

Speech by NSW Govt Minister Linda Burney MP



To Teachers Federation Conference on 1 July 2007

I wish to acknowledge that we are gathered here today on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. I pay my respects and remind us of our shared inheritance and heritage.

I want to speak with you today about unfinished business.

Reconciliation is like the tide. Some days it comes crashing with awesome power and a sense that all around will be swept up in it. At other times, the tide is low, the beach swept clean and you feel that everything will have to start over.

Recently we celebrated the 40th anniversary of the 1967 referendum. The referendum was one of the high tides, a glorious moment in this ebb and flow of reconciliation between black and white Australia.

I am of the Wiradjuri nation. Wiradjuri territory spreads the heart of this State like a fan. It sweeps across the catchments of the Lachlan, Macquarie and the Murrumbidgee Rivers. In the language of the Wiradjuri these three rivers are called Galari, Wambuul and Marrambidya.

I am of the Marrambidya Wiradjuri.

The Wiradjuri were the first inland nation to experience the brutality of British colonisation. The so-called 'first crossing' of the Blue Mountains by Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson in 1813 may have provided the expanding colony with rich grazing land, but it spelt a litany of horrors for the Wiradjuri.

The resistance of the mighty Wiradjuri leader Windradyne and his warriors was so strong that martial law was declared in Bathurst in 1823 - two thirds of the Wiradjuri around Bathurst were murdered during the four months of martial law. To compound the damage even further, gold was discovered at Bathurst in 1851. I tell this story so you can place me. It underpins the essence of Aboriginality.

That is, connection to country and where you stand in it.

It also reminds us of the injustices perpetrated on the First Peoples in the so-called building of our nation. It is the telling of truth. In the stories of nations there are events that define those countries into the future.

In the 1860s, the Emancipation Proclamation and the Civil War led to the abolition of slavery in the United States. In 1901, Australia was brought together as a single country by Federation. In 1989, the pulling down of the Berlin Wall meant not only re-unification for Germany but also the end of the cold war. In 1994, South Africa held its first democratic elections marking the end of apartheid. The 1967 referendum was such a moment.

Not everything came from it. Some rights came before, some after and many are yet to fully realised. Yet this was the time when the rest of Australia took their chance, and took it overwhelmingly, to embrace the first peoples of this land as equals.

The referendum was the single act of the whole of the Australian people where they had a say on Aboriginal rights.

At other times the people's will has been expressed only indirectly through politicians. This time, it was all the people choosing greater equality for Aboriginal Australians. And in such heartwarming numbers. Only a few times has the Constitution of our country been changed and this time it was by far the highest margin ever with over 90% voting Yes.

This is not ancient history.

I was a child. The '67 referendum drew a line in the sand of our national story marking where the foot prints of Australia's first peoples were to be found. I think of the great number of eminent people, many of whom have now left our presence, that held a mirror up to the nation and ran the "Yes" campaign for 67.

What determination, what intelligence, what inspiration. True reconciliationists in the full sense of the word. Their motivation was that the rights of Aboriginal people is a cause which is just and right. I celebrate their motivations and the success of their actions.

At the same time, this anniversary also commemorates the reality that despite the ambitions of the 1967 referendum, Aboriginal Australians remain the most disadvantaged group in this country. What this means is that no matter how well we can make one thing happen one day, we need to get up the next day and there is another challenge there for us.

In the decades after that time there were some great advances and also some appalling failures. Some land rights have come while some have gone, anti-discrimination laws have been enacted while the rates of imprisonment are still shockingly high, much cultural heritage has been preserved while the health of many has further deteriorated.

One could be very despondent about progress of the imperatives of reconciliation— recognition of a shared history, of the rights of the first peoples and most painfully of meagre social justice outcomes for our community.

The political situation has been diabolical. Our challenge is not to despair but remain defiant, not to give up hope but hold to our determination and keep the flame of reconciliation alight.

It is important to mark anniversaries but only when they keep the spirit alive – the danger is that we use an anniversary as a gravestone marking the resting place of an issue that has been dispensed with and that can now be ignored.

