healing' process.

It had to happen before we could begin "the healing journey".

I recently read a newsletter about that February day –in an 'as yet unpublished book' called "Encounter – the Past and Future of Remote Kimberley". It's a fascinating, local WA history sent to me by its author, Sister Brigida Nailon.

The newsletter was written by Father Ray Hevern who is the Regional Leader of a Catholic order – the Pallotines - based in WA for over a century.

Father Hevern wrote poignantly about standing alone in the crowd on the Perth Esplanade lawn, watching Mr. Rudd speaking from Canberra on the giant screen. It was a little after 7am in Perth. The priest spoke of 'the crowd near him quietly crying'. And he goes on:

"I felt glad that I belonged to a country that was no longer in denial, but whose populace - as a whole - could admit the immeasurable harm that had been done. And respectfully and graciously apologize to the aboriginal people sitting in front of them."

We've come a long way. And it's been a long time in coming.

In my journalism career I've interviewed every Prime Minister since Sir Robert Menzies.

I don't know, but history may well decide that Malcolm Fraser was arguably the most pro-active of our PM's - when it came to indigenous rights. Fraser was horrified by the assimilationist policies of the past; he favored land rights; he personally had no trouble with the idea of a treaty, as he pushed his reluctant Cabinet to accept the idea of 'a Makarrata'.

Malcolm Fraser believed in the right of self-determination.

He also doubled the Federal monies spent on Aboriginal affairs

He set up the Aboriginal Development Commission with Charlie Perkins as it's boss, which sparked – amongst other initiatives – the CDEP.

We can all probably remember those photos of 'Big Mal', sitting in the empty Todd River in his tweed suit, talking to ordinary black fella's for an hour or so. And the time he went fishing (in a tinny) with Gallaruy Yunipingu wearing a safari suit and a slouch hat – holding up barra as long as his arm.

At the time, in the late 1970's, early '80's, Fraser's policies were radical – especially for the Liberal and National Country Parties.

Yet, in his memoirs just published in April - the former Prime Minister speaks of being ashamed of the suffering and the inequalities, the lack of human rights for indigenous Australians.

" I think we were too timid...we didn't go nearly far enough', he says, even suggesting his Government should have instituted a policy of ' positive discrimination' - to ensure aboriginal jobs in the Commonwealth Public service.

"How else are you going to get change? " he asks rhetorically. "We should probably have gone ahead & done it. And today there might be a real difference as a result." UNQUOTE

We'll never know.

Still, such impassioned statements – public apologies if you like - from former Prime Ministers undoubtedly help the 'healing' process.

So, let me offer a brief final quote from Malcolm Fraser again, from his latest political memoirs. The book's co-author, journalist Margaret Simon writes about a speech Fraser researched and delivered in the 1990's:
Let me read it to you...

'He (Mr. Fraser) quoted health experts who said that an extra three hundred million dollars per year in aboriginal health would increase life expectancy by 30 percent within a decade. But neither Labor nor the Coalition was prepared to commit these resources. The notion that more was spent on Aboriginal health than on the health of other Australians was a complete fiction, said Fraser. The idea that there is something uniquely intractable about despair and dysfunction in Aboriginal Australia was wrong, and implicitly racist.'

It's commendable stuff, which I have no doubt he now honestly believes.

The only trouble is that Malcolm Fraser – like so many of our well-intentioned political leaders – seems to have acquired his wisdom and certain solutions AFTER he left power and office.

It's the 'wisdom of hindsight' once again.

Now, I wasn't going to even mention indigenous health tonight.

I figured we all know how outrageously bad...how shameful ...it really is.

Still. It's the horrific detail that makes you stop. That sometimes takes your breath away. That may yet force Governments to fix it – in this time of healing.

Did you see the medical report in last weekend's "Australian" newspaper?
It was a new study of diabetes in Western Australia?

We learn that indigenous Australians are SEVEN times more likely to suffer from diabetes.

That's not surprising. It rolls off the tongue easily. We shake our heads in the certain knowledge that it's always been bad. The knowledge that, for whatever reason, indigenous people are 'pre-disposed' to getting diabetes...in Australia, the Pacific Islands and other places.

