

‘Nurturing Tomorrow’s Indigenous Leaders’

2003 Family Oration

Relationships Reconciliation and Children Conference

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Professor Mick Dodson

Australian National University Institute for Indigenous Australia

Firstly I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of this country the Kurna people.

The focus of my speech today is our Indigenous futures – our children.

In doing so, I want to share with you some of my gravest fears resulting from the crisis of extreme violence and dysfunction which exist in many parts of Australia.

I also want to share with you some of what inspires me that I have seen rising from our violent pasts and showing promise for the future of our Indigenous communities particularly and for Australia generally.

So. The bad news first. Let me impress upon you the urgency of the situation we all face here in Australia in relation to young Indigenous people.

We have a situation where a rapidly growing, very young Indigenous population, is dependant on the care of comparatively few Indigenous adults.

Many of these adults are incapacitated by colonial stresses, violent pasts, forced separation from their own families, shared histories of child abuse and violations, health crises, poverty, homelessness and marginalisation.

Many Indigenous adults today burdened by the care of their children, may never have known a trusting relationship.

They may never have inherited parenting skills and nurturing skills from their parents.

They may only have ever known abusive relationships, institutionalisation and marginalisation.

And consequently have not the capacities themselves, without significant support, to nurture their children into confident, participating, active adults and future leaders.

The result more often than not, is another generation of Indigenous children experiencing violence, abuse, neglect and lost opportunities.

Without exposure to nurturing, supportive, trusting relationships – the violent, hopeless cycles of life experienced by their parents with simply continue.

At the same time, those adults who can nurture our children are significantly overburdened themselves.

The Grandmothers, the single parents, the older siblings and the cousins, caring for their own, and often for their relatives' children at various times.

They are often caring for many more children, with far less of everything:

- less than adequate support
- less than adequate economic resources
- less than adequate housing
- less than adequate access to vital community services
- little acknowledgment from the wider community
- little acknowledgment from service providers, employers, housing providers
- and because of this, many of those children with access to supportive relationships suffer as well.

Of course, for most of you here today, this is not new news. It is however, a stark reminder of the bare facts of reality of what we currently endure.

Currently, it is impossible to know the full extent of child abuse in all its forms in the Indigenous community.

Certainly, anecdotally, indications are that there may be few Indigenous families not affected by child neglect and abuse.

Although measures of hospitalisation, notifications of STD infections in children and mandatory reporting don't fully capture the extent of the

problem, they do indicate that Indigenous children are fairing far worse than non-Indigenous children.

For instance, a draft report soon to come out of the National Child Protection Clearing House, says that:

“Indigenous children are significantly over presented in most statutory child protection systems.ⁱ

Based on child abuse and neglect which was notified and reported to child protection departments around Australia in 2001-2001, 3,254 Indigenous children under 17 years had some form of abuse substantiated (i.e. the statutory protection authority believed that physical abuse, psychological abuse, sexual abuse and /or neglect had occurred (AIHW 2003).

This rate of substantiation was disproportionately high (4.3 times higher on average for all types of abuse) in the Indigenous population, than in the non-Indigenous population. (2003:4)

Another disturbing figure listed in this paperⁱⁱ is that Indigenous children are

‘six times more likely to be removed from their families than other Australian childrenⁱⁱⁱ

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children comprise 2.7% of children in Australia, yet constitute 20% of those placed in out-of -home care’.^{iv}

These are the measurables in child neglect and abuse.

What is most concerning for Indigenous children is making visible the unmeasurables – for example,

It has been estimated that 88% of all rapes go unreported^v despite the official measures showing that the ‘rate of reports to police of sexual assault of Indigenous girls was approximately double that of non-Indigenous girls in some areas^{vi} .

There is also increasing evidence that exposure to and witnessing of family and community violence leads to debilitating levels of trauma and stress in individuals particularly children.

And in many ways normalises violence as an acceptable response to stress.

These factors, combined with a fertility rate for Indigenous peoples amongst the highest in the world, means that if the current levels of violence and trauma and child abuse continue unabated, then it won't be too long before dysfunctional, traumatised Indigenous children and young people hit the streets of our cities and towns in unprecedented numbers, further damaging themselves, their families and other people and property.

Interactions with the criminal justice system and institutionalisation of our young people will soar beyond the current unacceptable levels. We stand to be condemned if we allow that to happen.

In an article in the Weekend Australian only the Saturday before last, it was reported that:

“Aboriginal Australians face a devastatingly bleak outlook over the next decade with economists forecasting a ‘distinct prospect’ of further social deterioration and much higher unemployment”.^{vii}

The same article referred to research by the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the ANU which predicts “that by 2011, the Aboriginal population will swell from 458,520 in 2001 to 556,606 driving unemployment up to almost 31 percent”.^{viii}

Earlier this year I spoke at the National Press Club in Canberra about the unacceptable levels of violence experienced by Indigenous people everywhere in Australia.

I called for leadership in the Indigenous community and in Governments to take extreme action to address the severity of the problem.

Following the Press Club delivery, the Prime Minister responded by convening a meeting with a small number of Indigenous Leaders to discuss family violence and child abuse in Indigenous communities.

A working party developed out of that group, prepared a report to the Prime Minister called ‘Family Violence and Child Abuse in Indigenous Communities’.^{ix}

The report included a Statement of Principles and a Framework to Address Family Violence which was to be discussed at the August meeting of the Council of Australian Governments (COAG).

Unfortunately, this Report was not discussed at this meeting because the COAG meeting broke up early. However I would like to relate some of the relevant sections to you today.

It suggests that solutions to breaking the cycles of family violence and abuse must be:

‘informed by general community experience and driven by local community initiative.

