

# **7<sup>th</sup> Vincent Lingiari Memorial Lecture**

## **‘Into the Light’**

**I wish to thank all those who have assisted me in the writing of this paper, in particular  
I thank Nigel Parbury, a good mate.**

**Linda Burney, MP  
Wiradjuri**

Ballumb Ambol Larrakia and Gurindji yindamarra.  
Ngudu-yirra bang marang.

I pay my respect to the ancient Larrakia and Gurindji. I say this to you. Greetings.

I honour your custodianship and care of country.

I also pay my respect to the many senior Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people here this evening.

In observing the protocol of acknowledging country, we are reminded of three things.

Firstly, that Australia is a country of many layers. The most ancient layer is that of Aboriginal Australia. Hundreds of nation states. The Larrakia, Gurindji, Wiradjuri, Kitja, Yorta Yorta, Waka Waka, Pitjantjara, Barkandji, Warlpri and Paredarerme. This is a map that should be as familiar to Australians as the eight states and territories. Sadly it is not.

Secondly, acknowledging country reminds us of the great gift Aboriginal culture and survival bestows on us as a nation.

Thirdly and most urgently, acknowledging country reminds us of unfinished business. This relates to the rights and social justice outcomes - or lack of them – of the first Australians.

I wish to thank the Charles Darwin University for the invitation to present the 2006 Vincent Lingiari Memorial Lecture. I am very conscious of the calibre of the people who have spoken in previous years. Sir William Deane, Gough Whitlam, Malcolm Fraser, Patrick Dodson, Galarrwuy Yunupingu and Brian Manning. All have played an important role in the writing of the Australian story. However I did note there were no girls on the list. There will be now. I am extraordinarily humbled by the invitation.

I am of the Wiradjuri nation of southwestern NSW. Our country begins on the western side of the Great Dividing Range between Blackheath and Bathurst. Wiradjuri territory is shaped like a fan. It sweeps across the catchments of the Lachlan, Macquarie and the Murrumbidgee Rivers. In the language of the Wiradjuri these three rivers are called Galari,

Wambuul and Marrambidya. I am of the Marrambidya Wiradjuri.

The Wiradjuri were the first inland nation to experience the brutality of British colonisation. The so-called ‘first crossing’ of the Blue Mountains by Blaxland, Wentworth and Lawson in 1813 may have provided the expanding colony with rich grazing land, but it spelt a litany of horrors for the Wiradjuri.

The resistance of the mighty Wiradjuri leader Windradyne and his warriors was so strong that martial law was declared in Bathurst in 1823 – two thirds of the Wiradjuri around Bathurst were murdered during the four months of martial law. Some of the most brutal recorded massacres in the colony’s history happened to my ancestors. And then to compound the damage even further, gold was discovered at Bathurst in 1851. The Great Australian Gold Rush started in the land of the Wiradjuri.

I tell this story so you can place me. It underpins, as does the story of Vincent Lingiari, the essence of Aboriginality. That is, connection to country and where you stand in it. It also

reminds us of the injustices perpetrated on the First Peoples in the so-called building of our nation. It is the telling of truth.

Tonight is about truth telling. Vincent Lingiari and his people forged a shining chapter in the narrative of our nation. This chapter was fired by connection to country and the pursuit of justice and decency. The steely determination of ‘that old man’ and his mob to ‘stay out’ for eight years until justice was served is humbling and inspiring.

Gathered here this evening, we participate in the further forging of that story. This year we celebrate the Gurindji story 40 years on. I was very much reminded of this in a recent article in the Sydney Morning Herald. The headline was ‘Stockmen mark long walk to freedom and land rights’. It quoted Billy Bunter Jampijinpa, one of the few remaining stockmen who took that long walk. He said: “It was the day we walked out of the darkness into the light.” In 1966 the Gurindji, like other Aboriginal people all across this land, were not yet citizens. In 1966 I was nine years old. Friends, it was not such a long time ago.

