

**Facing Ourselves to Make Indigenous Poverty History**

**Speech to Western Sydney Community Forum**

**November 27<sup>th</sup> 2007**

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I would like to start by acknowledging that we meet today on Aboriginal land, the land of the people of the Darug Nation.

I was interested when I saw the theme of this conference “understanding diversity and facing change: influencing social policy” as it throws up many challenges for those of us who are indeed seeking to not only face change but importantly to create it. One of the things that I firmly believe in is that if you want to create change you need to work at the individual level – and that each and every one of us needs to face ourselves in order to work for the greater good. And it is that concept of facing ourselves and how we have incorporated that into our work at NATSIEC that I want to talk about today.

Let me set some context however and explain a little bit about what NATSIEC is and who I am.

NATSIEC is the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission of the National Council of Churches in Australia. Quite a mouthful, but what it means is that we are the Indigenous arm of the National Council of Churches. We have seven member churches of the commission, the Catholics, the Anglicans, the Uniting Church, The Churches of Christ, the Lutherans, the Salvation Army and we have recently been joined by the Coptic Orthodox Church. The role of NATSIEC is to be a voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Churches; to advocate on social justice issues; to build the confidence and empowerment of our people and to help develop individuals and communities. For those of you who might be thinking that churches have no role to play in politics or being vocal advocates on social policy, I would point out that many of the leading Indigenous activists that you regularly hear from had their start in church. In fact some, such as Pat Dodson and Galarrwuy Yunupingu were commissioners in the forerunner of NATSIEC. We do not shy away from tackling the issues of the day.

I am a Bundjalung man, from northern NSW. Our country runs from the Queensland border, some would say into Queensland, down to the Clarence River in the south, the ocean in the east and the mountains in the west. My home country includes some of the finest beaches in Australia, but I am from the west, from the magnificent river country that includes the Clarence River, the Rocky River and beautiful Wold Heritage rainforests. My father was born in Baryulgil, which is well known for its asbestos mines. I would like to pay my respects to Bernie Banton, and his family, who sadly passed away overnight. My family have also been affected by these asbestos, all my uncles died young as a result of working in the mines without protection. My grandfather was from Tabulam, which is well known for being the birthplace of the Lighthorse. I was born in Grafton, the Jacaranda city, but came to live in Western Sydney when I was a child.

I am the youngest of eleven, three girls and eight boys and when my older brothers and sisters got to an age where they needed to work; my parents brought all eleven of us to Sydney so that we could get work and a good education. I often think of myself as an economic refugee as we had to move away from our home country to ensure a future for ourselves and our children. But I know where my home is and I know where my country is, we remain Bundjalung and always will be. However, like many Aboriginal people I grew up here in Western Sydney, in Auburn.

I tell you this little bit of information about myself because that's the way that we Aboriginal people are. "Where are you from?" is the most common question. Coming from such a large family I can tell you that most places I go to I bump into one relative or another. Through my mother's side of the family, who is a Donovan from Nambucca Heads, we are related from there right down to the south coast of NSW.

Relationship is so important to us, how we relate to each other, to our wider families, to our country and the world around us. To understand our relationships it's also important to understand where you come from and your fundamental values – what drives you? I was raised a Catholic, so I express my values through a melding of Christianity and Aboriginality. Whatever your religious faith, or philosophical leanings, I think it is important to be aware of who you are, and where your understandings of the way you perceive the world come from, when you advocate for social change.

Without this grounding we can cause more harm than good. Too often we get well meaning non-Indigenous people come to us and say "we want to help", but they don't know how to help, or even worse they think they do and go in head first without taking the time to listen to us. They don't take the time to find out where we are coming from, who we are and what we really need. They are too busy pushing their own agenda, whether it is political, spiritual or egotistical to be able to create meaningful relationships that can co-create long lasting change.

For example, a big push in Indigenous affairs right now is for communities to develop businesses. To become more entrepreneurial – the thinking is that if Indigenous people develop businesses they will provide jobs, skills, and less dependence on government welfare and that economic development will contribute to ending disadvantage.

