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Violence Dysfunction Aboriginality

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Speaking Notes

AS DELIVERED

Ladies and Gentlemen

My first duty is to acknowledge the Ngunnawal People. They are the Traditional Owners of the land upon which we meet. My very warm greetings to you, it is my pleasure to be giving this address on your ancestral lands.

Secondly I would like to thank Jo Victoria, Richard Davis and Ed Wensing for their research and assistance with this speech.

Today, I am here to talk about violence.

Violence is a difficult subject to talk about, but we all must.

I want to talk about the different forms of violence afflicting Aboriginal communities and about how we (collectively) let this situation get so bad. I also want to mention what we are doing about it and what I think we should be doing.

And importantly, I want to make the point that violence is not and never was part of Aboriginal tradition.

1. What is the problem?

I am going to begin by talking about the different forms of violence that are shattering our communities and if this level of violence continues we will not be able to realise our potential or achieve our aspirations.

In saying this, I acknowledge that violence is not just an Aboriginal problem, but unfortunately seems to be endemic in all societies, including the broader Australian society.

It manifests itself differently in different societies, it may be more or less visible, and it evokes different responses in different societies. Violence is common in impoverished, depressed and marginalized communities everywhere. There are no exceptions.

However, I am not talking about violence generally, I am talking specifically about Aboriginal experiences of violence.

Violence is undermining our life's very essence, it is destroying us, and there are very few Aboriginal families that are not struggling with the debilitating effects of trauma, despair and damage resulting from their experiences with violence.

I am talking about violence between Aboriginal people, and against Aboriginal people, about domestic violence between partners, sexual violence against men, women and children by individuals and groups, violence by groups against other groups, self harm and suicide, and all forms of psychological and, what I call 'historical violence' experienced by individuals and families over generations.

I am talking about violence that is now so entrenched in our relationships that the victims become the perpetrators of violent acts which continue to the next generation of children, so that even before those children reach adulthood, they in turn become perpetrators of violence against members of their own families.

I am talking about violence that traumatises entire families and communities that is sometimes referred to as 'dysfunctional community syndrome'. Where people are traumatised even by association and the knowledge of, and the witnessing of acts of violence.

I am talking about alcohol and drug induced violence, and the sheer madness of communities supporting clubs and wet canteens where alcohol related violence and dysfunction dominate the rhythms of life for everyone.

And I am talking about psychological violence experienced through racism, through misguided public policies, through exclusion and limited opportunities for economic integration and participation in Australian life.

We are overburdened by our experiences of all these forms of violence.

To read the many reports detailing violence in our communities is to make one weep.

While we have endured and survived cultural ravages, violence and abuse beyond the comprehension of the colonisers and their descendants – our friends and critics – we cannot and must not refrain from taking individual responsibility for our actions- especially our actions of abuse against others less powerful than ourselves – namely our women and children.

2. Not part of Aboriginal tradition

We have no cultural traditions based on humiliation, degradation and violation.

Let me make this point abundantly clear.

Most of the violence, if not all, that Aboriginal communities are experiencing today are not part of Aboriginal tradition or culture.

The kinship system in Aboriginal communities is and can be a and powerful force. Social relations between people are among the most important aspects of Aboriginal life and have a huge impact on what Aboriginal people do.

Family ties and extended relationships underpin how people interact, including which individuals have obligations toward each other, and individuals they should avoid. There is a strong sense of reciprocity between Aboriginal people. Adults have ongoing commitments to one another, and to other younger and older members of the community. All disputes are resolved by kinship structures of reciprocity and in most Aboriginal communities, senior lawmen or elders receive great respect.

Some of our perpetrators of abuse and their apologists corrupt these ties and our culture in a blatant and desperate attempt to excuse their abusive behaviour.

Physical punishment is not unknown in Aboriginal culture as it is in other cultures. However, in Aboriginal culture it was highly regulated and governed. Carried out by and witnessed by people with particular relationships with the perpetrator and the victim.