How well we know the photograph taken in 1975 by Merv Bishop, of those two men, one black and one white, symbolically exchanging the red dirt of Gurindji country. It is a powerful image and has come to represent a great moment in our history - recognition in Australian law of Aboriginal people's right to country. My heart surges when I hear the words of the Paul Kelly-Kev Carmody song 'From Little Things Big Things Grow':

That was the story of Vincent Lingiari  
But this is a story of something much more.  
How power and privilege cannot move a people  
Who know where they stand and stand in the law.

Tonight we honour that old man and all of those, across the country, who stood with him.

In the context of honouring people, there are three other Australian men who meant an enormous amount to me. Much of what I share with you this evening has been fashioned by them. I loved them all very much. Like Vincent, they too have passed from our presence. And, like Vincent Lingiari, they

have left us richer for them being here. My heart has been heavy of late. It is difficult for me to explain, but as I was preparing this paper for tonight's lecture I realised it had become part of my own healing. I thank you for allowing me to mention their names.

Judge Bob Bellear, Noonuccal/Vanuatu, 1944-2003. His grandfather was 'blackbirded' - stolen - and brought to this country as a slave. Bob joined the Navy and put himself through matriculation and law school to rise to be the first, and still the only Aboriginal Judge. Bob was humble and honest. He sought no accolades but dispensed justice intelligently and with complete fairness. He, and his family, were accorded the honour of a State funeral. His wife Kaye is with us this evening. Thank you, Kaye, for travelling with me to Darwin. I needed a strong hand to hold. Bob died from asbestos-related cancer contracted while he served this nation in the Royal Australian Navy.

Michael Alan Riley, Wiradjuri/Kamilaroy, 1960–2004. World-renowned photographer and filmmaker, and one of the leaders of the 'Koori Art' movement of urban Aboriginal

artists in the 1980s. Michael's work is currently featured in a major retrospective at the National Gallery of Australia. I'd known Michael for over half my life. He was my dearest friend. Michael died of end-stage renal failure at the age of 44.

Rick Farley, 1952-2006. My husband, a brave, foresighted Australian. Rick saw the issues clearly and was able to bring people together. He was one of the architects of the first Native Title Act. He was proud of the role he played in brokering a regional land agreement between Aboriginal people and cattlemen and conservationists in Cape York. Rick put decency and honesty before everything else. Farley was the love of my life. His death was a great personal tragedy, but, like the others, also a tragedy for this nation.

These men made enormous contributions to this country and have left great legacies.

I understand there has been sorry business here as well. My deep condolences to the Lingiari family. Your legacy is stitched firmly into the blanket of our nation.

Many people here this evening will know what it means to carry so much grief. I will never forget a meeting I chaired when I was the Director-General of DAA in NSW. The room was full of senior Government officials discussing what performance indicators should be used in Aboriginal Affairs. The Health Department representative, one of the few Aboriginal people in the room, indicated he wanted to say something. He said, and I paraphrase: “Listen, I have been to 5 funerals of close relatives this year and it’s only April. How do you think we feel? We feel sad and angry. I am sick of going to funerals. How do you develop a performance indicator for that?”

It is not my intention tonight to retell in detail the story of Vincent Lingiari. The eminent people who have delivered this lecture in the past have done that with more eloquence and authority than I can. And as such it lives in the memories of thinking Australians.

I want to focus on four things:

1. the power of narrative and the importance of truth in telling the Australian story
2. the ‘back-to-the-future’ state of Aboriginal Affairs in Australia today.
3. the quiet strength of real leadership
4. the failure of Australians to value Aboriginal Australia and to live up to the promise of great events of the past

The story of Vincent Lingiari and his people’s long struggle for simple justice embraces all of these points.

Next year will be the fortieth anniversary of the 1967 Referendum, which at last counted Aboriginal people in the Australian census. It seemed at last that we were all citizens together, all equal.

And thirty-one years ago this year, that great old man Vincent Lingiari received a symbolic handful of earth from the Prime

Minister of Australia Gough Whitlam. He said ‘Thank you. We are all mates now.’

But the truth, my friends, is this. We are not all equal. And we are not all mates.

