



Closing the Gap: When and How will Australia Ever Become Truly Liveable for Indigenous Australians?

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Presentation by

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*If quoting from this speech, please acknowledge that it was presented to the

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Thank you very much for that warm welcome Rhonda. I must begin of course in paying my respects to the members of the Kulin Nation and to thank Joy for her warm welcome to country yesterday.

It is proper that we acknowledge the different Aboriginal groups when we travel to different parts of Australia because we have never forgotten that our people lived here for 60,000 years before the British arrived in 1788. In fact, in those days Australia was a truly liveable place for our people.

So how come in 220 years we have been utterly dispossessed, utterly denigrated, utterly discriminated against, utterly marginalised, and we are now among the poorest, the least educated, the unhealthiest, the most unemployed, the most imprisoned in pro rata terms – and the list goes on.

Time is up. We can no longer call ourselves a First Nation state with the economy booming and leave the plight of indigenous peoples, the original owners who so generously gave up their lands, with a struggle, but by no means with the power to defeat the colonisers, for which we have never been compensated and for which there is much unfinished business to deal with.

Time is up. The time for governments to impose solutions is no longer acceptable.

I want to tell you a little bit about myself. I was born and raised in Alice Springs. My father was an Arrrente man who died when I was 11, my mother is a Gurdanji woman from the top end of the Northern Territory. I had three Aboriginal grandparents and one white grandfather. The only thing I inherited from the latter was his surname.

The experience of my family has been similar to most other Aboriginal people in this country. My mother was eight years old when the policeman rode into the family community where they lived and decided that my mother Emma and her sister Kate, at eight and seven respectively, had to go to school and that he would take them.

As far as we can work out that was in 1933 and no effort was ever made by the authorities to reunite my mother with her parents, and in fact her father died before she saw him again. Her sister died never to see her parents again.

All of the boys were taken the following year and put on Garden Point. My mother went to Carlin Compound in Darwin.

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We traced my mother's mother when my brother worked at Social Security and went through all the microfiche records, which he wasn't supposed to do, and found my grandmother and where she lived because she was then on an aged pension.

On Boxing Day 1978 we hired a car from Alice Springs and we drove to Borraloola where we thought she was. We left Mum at home at Tanumbirini. We didn't tell Mum what we were doing.

They said, "No, no, she's not there." So we drove back to Tanumbirini (if you know these distances, I'm talking several thousand kilometres) and when we arrived she was sitting outside this little tin shanty with one of my uncles who was a babe in arms when he was taken away. That was the first time he'd seen his mother – in late 1978 – since he was a babe in arms.

We stayed there with Nana. He said to her when we jumped out of the car, "That's Emma's kids." She was a tiny little woman and she came up and there were three of us and we were all giants. She embraced us and we cried and we got to know her.

I was very angry as a young woman growing up in this country that I didn't know my parents' parents. I knew my father's mother, Hetty Perkins, because she lived across the road from us. But I didn't know my mother's people. I was denied that as a result of the abhorrent policies of assimilation, for which, give him his due, the new Prime Minister of Australia Kevin Rudd has now apologised to the Stolen Generations and their families that were affected.

So it doesn't matter how successful I may have been in my life, I still carry the grief of the denial of my rights to my family, my culture and my heritage and my language. I'm getting over the angry bit but I'm still sad that I was not able to exercise my rights in relation to enjoying my cultural heritage to the extent that I would have liked to.

Now, having been born and raised in Alice Springs and the niece of the late Charles Perkins, I was very aware of the situation facing our people across the country from a very young age. At 14 years old I was handing out how-to-vote cards for Aboriginal candidates standing for elections.

I went to my first FACATSI meeting when I was 14 years old. I attended Aboriginal Progress Association meetings when I was at secondary school in Adelaide in the 1960s. In fact the 1960s for me, growing up as a young

woman in my teens, was a very exciting time of social change, not only in Australia but in other parts of the world. In the 1960s you saw the civil rights movement which inspired many of us to do the same here in Australia. We had the anti-Vietnam wars, we had the women's movement, we had all these calls for social change for the better. People took to the streets, they got organised at the local level and they stood up – and so were Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples doing that.

