



<http://reconciliation.org.au/nsw/recent-issues/archives/>

Speech - Larissa Behrendt

Dec 24th, 2007 by reconciliation

Transcript of Larissa's inspiring words spoken at the launch of the Online Education Kit:

"I would like to begin by paying my respects to the Gadigal people of the Eora nation on whose land we are meeting on today. I was born into the Eualayai and Gamillaroi nations in north-west New South Wales but I have lived in the Sydney Aboriginal community since I was a young child.

The welcome to country is a wonderful protocol that not only gives us a respectful way to acknowledge the custodians of the land but reminds everyone that we continue to share this country, even in the most populated, urbanised and colonised areas. It is actually one of the real symbolic achievements of the reconciliation movement that on most formal occasions, in all parts of the country, we now start with an acknowledgement of respect to the traditional custodians.

The 24th of November 2007 will long be remembered as the day in which the Australian people finally ousted the conservative Howard government. It will also be the day in which we remember that the Howard's era of failed policy on Indigenous people ended not just with the ousting of his government, but with Howard losing his seat and his Indigenous Affairs minister also failing to hold on to his electorate. (I have to confess that my favourite line from the election night was Mal Brough conceding defeat by saying, "Well, that's all from me.")

While Howard's intervention into the Northern Territory was a key factor in the election to those of us interested in Indigenous issues, it cannot be said that the trouncing of the Coalition in the polls was a result of this most patronising, ill-conceived and politically motivated policies. Howard's failure to understand the resentment created by his industrial relations laws and his appearance of being out of touch as he begrudgingly admitted that climate change should be a priority highlighted how out of touch his government looked.

The opportunistic timing of his governments decision to do something about the long standing issue of child sexual abuse in the Northern Territory so close to an election, and the very effective campaign of those seeking to raise doubts about the mechanisms used to achieve this purported aim merely added to an image of a government that was out of ideas and, quite frankly, dishonest.

With the curtain going down on the Howard years, it closes an era in which we have a Prime Minister who does not believe in saying "sorry" to the stolen generations, a Prime Minister who dismissed the Bringing them Home report as too emotive and countered that only one in ten children were taken away and that it was for their own good, a Prime Minister who derailed the reconciliation process and ostricised any Indigenous leader that did not agree with him (and that left only Noel Pearson and Warren Mundine if you use the term leader in its loosest sense) a Prime Minister who used the decision in the Wik case to fuel an anti-Aboriginal election, who termed native title and the right to negotiate as un-Australian, a Prime Minister who dismantled the national Indigenous representative body a Prime Minister who repealed the application

of the Racial Discrimination Act from applying to Aboriginal people three times – during the Hindmarsh Island dispute, through the Native Title Amendment Act and in relation to the Northern Territory intervention.

I could go on.

But Howard was smart. He passionately believed in his ideological views and he ensured that he entrenched our institutions from the ABC to the National Museum to the High Court with people who were coloured with the same conservative brush. He worked very hard to shape our institutions in his ideological image to ensure that his legacy would last long after his inevitable political demise.

So those of us who understood that reconciliation at a national level could not resume until Howard was gone should not be smug. Not only will his legacy be long-lasting, there is much work ahead of his if a Rudd government is to deliver what Howard could not.

Rudd, in opposition, supported, without any amendment, Howard's intervention in the Northern Territory including the aspects that repealed the Racial Discrimination Act, the abolition of the permit system and the compulsory quarantining of all welfare payments.

While Rudd has given some very clear indications that things will be different – and his consultations about the apology is one key way – there are still some very big questions. There is a commitment to sign the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People but no indication of how that will be implemented.

The key problem under Howard was that throughout the whole of his time in office his decisions about Indigenous policy were directed by ideology. Whoever the Minister, whatever they called the policy, the direction was defined by the ideologies of mainstreaming, assimilation, mutual obligation, opening up access of Indigenous controlled land to non-Indigenous interests and the philosophy that the “real” Aboriginal people live in the north. Policy and resources were directed by these ideals.

Now the frustrating thing about this has been these ideologies of “mainstreaming” and “assimilation” have failed in the past to shift the poorer health, lower levels of education, higher levels of unemployment and poorer standard of housing that Aboriginal communities have experienced and have never offered ways to protect Aboriginal cultural heritage, interest in land, language. And they have not offered a way in which Aboriginal people can play the central role in making decisions that will impact on their families and communities.