I have no issue with ensuring that people have work to do that is empowering and sustaining for them as individuals. I have no problem with the idea of developing business; we have after all been traders for many years before White fellas came. But I do have a problem with the pushing of economic development as a community's saviour. I don't believe that simply teaching communities better governance techniques or doing business plans for them is going to be the answer to the wide gamut of issues that plague communities. Where's the soul in that? Where's the sustainability for us as Aboriginal people? Let's remind ourselves that the corporate world, which so dominates our thinking at the present time is not an ancient tradition, it's only two or three hundred years old – yet our culture is how many thousands of years old? Let me ask you who should be teaching whom?

Of course the other issue is what is a community? The majority of Aborigines now live in urban centres and cities. Western Sydney is in fact home to the largest populations of Aborigines, so when the Government talks of community development what actually does it mean and how does it facilitate our development when we don't live in a discrete "mission" or "reserve".

I want to tell you a story that was told to me by the Acting Chairperson of NATSIEC, the Anglican Bishop of the Torres Strait, Bishop Saibo Mabo.

One day a farmer was out in the fields and he noticed an egg, he looked at it and thought he would put it into the chook house and see what happened. So he picked it up and put it in with the hens. Over time the egg hatched and a little chick was born who happily scratched around with the rest of the chicks. But it was clear as the other chicks grew into chickens, that she was not the same. Nevertheless, she knew no different and continued scratching around in the dirt with her chicken friends.

The farmer, who could see she wasn't a chicken, left her there for some time. Eventually he could no longer ignore the fact that this was no chicken in his henhouse. So he thought he'd better go take it where it belonged. So he picked up the bird and took her onto a hill where he said to her "you aren't a chicken, you're an eagle, now fly away" and he released her into the air. The eagle immediately fell to the ground and did what chickens do, started scratching around. So the farmer picked her up and took her back to the chook pen. A few times the farmer took the eagle out and told her to fly, but each time the eagle fell to the ground and resumed her chicken ways. The farmer thought it was one pretty silly eagle who couldn't work out how to fly. One day however, as the farmer insisted she fly away, she looked up and saw an eagle soaring above her in the air, and she knew that was what she was to do. So on this day she stretched her wings and took flight, and finally became what she was meant to be all along.

This is a very powerful story, which has caused much intense discussion when it has been told in other forums. I want you to think about whether you are the chicken, the eagle or the farmer in that story.

The farmer seemingly did the right thing, he saved the egg, he kept the eagle safe and then he took her out to fly. Was it his fault that the eagle thought it was a chicken, or could he have done more to help her understand what it means to be an eagle.

Do you think if the eagle knew it could soar it would have; or was it safer to be a chicken than take the risk of being an eagle? Is it easier staying in the chook house, doing what we have always done, than to take a risk and fly high and become what we truly are? And did the chickens play it safe by teaching her their ways, rather than letting her be different, letting her live amongst them, but letting her live as an eagle.

I am sure you can see why this is such a powerful analogy for Aboriginal people. Too often we have a farmer, sometimes kindly, sometimes not; who thinks it's in our best interest to be put in the chook house.

Rather than let us be the people we are and let us live in a way that will be in our best interest we are forced to be something else. We are forced to live by somebody else's rules, somebody else's customs.

In our lives, the farmer might be a policy which doesn't address the needs that we have; the farmer might be the church which insists we worship with European rituals, and makes no room for our cultural expressions of worship. The farmer might be the worker in our community whose aim it is to make us like them, who says if we can only become better at business or get off alcohol - go to school or wash our faces we will be alright, but who never considers the structures of government or the effects of poverty, or even their own attitude that conspires to keep us in these positions, or if you like in the chook house.

We also need to face the fact that it can be hard to be true to ourselves, to take flight and be an eagle, that often it is easier to stay with the status quo. Sometimes too we Aboriginal people are part of the structures and habits that keep people downtrodden, penned up and unable to be who they are called to be.

And what do I mean when I liken our situation to being kept in the chook house? I mean being kept in a position where we are not able to be truly ourselves, when we are so busy scratching around for basic rights such as health and education that we are unable to soar and fulfil our lives.

I am sure that thanks to the calls in the past year to *close the gap*, a campaign initiated by Tom Calma, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commissioner that you are all aware of the great distance between the health of Aborigines and the health of main stream Australia.

The fact that we have a life expectancy 17 years less than other Australians is a disgrace. The fact that our children are twice as likely to die in infancy is similarly a disgrace. We are more likely to suffer from preventable diseases and those that are seen as "lifestyle" diseases such as diabetes.