But, then you move on...to the gory details. My wife didn't want me to read them aloud to her. But, we must!!!

This new report says that those people in the age group 25-49...(the back half of their lives) these indigenous men and women are TWENTY SEVEN times more likely to have their toes or feet amputated than white fella's.

Twenty seven times more feet or toes chopped off!!

And - wait for it - THIRTY EIGHT times more likely to receive MAJOR leg amputations i.e. above or below the knee.

And, if that isn't reprehensible and disgusting enough - the new report says that five years after amputation (because of diabetes remember) - half those same people are dead. Or need the OTHER leg amputated!

To say that indigenous people get diabetes SEVEN times more often than white fella's isn't enough.

Visit an aboriginal camp or settlement and see just how many people have their feet and legs amputated. Imagine for one moment...if it was happening in white Australia. Imagine how quickly the problem would be fixed.

We must tell these shocking stories. And then tell them again and again to ordinary Australians, at barbecues and at dinner tables and at public meetings. Because I think it's truly part of the 'healing' process.

And I believe we must especially tell these stories to women. And mothers.

Early on in the work of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation we deliberately aimed our messages at Australian women - through the Women's Weekly, the glossy magazines, the Country Women's Association, clubs and school P & C's. Unashamedly. And, anecdotally, I think it worked.

Because women are ultimately the ones in our society who finally decide our attitudes and our morality. They set the parameters of what's decent and what's acceptable. And, conversely, what is UNACCEPTABLE.

I tell Lowitja O'Donoghue's own story to women - and women's groups - often. Probably more than she does herself these days. Because Lowitja comes across to Australians on television and in life as an intelligent, caring, compassionate, capable, well educated, role model. For black and white women everywhere. Of course, she has all those qualities and more.

But, then I tell them about how she and her sister and brother were taken away as babes and toddlers, down here to Adelaide. And, her work here as a domestic & then as a nurse.

And how, some 30 odd years later, she ended up at the Oodnadatta District Hospital – as the Senior Nurse.

Was that right, Auntie?

And how when she arrived at the Oodnadatta airport one Saturday a couple of local aboriginal women recognized her as the daughter of Mary...or Agnes...or whatever her mum's white name was.

And a couple of weeks later her mother walked through the hospital door, fell into Lowitja's arms and cried a bucket of tears. Her mother spoke no English but she'd pined for her 'stolen daughter' (and children) for 30 years.

That's a much better story – more real – than saying that 10 thousand aboriginal boys and girls made up 'The Stolen Generation'.

White women understand what that kind of trauma and heartache must have been like. Even though they may never have known it themselves.

Lowitja first told me that story about twenty years ago, in a restaurant here in Adelaide. But, only after I'd asked!

And then, later that night, she left her colleagues from the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation to go down to the Adelaide train station. In a cotton frock - without a coat or cardigan - in the cold, I remember. Like a kelpie sheep dog, she was rounding up the aboriginal kids who were hanging around the station – kids who were waiting to get into trouble. She barked at them & herded them onto their trains, to at least get them out of the clutches of the city predators.

Lowitja O'Donoghue was the boss of ATSIC at the time –one of the most senior public servants in Australia - but, caring (and healing) is in her blood.

She doesn't know how to stop. And thank God for that!

There are two other quick stories I like to tell. I call them part of my 'healing process'.

43 years ago, when I first got graded as a journalist I was dispatched to the ABC's Perth bureau. On one radio assignment I ended up in Meekatharra – at the end of the railway line! This was 1967 – just weeks before the famous '67 Referendum- but, Meekatharra was an apartheid town. Segregated, divided, racist. South Africa in outback Australia.

I got talking to an old aboriginal man, who'd been thrown out – physically – of the 'Whites Only' main street pub. "Old"? He was probably 55, but he seemed 'ancient' to me. He told me about being arrested as a kid outside of the Pilbara town of Roebourne. "It was the year the first T-model Ford hit town", he recalled, with a laugh. He laughed a lot. Although he reckoned he was only about ten, he was arrested as a suspect in "the spearing of two cattle". He told the police which blackfella's he thought had done it, but before they headed off in hot pursuit they chained him to a boab tree, in the hot, tropical sun. They left him a pannikin of water, which he accidentally knocked over. He says it was three days before the coppers returned with the guilty culprits, and set him free.