It is also frustrating that these ideologies are not only offensive and simply do not work but that they work completely contrary to what the evidence shows works. The focus on the ideological has blinded us to what we can learn from the many successes that go unnoticed. In the face of government neglect and failed policy, many Indigenous communities continue to flourish, creating successful and viable institutions and continuing to keep their cultural values strong and their children safe.

We could learn much from what it is that successful organisations do to ensure their effectiveness and viability in this climate and use that information as a basis for developing similar conditions in the communities that fail.

And we can look at research in Australia and North America that has detailed that better socio-economic outcomes are achieved when Indigenous people are involved in the setting of priorities within their community, the development of policy, the delivery of services and the implementation of programs.

One element of the intervention assists in making this point. The intervention employed a mechanism that linked school attendance with the quarantining of welfare payments. There is no evidence that the use of welfare as a stick improves school attendance. In fact, all of the research points to the fact that using welfare payments in this way can add an additional stress factor into an already dysfunctional situation. What the research also shows us is that in the Northern Territory there are not enough teachers and classrooms to accommodate all of the Indigenous children who live there and for every dollar spent on the education of non-Indigenous children only 47 cents is spent on the education of an Indigenous child. There is an enormous amount of evidence of government neglect of Indigenous education from the government side and no effort made to fix that under-investment in education while parents are being punished if their children do not attend school.

What the evidence shows works in engaging Indigenous children with the school process are things like involving members of the Indigenous community in schools through elders programs or as aboriginal teaching aides. Breakfast and lunch programs work. And creating a curriculum that is culturally focused to engage Indigenous children in the learning process is another key factor. The successful combination developed by Indigenous educator Chris Sara is one that emphasises academic excellence while developing self-esteem often through cultural programs. Not one of these types of programs was funded as part of the intervention.

It is encouraging that, generally, Rudd has said that he wants his government to be guided by research-based policy generally, he has yet to confirm that this will be his approach to Indigenous issues specifically. I am heartened to hear that he is finally meeting with the leaders in the Northern Territory to discuss the intervention. This first step in consultation is an important process for us to all move forward.

But the fact that we now have more opportunity to make a real difference means that there is as much work to do as there was during the Howard era. In fact, we have the chance now to make changes that can sustain us for the long term and weather the next time that we are assaulted by the narrow thinking that pervaded the Indigenous affairs portfolio under Howard. So there is still much work to be done.

And that is why the work of ReconciliACTION remains so important today. It is an organisation of committed people who – along with state and local reconciliation groups – kept the fire burning on meaningful reconciliation when Howard tried desperately to extinguish it. When leadership on the national level faltered, it flourished at the local level because of the work of these groups. It has been able to harness the energy and enthusiasm of particularly young Australians who have always contested Howard's vision for the relationship between black and white Australia.

The other thing about ReconciliACTION that I find inspiring is that there is a popular misconception that somehow younger people today are not interested in politics. This false generalisation of a whole generation as self-interested and disinterested defies the reality (like any false generalisation). The younger generation simply engages in their political activity in a way that breaks the mould from the old style activities. Instead of simply meeting in community halls and producing newsletters, there are virtual communities creating spaces to discuss key issues and the internet is employed as an effective and powerful tool of politics and protest.

And that is not to say that one way is better than another but to celebrate the fact that the more innovative and varied ways we have to provoke discussion, debate, and social change, all the better for the society we live in.

So I am very honoured to be asked to be part of the launch of this online education kit. It will play an important and vital space in which information can be disseminated and the important and sophisticated debates that we can now have can take place. It is especially important as this is a forum that will engage the younger generations and you have the most at stake in a resolution of the unfinished business of reconciliation and the energy to keep the process going.

The ability to be able to inform those who are interested about how to harness their interest to progress the cause of creating equality between black and white Australians and repairing the relationship between our two communities remains the most important challenge of our time and ReconciliACTION, through all of its work, in particular the on-line education kit we are here to celebrate to day, can play an instrumental role in that process".

Archives found at <http://reconciliation.org.au/nsw/recentissues/archives>

This work is licensed under the *Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 2.5 Australia* License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.5/au/>

Disclaimer: ReconciliACTION NSW has undertaken all reasonable measures to ensure that the information in this document is accurate and specifically disclaims any liability, loss or risk, personal or otherwise, which is incurred as a direct or indirect result of the use and application of any of the contents.