

2019

Storytelling: Culture, Truth-telling and the Arts

PRESENTED BY DAVID RATHMAN AM PSM FIML

Introduction:

Acknowledge the Kurna people, other traditional custodians.

Elders, Lowitja O'Donoghue, The Premier of South Australia Stephen Marshall, distinguished guests and each and every one of you seated in the hall this evening.

The heart of Australia's footprint in the world is the cultural history and presence of the oldest living culture in the world.

It is my intention to speak about scene setting, intent, relationship, partnership, mutual respect and unity in the address tonight.

I want to take a moment to thank the many people who have worked to preserve cultural heritage, worked in the Arts, Aboriginal cultural groups, the custodians of language and country. The scientists, writers and researchers who have worked in the Universities in the city and at Adelaide University, Flinders University and University of SA, the north terrace institutions, State Library, Art Gallery and the SA Museum, History Trust and State Records.

When the Government announced the building of a centre for Aboriginal Culture and Art a group of Aboriginal people representing Native Title bodies, the Museum Aboriginal Advisory committee, Tandanya and North Terrace institutions supported by ILC and the Native Title unit worked to constructively support the vision of the Premier for a centre on lot 14 that represents the Aboriginal people's culture through history, story of country, arts both visual and performing.

We have said "it will be a place devoted to Australian Aboriginal Cultures, truth telling, art, history, science and contemporary life.

A living, breathing, cultural experience "it must recognize and celebrate the longest continuous human culture on the planet, provide a dynamic cultural and economic hub and be a beacon of reconciliation for generations to come."

The Aboriginal people have cared for and respected country for over 60,000 years weaving a story of country and place that connected all that was in their midst into one story and means of existence. This was a rich place with diverse land scopes that offered security and an abundance of food sources, knowledge passed from generation to generation. I recall an old man saying to me once, "the land owns us we don't own it as we are just passing though."

Australia is often dismissive of the dispossession of Aboriginal lands.

The Lutheran Missionary Teichelmann observed the Kurna peoples community arrangement,

“Each tribe has a certain district of the country as property received by their forefathers, the boundaries of which are fixed.”

A lack of sustained Government commitment and the continuing loss of arrangements that enabled Aboriginal people to continue the system of Aboriginal governance were ignored and the arrogance allowed the English colonials to treat our people as irrelevant. Aboriginal peoples attempts to build a base of traditional influence to protect interests of the people in dealing with authorities and government was thwarted by those in power. This attitude was put in place from the very beginning when the South Australia Act was assented to in England.

The South Australia Act Of 1843, an Act to empower His Majesty to erect South Australia into a British Province or Provinces, and to provide for the Colonization and Government therefore’, Proclaimed the Lands of South Australia to be waste and unoccupied lands....fit for the purpose of colonization’.

The first Colonization Commission report by the settlement authorities was humiliating for Aboriginal people as it introduced what could be described as a form of slavery. The report stated with settlement the provision Aboriginal ‘asylums’ which would be a ‘weather proof sheds’. In the asylum Aboriginal people could receive food and clothing in exchange for labour.

In that same report the colonizers promised the ceding, for the use Aboriginal people, sixteen acres of every eighty acre allotment of land sold.

It didn’t happen. I once raised the intention in the report with a Premier of South Australia who said if Aboriginal people called on and proved its right to recover the debt it would send the State broke.

Is the letters patent a hollow vessel for covering the intent of colonizers as detailed in the South Act to declare the land waste land.

The letters patent formalized the crowns creation of the colony on February 19, 1836. The letters patent was full of wording to guarantee the interests of Aboriginal people and made statements of intent;

‘..... that nothing in these our Letters Patent contained shall affect or be construed to affect any Aboriginal Natives of the said Province to the actual occupation or enjoyment in their own Persons or in the Persons of their Descendants of any Lands therein now actually occupied or enjoyed by such Natives....’

I often get told “I didn’t do these things to Aboriginal people.”

My response is to ask you the question - Who are the modern beneficiary of the South Australia Act and the letters patent?

Aboriginal people must have a venue for truth telling about the story of displacement to enable South Australians to understand their history.

Aboriginal people for decade after decade called for all Australians to be more open to their history and embrace the story of country, the spiritual and cultural ongoing presence of Aboriginal Australia in our lives.