There was a 10-year campaign by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with their white supporters to bring about the 1967 referendum. Why was that necessary? It was necessary because there was entrenched in the Constitution of Australia a clause that prevented the Commonwealth Government from legislating for Aboriginal people. Section 5126 said that the Commonwealth had the power to make laws for people of any race except Aboriginals. Section 127, which was repealed in the 1967 referendum, said in the reckoning of the population, Aboriginals shall not be counted.

A lot of people think that the 1967 referendum gave us the right to vote and the right to be counted in the census. In fact, that's a myth. What the 1967 referendum did was to give the Commonwealth the power to legislate on behalf of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – that's it. And it removed the clause about the reckoning of the population, which has not only to do with the census but was also to do with how to distribute the electorates. In those days, in the Commonwealth funding arrangements, the population count was important in terms of determining the distribution of money to the states.

So 1967 was a big turning point, but remember the policies that preceded that as far as they went for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. After the initial annihilation and dispossession of lands, the poisonings, the hangings, the killings, all of the massacres and the nasty treatment of my people that went on, we then had "soothe the dying pillow" – they're all going to die out so let's put them all onto missions and let's control their movements and let's just let them die out eventually. Of course, that didn't happen.

Then we had the assimilation policies which led to the Stolen Generations. Then in 1971, following the 1967 referendum and the fact that the states were putting pressure on the Commonwealth to provide more money for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander services across the country, the Commonwealth started to act.

A Liberal Minister denounced the assimilation policy in 1971 and adopted the policy of self-determination, provided it was done on the terms that Government thought it needed to be done on.

I have worked in Government for over 30 years, 21 years in Canberra in the senior executive service, 17 of those years at Deputy Secretary level and above. I've had a lot of experience in dealing across bureaucracy, in dealing with governments at every level in this country. In my experience, never ever has any one government ever had the backbone to commit the resources required to redress the disadvantage suffered by my people on a daily basis.

I do not need to tell you what the statistics are in relation to how much the gap has to be closed. Housing – billions of dollars of investment required. Why do we have such deplorable overcrowding? Why does every new government that gets elected come up with a new way that they want to deal with the Aboriginal 'problem'?

It's not our problem. We are disadvantaged, we are marginalised, we are poor, we do not have the numbers to influence government to the extent that others do, but we keep on trying. Why do governments have to impose rather than negotiate? All government policy is empty if it is not, in my view, guided by principle.

I started in the public service in 1979s – and, remember, the first Department of Aboriginal Affairs established at the federal level was in 1972 by the Whitlam Government. What that enabled us to do was to fund community controlled and community based Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations to fill the service delivery gap because our people could not get access to the full range of services available to other Australians. It is very important to remember that.

We almost set up an Aboriginal public sector through the funding of those NGOs. But we were very clear that they were community controlled and community based and that they knew how to provide the services more effectively than mainstream to our people, because they were culturally attuned, they were culturally appropriate and people used them at the right time, when they needed them.

I always argued as a public servant that the investment of public monies, particularly at the state level, was at the negative end of the socio-economic scale. What the dollars were paying for was the over-representation of

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in hospitals, in prisons, in juvenile detention centres and so on.

In my view, many of those programs don't work. They don't bring about the responsible change for individuals that need to be brought about. In terms of the over-hospitalisation of Aboriginal people, that could have easily been prevented with ready access to primary health care in communities.

The attitudes that we had to contend with were such as Charlie Court's when he was the Premier of Western Australia and we found the money to fund the Aboriginal Medical Service in Broome. Charlie Court's response as the Premier of Western Australia to our announcement of funding of the AMS in Broome was "They are setting up a terrorist organisation". It was to provide basic primary health care – nothing more, nothing less.

So there were a lot of attitudes held by very powerful people in this country that were ill-informed, ignorant and misplaced. The way to overcome that is for governments to adopt principles, and the principles that I want to see in place are recognition, rights and reform.