There was no angst. No bitterness. He just thought and knew, that's what whites did to blacks. That was life.

Forty odd years later - here in Meekatharra - they threw him out of the pub. Not because he was drunk, but because he had black skin.

He wasn't upset at all.

But, I was. I was really angry.

I couldn't believe such racist, outrageous things could happen in my country.

In the years ahead I would learn that things were much, much worse.

The final story happened in the late 1990's.

Bryce Courtney, the best selling author, asked me to launch his latest novel – a book called ' Jessica'.

Set in the prosperous Riverina town of Narrandera, it tells the story of a white woman who goes mad and is saved by the local aboriginal people.

After the book launch, a lady - who happened to be the Narrandera librarian - told me of an incident a year or so earlier.

It was Nadoc Week, so in the library foyer she'd posted a number of old, black and white photos of the local Waradjuri people, taken in the 1930's.

While she stamped the books that were being borrowed by a local white man, she was intrigued to see him shaking his head - as he examined the photos. When she asked him why, he explained that one Sunday morning, as a six- year- old boy, his father had taken him down to an island in the Murrumbidgee River, with a shooting party. They were 'going out to shoot some blacks' his father told him. And they did. What shocked him now, was not only that they had shot innocent women and old people – but, that his father had taken him along. As if 'shooting blacks' was part of his transition to manhood. Part of the culture.

The librarian figured, given the old man's age at the time, that he must have been talking about Narrandera in the 1930's. The 1930's NOT the 1830's.

I tell these stories – and many others - to remind white Australians... to inform them...of life as it really is and has been for black Australians for 200 years – beyond the colonial massacres and poisoned waterholes, the contagious diseases and forced separation of families.

...Before white fella's start talking absurdly like Pauline Hanson about 'special deals' for blackfella's and priority treatment, and AbStudy and free buses and lunches for kids.

I remind them of the reality. The stigmata. The racist attacks on indigenous Australians just because they're black. (Or even mildly brown!)

That's before I tell them proudly that my great, great grandmother was a Kamilaroi woman from Keepit Station in North East NSW.

That usually slows them down.

Stories like that, are always better than making white Australians feel guilty. Or 'poor bugger me' stories about black fella's.

Indeed, I like to tell white Australians how leaders like Lowitja and Noel Pearson and Charlie Perkins (when he was around) used to harangue & harass & tongue-lash black fella's for not picking up their garbage. For not sending their kids to school. For not getting off 'their black asses' and getting a job. For living off welfare. For not setting an example to their kids.

They're powerful messages. More powerful when they come from black leaders. And they resonate amongst whites.

And remember – in this 'healing process' – we don't have to win over the blackfella's. We have to win over the whitefella's. The 98 percent of the population. They're the ones who truly have to be reconciled.

Let me underline this. It's clearly time for a change in the message being sent out to white Australia. This is a two-way street. Indigenous leaders have to get much smarter in bringing about change, in capitalizing on this positive mood, this 'healing process'.

The days of endlessly bashing up white fella's for being racist, insensitive and not caring are over. That knee-jerk reaction is clearly out of step with modern, multi-cultural Australia. That's not to deny for one second that racism exists – especially in regional Australia. It certainly does. We have to be vigilant and stamp it out. But, it's no good trying to make Australians still take the blame for policies that go back fifty or a hundred years. And attitudes.

And it's too late for blackfella excuses.

Clearly, blackfella's have to show strong, new leadership. More than ever before. And get fair dinkum about the raging problems in their communities. The new leaders have to start taking responsibility for the chronic and widespread abuse and violence. No excuses. And stop denying that it exists.

That gives them no credibility at all.

Parents and community leaders must get kids to school. No excuses. Men have to get off welfare and booze and gunja. No excuses. And get into jobs that are clearly available, and stick at them. Young indigenous men have to be encouraged to take up training for the countless jobs, in mining especially, that need special skills.

No more excuses.

