

2009 LOWITJA O'DONOGHUE ORATION  
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I wish to acknowledge the country of the Kaurna peoples of this land and thank them for the welcome and allowing me to speak on their country for what is the prestigious Lowitja O'Donoghue Oration alongside my good friend Fred Chaney. I pay my respects to Elders past and present, and to all Aboriginal people within these boundaries.

In delivering this lecture "Bringing Black and White Australians Together" I am reminded that I am often asked what does Reconciliation mean to me. It means three things to me – Recognition, Justice and Healing.

Recognition as the First peoples of this land, recognition that the First Australians should be included in the preamble of the constitution and within the constitution itself and of course to be respected as such.

We have existed here over 70,000 years and have maintained and cared for land and for people. There are moves on to progress this understanding from kindergarten level in the teaching of Aboriginal culture which can only be hailed as a positive move. Far too long have we been asking our country to learn its true history.

Justice is about overcoming all the social disadvantages that can be summed up in one stunning statistic which says our children can expect to die on average 11.8 years earlier than the children of other Australians. It has become a reality that when statistics are given about Aboriginal lives it numbs and does not record in the psyche of most average Australians because they are still so so bad. However I have absolutely no doubt that we can only meet this enormous challenge if we work together as Australians who care about it. That we work together with trust and with respect.

Healing because that really is our fundamental goal as human beings. And we will only achieve it in this country if we achieve reconciliation. But that will never be achieved if Government's concentrate on "practical reconciliation" and ignore the spiritual or symbolic side of reconciliation. By the symbolic, I mean all the many things that have to do with building respectful relationships. The balance needs to be right.

How can we share in this country's vast opportunity and prosperity if we don't understand the basic principle of respect in working together. It was something Australians understood in 1967 at the time of the Referendum, if only for a moment, but it has driven and inspired many people since, more and more people all the time. And not just a certain type of person, left leaning, religious, or just people who like stirring the pot.

Lots of different kinds of Australians support reconciliation. They're people who understand when something's not fair and know that something should be done about it. People in business, in government, in media, all different professions and political persuasions. People you meet in supermarkets.

People get involved because they feel something should be done about the disadvantage and maybe something can be done about it. They hear the good and the bad stuff and try to chip away at the misconceptions.

But getting there is going to require of us, First peoples and others, that we shift out of our entrenched positions. We need to see and learn about what's actually working in improving Indigenous people's lives, and think about how we can reasonably apply it in different contexts. We need to be prepared to listen to one another.

Reconciliation started because enough Australian people wanted it.

There are many stories about Aboriginal and non Aboriginal people working together. Perhaps too many than we are prepared to realise. Thousands upon thousands upon thousands throughout our history. And when it got so hard these people would still stand shoulder to shoulder. People in the audience too such as yourselves – you've all got a story for sure.

People like you who have heard about various campaigns in your churches, women's groups, trade unions and you'd tell your families, friends and workmates who then told their neighbours. It is still there but for most of you, you decided to do something about it. You need the accolades for getting involved. Even just coming here and listening to this Oration is indeed itself involvement. It was many, many conversations that joined in a spirit of reconciliation and became a national determination. I know that kind of determination is still around today.

Seeing Blackfellas and Whitefellas working together to make a difference – it sounds so clichéd but it's such a heart warming sight. Whitefellas don't need to do this work like we do. They choose to get involved in reconciliation, and in making a difference for us they realise they get something special in return. And it makes a difference for them too.

My own natural optimism only wavers when I experience racism and when I sense the low expectations of my people, from others and from ourselves, particularly our young. The escalating violence and recession in the world and in our communities. Inaction still by so many, or action that is disrespectful and manipulative, so destined to generate failure.

Sad things, and there are many, sharpen my conviction that for things to really change in this country, whitefellas have to come to terms with the racism too many of them will accept and excuse, even if they don't feel it themselves.

Being involved in reconciliation has brought me into contact with the best and worst of people – the highs and the lows, walking three paces forward and two back, the magnificent and horrible people met along the way. But somehow they bring out the best in the individual.

Australians need to know about these networks of changemakers who brought out the best in us. Because the best is always there waiting to be tapped by true leaders in our communities. True leaders like Lowitja O'Donoghue. No one knows the struggle better than Lowitja.

Then there is the leadership which has to happen at all levels of Government and within our own communities. Throughout my time there have been so many influential leaders who have shone the light for First Australians. And then again there have been some who have done the opposite in relation to obstructing and denying a rightful place for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

The work I currently do around leadership these days tells me that there is a great thirst out there among our people who want to do good things in their lives to get themselves and their communities into better shape. Research in other countries shows that leaders who got rid of their addictive behaviours and reliance on alcohol or drugs achieved outstanding results in their communities because their people wanted to follow them.

Great role models have paved the way for us and in my earlier life I was able to sit at the same table as people like Lowitja, Charles Perkins, and many others whom I observed at close range the way they handled every type of situation. Their honesty and integrity in dealing with matters inspired me to do the same. And even my non Aboriginal peers like Fred Chaney became the role models that I could borrow certain characteristics from to develop my unique style of leadership.