But as Oodgeroo Noonuccal, one of this country's greatest poets has written:

Let no-one say the past is dead, the past is all about us and within

I see the true value of the anniversary of the '67 referendum not so much in what it achieved at the time but as a call to arms. Aboriginal people will never give up; we cannot give up. There have been so many people moving towards reconciliation over so long.

- In the 1880s David Fernando stood outside Australia House in London for many months with little white skeletons all over his coat protesting about the condition of his people.
- In 1927 Jimmy Clements made the journey to the opening of Parliament House in Canberra. He went to remind the Duke and Duchess of Kent that we had not ceded our sovereignty.
- Bill Ferguson, Jack Patten, Margaret Tucker, Pearl Gibbs and all those others who gathered in Sydney's Australian Hall in 1938 for the first-ever Day of Mourning to discuss and affirm our rights.
- The Yirrkala Bark Petition sent to the Commonwealth Parliament in 1963 - was about our rights within the Australian Constitutional and legal system.
- Charles Perkins and the Freedom Riders in 1965 set out to expose the lack of rights for blackfellas in rural NSW.
- Towns where picture theatres were segregated, black kids not allowed to use public swimming pools. Aboriginal women were not allowed to try clothes on in stores, and Aboriginal diggers not allowed into RSL clubs.
- The men and women who set up and sustained the tent embassy on the lawns of Parliament House in 1972 were demanding our rights.
- The thousands of people who marched with us through the streets of Sydney on the 26th January 1988 marched for freedom justice and hope.
- Michael Long's walk from Melbourne to Canberra was about rights.
- Every time Bangarra Dance Theatre opens a show anywhere in the world it affirms our right to story and dance and cultural identity.
- The smash hit at last year's Cannes film festival 'Ten Canoes' set ten thousand years ago in country and language - this is surely about our right to country and culture.
- The tireless efforts of Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindji people for land rights over nine long years ended in 1975 with the Prime Minister of Australia Gough Whitlam pouring a symbolic handful of earth into his hands.

At the time Vincent said 'Thank you. We are all mates now'. But the truth is this. We are not all equal. And we are not all mates.

I have often recounted my own experience as a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl sitting in a classroom being taught that my people were savages and the closest example to Stone Age man living today. I felt ashamed and embarrassed.

I vividly recall wanting to turn into a piece of paper and slip quietly through the crack in the floor. Why is it such effort and care has been taken in Australia to betray, blur and deny the truth. I have often used the analogy that growing up as an Aboriginal child looking into the mirror of our country was difficult and alienating. Your reflection was at best distorted and at worst non-existent.

And of course it was only in 1972 that the authority to exclude an Aboriginal child from school based solely on their Aboriginality was removed from the NSW Teacher Handbook. How often have you heard Australia described as a young country?

I well remember a moment at the NSW Reconciliation Convention in 1999, the then Premier of NSW, Bob Carr said: 'We are now seeing the first generation of Australian children growing up being taught the truth'. This statement made me catch my breath.

I had spent so many years of my life working in the education arena. Fighting for the truth to be told. Much has been done over the last 15 to 20 years to tell all Australians the truth. Groundbreaking research by historians. Years of curriculum reform. Sixteen years of publicity by the Reconciliation Council and Reconciliation Australia. All the work by the dedicated people at the grassroots of the people's movement.

Yet in 2006 we have the federal Minister for education launching a paper by the Menzies Research Centre that calls for Aboriginal culture to be taken out of schools. It is almost impossible to put into words the distress being felt at the roll-back in Aboriginal Affairs.

Not least because you think of all those people who gave so much.

At the time of the 1996 election, Mr Howard was quoted saying the pendulum had swung too far - as you can see he's given it a hell of a thump back.

Most recently of course Mr Howard and Mr Brough have concocted their scheme in the Northern Territory.

But this is not a single instance, it has brewing for years.