Probably of most concern are the issues that are perhaps the hardest to address. The high rate of violence in our communities that are too often related to alcohol and substance abuse. The high rate of child abuse that has been highlighted so graphically in the Northern territory intervention. The fact that the highest cause of death for Aboriginal women in the Northern Territory is murder, not accident, not illness, but violence. The fact that our children are still not receiving a proper education.

These are all signs of a broken down community.

We know that health and education are the two most important factors to bring people out of poverty and that they are interrelated. For example research shows that for every year of education that a girl has it will add four years to the life of her child.

We also know that Aborigines, by and large, do not get the same level of education as non-Indigenous Australians. Studies show that Aboriginal year 3 students have a much lower reading, writing and numeracy achievements than year 3 overall; and this worsens by year 5. The Year 12 retention rate is only 40 % compared to 77 % for non

-Indigenous students. Less than 10 % of Indigenous women have a post-school qualification.

So what is the answer to this – what can we do? Is the answer a Northern Territory style intervention?

That intervention is a good lesson in being careful what you wish for when advocating for change. Some years ago, we were concerned that Indigenous affairs had seemingly fallen off the national agenda. The history of Indigenous affairs is that it ebbs and flows. We had the 1990s with Wik and Mabo, we had the bridge walks and the sea of hands, but nothing had really changed and people's interest had waned and we felt like we were in a trough with regard to raising the issues. Meanwhile our people were still dying too young and we were still excluded in so many ways.

To address this NATSIEC made a policy decision which we called “bringing Indigenous affairs back to the centre of our common concerns”. We aimed to bring these issues to the front of mind, particularly for our member churches. In 2005, continuing this theme we started the campaign to Make Indigenous Poverty History, which I will talk about more later. This was at a time when Indigenous affairs were still something on the edge, and not in the mainstream consciousness.

Two years after starting our focus on Indigenous poverty, in June this year, that all changed and suddenly Indigenous affairs was on the national agenda when our *former* Prime Minister. John Howard and *former* Indigenous Affairs minister Mal Brough made their dramatic announcement of their so called emergency intervention in the Northern Territory. Suddenly Indigenous issues were at the centre of our common concerns and were front page news every day, and everybody had an opinion. Suddenly we had what we wanted, a national focus to address the dire situation that many Aborigines live in – or did we?

I don't want to turn this speech into an analysis of the NT intervention, but there are some things that are relevant to all Indigenous peoples, even here in Western Sydney. If the Liberals had been returned to Government they would have been certain to pressure the States to take on similar interventions. We have yet to see what the new Labor Government will do.

However, the first and fundamental mistake the previous Federal Government made was the lack of consultation. The Government took a report on child sexual abuse called *The Little Children are Sacred* and used that as the tool to force their long held policy agenda on Aboriginal people. The subsequent legislation that purported to protect children from abuse, didn't even mention children. People that stood up and criticised the intervention were labelled supporters of child abuse. The Government ignored almost all of the recommendations of the report and they also, importantly, ignored the fact that Aboriginal people had been crying out for help for decades. Aboriginal people themselves recognised that there were problems, in some places they had instigated great programs, but there was never enough long term support and interest to really change things.

On November 5<sup>th</sup> the ABCs Four Corners presented, what I thought, was an excellent coverage of the progress of the intervention. It is available to watch on the ABC

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website and I would recommend you do so if you want to understand more about the Intervention.

Four Corners went to Maningrida, and showed how the intervention has been experienced there. The program highlighted complaints about the lack of consultation and fears were expressed that the army were going to take children away. But the story also showed that this is not a pathetic community of alcoholics and child abusers as is generally portrayed in the media and by Government. This is a community of strong people who themselves have taken initiatives to deal with problems within the community. That's not to say the community does not have chronic problems, but it is easy to see that with the right support and funding the community themselves will be able to find the answers.

