

Tenth Anniversary of the *Bringing Them Home Report*

hosted by

Stolen Generations Alliance: Australians for Healing, Truth and Justice

Great Hall of Parliament, Canberra, 24th May 2007

Professor Lowitja O'Donoghue

I am delighted to be here. And as co-patron of the Stolen Generations Alliance. I welcome everyone to this important occasion.

I hope that together we can move closer to outcomes that we can all take pride in.

When I reflected about coming to this gathering today, and the ten years that have passed since the *Bringing Them Home Report* was tabled, I experienced a range of conflicting feelings.

The first was the feeling of weariness at how many times in my life I have stood up to speak about rights and justice for Aboriginal people. I decided that, at my age, it's probably not a good idea to even try to begin counting!

And of course, what accompanies this feeling is a profound sadness about how little has actually been achieved in terms of the wellbeing of Aboriginal people in this country.

On the other hand, I am constantly inspired by the hard work and commitment of those who work for change - and there are many of them.

They are peoples from all walks of life who never give up in their struggle for justice. This must be celebrated and honoured if we want to sustain and grow our healing.

Another positive is that I also feel is that the general population of this land is responsive to justice (as they overwhelmingly were in the 1967 Referendum) – if these issues are adequately represented in the public domain.

But this is a very big 'if'.

In spite of the much touted prosperity of Australia many Aboriginal people still live in the worst of third world conditions.

On any social indicator of wellbeing: health education, housing, employment, civic participation, numbers in custody – you name it – Aboriginal people are always over-represented at the wrong end of the scale.

Aboriginal people, the first people of this land, are dying of despair while those in power look the other way. Their eyes and their priorities are clearly focused in other directions. It is for this reason that I have no expectation of an apology from our current Prime Minister.

Yet acknowledgement of the wrongs of the past is a fundamental plank in rebuilding relationships. Every State Government has taken this important step – and said Sorry.

The Tasmanian Government has even passed legislation to compensate Tasmanian members of the Stolen Generations.

But at the Federal level, rebuilding relationships is not the name of the game.

The rules of the game that prevail in this town under this leadership are to respond to (and only to) what will win votes.

And this is not good news for Aboriginal people – or for that matter any groups of people who do not have a powerful voice.

Of the 54 recommendations made in the *Bringing Them Home* report, 35 have been ignored – that is two thirds.

Where there has been a response – for example, Link-Up services – the funding is drastically inadequate to meet the need.

The wonderful dedicated workers of these services as with so many workers in Aboriginal services, buckle under the load.

The Prime Minister either doesn't 'get it' or he doesn't care, and I am not sure which is worse.

What I do know is that:

- There has been a failure of moral authority and ethical leadership in Australia over the last ten years
- This country is in a position to be a world leader in human rights and social justice. Instead it is, as Aboriginal people would say, 'a shame job'.
- When initiatives are taken, they are too small and mean spirited to bring about significant and long-term change
- And, most importantly, the colonial attitudes of two hundred years ago are still alive and well in the corridors of power today.

I want to look at some of these attitudes because they underpin the sorry state of Aboriginal affairs in this country.

There is a general attitude of entitlement that pervades the mentality of the privileged. It is a view that assumes a right to have advantage.

And it is a view that does not question the price that others have had to pay for that advantage.

This stance of entitlement incorporates a pride in many achievements – sporting, military and economic. But it ignores the parts of the story that are shameful.

These are not incorporated into any sense of self or identity. (*I was not there. It is not my fault* becomes the catch-cry.)

It is a stance that does not respect differences or other ways of doing things.

Take, for example, the recent budget allocations to Aboriginal health and housing.

While there was a much-publicised scheme for a small number of people to buy their own homes in a small remote Top End community, there was almost nothing done to ease housing affordability for the majority of Aboriginal Australians who live in urban communities.

The Costello budget with its focus on remote and regional areas actually takes money away from Aboriginal housing in urban areas.

A recent World Health Organisation report into Indigenous health worldwide concluded that the health of Aboriginal people lags almost 100 years behind other Australians and that they are the sickest Indigenous people of all the wealthy nations.

