

13th Vincent Lingiari Memorial Lecture

**Stronger Smarter Aboriginal Policy
Reform: like Vincent, '...we know how
to wait...'**

Charles Darwin University

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Stronger Smarter Aboriginal Policy Reform: like Vincent, ‘... we know how to wait...’



Let me start this evening by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land upon which we meet. Let me also acknowledge and honour those very important Elders, both past and present.

I also acknowledge those special guests here tonight on what is a most significant occasion. Earlier speakers have already articulated the significance of this night, and indeed the extraordinary significance of the actions of Vincent Lingiari as

he led his people, our people, Australia's people, off Wave Hill Station on 23rd August, 1966.

I am deeply humbled by the invitation to be the 13th speaker here this evening to present this memorial lecture. In some ways I am humbled by the illustrious list of previous speakers at this forum, but primarily I am humbled by the great man himself, and all that he stood for, Vincent Lingiari. I hope tonight I can honour his legacy.

Tonight I bring what I think are some very simple messages. Messages that I know would have been easily understood by one as wise and noble as Vincent Lingiari, yet simple messages that seemingly escape too many other Australians. The reasons for such misunderstandings are indeed complex I know.

Complex, yet not insurmountable.

The key, yet simple messages I want to convey tonight are these: -

- It is far more effective to do things WITH people... not TO them!

- It is far more efficient (i.e. cheaper), to do things WITH people... not TO them!
- It is far more honourable to do things WITH people... not TO them!

To Aboriginal Australians the key message I bring tonight is this...

- Like Vincent Lingiari, as the first Australians we must retain our faith in the strength of our ancient rhythms and the values of our cultural identity.

To all Australians, my key message is this...

- We undermine our own humanity when we undermine the humanity of others.

In 1975, then Prime Minister Gough Whitlam poured local sand into Vincent Lingiari's hand, symbolic of handing back of the Wave Hill Station to the Gurindji people. Little could Whitlam have known that the gesture would so accurately encapsulate the essence of what I have come to articulate as the Stronger Smarter philosophy.

The Stronger Smarter philosophy...

The Stronger Smarter Philosophy

The Stronger Smarter philosophy honours a positive sense of cultural identity, acknowledges and embraces positive community leadership, enabling innovative and dynamic approaches and processes that are anchored by high expectations relationships. High expectations relationships honour the humanity of others, and in so doing, acknowledge one's strengths, capacity and human right to emancipatory opportunity.

*... Doing things **WITH** people... not **TO** them!*



In that most precious single act, Whitlam honoured Lingiari's humanity and cultural identity. In so doing he acknowledged his strengths, capacity and the human right of his people to emancipatory opportunity. It was an event from our shared past in which an important precedent was established for a strength based approach to engaging and honouring the first Australians.

I am using 'event' here in the manner used by the French philosopher Alain Badiou. For him an event is an eruption that contains the possibility of a new world for everyone, if we name it and are true to it. For Badiou the archetypical event was Saint Paul's naming of and being true to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Badiou says when we name an event and are true to it we become more fully human.

Whitlam had the courage to embrace that moment, to embrace that initial event, and take us to the brink of a new Australia. Sadly the pastoralists in this story responded to this event and the equal wages decision, by sacking Aboriginal workers, thus commencing the process of engineering the chronic impoverishment whose legacy still manifests in our communities today.

We had the opportunity to embrace a 'new Australia', a 'Brand Nue Dae', a place characterised by integrity and humanity. Instead we retreated to the confines of mediocrity; a place loaded with denial and bereft of courage, integrity and humanity.

There have been other 'events' when we could have named an event and been true to it. These include the Mabo Judgment, and the Rudd Apology; also in what I think was the closest we ever came to a new Australia, the Redfern speech by then Prime Minister Paul Keating. These were events loaded with the potential of a new Australia for all of us, yet events from which we retreated to the 'comfortable for some' confines of mediocrity.

Whilst such events have now obviously passed, their potential to project us into a new Australia, is so powerful, that it remains even today *and* into the future. As Aboriginal Australians we have always known and understood this.

In fact it is tremendously frustrating to know and understand this, and to know that at several 'events' from our shared past, we have actually been at the brink of a new Australia. And so it is here today that we draw upon that strength, patience and wisdom of Vincent Lingiari, who knew how to wait.