Five weeks ago I was in Athens. I walked with awe around the Acropolis, the ancient Agora and the Temple of Olympians. I saw the reverence, effort and respect paid by Greek people to their history. In the National Archaeological Museum of Athens, I found myself standing in front of a white marble bust of Homer. As I stood looking at Homer, the story of Vincent Lingiari and his people came to mind. I thought, ‘Well old man, our mob’s been around a lot longer than these fellas’. It begs the question. We live in a country whose real human history spans back longer than any other - yet as a nation this is not respected, not revered and not collectively celebrated.

Why is it such effort and care has been taken in Australia to betray, blur and deny the truth. I have often used the analogy that growing up as an Aboriginal child looking into the mirror

of our country was difficult and alienating. Your reflection was at best distorted and at worst non-existent. How often have you heard Australia described as a young country? The conspiracy of silence to my way of thinking was racist in its origin. I vividly recall a moment at the NSW Reconciliation Convention in 1999, the then Premier of NSW, Bob Carr said: “We are now seeing the first generation of Australian children growing up being taught the truth.” This statement made me catch my breath. I had spent so many years of my life working in the education arena. Fighting for the truth to be told.

As Alex Boraine, the Deputy Chair of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission, said at the Reconciliation Convention in Melbourne in 1997:

‘Reconciliation ... is a vision. But a vision must be grounded in reality.... There are three anchors which can keep us on the ground...The first of these anchors ... is the exercise, the experience of truth...of telling, of coming to terms with the truth of our past, and the truth understood in this way transcends lies ... It rejects denial and helps to come clean in order to build, to heal.’

Pepe Zalaquett, a South African human rights lawyer jailed and exiled by his own country, has said: ‘Society cannot simply black out a chapter of its history. The unity of a nation depends on a shared identity. Which in turn depends largely on a shared memory. The truth also brings a measure of social catharsis and helps to prevent the past from reoccurring.’

I think of Australia as this amazing mosaic of many tiles, different colours, different sizes. Each tile is the story of an individual. If a tile is missing the mosaic is incomplete and unbalanced. Each individual story creates the whole narrative and each individual story is amazing.

I have often recounted my own experience as a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl sitting in a classroom being taught that my people were savages and the closest example to Stone Age man living today. I felt ashamed and embarrassed. I vividly recall wanting to turn into a piece of paper and slip quietly through the crack in the floor.

I mentioned earlier my encounter with Homer. In Book VI, of the Iliad he writes:

‘Urge him with truth to frame his fair replies;  
And sure he will: For Wisdom never lies’

Forty years on you marvel at the course of events that led up to that time and the course of history that flowed from that day in August when Vincent Lingiari gathered up his people and ‘walked into the light’.

It was a time in our history when, as Brian Manning said in his Lingiari Lecture, ‘Aborigines were arbitrarily bound to employers by a system of institutionalised poverty’. In March 1966 the Northern Territory Workers Union took the Cattle Industry Award to the Arbitration Commission. Equal pay was granted to Aboriginal stockmen. The catch being that the pastoralists were given three years to get used to the idea. Tom Fisher, Lord Vestey’s manager at Wave Hill, said no way to Vincent when he asked for full wages for the stockmen. The flow-on from this is well captured by Patrick

Dodson's words in the foreword of Sir William Deane's 'Signposts from Daguragu', the first Lingiari Lecture:

'But what was apparently an industrial dispute over appalling working and living conditions soon revealed itself as a demand by the Gurindji people for the return of their traditional lands'.

Those words of Vincent when Lord Vestey tried to induce the Gurindji away from Daguragu back to Wave Hill - 'You can keep your gold, we just want our land back' - clearly demonstrated that the walk-off and strike had indeed become something much more.

The stars were in line. The strike coincided with the beginnings of a concerted Aboriginal rights movement. It was the time when the successful YES campaign was in full swing, arguing that the First Australians be included in the census. That old man and his mob, and all their supporters, were main actors in a renaissance in Aboriginal self-determination, pride and identity. They built the foundations of the Land Rights movement. But they did something else as

well. They provided a point for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to join hands. Trade unions and churches, artists and activists, politicians and so many ordinary decent Australians.