We all must acknowledge that the level of violence in our communities is totally unacceptable. It is extreme and requires extreme action. Our behaviours of silencing is no longer sustainable and can no longer be excused.

3. The nature and extent of the problem

The statistics and descriptions of violence are well known and well documented.

In 1998 the Queensland Domestic Violence Taskforce estimated that family violence affects 90% of Aboriginal families living in Aboriginal Trust areas and that Aboriginal women experience violence at a rate of 45 times higher than for the non-Indigenous women¹.

The Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Inquiry found that in Queensland in the period 1980 to 1989, 27 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people died in custody. Recent research by Atkinson has found more women have died from family violence in one community in Queensland than all the deaths in custody in that State². This is devastating for any community.

Recent research by Paul Memmot and others for the Federal Attorney-General's Department concludes that the rates of violence is increasing and the types of violence are getting worse in some Indigenous communities and regions³.

Peter Sutton describes a scene of devastation among the newly placed crosses in the cemetery of a small remote community.

“The cemetery there reminds me of the Australian war graves cemetery at Villers-Bretonneaux in France, white crosses, many of them fresh, stretch away seemingly for hundreds of meters. In my time with this community eight people known to me have died at their own hands, two of them women, six of them men. Five of these were young men. From the same community in the same period

¹ The Queensland Domestic Violence Taskforce 1998:256; Atkinson, C. 1998; Atkinson, J. 1996.

² Cited in Atkinson, C (1998) *Violence Against Aboriginal Alternative Dimensions and Proposed Ways Forward*. A thesis for Bachelor of Social Work, University of South Australia 1998.

³ The Memmot Report – a Federal government initiative – *National Crime Prevention Report on Violence in Aboriginal Communities*, 2001;

thirteen people known to me have been victims of homicide, eight of them women, seven of them men, and twelve others have committed homicide, nine of them men and three of them women. Most of these again were young people, and most of the homicides occurred in the home settlement of both assailant and victim. As far as I knew there was only one homicide and one suicide in this community between 1960 and 1985. A wet canteen was opened there for the first time in 1985. Most of the homicides and suicides I refer to here have occurred between 1986 and 2001.”⁴

Child violence includes neglect, incest, and assault by adult carers, paedophilia, and rape of infants by youths. Our children are experiencing horrific levels of violence and sexual abuse beyond comprehension.

I cannot bring myself to relate the extent and the detail of some of the violent encounters endured by children and babies that I have read in process of writing this paper.

Others also have written about how this is ‘threatening the future of the community as a viable social entity’⁵.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Taskforce Report said that:

“When a community has to deal with the tragic deaths of 24 young men in one year, most of which were suicides, there can be no stronger cry for help. Indeed, it is a deafening roar that something is desperately wrong. When the same Community reports three men raping a three year old child, who was raped by another offender ten days later, there is a crisis huge proportions. This same community has a \$6million tavern.”⁶

4. How did we let it get so bad?

How did we get to this point in our history?

There are various causal theories about why violence in Indigenous communities has reached this crisis point.

These theories have been debated and developed for years and all direct our attention to the complexities of the specific Indigenous experience in this country.

Not many allude to the manifestation of violence and abuse that are common in all communities who are impoverished and marginalised both socially and economically.

⁴ Sutton, P (2000) A Revised Version of the Inaugural Berndt Foundation Biennial Lecture given at the annual conference of the Australian Anthropological Society, University of Western Australia, on 23 September 2000. P.3.

⁵ (Martin 1988 cited in. Memmott et al 2001:43, Memmott also refers to articles by journalist Tony Kock in 1998, where he reported 30 cases of child rape and abuse from the remote Queensland communities that were before the courts at that time. They were only the ones that had come to the attention of the authorities.)

⁶ Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women’s Taskforce on Violence Report, p21 no date?

There was of course, our violent colonisation; over two centuries of discriminatory and damaging social policies often enforced or imposed with violence resulting in trans-generational trauma.

There have been our own individual experiences of violations and violence as children; our continued collective social marginalisation and economic exclusion and impoverishment, all of which combine into a volatile cocktail of despair, anger, powerlessness, and a sense of hopelessness.