I am not suggesting for one moment that we become complacent in our aspiration for a better and more honourable Australia.

All I am saying is that we must never lose hope.

In order to retain hope it is useful to reflect on that which is our tremendous source of hope, our cultural identity, and also to reflect upon some notions of time and the inevitabilities they bring. I will reflect more deeply on notions of time towards the end of this address.

A positive sense of cultural identity is in fact the first key facet of the stronger smarter philosophy.

The Stronger Smarter Philosophy

- Acknowledging, embracing and developing a positive sense of identity

Which Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander Identity do your attitudes, beliefs and behaviors collude with?

Stronger Smarter \vee *negative stereotype*

*... Doing things **WITH** people... not **TO** them!*



Our ability to reflect positively on our sense of identity is dramatically challenged by the existence of the negative stereotype of Aboriginal people. It is a point I have laboured consistently, and quantified empirically. Rather than lamenting on the tragedies and fallacy of this negative stereotype, I make one very simple point.

All of us... Aboriginal Australians and other Australians make a choice about where we stand in relation to this stereotype. Our own individual actions, beliefs and behaviours signal whether or not we are complicit and colluding with a negative

stereotype, or whether we are intent on smashing that stereotype in the pursuit of what I call a stronger smarter Aboriginal identity.

In order to acknowledge and embrace a positive Aboriginal identity, one has to believe it exists in the first place. There are signs that some of us not believe a positive Aboriginal identity actually exists.

Doing things TO Aboriginal people, is collusion with low expectations and with a negative stereotypical view of Aboriginal people.

When the state sanctions wages to usurp decisions about where and how people can spend their money, this is collusion with low expectations and a lack of belief in a positive Aboriginal identity.

Imagining for a moment that the Direct Instruction education product bought from the US is somehow a solution in Aboriginal education is collusion with low expectations.

Complacency about discrepant data for Indigenous Australians is collusion with low expectations.

Expecting Aboriginal Australians to assimilate is collusion with low expectations, and with a negative stereotype.

In her recent PhD thesis Dr Gracelyn Smallwood speculates about a type of modernity that Vincent Lingari represented, while remaining loyal and inspired by his sense of cultural identity, thus retaining hope. Smallwood's well heralded response emerged thankfully to refute criticisms levelled by Professor Peter Sutton in his book *The Politics of Suffering*. He suggested that Indigenous culture was a barrier to the modernizing of Indigenous Australia. For Dr Smallwood and for Vincent Lingari, Aboriginal culture is a resource and a source of strength, not a barrier.

Let us drill down on some of the points Dr Smallwood makes here. As I do this let me recruit the intellect of Canadian thinker, Charles Taylor and his insights about what he calls the politics of recognition. He articulates the value of identity recognition and the stifling effects of failure to recognise and embrace difference. Taylor would agree with me when I suggest that Vincent was able to be a modern Australian, and

through loyalty to his cultural identity, he scored a great victory, not only for the Gurindji, not only for Aboriginal Australia, but indeed for ALL Australia.

It is also useful to recruit an intellectual concept devised by a friend and modern day philosopher Roy Bhaskar to alleviate any sense of confusion about this ability to be different yet same. I have introduced this intellectual concept already in last year's Mabo Oration.

Bhaskar discusses the concept of the Concrete Universal which has four dimensions. At its base is the notion of a ***core universal Human nature***. We are all of the Human Race.

At a higher level this basic core is acted upon or mediated through a variety of ***differentiae*** such as gender, sexuality, age, culture and ethnicity etc. The core and the mediations result in a ***concretely singularized individual***. The fourth dimension to this concept is that of ***processuality*** or the rhythms of time in action.