How on earth can we grow up as a country if we cannot own our history? When you think about it, Captain Cook's claim over the whole east coast in 1770 was based on the lie of Terra Nullius. It wasn't till 1992 that our legal system recognised that this was a lie. Over 200 years of living a lie.

Much has been done over the last 15 to 20 years to tell all Australians the truth. Groundbreaking research by historians. Years of curriculum reform. Sixteen years of publicity by the Reconciliation Council and Reconciliation Australia. All the work by the dedicated people at the grassroots of the people's movement.

Yet in 2006 we have the federal Minister for education launching a paper by the Menzies Research Centre that calls for Aboriginal culture to be taken out of schools.

I view the so-called history wars as a backlash against telling the truth – and against decency. Starting with the ‘relaxed and comfortable’ landslide in 1996 and continuing through the years of Hansonism. The history wars are about some Australians wanting to re-invent Australia behind the white picket fence of monoculture. Consider the war of ridicule on ‘political correctness’. The targeting of the so-called ‘black armband’ history. The rubbishing of intellectuals; the brutal mockery of ‘chardonnay human rights’. Many of you here tonight would fit this description. I say to the perpetrators of this deceit, Margaret River chardy is a pretty good drop.

Think of the demonising of asylum seekers.

What we have seen, my friends, is the reduction of debate on the whole range of human issues to the lowest common denominator.

Nothing has been more distasteful than the debate on whether the Aboriginal children who were taken from their families were stolen or removed for their own good. Hard as this was

for decent thinking Australians to stomach – how must it affect the people who have been the victims and still suffer?

As Professor Larissa Behrendt wrote recently in the National Indigenous Times:

‘... those debates are not about Aboriginal history. They are about white identity. These debates are about the story that non-Aboriginal Australians want to tell themselves about their country, and more specifically, they are about the stories that white people want to tell themselves about this country.’

Truly, as Faith Bandler said in Melbourne in 1997:

‘In this climate of callousness, where a move to dismantle the structures of democracy is heavily overshadowing us, our task now, is to use our voices, our energy, our will, and our talent to mobilise the forces of good will. We can demolish those forces of distraction under the banner of justice for all. But we must act now before it is too late.’

How right Faith was. And how long ago!

I have worked in Aboriginal Affairs for a very long time. Twenty-six years in fact. Don't be too impressed by the fact my hair is still black. I have a deep and meaningful relationship with my hairdresser. The United States politician Hubert H Humphrey posed the question 'What is the measure of a society? A society is measured by how it treats its most vulnerable'. Hold that thought as I share with you what I call the déjà vu, 'back-to-the-future' state of Aboriginal Affairs in Australia today. It is impossible in this setting not to ask what would that old man think of the current debate which ignores the fundamentals: culture; country; and kin – all swamped by the 'new way forward'.

It is almost impossible to put into words the distress being felt at the roll-back in Aboriginal Affairs. Not least because you think of all those people who gave so much.

At the time of the 1996 election, Mr Howard was quoted saying the pendulum had swung too far – as you can see he's given it a hell of a thump back. Some examples:

\* Mainstreamed Aboriginal health – and now extended this idea to all of Aboriginal affairs.

\* Denied the existence of the stolen generations – refused to say sorry - then spent millions in legal costs to deny what happened to Lorna Cubillo and Peter Gunner.

\* Ignored the final report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation.

\* Rolled back Native Title, an issue the UN Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination took a great deal of interest in. The proposed changes to the NT Land Rights legislation could mean whole communities being leased for a century to the highest bidder. The legislative changes will also undermine the Northern Territory Land Council structure.

\* Encouraged the States and Territories to abandon cultural considerations in sentencing known as the Fernando Principles. If the states and territories legislate to do so, Commonwealth money would flow to the states. I say to Minister Brough, there are already enough of our mob in jail.

\* Abolished ATSIC. For the first time since 1973 there is no nationally elected Indigenous voice. Therefore, there is no Indigenous point of accountability of Government effort and outcomes in Aboriginal Affairs. In essence it is the complete abandonment of the principle of Self Determination.

