

**SPEECH BY JACKIE HUGGINS
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FOR THE SUSTAINING PROSPERITY CONFERENCE
1 APRIL 2005
COMMERCE THEATRE 2
ECONOMICS AND COMMERCE BUILDING
UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE**

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today and pay respect to those who have gone before us.

Thank you Belinda and thank you to Peter Dawkins, the Melbourne Institute and the *Australian* newspaper for inviting me to take part in this year's Sustaining Prosperity Conference.

Of course, the notion of sustaining prosperity has very little to do with the experience of most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians – we may be prosperous in terms of culture but Indigenous people in this country have little to sustain us in terms of material prosperity.

Our life expectations from birth are so different from those of non-Indigenous Australians, as is our capacity to contribute to a prosperous Australia.

I've been invited to speak today in my capacity as Co-Chair of Reconciliation Australia. The session is about Indigenous health but I see my role as putting health into a context with all the interconnected facets of reconciliation.

And I'll start by telling you that I don't enjoy going to funerals any more than the next person. But the fact is that it's not unusual for Aboriginal people to attend hundreds of funerals in a year.

In fact it's commonplace.

Like all Aboriginal people, I get tired of attending funerals especially funerals of people younger than I am. Our life expectancy is 20 years less than that of other Australians. We have the lowest life expectancy of any other Indigenous peoples of the world. Lower even than our Maori, Canadian Aboriginal and Native American brothers and sisters.

Something is drastically wrong here.

Aboriginal Australians often say that funerals come in threes. We get signs when someone is going to die - maybe a bird call or something strange in our cosmology, some unexplained event. And then we brace ourselves for the time we hear word that someone has passed on.

Just recently, three of my dearest Aboriginal brothers died - two before they reached the age of 50 and one at just 52. I fear for the men in my family when the "magical" half century comes around. I hold on tightly to the precious time we have left with one another.

Our men die so young and it pierces my heart. My fellow panelists have provided a whole lot of shocking statistics on Aboriginal health and these are things you need to hear. But the trouble is Australians have heard these numbers so many times before, they're numb to the human significance.

Too often, they're so numb that their first impulse is to blame the victim.

And some of these numb people would have been among the first to donate to the Tsunami relief appeals promoted on television. And while I have no problem with this (I donate too), I am concerned when people pride themselves on being compassionate but somehow cannot extend that compassion to people living - and dying - in their own backyard.

If we are considering Indigenous health today in the context of the three conference themes: economic and social stocktake; the Howard fourth term agenda; and major reform issues for federal and state governments – we need to talk about how to wake the nation up to the relevance of Indigenous ill health to Australia's overall prospects.

But let's do it with the recognition that different aspects of disadvantage are inexorably linked, that one problem predisposes us to the next and the next and the next until it becomes virtually impossible to break through and take some control.

The President of the Australian Medical Association, Bill Glasson, made this point in February to the Senate Inquiry on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs. He told the Inquiry that if we consider Indigenous health in isolation, we get nowhere.

Our recognition of this reality has been rather slow in coming. Twenty-five years ago research in Nigeria showed that even very modest amounts of education for mothers improved their health, and quite dramatically increased life expectancy for themselves **and** their children*.

Australia has also been on a slow learning curve when it comes to acknowledging that government or business or anyone else trying to develop health and other projects without the close, constant and respected involvement of Indigenous communities are on a road to nowhere.

* Caldwell. J. 1979 'Education as a factor in mortality decline: an examination of Nigerian data', Population Studies 3 (3): 395-413

What are we doing here at this conference talking about Aboriginal people as THEM. As you see, I am me and I am we.

I so often find myself on panels like these as the sole Indigenous voice, trying to explain things that should really have been understood by now. Surely we're past the point where we imagine that a bunch of white people talking about how to solve the health problems of black people is going to get us very far.

The rhetoric at least is improving and well-overdue insights about putting control into the hands of Indigenous people provide a foundation of common ground between the main stakeholders involved in Indigenous policy.

But if these insights are to amount to anything in terms of improved outcomes and progress towards reconciliation, they must be backed with very different structures and practices from what we're used to.

The bottom line is this:

1. it must be understood that real progress won't be made unless and until Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are given real power to make decisions for ourselves. Call it self determination, call it whatever you like but it's shown around the world to be the essential ingredient in improving health and other outcomes for Indigenous peoples;
2. Indigenous communities must be supported in building the capacity to do this well, and to engage with government in the way government says it wants and needs to engage; and
3. government agencies must also build **their** capacity and cultural competence to work with Indigenous communities in a way that has not so far been evident.