Governments can no longer do as they please when it comes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in this country. They have to be fully engaged and negotiate with Aboriginal leaders.

If you saw *Four Corners* last night on education on Bathurst Island you'll see that the view is that no matter what you do, it doesn't work. Well that's not true. If you give Aboriginal people full control and true self-determination with the resources to buy in the expertise they want, and to develop the expertise within their own people, you will see the changes.

NGOs can't do it by themselves, governments can't do it by themselves, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can't do it by themselves. But Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islander people must have the right to negotiate the future and how the pathway will be pursued.

For over 30 years I worked in government, not only from 1979 in Canberra, but prior to that I worked for the Commonwealth in the old Native Affairs Department. In fact it was a branch that was under the Department of Interior in the late 1960s and early 1970s in Alice Springs. I started off there as the switchboard operator, using the old plug-in switchboards.

One day a person came into the office and wanted to see one of the bosses. So I went down to the boss and I said, "There's a man here to see you." And he said to me, "Is he black or white?" I was a young person and I said, "What the effing difference does that make?"

He said, "All right, all right. I'll see him." So I went back out and I got the man and I took him in. Of course he was Aboriginal but I was so angry that the boss even had the audacity to ask me that. I got moved off reception and ended up the CEO.

I have to say that in all my years of working in the government, nothing was easy. No matter what promotion you got, you only got it because you were black and a woman. It didn't matter how hard you worked, it didn't matter.

I didn't care. The personal experience wasn't as bad as what I felt was the indifference that I encountered among my colleagues in other departments. Remember that the Commonwealth had no involvement across the breadth of Australia in Aboriginal Affairs until after the 1967 referendum. When Gough Whitlam set up the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in 1972 they had to negotiate with the states and they set up these very grey worded agreements between the Commonwealth and states as to who was going to do what.

Of course, every time you had a meeting with state officials you argued about the content of the agreements and you could interpret them whichever way you liked, depending what side of the fence you sat on.

We've experienced many broken promises. You will remember that Bob Hawke said "No child will live in poverty". Well our kids still are.

You remember Bob Hawke promised us a treaty at Burunga. We still have no treaty.

It's probably not known so well publicly but when the Mabo decision was handed down by the High Court, the Keating Government said it would respond in three ways. One, it would implement Native Title legislation to give effect to the High Court's decision.

Two, it would set up the Indigenous Land Corporation to buy back land that could no longer be claimed under Native Title because Native Title had been extinguished by the other land administration leases and so on that had evolved over the period since 1788.

The third one was that there would be a social justice package.

I was the CEO of ATSIC and we had to undertake a nationwide consultative process with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. We produced a report called Recognition, Rights and Reform. It identified indigenous-specific rights and it identified the human rights and civil rights and other rights that Australians enjoyed.

It wanted recognition of the fact that Aboriginal people had been here for 60,000 years and had some legitimate place in this nation – and that in fact to destroy the oldest living culture in the world would be a bigger blight on Australia than it would be to embrace it and have it at the core of our Australian heritage.

In the section on reform, we identified how to change the nature of engagement and service delivery and close the gap.

Do you know what we got? One recommendation was accepted and adopted by the Keating Government. Do you know what that was? The official recognition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander flag. That was it. Nothing more.

When the Howard Government came to power in 1996 the first thing they did was cut \$480 million out of the ATSIC budget. Why did they do that? Because they were cost cutting across the service and blacks weren't going to be exempt – it didn't matter about the need.

Do you know what programs got cut? The programs for families, women and children in Aboriginal communities. We never recouped the money, ever. In last year's dollars that would have equated to something like \$800 million that we lost back in 1996. That was money that was going directly into Aboriginal communities.

These are the sort of trials and tribulations that are driven by ideological pursuits rather than good public policy. The most abhorrent public policy for Aboriginal people over the last few years was the so-called national emergency response causing the so-called Northern Territory Intervention in 72 Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.