\* The whole debate around ‘shared responsibility’ and ‘mutual obligation’ - boils down to: we will tell you and by the way if you don’t toe the line we will punish you. I fail to see how a child is going to be better off if there is going to be less income the home. More than a whiff of social engineering.

\* The ‘new paternalism’ being advocated by Tony Abbott, i.e. putting administrators in communities with authority to direct all funding and services. Noel Pearson’s description of this approach as ‘Groundhog day’ hits the mark.

\* What would Vincent think of Kevin Andrews and Workchoices? Very little I suspect. He could be forgiven if he thought it was still 1966.

\* Another disturbing trend is a largely unquestioning and uninterested fourth estate less and less Aboriginal voices are being heard in the media. The debate on Aboriginal Affairs is increasing being held between non-Aboriginal commentators and decision makers. Our only national newspaper, is upfront and unapologetic for a deliberate conservative approach in Aboriginal Affairs. Needless to say, Rupert does not get my \$1.20 a day any more.

Australia is sitting on a ticking time bomb. The Indigenous birth rate is almost double the mainstream – 2.3% compared to 1.2%. The average median age of Indigenous people is 21 years compared to 36 for other Australians. 39% of Indigenous people are under the age of 15 years, compared to 20% of the mainstream. And a massive 57% of the Indigenous population is under 25!!

This is in the context of public policy being driven by an ageing population. As Tom Calma points out in his 2005 Social Justice report, this means more money than current budgets will be needed just to keep up with the status quo,

which is already appalling. Another side effect is the increased number of Indigenous young people who we can expect to be unemployed. This leads us to the number of Indigenous young people who are likely to fall foul of the juvenile justice system – with all that that implies. Not least because school completion rates for Indigenous students – barely over half the mainstream – are still unacceptable.

The life expectancy of Indigenous people is 59.4 years for men, 64.8 for women compared to 76.6 for men and 82.0 for women in the mainstream. The infant mortality rate is 3 times the non-Indigenous rate; an Aboriginal baby is twice as likely to be under-weight. In the area of mental health, the subject of major national focus recently, we are twice as likely to be hospitalised for mental and behavioural disorders. Aboriginal men are **7 times** more likely and Aboriginal women a staggering **31 times** more likely to be hospitalised for intentional self-harm!!

When you collapse these figures down to a local community level the true horror is revealed. The average life expectancy in Wilcannia, far west NSW is 33 years old.

In 1994 Mick Dodson wrote his second Social Justice report:

“We have all heard them – the figures of death, and of disability... Every few years (the) figures are repeated and excite attention. But I suspect that most Australians accept them as being almost inevitable. A certain kind of industrial deafness has developed. The human element in this is not recognised. The meaning of these figures is not heard – or felt.

The statistics of infant and perinatal mortality are our babies and children who die in our arms... The statistics of shortened life expectancy are our mothers and fathers, uncles, aunties and elders who live diminished lives and die before their gifts of knowledge and experience are passed on. We die silently under these statistics.

There should be no mistake that the state of Indigenous health in this country is an abuse of human rights. A decent standard of health and life expectancy equivalent to other Australians is not a favour asked by our people. It is our right – simply because we too are human.”

These words were written twelve years ago. Things have not improved; it is worse in the sense that twelve years ago these words had an impact but now they are as familiar as lift music.

‘It is our right – simply because we too are human.’ This, my friends, is what it is all about. It is about humanity. History tells so many horror stories of what can happen if humanity is denied – the Holocaust, Bosnia, Rwanda or the Sudan. And the examples in our own history of what happened when Aboriginal people were seen as less than human.

Racism is still alive and well in Australian society. It feeds the current debate. Just one example, the Palm Island man whose lawyers were successful in having his trial for his involvement in the so-called riot moved to Brisbane when the Supreme Court ruled that no Aboriginal person could expect a fair trial. This is not Alabama, in the 1950’s – it is Townsville, in Australia in 2006.