Just last week Reconciliation Australia hosted a visit by Professor Stephen Cornell who co-directs the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development at the University of Arizona.

Over 20 years, this project has collected research on what works in building healthy, prosperous communities - what turns around the bleak statistics of disadvantage.

There are lots of lessons to be learned from the Harvard Project that are highly relevant to what we are trying to achieve in Australia. And the Harvard experience suggests that the Federal Government's new arrangements hold promise but only if they involve a genuine transfer of decision-making power into Indigenous hands, something governments find hard to do.

In the mid-1970s, after a century of failed U.S. Indian policy, the government there adopted a policy stance toward Indian nations that finally acknowledged their unique status.

By the turn of the century, more and more American Indian nations rose to the challenge of self-governance and assumed greater control of their own futures. Today, these nations are reaping the benefits and achieving remarkable success politically, socially, economically and culturally.

The Harvard research shows that successful tribes think strategically, make informed decisions, assume responsibility for their own internal affairs, and spend time, energy, and resources, laying sound institutional foundations on which progress is made. In other words, good governance is a precondition of success.

The Harvard Project consistently finds that governance goes a long way in explaining why some tribes break cycles of poor health, dependency and poverty.

The caution we have to make about the Harvard work, is that while the research holds important lessons and parallels for Australia, for us to think we can import it outright would be inappropriate ... and lazy.

Which is why Reconciliation Australia is coordinating a groundbreaking project to identify and promote all the different aspects that constitute good Indigenous governance in Australia.

The project was developed with funding from BHP Billiton and involves the Commonwealth, the governments of the Northern Territory and Western Australia, and the Australian National University.

We have 12 research teams on the ground across Australia, looking at different models of governance, some that are enormously promising, others that are having problems.

Over time, Australia stands to learn a great deal from this project about good Indigenous governance and in the meantime, we expect to get sizeable chunks of insight which we can share with other communities and with policy makers.

The project is all about building healthy communities from the ground up. About making Indigenous communities genuinely accountable by giving us real power to set priorities and make decisions.

I mean, what point is there in being accountable if you don't get to make decisions?

What on earth does shared responsibility mean if it doesn't involve any sharing of power?

And where does that leave the myth that government and some commentators continue to perpetuate that the so called "practical" aspects of reconciliation are somehow separate from the so called "symbolic" ones – the aspects of reconciliation that recognise and respect difference in priority and approach, and the overarching significance of family and community.

In reality, the practical and the symbolic sides of reconciliation are impossible to separate because that sense of who you are and how you feel about yourself is intrinsic to how you behave and how you shape solutions to problems that affect your community.

The sense of how connected you feel to fellow Australians.

If you believe you're an outsider, you are an outsider.

If you believe you're beaten, then you're beaten.

If you believe that the rest of Australia has no respect for you or your culture, then for all intents and purposes it doesn't.

These things are self-fulfilling and we have to find the symbolic basis, as well as the practical basis, for living together and bringing out the best in one another.

Stephen Cornell laughed out loud last week when media asked him to weigh up the importance of practical vs symbolic reconciliation in improving the situation in Indigenous communities.

He made the point that if the Australian Government speaks of shared responsibility without shared power, then agreements being drawn up with communities are in themselves only symbolic.

Recognition of the special place of Indigenous people on the other hand, the kind of recognition that has been extended to Indigenous peoples in the US and Canada and New Zealand, has enormous practical implications. It is the basis on which people can take control of their own lives.

It provides the only real basis for lasting reconciliation.

So you see that Aboriginal health is about many things and perhaps we are just starting to understand that well enough to end the cycle of failure.

As opinion leaders, you shouldn't receive what you hear about Aboriginal health this afternoon in a passive mode. It does affect you, no matter whether you work in business, in government, in the media or in education.

It matters what you think and what you say. And it matters most what you **believe** about this stuff.

Governments will only go so far without backing from the community. They don't like taking risks or providing the space for Aboriginal communities to make mistakes as we start to make decisions for ourselves.

We're human beings - you have to expect that mistakes are going to happen from time to time.

But you also have to expect that great things will happen. We will succeed. We will prosper, as Indigenous peoples around the world have shown they can prosper when they've been given the chance.

Around Australia, exciting examples are already out there to see in our communities and we're ready to join the points of light.

Instead of funerals, I look forward to the graduations, the birthday parties – for 60th, 70th and 80th birthdays – and seeing my great great grandchildren for that matter!

I look forward to a true and lasting reconciliation where the life chances and expectations of kids all over Australia are equal.

We have a real opportunity now to shift direction and make all of this possible.

I thank you for the opportunity to speak about it with you today.