The authors wrote that progress would not be made until the Government publicly acknowledged the role of Aboriginal people's "stress, alienation, discrimination and lack of control."¹

Health experts agree that \$500 million per year is needed to lift the Aboriginal health standard to that of non-Aboriginal Australians and reduce the 17-year gap in life expectancy.

Tom Calma, the Social Justice Commissioner, believes that with an input like this we could close this gap within a generation.

But rather than \$500 million the 2007 budget allocates only about \$30 million per annum to this nationally and internationally scandalous situation.

So, as a result of the latest budget, a tiny minority of Aboriginal people will have the chance to own their own home and a few will have the opportunity to do real work with appropriate conditions – but this represents only a tiny number of people compared to those who need it. It is window-dressing.

And I can guarantee that what will happen is what has so often happened in the past. And that is, that we will be given good news stories of one or two individuals who have achieved – with an implication that success is available to all, if only they would choose it.

The point is that no-one can "succeed" if they are not healthy, if they are not respected, if they are not given opportunity and if they do not have the basic building blocks for survival such as clean water, nutritious food, adequate accommodation and access to services.

It is these fundamental system issues that need to be addressed. And of course it is not simple. But neither is it rocket science.

If we can happily take on issues on the other side of the world under the name of democracy – why not at home?

Watch my lips. Put in adequate human and financial services at ground level to meet the needs of communities – in consultation with those communities.

And then work with the communities on the ground to address the problems that they have identified.

It is not the answer to leave communities to sort things out under the excuse that it's self-determination.

The problems that communities face are too entrenched for that to be possible.

Neither is it good enough to put in place one-off programs that are not sustainable.

The Government responds to these issues by quoting sums of money that they have spent. But these sums pale into insignificance when compared to spending on other areas – or indeed spending per head of population on the health and well-being of non-Aboriginal people.

Just compare \$135 million over four years on Aboriginal health with \$123 million for the very silly and totally unnecessary new citizenship test. What is more important, I ask you?

It is time for some genuine bipartisan commitment to job creation, education and improved housing and health for Aboriginal people.

¹ Dr Lisa Jackson Pulver, University of NSW, co-author of the chapter on Australia and New Zealand in a report by London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, presented to the WHO's Commission on the Social Determinants of Indigenous Health, Adelaide, April 2007

We cannot leave it to the government of the day. Mr Howard's record on Aboriginal affairs has been woeful.

Yet Australian citizens have demonstrated their openness to justice by working in groups all over the country for reconciliation. They have marched in the streets and they have signed Sorry Books in their hundreds of thousands.

And a number of corporate citizens have become aware of the need to play their part to bring about change.

It is time to re-invigorate the debate. And, dare I say it, it is time for some fresh thinking.

It is time to lead the country to understand that no Australian person can feel pride in Australian citizenship unless there is an equal concern for the wellbeing of all Australians.

There is no Aboriginal person who is not affected by the removal of their people from lands, from communities, from families and from culture.

The journey of healing will always be difficult – but Aboriginal people have always come to the table – ready to work things out.

The campaign to achieve a Yes vote in the Referendum 40 years ago was fought with courage and vision. An incredible 90.77% of the population voted 'Yes'.

This did not, as some people think, give Aboriginal people the right to vote, or give them citizenship rights, but it did remove discriminatory sections from the Constitution and it did empower the Commonwealth to legislate directly for Aboriginal Australians as a group.

It opened the door for the Commonwealth Government to take particular action in relation to Aboriginal people. As a result of the constitutional changes, several important Acts have been introduced which allow positive action and redressing discriminatory practices.

On this, the tenth anniversary of the Bringing Them Home report, I urge those of you who have worked for justice to keep up the good work.

I urge those of you with the capacity to act, to act now and to begin by implementing the rest of the Bringing Them Home recommendations.

I urge those of you who hope to be in a position of leadership in the future to rekindle a vision of fairness for this country – and to demonstrate to the rest of the world that Australia can hold its head high on the platform of human rights and social justice.