It is important to make the point that it has not just been governments who have failed our people. Some of our own mob have failed us too. I have no argument with the notion that communities and individuals have to take more responsibility. Where I have the argument is the almost total lack of public recognition that many communities are displaying great leadership, innovation and success. Just look at the 47 nominees for the 2006 National Indigenous Governance Awards. Just a few examples from across the country:

### **Eight Examples**

Aboriginal Family Support Services Inc – South Australia

Boigu Island Council – Torres Strait

Broome Aboriginal Media Association – Western Australia

Darkinjung Cattle Company Pty Ltd – New South Wales

Traditional Credit Union – Arnhem Land

Women's Karadi Aboriginal Corporation – Tasmania

Yarrabah Shire Council – Queensland

Goolum Goolum Aboriginal Cooperative – Victoria

In 2002, I attended a Ministerial Council on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs meeting in Brisbane. A group of women led by Boni Robertson who had just finished a report on community violence in Queensland, pleaded with the Ministers for help. The evidence was there of not only systemic failure by Governments over a long time but also failure within our own communities.

Aboriginal women in particular have been screaming out for help with this awful and unacceptable problem for years. It is possible to tackle the issue. Provide a safe place and back-up resources so people can disclose in safety and with confidence. Provide a safe refuge for women and children. Recognise that it is not purely an Aboriginal problem. Implement a proper whole-of-Government response - Cross-jurisdictional cooperation based on partnership with communities is crucial. And build capacity within the community.

Accept that it will take a long time to deal with the problem. Educate victims about their rights and how to protect themselves. Work with community-based organisations to run

a campaign in the community that abuse is unacceptable and will not be tolerated. Recognise that it will cost money. Back community members who are prepared to speak out about abuse.

Recognise the cultural implications, especially if the abuser is a relative. And prosecute the perpetrators.

One firm point I want to make this evening is to debunk the recent rhetoric that the rights agenda has been put to rest. It has not. Every time we go to a funeral we think about rights!

I rarely start my day off cross but on the 26<sup>th</sup> July this year I did. I was listening to the Michelle Grattan-Fran Kelly morning chat on Radio National. The basic message was that Howard had moved the debate onto his own ground and the whole idea of rights was off the agenda. It was the day after Mick Dodson appeared on the same stage as the Prime Minister at a Reconciliation Australia event.

To think that we have abandoned the rights agenda is as ridiculous as thinking that Vincent would have walked away

from his struggle for decency and country. Those two young Koori boys I saw rapping in Redfern last week understood absolutely how important rights are. They sang about rights, coupled with respect.

Aboriginal people will never give up; we cannot give up. I suggest to some of the commentators that you stand in our shoes before you profess to know what is in our hearts and our heads.

In the 1880s David Fernando stood outside Australia House in London for many months with little white skeletons all over his coat protesting about the condition of his people.

In 1927 Jimmy Clements made the journey to the opening of Parliament House in Canberra. He went to remind the Duke and Duchess of Kent that we had not ceded our sovereignty.

Bill Ferguson, Jack Patten, Margaret Tucker, Pearl Gibbs and all those others who gathered in Sydney's Australian Hall in 1938 for the first-ever Day of Mourning to discuss and affirm our rights.

Charles Perkins and the Freedom Riders in 1965 set out to expose the lack of rights for blackfellas in rural NSW. Towns where picture theatres were segregated, black kids not allowed to use public swimming pools. Aboriginal women were not allowed to try clothes on in stores, and Aboriginal diggers not allowed into RSL clubs.

The brave men and women who worked so hard for the YES vote in 1967 were fighting for our rights. The Yirrkala Bark Petition sent to the Commonwealth Parliament in 1963 – was about our rights within the Australian Constitutional and legal system. The men and women who set up and sustained the tent embassy on the lawns of Parliament House in 1972 were demanding our rights. The thousands of people who marched with us through the streets of Sydney on the 26th January 1988 marched for freedom justice and hope.

Michael Long's walk from Melbourne to Canberra last year was about rights. Every time Bangarra Dance Theatre opens a show anywhere in the world it affirms our right to story and dance and cultural identity. The smash hit at this year's Cannes film festival 'Ten Canoes' set ten thousand years ago

in country and language – this is surely about our right to country and culture.