Our collective experiences form deep scars within each of us individually. And we become over-whelmed by emotions of insecurity, hurt and shame that often manifests itself in silence, sickness and isolation, or violence.

5. What are we currently doing about it?

We must find ways of moving beyond the silence, we must find a way of moving beyond the shame and numbed acceptance.

Many of us are trying, but many of us are not trying hard enough.

We are not trying as individuals, we are not breaking through the silent shame to confront our violent brothers, and are not supporting others who, despite their own traumas, are trying to help themselves and others to come to terms with their own violent experiences.

And, I don't think those of us who are said to be leaders are providing the leadership that is so desperately required in these circumstances.

We are not calling on Governments at all levels to support us, to support community initiatives and to work collaboratively to combat violence and to service our communities with counsellors and other resources as a national priority.

Here, in this forum I propose that the Aboriginal leadership in country, men and women together, call on the Australian Government to work with us in partnership, to acknowledge the centrality of violence induced trauma and its debilitating effects and to combat family violence as a national priority.

The unacceptable levels of violence have not gone unnoticed by Aboriginal communities, or by States and Territories and the Federal Government.

Indeed there are reports after reports at Federal, State, local government and community levels detailing the extent of violence in Aboriginal communities⁷.

⁷ (See for example:

- the Gordon Report WA with nearly 200 recommendations for all of government, all of community directions;
- The Queensland Domestic Violence Taskforce Report – Beyond these Walls, Department of Family and Community Services and Welfare Housing, Brisbane in 1998;
- The Office for the Status of Women's Report on Partnerships Against Domestic Violence;
- The Memmot Report – a Federal government initiative – National Crime Prevention Report on Violence in Aboriginal Communities, 2001;
- The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence Report;
- The Western Australian Task Force on Domestic Violence, 1986;

There are dozens of small community projects around Australia being funded under these and other small grants programs from many sources.

Some of these small projects are creating headlines with their determination, direction and results at the community level. But many lack long term, coordinated, sufficiently resourced and networked support.

Some of these programs include:

- night patrols,
- community justice groups,
- therapy camps for victims and offenders,
- youth services,
- violence education,
- family violence prevention,
- women's shelters and resource centres,
- suicide prevention,
- counselling services,
- men's anti-violence services and sobriety groups, and
- substance abuse programs⁸.

Indigenous researcher, Judy Atkinson, has been working for many years on violence projects and Judy believes that:

“It seems that a healthy {supportive} family is the best prescription for recovery from trauma. This, more than any other factor, underlies the tragedy and criminality of the wilful destruction of Aboriginal family systems by the governments of Australia. It emphasises the need to focus on rebuilding Aboriginal families for a whole of community, whole-of-government approach to violence and trauma in Aboriginal lives.”⁹

Aboriginal women have been crying for help and have gathered themselves together for support and healing in many forums.

Despite Aboriginal men's general silence and our inability to collectively embrace discussions about violence there are also many notable people and programs developing.

6. What should we be doing?

As I said earlier: Extreme situations require extreme responses.

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- Break the Silence: Report to the Western Australian Government;
 - Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody 1991;
 - National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families 1997, Bringing them Home, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commissioner;
- just to name a few.)

⁸ See Memmott, appendix 2 for a list, also see Partnerships Against Domestic Violence Program, OSW Indigenous community programs.

⁹ Judy Atkinson (2002) *Trauma Trails – Recreating Song Lines - The Trans-generational Effects of Trauma in Indigenous Australia* p.78.

While there are certainly issues of structural change, recognition of past wrongs and influences of violent histories that require attention at the Federal level, so too are drastic, overarching responses required at other levels to address the fear and terror that many Indigenous people are experiencing now.

Most of the above mentioned reports and initiatives have acknowledged the complexities of the Indigenous experiences of violence and most have called for ‘whole of government – whole of community’ responses.