The Four Corners episode highlighted how hard it can be to get the right support and funding. For example, the Maningrida Child Safety Service was highlighted as a service making headway in educating people about abuse and violence as well as protecting children from these things. But their funding is about to run out and although the intervention has a budget of \$1.3 billion, this project is not seeing a cent of it and faces closure. When asked about this, the head of the intervention Sue Gordon, who didn't know about this Child safety project despite it being referred to in the *Little Children are Sacred Report* said:

*"Sometimes it's easy to think well, this is the special one, but there are so many Aboriginal organisations within Aboriginal Communities in the Territory who are doing a fantastic job across the board, but you have to look at them as the total picture".*

Gordon continued the interview by saying that child protection is a Territory responsibility. This response highlights two issues, one is that support can be jeopardised by conflicts between Federal and State and Territory issues and secondly that the intervention is fundamentally flawed if it ignored effective programs initiated by communities in favour of a top down, forced intervention. I would also query Gordon's assertion that they can't fund this program because child protection is a state issue – so what is the purpose of the Intervention?

Also, consider the comments of Dr Geoff Stewart the Maningrida Clinic Medical Officer about the \$83 million spent by the task force on bringing in doctors and health professionals to do the health tests of the children. Strangely enough these tests are not being conducted at the clinic, but in a makeshift shed which has been built for the purpose. Dr Stewart said:

*"It's more than what would be estimated to be required to bring all health services across the Northern territory up to a level of funding where we'd all be expected to be able to provide a comprehensive range of primary health care services. So we've already exceeded the amount that would correct the current under-funding of health services in the Territory".*

Is the intervention a responsible use of tax payers money? Would it not be better policy and better fiscal management to build up the health system to the level that is required to provide proper long term health care for Aboriginal Territorians, rather

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than bring in a dramatic action which is doing nothing more than an audit of health, without looking to ongoing and long term solutions?

These issues of lack of consultation and lack of focus on addressing Indigenous issues are not confined to the Northern Territory intervention. I have already referred to the NATSIEC campaign to Make *Indigenous* Poverty history which we started for this very reason.

The Make *Indigenous* Poverty History campaign aims to Indigenise the Millennium Development Goals or MDGs, which are 8 time bound and measurable goals to address poverty by 2015. There is a global campaign around the MDGS but when we started looking at the campaign and the goals, we found that once again Indigenous peoples were not included. They had not been included in the drafting of the MDGS and were certainly not specifically addressed in the goals themselves, despite Indigenous peoples being the most likely to be impoverished all around the world. The MDGs certainly did not address the poverty of people, such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders who experience poverty even in a wealthy developed country such as Australia.

If there is any hope to address the poverty of Indigenous peoples the MDGs must be aligned with poverty reduction strategies that address the particular needs of Indigenous Peoples. Also without the meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples in deciding these poverty reduction strategies their marginalisation and exclusion will continue. This is true at the International level or the local level.

In Australia, the question is - do the MDGs have relevance for Indigenous peoples? We think so, we don't see them as the answer, but rather as a tool to measure how we are progressing towards ensuring that the Indigenous Peoples of Australia have the same opportunities to live as long, to create as much wealth and to see their children grow into healthy and productive adults as non-Indigenous people do.

We have to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are able to continue living culturally – in ways that is meaningful to us. We must maintain ancient traditions, but we must also live in the modern world and find a way to ensure that our culture retains its vibrancy and diversity, but which also allows us to take our rightful place as modern citizens. We must ensure that our kids can inherit a culture that empowers them and that they are proud to claim. But how will we know we are achieving this if we don't have ways of measuring, of holding Governments accountable for the policies they deliver, which is where we think the MDGs can play a role.

When we talk about Indigenous poverty and disadvantage, it is easy to blame the Indigenous peoples themselves and we see that argument played out in the media constantly. But I believe that it is the responsibility of non-Indigenous people to understand both the historical and contemporary context that conspires to degrade our lives. To understand the real situation and not get swayed by political rhetoric.

It's not one sided either, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples need to stand up and demand an end to our suffering. When the Government comes at us talking of shared responsibilities and interventions we must not trade our human rights and those

citizenship rights such as education and good health that every other Australian takes for granted, for swimming pools and face cloths.

We have been there and done that. We traded away so much for scratchy blankets and flour.

This country has been built on our land. This country has been built on the back of our labour. This country sells our images to people all over the world and calls it tourism. This country sells our cultural artefacts all over the world and calls it art.

But we are not simply cultural artefacts, we are living breathing human beings who have been colonised and stripped bare of our culture. And it is that which causes our material, spiritual and cultural poverty today.