I was very outspoken against that move by the Government when Mal Brough and John Howard announced it last year, just before the election – “We might be losing. Let's drag out another issue. Let's use wedge politics.”

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I could not believe it when Kevin Rudd agreed to go along with it. I could not believe it. I thought, “My God, don’t do this ‘me too’ stuff Kevin, just to get over the line.”

Everybody wants a change. Let’s make it happen for the better.

But with the Northern Territory Intervention, they’re rolling out the income quarantining. Do you know what they did in the Northern Territory? They suspended the operations of the Racial Discrimination Act and they ceased the operation of the Community Development Employment Program which was in fact a Work for the Dole program that had operated for over 30 years in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities around the country.

The reason they cut CEDP was because they couldn’t quarantine CDEP so they had to abolish it so they could quarantine Centrelink payments. What they did was effectively suspend the operations of the RDA and argue that what they were doing was a special measure. Now, we still don’t believe that it was a special measure eligible under the RDA – it wasn’t. We’re going to contest that legally still because the point has to be shown.

Three times since the implementation of the Racial Discrimination Act its operations have been suspended – and three times it’s been about my people. The first case was a women’s sacred site versus the building of a bridge at Hindmarsh Island in South Australia. It wasn’t about what was right or wrong in that but that’s a whole other story which I haven’t got time to go through. The fact of the matter is that in order for that bridge to get built they suspended the operations of the RDA.

The second time they did it was in the Wik Case for the Wik people.

And the third time they did it was for the Northern Territory Intervention.

My people, many of whom taught me about the history of our people and the history of politics and engagement with governments and so on, who campaigned for the 1967 referendum, would have been horrified. They had thought that by giving the Commonwealth the power to legislate on behalf of Aboriginal people they would only legislate in a positive way for a positive outcome. I think probably most Australians thought that as well. But the fact of the matter is it has now shown that it can be used against the interests of a particular racial group.

So what do we need to do about that? We need a Bill of Rights. We need a renewed constitution. We need to be a republic and we need to have recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the first peoples of this nation – we need our status entrenched in the Australian Constitution.

The Government needs to get serious about what you might call a Futures Fund to overcome the plight of my people in this country. It is a blight on the nation if the gap is not closed. It is a blight on every single Australian and every single government.

It's not our blight. It's everyone's blight. We're the victims – don't blame us. Take a good hard look at yourselves and what you can do to make a difference.

I want to finish on the principle of engagement. I was at the 2020 Summit with 1000 others. It was a privilege to be there. Despite some of the negative publicity and whatever afterwards, and the hurried nature of the reports back at the plenary sessions, the actual experience was very good. I think it was welcomed by the people who were there because at long last, after this cloak of 10 years of fear being thrown over the country – don't speak out or against an ideology otherwise you're banned for life, you're blacklisted – people had a chance to have a say. People had a chance to put forward ideas.

In the group that I was in, in the Indigenous group, there were many things that came out. But fundamentally we said three things: we said we wanted recognition – formal recognition of the status of our people; entrench it in the Constitution and make a treaty. A treaty is nothing to be frightened of. All a treaty is a formal agreement between two parties that sets out their relationship and the roles and responsibilities of each. That's it. No big deal. They've had one in New Zealand for hundreds of years. They get on. They're making changes for the better. So are American Indians and Canadians. Why is it such a dirty word? Don't treat it as a dirty word. Promote it. It needs to happen.

And we talked about rights, in terms of indigenous-specific rights. Stop all the whinging about whether Aboriginal kids get study grants or scholarships. We need them. We're poor. Our kids break the law so they can get into a juvenile detention centre to get new clothes because the families can't provide for them. That is an indictment on society.

Let's get real about what the rights are – a right to decent housing, a right to decent healthcare, a right to be able to live in a functional community, a right for kids to have proper schooling.