If we're talking honesty.... it's time for a bit of honesty about all the tens of billions of taxpayer's dollars that has gone into Aboriginal affairs over recent years WITHOUT any real sign of improvement. Money that's clearly been wasted by Governments.

It's a question I get asked all the time. And it makes me smile.

Because it's the same question I asked Charlie Perkins 25 years ago.
"What happens to the billion dollars a year that goes into so-called 'Aboriginal Affairs'?"

Back then, Charlie threw his head back and laughed out loud. And said he bloody wished he knew what had happened to it.

Well, today taxpayers are slugged over TWO billion dollars a year to help close the 'gap' of disadvantage. It's still the same answer. Nobody can properly explain where all this money ends up.

One thing's for certain. They're aren't any blackfella's living with George Cluney in Switzerland, or sitting back on sunny, Spanish tax havens like Christopher Skase.

You may remember in the Oscar-winning movie 'All The President's Men", Robert Redford's character Bob Woodward of the Washington Post. He asks 'Deep Throat' – down in the darkness of the garage – how he can get to the bottom of the Watergate puzzle?

Deep Throat tells him obliquely to 'follow the money'.

Well, if you somehow follow 'the aboriginal money trail', you'll quickly find that it bypasses the shanty towns, the camp dogs and Diabetes Row...to white consultants and white contractors and white public servants. It ends up in the deep pockets of the "Aboriginal Industry".

These days, I tell people about the 90 very nice – but very basic – houses for black fella's I saw being built up on the Tiwi Islands last week, costing almost one million dollars each. Almost One million dollars each. Paid for by the Australian taxpayer.

I met a couple of white workers on the housing project – good, hard-working blokes - who've passed-up the fishing season down at Port Lincoln this year, because there's much more money to be made contracting houses for blackfella's.

I tell people that while 2000 indigenous folk sit around the Tiwi Islands – without a job to be had – there's not one young, blackfella tradesmen being trained by the Government, for when the contractors go home.

So, your guess is as good as mine as to what happens when the toilets break, or the electricity fails or a few tiles come loose – as they do in every new house. Who's left to fix them? And what shape are these million dollars houses going to be in ten years time, if there are no local tradesmen to look after them?
Again, your guess is good as mine!

I've spent a lot of time tonight talking about the failure of Governments in "Walking Together on the Journey of Healing".

I want to finally spend a moment talking about a couple of the success stories.

And, there are a growing number of them. Some are small and more symbolic, seemingly trivial. I don't think they are.
Some are large and very exciting - all adding, we can hope, to greater tolerance and understanding. All part of the 'healing process'.

For example, still up on Bathurst and Melville – the Tiwi Islands off Darwin – I saw some terrific things being done by the Australian Football League. The AFL.

I think their work in indigenous communities – respecting families, culture and tradition – is easily the most enlightened and professional of any sport in Australia. Easily.

If you think this is just about football, well think again. This is about life.

Remember, it wasn't so long ago that black Aussie Rules players like Nicky Winmar & Michael Long were pulling their club jerseys up and pointing to their black skin. It was their way of responding to ugly racist taunts from white crowds. And even other players.

Racism was rampant in sport. Especially football. That's now stopped.

Today, as part of the AFL's genuine role in the 'healing process' they pump huge piles of money into coaching indigenous kids. - offering an alternate lifestyle to booze, drugs and indolence. They organise interstate excursions and promotional tournaments, while they deploy squads of senior players to work with indigenous kids - boys AND girls. By the thousands.

And it's not only about finding the next fleet-footed, high-flying black superstar.

It's not about teaching kids to kick with both left and right foot either. Nobody has to teach them. They do that automatically - almost from birth. (Incidentally, I found it astonishing to see boys - five and six years old - kicking an empty, plastic Coke bottle if they didn't have a ball. And, bouncing it on the ground and back up into their hands like a proper, pumped-up football.)

The AFL now realizes the power that the shiny, red Sherrin footy has over indigenous communities. It's a power for good. It's a magnet, for kids in particular.

So now, if you're a footy-mad indigenous primary school kid you can't be part of the OZkick program -which means you don't get to kick a ball - if you don't turn up to class.

That's the rule.