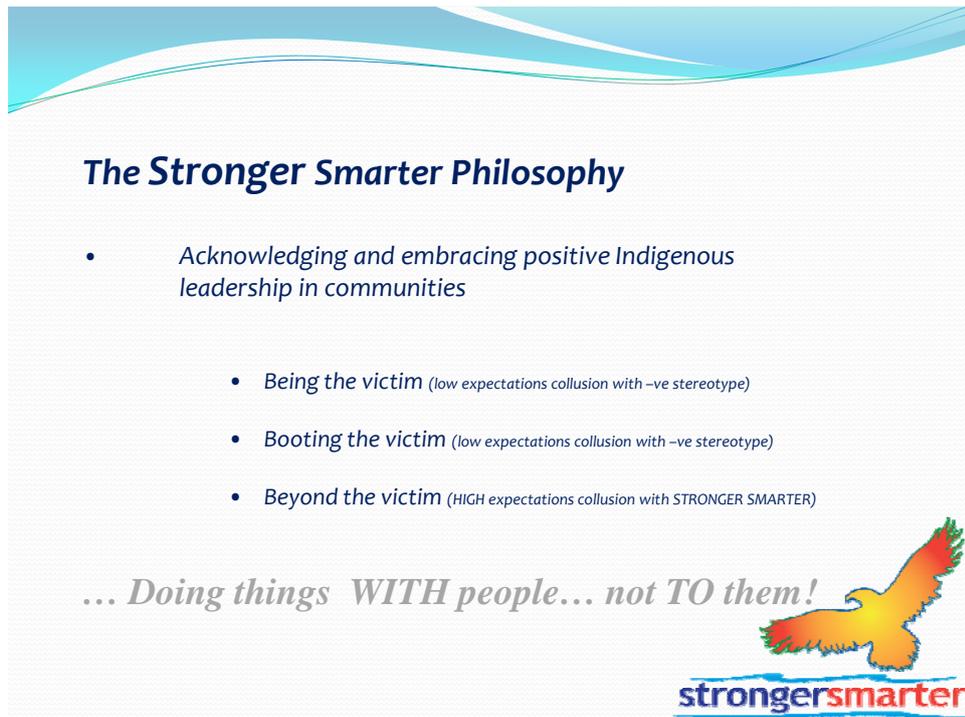
The key to understanding the importance of the concept of the

Concrete Universal is that it is part of a stratified ontology. Put simply, each of us has layers or stratifications of our sense of being. The concept of a stratified ontology enables us to escape entanglement in these seemingly intractable dualities, or the question of whether we are Aboriginal or Australian. From the Concrete Universal we can see that at our core we are all human, and then given the notion of complex mediations we can indeed be both Aboriginal and Australian.

In the context of those mediations of being Aboriginal, the organizing principles were honour and respect for one another and love for country. Through other mediations it might be argued that modern Australia is organized around the principle of production for profit. It is this principle which saw Vincent Lingari and his fellow workers treated like sub humans. But it was the Aboriginal principle of honour and respect which gave them the courage in their crusade to be recognized as equal human beings.

The notion of being embraced as equal human beings can only be realised in an honourable partnership that sees us embraced

well beyond victim status. This brings us to the next facet of the stronger smarter philosophy... embracing positive Aboriginal leadership.



The Stronger Smarter Philosophy

- Acknowledging and embracing positive Indigenous leadership in communities
 - Being the victim (low expectations collusion with -ve stereotype)
 - Booting the victim (low expectations collusion with -ve stereotype)
 - Beyond the victim (HIGH expectations collusion with STRONGER SMARTER)

... Doing things WITH people... not TO them!

strongersmarter

This aspect of our philosophy is made complex by Aboriginal leadership that is intent on being the victim, and Aboriginal leadership that is intent on booting the victim.

Leading through victim status entails having to explain just how hopeless and hard up we are, thus confirming in some ways, the negative stereotype that is cast for us. With this model of leadership Aboriginal communities are likely to be seen as mere receivers of service rather than creators of

emancipatory processes. Under this type of leadership government will do things 'to' Aboriginal communities, not "with" them, and very little will change. Adhering strictly to victim status means that Indigenous people are not responsible for their own lives and are what Malcolm X called "zombies" marching to the beat of someone else's orders.

It is impossible to imagine Vincent Lingiari aspiring to a sense of victim status in order to approach transformation. It is also impossible to imagine Vincent Lingiari as one who would turn on his own people and lead with a 'booting the victim' type of leadership.

Again in other forums I have lamented on the toxicity of this type of Aboriginal leadership. Put simply, this type of Aboriginal leadership will avoid articulating the unpalatable messages that *need* to be heard, and only tell their political and corporate masters what they *want* to hear!