A history based on exclusion, a set of demeaning government practices put in place to create a negative impression of our people. The system considered Aboriginal people as an inconvenience to the business interests of the colonizer.

Lowitja O’Donoghue AO, CBE stood up against ignorance and racism whilst remaining a voice for reason and sensible co-operative progress.

She was a woman who faced being apart from her family but her inner strength allowed her to stare down barrier makers:

She wanted to become a nurse. The Royal Adelaide Hospital refused her entry into its training course because of her Aboriginal descent. In an interview with the State Library she recalled being told 'Go back to the place where you belong', she was told. 'I suppose that was when I first really got my blood up', she says. 'It was completely unjust. I was deeply resentful and determined I wouldn't accept the decision.'

She joined the Aborigines' Advancement League and helped in a campaign which resulted in her being accepted in 1954 as one of a number of Aboriginal trainee nurses at the Royal Adelaide Hospital.

She graduated in 1954, was in due course promoted to charge sister, had a year in Assam, India, with the Baptist Overseas Mission, and joined the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in 1967. In 1975, she was appointed its regional director in South Australia. She was the first woman to be a regional director and she brought an inclusive quality to the administration of Aboriginal affairs in South Australia.

The repeated expressions of **intent** in Aboriginal Affairs began at the time of occupation and we continue to experience **intent** devoid of lasting action as an ever present colonial hangover from a time when commitment to recognizing the rights of Aboriginal people was a hollow promise without any substance.

The change in the way of life and the control by Governments of destiny for our people has

caused enormous cultural stress; a stress which has impacted on many generations of Aboriginal people in this State and across the country. Cultural stress refers to individuals' subjective sense of the risk that their ethnic culture could be changed and the resulting concern and worry about the development and survival of his/her ethnic cultural heritage.

Cultural stress is a critical issues faced by many people and countries in the process of social transition. Cultural stress, as a typical perceived cultural context, has become a general reality in modern society, especially for minority groups.

The systemic anti- Aboriginal sentiment and governance models is disrupted by the intervention of people who realized their dominant culture was being unreasonable and culturally bankrupt in treating Aboriginal people so harshly.

The story of people working to extend a hand of support matched by their actions is illustrated in a heartwarming story about the late Elsie Jackson in 2018 from the Port Augusta Transcontinental paper;

“Elsie went to the Neppabunna School for only a short time, but it was here that she found her passion.

She worked on a voluntary basis as a teacher's aide, educating students about Aboriginal culture and engagement.

David Amery, head teacher at the time, recognised the value of Elsie's work and attempted to get her employed in an official capacity with the Department of Education.

At the time there were no Aboriginal people employed within the South Australian education sector and Mr. Amery's request was denied.

Mr. Amery valued Elsie's wealth of skills so highly that he paid out of his own salary to employ her for the remainder of the 1966 school year.

The following year Elsie was placed on the Education Department's payroll, making her the first Aboriginal Teacher Aide to be employed in a state school in South Australia.”

The commitment to Aboriginal people comes from groups or the action of individuals who have taken the time to build a **relationship** with the community and individual Aboriginal people.

The mainstream Government Departments are generally well represented with reconciliation plans and an array of official rhetoric, but it is all PC and the commitment could be measured in a similar way to the annual vaccination programs; I have my plan injected into the strategic directions for another year until the next annual inoculation.

Most Australian departments and business is linear, task orientated as opposed to Aboriginal culture which is based on building relationships, respecting country and the spiritual connection to our Ancestors.

Eduardo Durran and Bonnie Durran are Indian American academics who decry the attitude of many in positions of influence, "For our profession to believe that solutions can come from anywhere but from the oppressed communities is akin to professional narcissism (a state in which a person has an inflated sense of self importance) bordering on imperialism. This narcissistic attitude merely ensures that the current problems continue and eventually the whole of society will suffer from such thinking."

The pretenders in government roles are spread across many decades:

Aboriginal people were placed under the Public Works Commissioner; when asked why this decision was taken the response was blunt, "no one wanted it."