When Governments talk about shared responsibility, better governance and mutual obligation they don't mean a real partnership, they mean that we, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, need to get our act together. But how can we hold *them* accountable, how can we make the words "mutual" and "shared" come to mean a real partnership. This is particularly relevant as we find out what life under our new Federal Government will be like. Will the new Federal government and non-Indigenous people in general look at themselves, will they address their own inadequacies, their own policies that have contributed to our status in this country, or will they continue to insist that Aborigines need to give up our culture and the things that make us who we are to become more like them?

I started by saying that I believe that to create change you need to work at the individual level and that it is up to each and every one of us to understand the issues and to do something about it; to face ourselves and our role allowing Indigenous people to suffer disadvantage.

We have designed the Make *Indigenous* Poverty History campaign to work at this level, to educate and change attitudes as much as to activate at a political level. We could have gone for an on line petition or some other mass campaign and sought lots of media, and those things are important and have their place. However, we decided not to, because one thing we know from our travels around the country is that it's too easy to sign something and to not take responsibility ourselves.

How easy is it to stand on the sidelines, saying Governments don't do this, Churches don't do that, somebody needs to do something. Yet when we go to a dinner party and somebody makes a comment about the dole bludging alcoholic Aborigines we say nothing. We don't stand up where it counts, in our everyday lives.

So often people come up to me and say I have been a member of one group or another, I believe in reconciliation, I walked across the bridge, I signed this or that petition, I have worked with Aborigines for 20 years – and then they proceed to make incredibly racist remarks and show how little they have learnt. They denigrate and misunderstand Aborigines as they try and explain why *their* actions have failed to make a difference. I also get people who come from the other end of the spectrum where we are characterised as the noble savage, the great spiritual beings who have guided these people to spiritual nirvana. People who have been given "traditional"

names and belong to the “tribe”. But these are people that still don’t understand who we are because they are so wrapped up in their own needs.

When will we be seen as people? Not as an issue that needs fixing, not one dimensional spiritual saviours, not as relics from the past, but as people - diverse, complex, multi-dimensional with the same hopes and dreams and aspirations as everybody else.

When will people stop trying to analyse our culture, our practices, our family structures and trying to work out where we get it wrong. And instead focus on themselves, their attitudes, their priorities, and how the way they choose to live their lives impacts on others.

Until Saturday I would have said it’s all very well hundreds of thousands taking to the streets, but when will people put those values, those hopes, into the ballot box, and hold our leaders to account for issues other than economics. When will human rights and justice become more important than interest rates and mortgages?

Perhaps the time is now; I think it is too early to tell. But perhaps the fact that Mal Brough, the architect of the NT intervention was resoundingly pushed out of his seat does send a message that we want more for our first nations, or perhaps it’s some local issue that lost him his seat. Either way the important thing is that if we want to understand our diverse Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and create change, first we need to face ourselves.

Therefore, as much as we talk about the statistics and ask people to write to politicians and support initiatives such as Close the Gap. We also ask people to do three things when they want to support an end to Indigenous Poverty.

To remember – to remember our history, a true and fair history of this country. Not to romanticise the colonisation of this country, but to know what really happened and what continues to happen.

To recognise – to understand what the situation is today. Not to be satisfied with the paltry and superficial media attention to Aboriginal disadvantage but to really understand what is happening all over the country, but also, importantly at a local level, in the community in which you live.

To rectify – to take personal action. This may be at a political level, going to protests, writing letters, holding politicians accountable. Alternatively it may be in an area where you have some influence.

For example ensuring that your organisation recognises it is on Aboriginal land. Or developing an employment policy to attract Aboriginal candidates. Your action maybe to actively ensure that Aboriginal perspectives are heard on committees, boards and other areas where community representation is sought. Or making sure that Aboriginal people are invited to and participating in local community events. Or it maybe getting to know Aboriginal people in your local area and simply sitting down for a cup of tea together.

**Indigenous**  
**MAKE ^ POVERTY HISTORY.**

Whatever your sphere of influence is it is up to each and every one of us to understand the issues, face our own barriers to change and to take action, however seemingly insignificant to Make *Indigenous* Poverty History.

For further information about the campaign to Make Indigenous Poverty History or the other work of NATSIEC, please go to our web site.

[www.makeindigenouspovertyhistory.org](http://www.makeindigenouspovertyhistory.org)