I have described this type of leadership as music to the ears of political and corporate masters and that which readily attracts attention, celebration and generous reward.

The deepest problem here remains that such views proffered by this kind of leadership, can validate the ignorance of political and corporate masters who have the power to make significant change. There becomes no need for such masters to have to truly engage with and understand the deep complexities of Aboriginal people and communities.

With a 'booting the victim' type Aboriginal leader in our camp, we can avoid the very tough and very complex challenges of getting into a high expectations relationship with Aboriginal Australians.

When challenging others with such views I have found the responses quite basic to say the least. It a basic response and one that lacks substance when the best we can do is question just how black one's skin is; whether they live in the city or in some humpy in the bush; whether they drink instant coffee or café latte'; whether one is well educated or not; whether one lives in chaos or calm.

Of course it would suit some to only have a dialogue with those uneducated in a modern sense as it much easier to railroad them.

As for me, I am very well educated in a modern sense. For the record my preferred coffee is skinny flat white. I may not live in chaos. I may not have the blackest skin. I may not live in a remote community and I do not even live in the Northern Territory...

But I know an attack on humanity when I see one.

And I am not one to sit idly by and be tacitly complicit with such an attack on others.

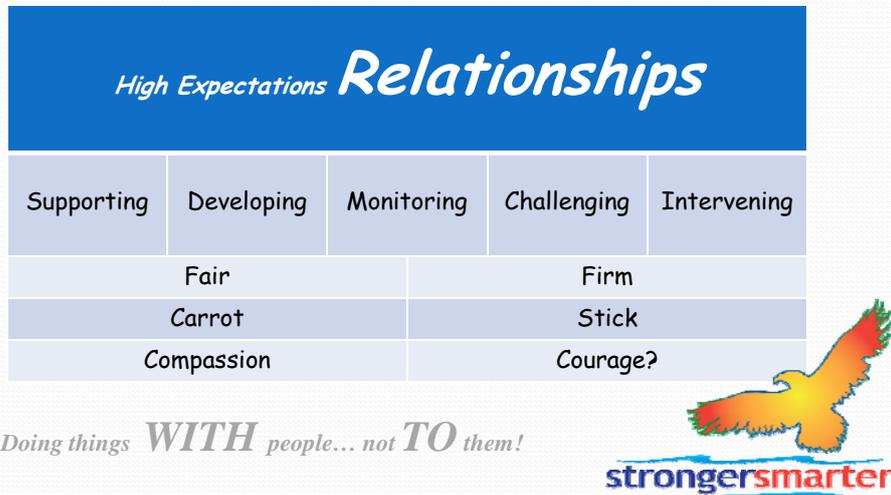
As I reflect on the leadership of Vincent Lingiari, it is easy to realise that he led with a definite sense of being well 'beyond the victim'. He didn't ask for favours or special treatment.

He asked for what was right! He led with a type of leadership that retained a sense of high expectation about his people and a positive and loyal belief in his identity.

From here let me discuss, again as I have continued to do, the importance of a high expectations relationship between Aboriginal Australians and other Australians.

The Stronger Smarter Philosophy

- 'High expectations' leadership to ensure 'high expectations' relationships



If you think this diagram tries to emphasise the notion of relationships then you are absolutely right. There is an important distinction to make here. Let me give you an example from a schools perspective here.

A school leader might have a zero tolerance policy on school uniforms in a community school. Their expectation is that every child will have a uniform and shoes and socks on and any child who does not turn up dressed accordingly is sent home.

This might look like high expectations but it is not a high expectations 'relationship'.

In a high expectations relationship the school leader might articulate a desire for all children to be in uniform and in a relationship they might find out that some parents and children will struggle to live up to this expectation because they have no washing machine; 12 kids in the house; can't afford uniforms; whatever complexities we can imagine. My simple point here is that in a relationship we can make room to discover and understand such complexities.

As a result we can negotiate a solution. Not one that involves lowering the bar, but one that enables us to work together to agree and deliver on an honourable and negotiated high expectation.

In this example, as I have seen occur in some schools, the school leader might agree to purchase and retain the uniforms at school, so that kids can turn up from the community in their home clothes, put their uniforms on, and return them at the end of the day. In other communities this is a solution that may not work, but my point is, that in a relationship we can negotiate whatever solution might work for us, without lowering the bar.