If you can get primary school kids into the habit of school, then you're half-way there.

On Melville Island teachers told me they're now getting 80/85 percent attendance rates. That's unheard of.

Let's stay at school for the moment. But way down south from the Tiwi Islands - at West Penrith High School, in Sydney's outer west.

I was there recently, as part of that highly-controversial 60 Minutes debate about changing the Australian flag. (I won't go anywhere near that tonight for fear of getting a few more threats from homicidal flag lovers.)

I found that many of these Year 10, sixteen year old kids - most of them from working-class homes - were happy to keep the flag the way it is.

But, what's most pertinent to tonight's topic was that every child in that class agreed that IF the Australian flag was changed then it must include 'recognition' of indigenous Australians.

That was an amazing sentiment - given that the kids came from about fifteen different nationalities, and only ONE was an aboriginal girl. Yet, they all agreed that any change in the flag must recognize the First Australians.

That simply wouldn't have happened ten years ago.

These are little things, but together they add up to a significant shift in Australia – for the better! As 'we walk together on the journey of healing'.

Don't tell me that nothing positive is happening in indigenous Australia.

On a much broader front than footy and flags ...there's a revolution outside, and as Bob Dylan said -

'Get out of the way, if you can't lend a hand,
Cos the times they are a changing.'

The Business Council of Australia represents a combined workforce of over one million workers. Last year, in its first annual report on its indigenous program, the President of the BCA, Greg Gailey said that the failure to significantly improve the education prospects and provide jobs for indigenous people is "our greatest national shame." And he promised to do something about it.

Joining with the Federal Government, BCA members – which include Australia's biggest companies -have committed themselves to indigenous jobs, traineeships, mentoring schemes and cultural awareness programs.

In tandem with this BCA pledge – the likes of which Australia has never seen before – is the Australian Employment Covenant, which promises to find 50 thousand jobs for indigenous Australians – especially in the mining industry.

The AEC is "the brainchild" of Andrew Forrest, with the backing of the Federal Government, along with the public endorsement of other billionaires like James Packer, Kerry Stokes, the Lowy family and Lindsay Fox.

So, in essence, Australia's richest men have made an unequivocal commitment of time, energy and money to Australia's poorest people.

Nothing like this has ever happened in Australia before.

Andrew Forest – who grew up with aboriginal people in the WA Pilbara region – is on record as saying he regards this '50 thousand jobs commitment' as more important to him than his lucrative iron ore business.

If the AEC even comes close to achieving this jobs target, individual lives and communities will be improved beyond their wildest dreams.

But, the scale of the indigenous jobs problem is alarming.

Over the next decade, 140 thousand indigenous young people will enter the working population. These students are leaving school with low literacy and numeracy skills, lower levels of school achievement than non-indigenous kids and, therefore, poor prospects of finding a job.

There are two remarkable and innovative programs, that are already making a small but significant mark on the problem.

One's about jobs, the other is about education.

I want to finish tonight briefly by telling you about their achievements. They're outstanding success stories.

Sixteen years ago, a prosperous cotton farmer up in the Northern NSW town of Moree named Dick Estens, started up something called the Aboriginal Employment Strategy.

"Doomed to fail" in the eye of local know-alls, it was a bold initiative to give jobs, pride and self-esteem to local aborigines. Moree was a sullen, angry place with a well-earned reputation from the Black Freedom Rides of the 1960's as "the most racist town in Australia".

Apart from giving young aborigines a new life and a future with achievable dreams, Dick Estens thought his AES – if it worked – might save Moree from wasting away, like the other wild towns of the NSW west. Towns like Brewarina, Bourke and Walgett.

Run almost entirely by indigenous staff, the Aboriginal Employment Strategy has been a spectacular, runaway success - spreading its jobs and school-based traineeship program through every state, except strangely enough here in South Australia. That's about to change they tell me.

With the backing initially of only the ANZ Bank -but now all the major banks, Australia Post, Woolworths and a host of our biggest employers - the AES will this year provide 1550 full-time jobs to indigenous workers and 500 traineeships to high-school students. These students, many of whom come from families where no one works, are all promised full-time employment upon completion of their school traineeships.