The Government later created the Minister for Public Works which did nothing to give hope to the Aboriginal people that things were looking up. State Records a Little Flour and a few Blankets publication-1953 comment in the South Australian Parliament highlights the attitude toward us as people;

"Minister of Works McIntosh displayed complacency in relation to Aboriginal education:

There have been one or two cases of half caste boys coming to Adelaide and entering into apprenticeships, and although they had done well, such cases are rarities, because it is hard to turn a nomad into a stool sitter in one generation. All that can be done has been done."

The pretenders in the Federal Parliament dismantled ATSIC and left the Aboriginal people with TLC - Tender Loving Consultation resulting in little or no commitment to self determination.

The pretenders in the education department who failed to take seriously the concerns of Aboriginal executives about the school targeted Aboriginal student funding being used as general use funding in schools.

The pretenders who gathered to implement or defend themselves against the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody resulted in an increase in the people in prison and today a disturbing increase in the number woman in goal. Growing numbers of children removed from their families. Why?

The cause is a cultural poverty; a failure to connect with an Aboriginal perspective and the lack of ability to accept failure and work to improve the working relationship based on mutual respect. The idea Aboriginal people must reach a consensus is beyond belief and if there is a

mistake response of the powers, that dictate what will and won't be tolerated, is to bring the Aboriginal self-managing structures crashing to the ground.

The idea of self-determination and self-management is something indispensable for Aboriginal people and it is a process of absolution for the system of government and the wider community.

Art; has become an important economic tool for many Aboriginal people and the growth of galleries representing Aboriginal Artists is an avenue through which people from remote areas can display and sell the product to the high traffic markets such as Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. During my time working with the community at Gerard it was an honour to meet Ted Roberts a carver who went back to country in the north to collect wood for his carving as he told me it was the best timber to work with. (Petrol money story)

Ted Roberts was a craftsman and business man in his own way because he did miniatures, small boomerangs, spears and shields. Ted told me he had a deal with a German bloke who wanted items people could carry in their case on the return trip home. Ted Robert's didn't comprise his craft but he adapted the product size to meet his market.

Tandanya was established to be a focal point in South Australia and remains an important location for performing and visual art expression.

There has been an increased interest in performing groups who are emerging to perform at festivals, official openings and welcome and acknowledgement of country ceremonies. Groups from South Australia have travelled overseas and across the country to perform.

The contemporary music scene has produced some equally talented performers. The contemporary art movement is healthy and new people are attracted to take up the brush and paint to tell their story. We must be careful to ensure all artists are able to be supported in the marketplace.

Any new development must provide space and room for groups to organize and control the decision about how to market the art and develop the performing arts.

There is an opening to create a space for artists to use as studio space to build skills and produce product for the marketplace.

It is critical to grow the contemporary expression of our story of country, personal story and the history of Aboriginal people by encouraging visual, performing artists, contemporary and traditional to make a connection with agency groups, the commercial sector and provide easier access to resources. There is a need to put in place an interface which is for groups and individuals to build an enterprise platform for all performers and artists with the public.

The history of Aboriginal people is a story lost in many cases because we failed to record the personal memories and experiences of our people.

The Aboriginal Family History Unit at the SA Museum is testament to the determination of one extraordinary woman the late Dr Doreen Kartinyeri who was the driving force behind the unit's establishment.

Dr Doreen Kartinyeri was an activist and historian. She published ten books.

Doreen researched and recorded the histories and genealogies of Point Pearce and Raukkan Aboriginal families. She was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Adelaide. She was named the South Australian Aboriginal of Year in 1994.

The Aboriginal Family History Unit at the South Australian museum is an important unit that has worked to assist many of our family's un-cover their family history.

History of each of the family groups in South Australia will ensure we have a record to share with future generations and build skills amongst our own people to author publications.

We need to remind ourselves there are many stories we didn't record because it was seen as not that interesting. My sister Gwen was a living library because she had grown up around Kokatha elders and she had a good command of the language but none of us worked with her to record on paper her library of the mind. When I decided to write our family book "A bush beginning" only four of the nine in our family remained to recall the story of the family.

Another issue is convincing people to tell you their story; my aunty would say it was their struggle and experience and they didn't want me to become bogged down in the past. Charles Perkins famously said "you can't live in the past but the past lives with you"

The record of the life people have led is often in their head. I spent time travelling with the Late Rex Stuart through Arabunna country and the experience was one that opened up the story of the country as Rex told me about his and his father's story of country. The country started to talk to you as he spoke about places and sights of importance.