Like many others I watch with dismay as political leaders try to justify this lack of a relationship, and the subsequent blanket application of draconian measures such as the basics card that are somehow supposed to 'empower' Aboriginal people by stripping away their rights to make their own choices about where and how they spend their money. I cringe as I hear them articulating anecdotal insights into what some people are saying, and using that as the basis to apply such blanket draconian measures in a way that lacks humanity and integrity.

Of course it is true that some people might be saying 'We want this. This is good for us because it means we don't get humbugged!'

At some point I accept that and the complexities that come with it. But if I come at that same challenge with a high expectations and a stronger smarter approach I would be inclined to respond by saying 'You might see this as the solution, but you know what. I believe you can do better than this! I have higher expectations of you and I don't believe you have to relinquish your power to the state to respond to this challenge!'

With a stronger smarter approach I would not dare to undermine the humanity of others, even when they seem to undermine their own humanity. I would be more inclined to offer an alternative in which their humanity, dignity and sense of empowerment remains intact. In this example I think there is an alternative.

How would I do this?

I would find ways to enable some of those people to access and understand internet banking for instance, in which they can make their own decisions about how much money can be automatically transferred to the shop, how much can be transferred to cover rent, and how much can be transferred to an account that nobody can see the balance of. The difference here is that the individual controls how much money comes and goes, and the individual can adjust or cease this at any time they like.

At the same time though I do not want to be accused of being too simplistic here. I readily acknowledge circumstances in which some children do suffer because money may not be

spent on food. This is why, with a stronger smarter approach, we acknowledge the need to be firm, and fair.

Again here, we can appreciate the importance of the notion of a 'relationship'.

Only knowing how to swing the stick, without the compassion and belief or understanding of the value of 'carrots', is low expectations. Lacking the 'courage' to be firm and swing the stick as required, is low expectations.

At the core of this discussion is the need for a high expectations 'relationship'; a relationship in which we as Aboriginal people can be like Vincent and stay loyal to our positive sense of identity.

As well as reflecting on and remaining loyal to our sense of cultural identity as a source of hope I mentioned earlier the need to reflect upon notions of time and the inevitabilities they bring. Again the intellect of Bhaskar is useful here as he refers to a notion of the rhythmic of time.

My very strong interest in sharing this intellectual insight with you tonight is deliberate.

I do not want you to think that I stand here comfortably saying 'Let's be patient and like Vincent let's wait' ... while our brothers and sisters endure ongoing chaos and dysfunction and the inhumanity of government approaches like the Northern Territory Intervention.

My reflection upon what was happening in that great stand-off between Lingiari and those who tried to oppress him and his people, has been shaped by Roy Bhaskar's insights on the differing rhythmic of time.

There is the time of our individual life spans where still the lifespan of Aboriginal Australians unacceptably below that of other Australians. But there are other rhythmic of time. There is for instance the long slow time of the survival of our people.

Over the millennia our people have lived, and endured and survived and thrived.

I reflect on that rhythmic of time as a rich resource and a source of inspiration for all Aboriginal people. It is the place of quiet courage and bravery. I feel sure Vincent went down deep into a deep sense of loyalty and understanding of that time rhythmic, and drew from it the strength to return to the

rhythm of his own life span and to be the strong leader that he was. I am also certain that those who reverted to a 'booting the victim' type Aboriginal leadership, lost faith and a sense of loyalty, about this important ancient rhythm. It is truly a shame that such people lost faith.

Our culture and our time truly are ours. The deeper we go down into them the stronger and smarter we will be when we encounter the very different rhythmic of our individual life spans.

We must all learn from Vincent Lingari's loyalty to his sense of identity which underpinned his patience and ability to endure for as long as it took. It is with that same confidence and patience we can stand as a people with our own humanity intact... And as we contemplate the inevitability of a new and more honourable Australia, that gains the courage to step beyond mediocrity, into a high expectations relationship with us; a relationship in which the humanity of all Australia is realised, through acknowledging and embracing the humanity

of others; we must retain our loyalty to the ancient rhythmic
of our people and to our sense of hope.

With our loyalty and hope intact we can say... Like Vincent, we
know how to wait!

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