Some examples:

- Mainstreamed Aboriginal health - and now extended this idea to all of Aboriginal affairs.
- Denied the existence of the stolen generations - refused to say sorry - then spent millions in legal costs to deny what happened to Lorna Cubillo and Peter Gunner.
- Ignored the final report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.
- Rolled back Native Title, an issue the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination took a great deal of interest in.
- Encouraged the States and Territories to abandon cultural considerations in sentencing known as the Fernando Principles.
- If the states and territories legislate to do so, Commonwealth money would flow to the states. I say to Minister Brough, there are already enough of our mob in jail.
- Abolished ATSIC. For the first time since 1973 there is no nationally elected Indigenous voice. Therefore, there is no Indigenous point of accountability of Government effort and outcomes in Aboriginal Affairs. In essence it is the complete abandonment of the principle of Self Determination.
- The whole debate around 'shared responsibility' and 'mutual obligation' - boils down to: we will tell you and by the way if you don't toe the line we will punish you. I fail to see how a child is going to be better off if there is going to be less income the home. More than a whiff of social engineering.
- The 'new paternalism' being advocated by Tony Abbott, i.e. putting administrators in communities with authority to direct all funding and services.

And the reality of life for Aboriginal people in Australia today speaks for itself:

- The infant mortality rate is 3 times the non-Indigenous rate.
- In the area of mental health, we are twice as likely to be hospitalised for mental and behavioural disorders.
- Aboriginal men are 7 times more likely and Aboriginal women a staggering 31 times more likely to be hospitalised for intentional self-harm!!
- The life expectancy at birth of Aboriginal people is 59.4 years for men, 64.8 for women compared to 76.6 for men and 82.0 for women in the mainstream. And these figures are for new baby. For grown adults, the message is even starker.
- In 2005, the median age at death of Aboriginal men ranged from 42 to 54 years while the median age at death for Aboriginal women ranged from 48 to 66 years. This year, I turned 50 – am I already a dead woman walking?

The true horror is revealed when you look at average life expectancy in a community like Wilcannia, far west NSW, where it is 33 years.

In 1994 Mick Dodson wrote his second Social Justice report:

'We have all heard them - the figures of death, and of disability... Every few years (the) figures are repeated and excite attention. But I suspect that most Australians accept them as being almost inevitable. A certain kind of industrial deafness has developed. The human element in this is not recognised. The meaning of these figures is not heard - or felt.'

There should be no mistake that the state of Indigenous health in this country is an abuse of human rights.

- A decent standard of health and life expectancy equivalent to other Australians is not a favour asked by our people.
- It is our right - simply because we too are human.
- It is important to make the point that it has not just been governments who have failed our people.

Some of our own mob have failed us too. I have no argument with the notion that communities and individuals have to take more responsibility. Where I have the argument is the almost total lack of public recognition that many communities are displaying great leadership, innovation and success.

What can be done?

Harriet Beecher Stowe was a great American abolitionist and the author of Uncle Tom's Cabin, the book that Abraham Lincoln credited with starting the civil war leading to end of slavery in the United States.

She had some words suitable for our times:

Never give up, for that is just the place and time that the tide will turn.

Treating Aboriginal people as just a particular disadvantaged group who need temporary extra services to bring them into the mainstream is not the answer.

- We must act for the long-term and find sustainable solutions to the underlying causes
- We must work in partnership with the communities involved.
- We must recognise that different communities require different approaches.
- There is no one-size-fits-all solution.

Many answers to the way forward sit on shelves gathering dust. 339 recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody; the Bringing Them Home report; the final report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation; and a myriad of others. Most of them cherry picked or ignored.

While I fear that we as Australians are not living up to the events of the past and that our country is getting harder to recognise, at the same time fantastic things still happen.

It will soon be a decade since we crossed bridges for reconciliation on clear Autumn days in May 2000. And in the same year, one of our greatest moments was when Cathy Freeman ran the 400. The wall of sound coming from the stadium was like nothing ever heard. And no matter where you were that night - as a nation we were focused absolutely on that race, and all Australians united with one voice to cheer Cathy on, to will her to win. We stood together and that my friends, is what Australia can be.

If winning the '67 referendum is to be more than just symbolic, we need to continue on in the spirit of the heroes of '67.

In the end, the referendum changed what was written on a piece of paper and that is good for nothing unless people go on breathing life into it.

As Nelson Mandela has said:

When the water starts boiling it is foolish to turn off the heat.