However, despite some national level directions and inter-governmental committees with responsibilities for domestic violence programs there remains no centralised national policy direction and commitment within a framework of shared responsibility.

This is not just our problem; this is everyone’s problem.

It is not only the Indigenous leadership that should be tackling these issues, it also requires strong political leadership from the Prime Minister and from State and Territory Premiers and Chief Ministers to properly prioritise policies addressing domestic and other violence in Indigenous communities.

Addressing the violence in Aboriginal communities is central to underpinning the success of all other Aboriginal programs.

Despite the national void in national Aboriginal violence policy, many people and groups around the country are trying to develop initiatives to deal with violence.

Unfortunately, this support appears to be lacking any sense of cohesion, across State and Territory boundaries and between on the ground initiatives.

The fact is that the effectiveness of all programs and services to Aboriginal people are undermined by the extent of violence in Aboriginal communities.

Violent encounters within houses cause untold, unmeasured damage to housing and infrastructure, it hinders people’s ability to work, and it affects children’s ability to engage in the education system. It creates such stress and physical trauma in our bodies that many health initiatives are pointless. All these major programs are ineffectual without acknowledging the extent that violence infiltrates daily activities and encounters.

Violence must be tackled as a priority, not part of some other secondary program, but as a central feature in Aboriginal social and economic policy across all of government- all of community priorities.

Before concluding there is one other issue we need to address.

If having established commitment and partnership at the national level by Aboriginal leaders, communities and governments for allocating top priority to address violence, we must focus on establishing safety and security in our communities.

People cannot talk about violence while they are still living in fear and terror. Once safe, the issues of silence and shame and hurt can be discussed by families and communities with governments and organisations.

The silence around domestic or family violence is deafening.

Silence takes on many forms in the context of violence. Let me explain.

There is silence because of shame.

There is silence because people are scared about revisiting painful memories.

There is silence because of intimidation and fear of reprisal.

There is silence because of the fear that the violent perpetrator may be locked up, or that of not wanting to hurt others in the family or community by exposing violence.

There is also silence because people continue to live in fear, that they have no safe place to go to express this fear or to seek help where they are confident it will be dealt with appropriately. Worse still there are too many places in this country where our people live where there is nowhere to go for help.

People are also silent because they fear the interrogation of the police more than the fear of repeated violent acts against them by their relatives.¹⁰

And there is silence because ‘it is not our business to talk up’.

I was very shaken by Peter Sutton’s remarks when he wrote, in his paper I referred to earlier, that:

“On my return to the city I felt unable to give comfort to the view that a non-Indigenous person should leave public statements on these questions to Indigenous people alone...The tragic circumstances I refer to are not alone the business of those who suffer them.”¹¹

Paul Memmott in his recent report to the Attorney-General’s Department quotes David Martin, who says there is a need to encourage the ‘muted voice to express’¹².

However, the muted voices – often the victims of violence – will not and cannot break that silence if they are not safe.

Publicly admitting the problem of violence in a community and acknowledging the need for collective action is the first step towards healing and combating such violence.

And it is impossible for me to emphasise this enough.

Concluding remarks

¹⁰ Memmott et al, 2001:7; cites Atkinson 1990c:20.

¹¹ Sutton, P. 2000:3

¹² Memmott et al, 2001:85; cites Martin 1992:168-9.

Ladies & Gentlemen,

Allow me to finish.

The violence occurring in Aboriginal communities today is not part of Aboriginal tradition or culture. It is occurring principally because of the marginalisation of Aboriginal people, the economic and welfare dependency, continuing high levels of unemployment, the dissolution of our culture and tradition and the breakdown of societal and community values.

Violence is devastating our communities and destroying our futures. I call on all of us to take responsibility now to work together to combat the violence. And because too many of us for too long are either unwilling or incapable of taking responsibility.

What we now need to do is to build the safe places so the muted voices can be heard. This is so vitally important to start the healing process in local communities.

This requires individual, family, community, state and federal governments to commit to working collaboratively against violence and to place these issues at the top of the policy agenda as a national priority.

Thank you

Ends...

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