They need to be addressed in a holistic manner, including through education, employment, health care, law enforcement, substance misuse services as well as family violence prevention programs.

Effective approaches are also likely to include healing and rehabilitation. Leadership needs to be developed within communities.’^x

The Framework to Address Family Violence Specifies that:

‘Shared responsibility between governments and Indigenous communities is essential to addressing family violence and child abuse.

Governments have a responsibility to provide support and protection to enable families and communities to rebuild and strengthen and to coordinate resources and services to complement community-based actions.

Developing community capacity and leadership will be central to developing effective partnerships to prevent family violence and address the underlying problems of community dysfunction’.^{xi}

This paper also mentions the key role alcohol and drug abuse play in violence, particularly in dysfunctional families and communities, and calls for alcohol regulation, control and diversionary programs to reduce recidivism.

The report raises concerns about the effectiveness of existing child protection systems and says that they are not meeting the needs of Indigenous children and families.

It calls for more responsive early interventions in such areas as ‘positive parenting programmes, relationship counselling and education of the vulnerability of children and their development needs’.

Issues of capacity for Indigenous communities to take a lead role in combating family violence and child abuse are also mentioned.

Capacity development to build local governance structures to engage with governments, service providers and the local community is called for.

Capacity to develop leadership within the communities ensuring that there are strong role models and mentors for young people which,

- explicitly condemn violence
- model respectful behaviours, and
- intervene in abusive situations involving children with the authority and backing of their communities.

Unfortunately, this Report has not yet been discussed by COAG, but it has been scheduled for its next meeting.

The Prime Minister has responded with a press statement on the 28th August this year announcing a commitment of \$20 million to address violence and child abuse in Indigenous Communities.

However, it is unclear from this statement, exactly what is new money or what is existing money that is being moved around and renamed as new.

Earlier, I promised some good news stories.

Its important to mention that many Indigenous communities have taken on the issues of violence themselves. Some being more successful than others.

Some individual Indigenous people have worked tirelessly within their own families and communities to protect children and make a stand against violence.

These people can be found everywhere working away in small but significant ways which may make a difference to just one, or to many children's lives.

There are people like Professor Judy Atkinson, who has developed methods to explore ways of healing, to understand trans-generational manifestations of trauma and to respond to Indigenous people and communities asking for help to develop healing processes in their own communities.

There are Indigenous communities taking a stand against alcohol abuse by closing wet canteens or restricting access to alcohol.

There are many communities supporting night patrols and programs that look after teenagers after dark and take them home before they get into too much trouble.

There are organisations that are providing counselling and education to victims and perpetrators of violence.

And there are many examples of community initiative trying to tackle local problems with partnerships with police and corrections for diversionary programs.

And finally, similarly the Indigenous Leadership of today must act responsibly and responsively to calls from our women and children to,

- reject violence
- to model respectful relationships
- to nurture and grow up our children so that they can exercise choice in how they wish to live their lives, without fear, or trauma.

Ultimately, it will be our children's parents, the significant adults in their lives, that will be the most influential in their development towards adulthood.

Professor Judy Atkinson has shown in her work, it often takes only one person who really believes in a child and is prepared to listen, listen to

their stories of fear and abuse, who can significantly influence the recovery and healing of that child.

The challenge for Indigenous communities today is to ensure that every child has access to a safe place, a place to escape violence, to seek help, and to be listened to.

Enabling a child to escape violence, to be protected and cared for is every child's right and every communities responsibility.

It is also the responsibility of Australian governments to work with communities to make this happen.

In concluding, I not only call on the government to respond to and implement the Framework to Address Family Violence outlined in the Report to the Prime Minister on 'Family Violence and Child Abuse in Indigenous Communities'.

And to committ new funding to resource its implementation.

I also call on Indigenous leaders and Indigenous families, together with our non-Indigenous friends, colleagues, service providers and support workers to take a tough stand.

To make it our business to speak out.

To be strong role models in responsible, respectful relationships.

To educate our children to know what are appropriate, non-violent ways to relate to each other.

And to nurture our children to be confident young people and to become tomorrow's leaders.

Thankyou

ⁱ Stanley, J. Tomison, A.M., Pocock, J. 2003 *The issue of child abuse and neglect for Indigenous Australian communities*, National Child Protection Clearing House, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Issues Paper no 18, p.4-5

ⁱⁱ Ibid:5

ⁱⁱⁱ Stanley, et.a.l 2003 cite Edwards, R.W.& Madden, R. 2001 *The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra

^{iv} Stanley, et.al. 2003:5 cite Cunneen, C. & Libesman, T. 2000 'Postcolonial trauma: The contemporary removal of Indigenous Children and young people from their families in Australia', Australian Journal of Social Issues, vol.35, no.2, 99-115

^v Stanley, et.al. 2003 cite Robertson, B. 2000 *The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Women's Task Force on Violence Report*, Department of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Policy and Development, Queensland

^{vi} This figure was reported in the Stanley et.al. paper as sourced to Ferrante and Fernandez 2002 – reported in Gordon, Hallan and Hery 2002 *Putting the picture together; Inquiry into Response by Government Agencies to Complaints of Family Violence and Child Abuse in Aboriginal Communities* Department of Premier and Cabinet, Western Australia

^{vii} Rintoul, S. 2003 *Black outlook grim, with jobless at 30pc* in *The Weekend Australian* Oct. 11-12 2003

^{viii} Hunter, B., Kinfu, Y., & Taylor, J. 2003 *The Future of Indigenous Work – forecasts of labour status to 2011* CAEPR Discussion Paper No251, CAEPR, Canberra

^{ix} Family Violence and Child Abuse in Indigenous Communities – A Report to the Prime Minister 2003

^x *Ibid*:2

^{xi} *Ibid*:4