Ironically, Dick Estens says, the biggest rival to his Aboriginal Employment Scheme in most towns and suburbs is Centre Link – the government-funded, dole scheme. At the moment, Estens says - with understand pride - where they go head to head the AES has more blackfella's on its books than Centre Link.

The last element in our "Walk Together on the Journey of Healing" tonight is the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation.

Upfront, I have to declare a certain attachment to this Foundation.

I'm the voluntary, unpaid Chairman of the AIEF.

Mind you, I had the same role in the Fred Hollows Foundation, where in a decade we fixed the cataract blindness of more than a million people. For free.

So, having an attachment to a good cause isn't necessarily a bad thing.

There's no 'silver bullet' when it comes to fixing indigenous disadvantage. We all know that.

If it were 'easy' governments would have done it years ago!

But, in the words of our distinguished patron, Sir William Deane, 'to overcome the appalling problems of indigenous disadvantage education is the key.'

The Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, echoed similar sentiments in his maiden speech to parliament a decade ago. "If equality of opportunity does not begin in the school system,' Mr. Rudd said ' then it begins nowhere at all."

Get a good education- again we all know - and jobs, housing, health and self-esteem will normally follow. Ipso facto.

The concept of giving 2000 full-time scholarships, at some of the best high schools in Australia, to disadvantaged indigenous boys and girls -which is what the AIEF is doing - is an absolute 'no brainer'.

Which is why the Federal Government has given us twenty million dollars, which we have to match – dollar for dollar – with funds from corporates, families and philanthropic Australians.

We're already well on the way to doing it, in just one year.

By the end of this year, there'll be close to 200 children on scholarships, boarding at our partner schools in NSW and Queensland. In the years ahead the scheme will spread across Australia, as I said, with a target of 2000 full-time scholarships.

Imagine for a moment hundreds of young, well- educated indigenous leaders.

It's an educational initiative that has been successfully tested on a local level for almost a decade – most especially at St. Josephs Boys College in Hunters Hill, Sydney. There are forty aboriginal boys, from a range of suburban and country homes, now boarding at Joey's.

Over the last five years, out of 149 indigenous boys and girls enrolled at the AIEF partner schools, 85 percent of them have completed Year 12. That's double the rate in the wider indigenous school population.

There are endless, extraordinary stories of students who have already beaten the odds – because of the opportunities provided to them by this scholarship. Graduates so far include teachers, lawyers, doctors, bankers, accountants, tradesmen and sporting stars.

Let me just mention two of those unbelievable success stories.

Craig Ashby was 16, and illiterate, when he arrived at Joey's. Raised in Walgett by his elderly grandmother, his life prospects were grim. Today, a university of Sydney graduate Craig is about to embark on a career as a History high-school teacher. He's already had lunch with the Pope and been the official youth delegate chosen to meet Prince William – the heir to the British throne - early this year.

Ricky McCourt is a kid from Nambucca Heads – a fishing town, half way between Sydney and Brisbane. His mother told Ricky that she didn't want him to go to the 'big school' in Sydney – St. Joseph's – when he first won his scholarship. She feared she'd miss him too much. 'But' she said ' if you don't get an education, you'll be ordinary - like all the other black kids in town. And I don't want you to be ordinary.'" So, he went, his mum cried a lot and so did he, even though the collage gave him a mobile phone to call home whenever he needed to.

This year, Ricky finishes his Law Degree at Bond University. He's anything but ordinary, with an outspoken ambition to be Australia's first aboriginal Prime Minister.

Nobody who knows Ricky McCourt would rule that out.

So, let me finish our ' Journey of Healing' with that story. An outstanding example of what can be achieved...with a little help from your friends. At school, or the AFL footy players or Andrew 'Twiggy' Forest.

I said a moment ago that the problems facing indigenous Australians are enormous.

Governments of all political persuasions – all of them well-intentioned – have failed to close the so-called 'gap of disadvantage'.
But, there are changes underway. One senses real progress and real reason to hope.
And even dream.

As Professor Hollows used to say – despite the long term heartaches...
"The alternative is to do nothing. And that is NOT an alternative."

Thank you so much for inviting me & for listening.