I never found out if anyone sat with Rex and recorded his story.

Another enjoyable exchange was the talks I had with Dr Archie Barton.

Archie Barton was an encyclopedia of the mind; he would talk about a date the weather at the time and the conversation between people.

In our respective journeys over many years in meetings and talking one on one we have experienced a rich weaving of stories with a cross section of people in our state. I recall how important gathering places were and how important they were to peoples well being.

Mrs. Wilson at Lower Murray Nungas Club provided a venue to meet formally with workers and clients or yarning place for a cuppa.

Agnes Rigney did the same at Gerry Mason centre at Glossop.

Venues for rebuilding confidence and a sense of Aboriginal place and unity are needed in today's Aboriginal community.

The Aboriginal Advisory Committee at the Museum is concerned about the preservation of the 30000 items in the Aboriginal collection. We are grateful to the Premier and the federal MP's who visited the collection. Everyone who visits is stunned by the size and history of the collection. It is important to find a permanent home for the collection that is secure and safe from potential damage. The Government has supported us to commence caring for the collection. South Australia doesn't appreciate the importance of the collection and it needs to be a centre piece on lot 14 for display, community research and teaching our young people about the skills required to conserve the collection.

Lot 14 is an important opportunity to talk, explore and share to achieve a central theme of reconciliation **unity**

The challenge is for all the parties with an interest to come as one to the table and agree to use the substantial collections at the Art Gallery, State Library, State Records, Botanic Gardens, the Museum and Universities in support of Aboriginal people being able to provide a powerful reflection of South Australian and Australian history, and story of country.

The Reconciliation Barometer survey concluded "almost all Australians, particularly Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, think the relationship is important."

I remain optimistic but the shadow hanging over our desire for relationship building is the level of trust continuing from survey to survey being stagnant. "There are gaps in the trust that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people have for each other. Key findings 46% Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people believe they have high trust towards Australians in the general community (also 46% in 2016), compared with 40% who think Australians in the general community have high trust for them. 27% Australians in the general community believe they have high trust towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, compared with 21% who think Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have high trust for them (19% in 2016).

51% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people believe that Australia is a racist country (57% in 2016), compared with 38% of the general community (39% in 2016). Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and 90% of Australians in the general community feel our

relationship is important. 38% Australians in the general community consider racial and cultural differences as the biggest cause of social divisions in Australia (37% in 2016), compared with 49% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (39% in 2016).

Pride in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures is increasing amongst Australians.

Lowitja O'Donoghue delivered the Australia Day speech in 2000 and words spoken on that day are relevant in 2019:

“it is still the case that many people believe that what happened to our people happened 200 years ago - and as such, it should now be put behind us.

It is implied that to talk of the consequences of white settlement is to be negative – to be clinging to a ‘black arm band’ view of history.

Sadly, these perceptions are fuelled by some of the most prominent leaders of our Nation. And, in economic times when many people are experiencing hardship – damaging and divisive myths are perpetuated, and become taken for granted.

Myths such as: ‘People having difficulties have only themselves to blame’.

Or that ‘anyone can succeed simply by wanting to’.

That ‘winners deserve to win and losers to lose’.

What many of our political leaders have failed to understand – or chosen not to acknowledge – is that the racist policies and practices of the past continue to affect every aspect of every indigenous person’s life.

The past is still with us.

It was said that there is no future for Aboriginal people only the past repeating itself over and over again. I am optimistic if the South Australian political, business and general population convert intent into to action based on mutual respect and partnership we can move to a positive space where Aboriginal peoples perspective is respected and valued as a partner in building a strong healthy Aboriginal community of people. The wider Australian people must build a relationship with Aboriginal people and remove the colonized mindset to reform their thinking and close the gap amongst Australians about Aboriginal people to create a future based on transparency and a modern place for Aboriginal governance.

An Aboriginal presence on lot 14 will shine a light on the past, demonstrate how we can work together now and forge a path to a future which reflects the true story of country.

My work is not done, our work is not done.

David Rathman AM PSM FIML