And of course, the story of that great old man whose struggle and victory we celebrate tonight – his struggle was all about rights.

I say in the strongest possible terms: Governments come and go. Public opinion waxes and wanes. We ain't going nowhere. This is our country. We will never forgo the pursuit of our rights. To do so would be to betray all those people both black and white who have gone before us - and the children and grandchildren who follow us.

That old man knew how to wait. And we know how to wait. We have done an awful lot of it. Perseverance and tenacity are fellow travellers.

I would like to turn my thoughts to the power of quiet leadership. I can think of no better expression of such leadership than that shown by Vincent Lingiari. Not just one time forty years ago, but his whole life.

You old man, who told your story to a nation and it could not look away. You old man, who said no to unfair wages and conditions and no to Lord Vestey. You who watched your people suffer. You who knew how to wait. You old man, who led - and won - the most heroic campaign ever seen in the history of industrial relations in Australia. You who declared: The issue on which we are protesting is neither purely economic nor political but moral ..... On August 22 1966, you old man who decided the Gurindji would ‘cease to live like dogs.’

I have given much thought to the notion of leadership. A book that has profoundly influenced my thinking is Harper Lee’s ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’. It is the story of a white lawyer defending a black man on a charge of rape in the deep south of America in the ‘40s. I learnt from the storytelling of Harper Lee that:

‘One of the keys to leadership is the ability to take off your own shoes and to stand comfortably, intelligently and sensitively in the shoes of others.’

People in positions of leadership affect the lives of many in the most profound ways. I say that it is wise for those people to remember that humility and loyalty are strengths. We have all stood on the shoulders of others.

Rick Farley said in his Barton Lecture in 2001:

‘For the last ten years I have been heavily involved in the reconciliation movement because there is no other choice about race relations that is acceptable to me. I have seen the generosity of Indigenous people as they continue to offer us the gift of their culture while every day they feel the deep pain of social injustices that shame us all.’

The generosity Rick speaks of is astounding. On so many occasions I have seen Aboriginal people say to the rest of the country, ‘Come take our hand; we can only do this together’. Why? After what some of these people have endured. Yet they can still extend their hand. That to me is true leadership. It is the sort of leadership Vincent Lingiari lived his life by.

Headlines and horror stories abound, bemoaning the lack of Aboriginal leadership or the failures of some Aboriginal leaders. I say this, there is much to learn from the first peoples about quiet leadership.

Thank you Vincent for teaching me two additional things. That leadership requires heart and that it requires compassion. This realisation will truly stay with me forever.

I'm very fearful that we as Australians are not living up to the events of the past. Our country is getting harder to recognise. Australians want to feel good and of course we are excited by international acclaim for our sports, our actors, our artists, our cities. One of our greatest moments was in Sydney 2000 when Cathy Freeman ran the 400. The wall of sound coming from the stadium was like nothing ever heard. And no matter where you were that night – as a nation were were focused absolutely on that race, and all Australians united with one voice to cheer Cathy on, to will her to win. We stood together and that my friends, is what Australia can be.

In the same year hundreds of thousands of Australians walked across bridges for truth, social justice and rights. To all those people I say, we need you now more than ever.

It is about time for responsible commentators to shine the media spotlight on the positive stories that abound in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australia.

Thirty four (34) years ago Frank Hardy finished ‘The Unlucky Australians’, his story of the struggle of Vincent Lingiari and the Gurindji, with these words:

‘Will I, having written it, be free to turn to other books and obsessions, will you, having read it, be free to turn to the pursuit of happiness, will the lucky country remain free while the unlucky Australians are in chains?’

The answer is no!

Deliberate attempts to destroy Aboriginal culture and identity over the past 218 years have failed. You wonder if the Australian establishment was afraid of Aboriginality – one

report of the Protection Board in NSW spoke of Aboriginal children as ‘a positive menace to the State’.

I recall listening to a media conference many years ago. The journalist said to a senior Aboriginal man, “What has been the greatest achievement of Aboriginal people? He said, “We have survived”.