Bill Heffernan and I had a big row up in Canberra last year about schools in the Northern Territory. The Northern Territory Government commissioned this report to look at spending on Aboriginal education from money that was given specifically by the Commonwealth to the Northern Territory for Aboriginal education. Out of every dollar that was given, they came up with a figure of 47 cents, which was a revised figure after the Treasury went ballistic, because the first report that John Taylor put out said 33 cents in the dollar. They still got short changed by 53 cents in every Aboriginal community. Where did the other 53 cents go? Into schools in Darwin – because that's where the bulk of the electorates were. I mean, that is outrageous.

So Bill Heffernan comes up to me, you know that Liberal bloke in Parliament, and he says to me, "You know you're wrong about all this, Pat. We've just built a new high school at Wadeye." I said, "Well good on you mate. Not before bloody time." So I went over to see some of the people who were with us from Wadeye and I said, "What's the go with this new school at Wadeye?" They said, "The building is there but there's no furniture or teachers or anything else." So don't believe everything that politicians tell you about what a great job they're doing because most of it's just to get reflected in the media.

When I left the public service in 2006 I primarily left for family reasons, personal reasons, besides the fact I couldn't stand it a minute longer. I mean, I had dedicated my life; I was a bloody good public servant, and I worked hard and I was determined to make a difference for the benefit of my people. I was absolutely determined to influence as many decision makers as possible to support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people getting out of the miserable situations we've been relegated to.

I went home to retire and took my mum with me, who lives with me and has for over 20 years. She's getting old and she wanted to go home – that's what they do; they want to go back to country, they don't want to die in other places.

So I went home to look after her. I was home for less than a month, two weeks in fact, when I got the phone call to say, "Can you come and project manage this NITV for a couple of months until we find a CEO?" And of course

the rest is history. I haven't stopped moving or working since. It's a seven day a week job.

What happened was I fully intended only to work for a couple of months until they got a new CEO. I went down to Sydney for three weeks to do a handover with the lady that was moving on from the secretariat, and I realised in that short time what a wonderful potential this was – payblack time! To have your own television service for God's sake! Just imagine what we can do! And are we going to do it.

I took until the 21st of May to bring one of 20 staff that I had on board. I brought my Head of Television on on the 5th of March and on the 13th of July we were on air – 19 weeks: unbelievable record time.

We went direct to the bush, beaming in the bush. We use Imparja's second channel (because we have to, the Government said so) to transmit. It goes direct to home satellites anywhere in Australia if you point it in the right direction and you've got one. It goes to all the communities, what they call the remote indigenous broadcasting service communities – there are 160-odd of them that have transmitters in the local area. They got it from the 13th of July. Other people got it on pay TV – Foxtel on Channel 180 – from the 1st of November last year.

No-one believed we would ever do it, especially governments. But I've been determined to demonstrate the increase in audience reach to impress upon government the need to continue to fund NITV and to continue to see its value. I've now got it on the Parliamentary House network in Canberra, one of four or six I think, which is very good – I'm very proud about that. Soon it will be in Ballarat or Geelong and Canberra on Transact and so on. So we're spreading all the time.

We do have an agreement here in Melbourne with Channel 31 – we pay them \$6000 to broadcast the Marngrook Football Show on Thursday nights because everyone in Melbourne is so mad about football. It's a wonderful show if you haven't seen it. But that's the only agreement that we have with the community TV people at this stage.

My aim for NITV is to be free to air across Australia into every lounge room office and community centre for all Australians to see. The reason I realise the potential of this is because people really need to see what our television service is for – by and about Aboriginal and Torres Strait people themselves.

We're producing a small news program at the moment. I want to make our news service the most trusted source of news for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. So if you want to get the alternative view from the sensationalist rubbish that's carried on the other networks, watch NITV news. We'll be increasing that as resources permit.

But to get our television service into the hearts and minds of people in lounge rooms and schools through Foxtel and Austar – through Austar we're on their schools program as well – will, I hope, result in a much better understanding and appreciation of the richness of our cultural heritage that has survived, despite everything that's happened, and why it should be at the core of our Australian heritage, and why our people should be embraced and able to enjoy not only their rights but a decent quality of life.

I believe NITV has an enormous potential. Even though it's the lowest paid job I've had for many, many years I'm very proud to be a part of it.