Nor is it easy being a woman either as Lowitja suggests:

“I am always inspired by examples of people having the courage to act on what they know to be right. It sounds simple – but I believe that it is a rare quality in the contemporary economic and political landscape. It is difficult enough in any sphere for a woman to succeed in positions of leadership. I believe it is even more difficult for a woman in a leadership position. If she challenges the status quo and the values that drive and protect it. If she takes this role, she challenges both male power, and the systems that support and maintain it (By definition she will be regarded as mad or bad – and sometimes both!)”

Leaders need to be brave and have a vision. For Aboriginal people we are dictated to by our past and the legacy we carry on for our ancestors. The struggle is constant and burnout is a usual condition. For many of us we do so without thinking because this is our family which is at stake. The strategies applied after can have improved or drastic results.

Governments must listen to the solutions derived at the local level by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. There are many locally driven programs and other initiatives across the country which enable effective and creative solutions to be produced at the grassroots level.

A few weeks ago I attended the Indigenous Family Violence Prevention Forum held every year in Mackay for the Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research which aims to:

- . highlight and celebrate the good work that is being done by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to end family violence;
- . share information and knowledge about strategies and programs that could be used effectively by others;
- . promote opportunities for networking between workers in the field of family violence prevention; and
- . identify issues to be addressed and recommend strategies to do so.

Each year, over 150 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from across the State, and more increasingly from interstate, come to tropical Mackay in Central Queensland for the Forum, and to share their knowledge and expertise.

Like all of the published research on family violence in communities, forum participants consistently put forward their strongly held views, based on their experience, that effective responses to domestic and family violence must be holistic, and locally developed, driven and owned. Policies and programs that are imposed on Aboriginal and Torres Island people are doomed to fail.

One of the ideas which came out of an early Forum was the one at Woorabinda in Central Queensland whereby footballers would be suspended from games if they engaged in any form of domestic or family violence. And further would have to talk to school classes about why the violence is not acceptable. DV orders were reduced dramatically. Recently I have seen the same ideas meted out in some areas of New South Wales where football is popular in communities. Locally based solutions do actually work.

I take my hat off to the workers who work tirelessly at the coalface of such tragic areas. They do so with dedication and strength.

This year I have been involved with Tom Calma and others on the work on the National Representative Body Steering Committee to give our people a voice in national affairs and policy development. The Adelaide workshop saw a great deal of commitment from all participants who were keen on a positive direction for the future after a long hiatus in Aboriginal affairs. A self-determining and independent body which does not deliver services and has equal representation of men and women are among the consensus points reached.

There was strong support for the representative body to primarily be an advocacy body and to focus on holding government to account for its performance in programs, service delivery and policy development. There was also a strong support for the body to have a direct relationship at a regional level so that its advocacy work is fully informed. Also the new body would play a leading role in working to achieve constitutional recognition for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and helping to close the gap in health status within a generation.

There was consensus that the rep body should play a unifying role among communities and contribute to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people controlling their own destiny and being economically independent.

Workshop participants agreed the new body should have mechanisms in place to ensure the participation of people who are generally marginalised in representative processes, such as young people, people with disability, members of the Stolen Generation and mainland Torres Strait Islanders. It would also represent the diversity of peoples in terms of geographical locations, relations to country and cultural diversity.

There have been many key issues for me in reconciliation overall however it has been about how do we build a respectful relationship between everyone. How do we accomplish that in our continuing journey? The issue was how to get across what a dignified race of people we actually are – to look at the rich culture that we come from, the old and ancient culture and how to encompass that in the fabric of Australian society, how to make it fundamentally the focus, the basis by which we are all here today. So it's about understanding and knowing, coming to terms with the beautiful culture we have in our country.

One of the ways we can stay positive is to look at the workable and successful programs we have around the country which concentrate on the positives and derive their existence around the good and not the bad. Starting off where people are at rather than seeing them as hapless victims who don't deserve a second chance. We just never hear enough good stories but we know there are so many.

I am privileged in that I work with the cream of the crop at University. Our students who are not without their struggles too, but sit in classes day in and day out to achieve their qualifications which can get them a better future and perhaps one in which their grandparents and parents could never imagine. I see our young women studying engineering our young men aerodynamics and physics and it is truly astounding. Perhaps I do work in an environment that doesn't lend itself to too many failures or you're out but nevertheless they are there.

A researcher asked me recently if reconciliation had lost its hour? I am still not sure what she meant by that but I responded by saying that I am a Leo and by nature very optimistic and showy. I don't know where I would be or this country if we never had a reconciliation plan in place. I fear a place without it no matter how tangible it is. There has been change and when you have been a part of that change it is very hard to go back to thinking there has been little change. We've all worked so hard for it that hopefully our lives have been for something. So by no means has it vanished, I told her, except we just need some oxygen masks from time to time, boosters to help us get to the next level and some soothers when we fall to get up again and keep trying.

I will always think of reconciliation as a fine and noble cause to be involved in. The art of Black and White working together is something which I saw as a child when my Mother was politically active and the good people we associated with who saw our treatment was shameful and who were prepared to do something about it. That is seen today and I can never give up on it. It's part of my DNA. I feel very lucky to have been so closely involved with it for such a long time.

But this is a movement of today and the future, just as much as it is of the past. More than ever we need Black and White working together in unison. It is only then can we really make the difference.

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