Here are some ways I think the values and the ways of thinking and relating of Aboriginal Australia can make a contribution to the idea of an Australian citizen identity:

- The Aboriginal sense of belonging to the land - not about owning land but caring for land; having a responsibility to country.
- A shared identity – it is time people realised how much of Australian identity comes from the first peoples.
- The way in which Aboriginal people define our place to a nation and a local community – this may be a way for

people to re-connect at the local level, thus leading to a real civic identity.

- To provide the foundation of the country so we can truly own the truth

The search for the mythical ‘real Australia’ can only be realised if people know and are proud of our shared history and our shared identity. What we need to appreciate more is how Aboriginal life has influenced other Australians from the beginning – from Aussie egalitarianism to our sense of humour. We will never understand who Australians are if we leave out the Aboriginal element. Not for nothing are Aboriginal people so often called the ‘real Australians’.

It always intrigues me that the public debate never recognises that for years, many other Australians have been dedicating their lives to working with us. There are, and there have always been, many life partnerships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people based on love and respect. These people do not view Australia through the prism of us and them, but we.

## **Conclusion:**

Tonight we have explored our shared history. We have reflected on what quiet leadership entails. You have listened to my personal assessment of the Aboriginal Affairs landscape in Australia today. Our journey has visited some issues of Australian identity.

It is incumbent on me to offer some ideas for a way ‘out of the darkness’. None of them are new ideas, and from my perspective most of them are obvious.

1. The imperative of reconciliation is urgent. It consists of three handfuls - truth, social justice, and rights. Each handful must be equally laden.
2. Recognise that there is no magic bullet that will ‘fix’ the unacceptable social justice outcomes faced by Aboriginal people. Communities are diverse. Plans devised by primarily non-Aboriginal people in city towers far from

the communities that will have to wear them simply will not work. Local solutions for local issues.

3. State Territory and local governments –have the capacity to and should advance regional land-use agreements and accords.
4. Symbolism is vital. An apology is required. The protocol of welcome and acknowledgment of country is respectful and good manners. A new date for Australia Day should be debated.
5. The demographics of Indigenous Australia must be factored into planning and delivery of services. A dramatic and sustained increase in funding is required. There has to be long-term planning – thinking in decades. For heaven’s sake, not just endless pilot programs, inflexible guidelines and fitting in with electoral cycles.
6. Acknowledge and actively support the principle of self-determination – that is, deal Aboriginal people back into

decision making. The gap left by the abolition of ATSIC must be filled.

7. Political leadership is required.
8. Stop attacking and undermining Aboriginal organization, back them instead – these are so often the bodies that have the staff and the ideas that can deal with local problems.
9. Enormous focus on educational outcomes - particularly pre-school education and the middle years of schooling. Education is a key to unlocking the cycle of poverty. Aboriginal Studies should be mandatory for teacher training and for all students in schools. We need programs that enhance pride and self-esteem in Aboriginal young people – eg. teaching Aboriginal languages.
10. The private sector must continue to forge partnerships with Aboriginal communities. Continue to train and employ people. And continue to provide infrastructure

and economic opportunities. There is so much to be learnt from this growing approach.

12. Australia needs a just settlement with its first people.
13. Constitutional reform that recognises the place of the first peoples.
14. For heaven's sake, stop reinventing the wheel. The way forward sits on shelves gathering dust. 339 recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody; the Bringing Them Home report; the final report of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation; and a myriad of others. Most of them cherry picked or ignored.

This is not a 14-point plan. Heaven forbid!! It is just some of what people have been saying for a very long time.

Can I conclude by borrowing words once again from our old friend Homer's Iliad:

‘And what he greatly thought, he nobly dared.’

Words that could have been specially written for Vincent Lingiari’s epitaph. But what these words also put in front of us is the great question of what is our own individual responsibility and role in nation building.

I was at a forum a couple of years ago and a senior Aboriginal woman called Maureen Watson posed a powerful question: Do we want to be honourable ancestors? I want to be an honourable ancestor. It is our collective responsibility to be honourable ancestors, as Vincent Lingiari is. It is also our individual responsibility to future generations who will inherit the legacy we bequeath them. Ultimately, they will judge what sort of ancestors we have been.