

‘OUR REALITY’ WHY AND HOW INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES RELATE TO THE NON-INDIGENOUS WORLD

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First I would like to say thanks to the Eora people, on whose land I am now standing, for allowing me the opportunity to be here to speak to you all. The topic I have been asked to speak on is ‘Our Reality’; and why and how Indigenous communities relate to the non-Indigenous world. The reality for Aboriginal people is that our lives have not only been deeply impacted upon by non-Aboriginal people in the past, but remain severely affected by this ongoing assault. I fear our future remains uncertain should this continue.

We relate to a non-Indigenous world because it is our reality, it is in our face if you like. We are realists; we fully understand the reality of no going back. We accept that we need to not only survive under this continuing impact but more importantly that we have to work to a vantage point where we feel we are actually living in the present.

To reach this point though, it is necessary for not only us to accept our reality but for the rest of the Australian society to understand the inter connectedness between my peoples’ reality and theirs. Trying to explain how we relate to a non-Indigenous world is a little more complex. Our world has various depths of reality that a non-Aboriginal world has no way of accessing. At one level my reality is a product of my ngurra, walytja and tjukurpa in a dynamic process unavailable to most of you present.

A non-Aboriginal world does however have the ability to deny and damage this reality that then establishes another level of an Aboriginal reality. At this level, the reality of my life and of my peoples is a product of the reality of collision between our worlds. In this collision my people are losing badly. However, as I have tried to explain in previous speeches, this reality does not have to remain.

The onus is though on the non-Aboriginal world to reconsider its position in relation to Aboriginal people. And it is my belief that should such a reconsideration of this relationship sincerely occurs, it would be for the benefit of us all. The title given to this workshop is “Learning from the Past – Thinking about the Future”.

I would truly like to think that this is possible, that is that non-Aboriginal people can truly learn from the past and that Aboriginal people can truly believe they have a future that they are able to determine. The past informs us of this reality. That once the process of colonisation commenced in this country, there has been another created which is one of a denial of our reality and I cannot see that much has changed since Terra Nullius was declared over our land.

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I acknowledge and appreciate the Mabo and Wik decisions from your High Court, but these were Acts brought about by our struggle, not by non-Aboriginal people accepting the reality of our existence, our ownership of land or of our own forms of law and governance. Your governments could have at any time in their history renounced the lie and deceit of *terra nullius* and yet they did not. Moreover, the response from governments to the High Court's decision has been basically to try and diminish and restrain the existence of native title, in what almost would seem an effort to re-apply the notion of *terra nullius*.

Still today our existence is unrecognised in your state and federal constitutions; in effect we are still not real to non-Aboriginal people. The reality of this is felt every day in our communities. I could stand here today and reiterate the numerous statistics that show the disadvantage of my people and the difficulty of their lives as a description of our reality.

However I am tiring of this, these facts and figures begin to sound so ineffective when I deal personally every day with the reality of the pain and hurt these statistics fail to reveal, not only within my own family and community, but also more broadly across the communities of Central Australia whom I represent. I am also sure that most of you people here today are aware of these facts and figures and have a motivation for wanting to try and stem the ongoing source of such disadvantage.

If this should be the case, what I would like to say to you people and not in an ill considered manner, is that for your efforts to end up anywhere near being effective for my people you then have to recognise who we are. You have to see the reality of your position as it relates to the reality of Aboriginal people. We have to develop a measure of respect and trust to create positive and meaningful relationships.

Trust and the effectiveness of our relationships can only emerge from an acceptance of truth. If this should prove a hard reality for some of you people, then let me assure the reality of my people is much harder. In the evolution of imposed governance upon my people and the 'corporatisation' of this country, Aboriginal people have lost, to the benefit of others.

I would think that many people here today have managed to obtain some of those benefits, however due to your 'love of mankind' you now wish to assist those who have suffered. For this I have real gratitude, but my gratitude is tempered by your approach and why and how you will relate to Aboriginal people. First and foremost you will have to accept and recognise that Aboriginal people have our own and law and governance.

For you this will mean that when it comes to issues of how resources may be most effectively and efficiently utilised, the final decision must be in the hands of the people for whom the benefit of these resources are intended.

For your assurance though, I am the first to accept the notion of accountability, after all I work for the most accountable and scrutinised organisation in this land. But there are two sides to accountability in this process and in the end it is Aboriginal people's lives and values at stake. If you are truly seeking the most effective outcome that means the best value for your

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money, then you may have to release some of the control you have always felt, over what you believe to be rightfully yours.

This may not be as difficult as some of you may consider, for in my own communities an example of such an approach is currently emerging. The monies raised by a Sotheby's art auction prior to the Olympics in this very city, perhaps some people here present were involved – is an example worth following. One million dollars were raised at this auction for the development of dialysis options within a number of communities in the Western Desert.

Through a process of information exchange, the community's committee members are becoming aware of the numerous and complex issues surrounding the development of dialysis options in their home communities. They are establishing an accountable, financial and administrative structure to deal with the funds available and importantly making informed decisions as they proceed.

The pace of development may not appear to be what was initially expected, but then in the NT there is not much experience or precedent in undertaking such an extensive exercise in community dialysis. This project is breaking new ground and it is doing it with no financial contribution, thus far, from either the NT or Commonwealth Government. It is though an example worth observing as to how philanthropic and corporate organisations may work with Aboriginal people.

In this instance, I think perhaps the actual experience of many of those who work in the Aboriginal Art movement throughout Australia have with our reality, has been of real assistance in this matter. Furthermore, as they are constantly promoting and marketing expressions of our selves, our law and our land, perhaps also they have come recognise and accept our right that our future must lie in our hands.

Apart from giving their own recognition to Aboriginal people, corporate and philanthropic organisations can assist Aboriginal people achieve their required and appropriate status in this country through political support and lobbying. The reality is that we have to operate within and remain confined by government laws and policies at all levels within our lives. In our efforts to develop a future for our children and grand children we are constantly blocked.

Whether this is by design or accident is of no real consequence, as the effect is the same. This creates frustration and hurt amongst Aboriginal people and in our eyes simply continues the mistakes of the past. It is a sad reality for us that our small communities' cemeteries grow, as good intentions prevail.