

# A long story about SNAICC



A conversation between former SNAICC Chairperson Muriel Bamblett AM and former SNAICC EO Julian Pocock



Muriel Bamblett AM stood down as SNAICC Chairperson in November 2008 and Julian Pocock resigned as SNAICC Executive Officer in May 2009. *SNAICC News* recorded a conversation between Julian and Muriel about their ten year partnership leading SNAICC.

Muriel Bamblett is the EO of VACCA, the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency and Julian Pocock now works with Berry Street, Victoria. Much of this conversation refers to the AICCAS - the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community controlled child and family welfare services, such as VACCA and Yorganop. This is a *SNAICC News* special feature treat. So get a cup of tea, sit down and enjoy!

**JP:** SNAICC was formally set up in 1981. How did SNAICC manage to grow a bit under the Howard Government whilst other peak bodies did not flourish so well?

**MB:** There were a lot of people initially involved in SNAICC – the Isabelle Coes and all the wonderful people that fought the hard fight for rights. But we were a new generation more focused on concrete things that the government could do. Having come in with Liberal Government we were always in a conservative milieu. The ten years we were both there were the ten years of Howard.

We had lots of people giving us good advice like Morgan and Disney, who helped us do our strategic plan. We were always on the front foot, not just going to them with problems but with solutions. I think that was the difference with SNAICC. We were able to transition better than others when government said: ‘You can’t have advocacy.’

We came and met the people who mattered and engaged. We never gave up. The thing about being all new was that we had a lot of energy for speaking to people – Warren Truss, John Herron, Phillip Ruddock, Amanda Vanstone, Larry Anthony and Joselyn Newman and we realised that the advisors and the senior staff were critical.

I met Howard a few times and I can be a bit more softer on him now. He had very conservative people around

him all the time. But having Larry Anthony as a Minister for Children was significant for us. He had good advisors and we had good relationships with them. It wasn’t all one-way either – they came and sat with our National Executive. So we were on the front foot all the time and jumped in where we felt there was an opportunity. They were conservative, but we were there, giving them good advice. We worked on the federal budget and issue papers and turned up with presentations. In my ten years with SNAICC I was probably the only person to survive every Children’s Council. There was the National Child Protection Council first, and then it was ACAP. Every time a new Minister came on board they changed the name and appointed a different committee. Thankfully I was on every one, which showed that they really did have respect for SNAICC. Larry Anthony gave us a lot more profile than other Ministers. After me saying to him a few times:

It’s been important to always work with all the political parties and that we have got to influence everybody and not allow ourselves to be captured by anybody

‘You fund us and you never mention us,’ he went on record quite a few times to say that he speaks with SNAICC.

**JP:** I think it’s been important for

SNAICC to always work with all the political parties, to understand they all play a role in the policy debate and that we have got to influence everybody and not allow ourselves to be captured by anybody.

**MB:** When I started with SNAICC I had a conversation with NACCHO EO Steve Larkin (*Editor’s note - not the current SNAICC Chair*). He said SNAICC needs to improve its profile and be known by government. He was saying if SNAICC was defunded tomorrow who would kick up a stink? That comment stayed in my head, that SNAICC had to build a profile, putting it in the thinking of senior bureaucrats and ministers. Alf Bamblett said to me then that SNAICC had no profile on the ground. We hadn’t done newsletters for a long time, the basic things, so we didn’t have a lot of support at the community level.

But at that time we were trying to save AICCA funding, as there was a view that the Commonwealth shouldn’t be funding the AICCAS, child welfare and SNAICC. To have tipped all that on its head now and have the Commonwealth invest in SNAICC and have SNAICC mentioned in most speeches about children has been a huge achievement.

**JP:** A lot of the AICCAS really struggled and quite a few fell over.

**MB:** The AICCAS were formed in the 1970s, acting on rights and strong political advocacy for children. So it was

hard to transition from being a voice to doing things on the ground. One of the things you and I focused on was trying to improve the personal relationships, but a lot of the AICCAS struggled with engaging the states. The Victorian government was social justice minded, but a lot of states are very racist and they don't believe in a separate service system. They never looked for the good in AICCAS and were quick to judge. Some Aboriginal people working in government worked against the AICCAS too, to get them defunded. It was sad to see Aboriginal people working against Aboriginal people. Some AICCAS were scape-goated when governments weren't doing the right thing and our Aboriginal services coped the blame.

Child welfare departments generally thought self-determination meant setting up small Aboriginal child welfare organisations and then hand balling them all the Aboriginal children in the child welfare system. When those agencies couldn't manage all those children, couldn't keep an eye on where they were placed and when kids ended up sometimes in more trouble, then the AICCAS got blamed, and most AICCAS suffered from not knowing what they didn't know. They didn't know the data. All they knew is that they were funded for a very small percentage of the children and expected to do a lot more than others.

I think the work of the AICCAS was really around fighting for the children's cultural heritage, but on top of that they were supposed to do the service delivery. Governments failed to recognise the complexity of keeping kids connected and protected, of building up families and keeping kids in their communities. This required workers to work with the whole family and that was a time when you weren't supposed to work with the family. You were mainly supposed to work with the child. Government really struggled with that.

If we have learnt anything from Stolen Generations, it's that disconnection from culture is the biggest issue for Aboriginal children – and there are too many Aboriginal children in-out-of-home care that Aboriginal services don't manage

Most of the AICCAS now are doing good work for the child protection system, but the original vision was to prevent kids going into the child protection system. That's still the

challenge for most of the AICCAS, how to advocate for and protect all of the rights of children and not just child protection rights. Children have rights to be in families, to be supported to go to school. It's critical that AICCAS have the resources to work with families to prevent kids going into the system, and if they are in the system, to make sure that they are connected with their

families and that we do no further cultural harm.

If we have learnt anything from Stolen Generations, it's that disconnection from culture is the biggest issue for Aboriginal children, and there are too many Aboriginal children in-out-of-home care that Aboriginal services don't manage. In Victoria there are 650 Aboriginal children in care, but Aboriginal services are funded to work with only 150 of them. So what is the role of the Aboriginal community and services for those other 500 children? We need to protect those children's right to their cultural connections, to push for compliance with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle. If we only focus on the small number we are doing a disservice to so many, but we still don't have all those systems in place.

**JP:** Maybe AICCAS could go back to SNAICC's original 1970s vision for some of that rights focus. Perhaps if AICCAS and other Aboriginal agencies in the child welfare area can be funded more from the Attorney General's department to do that advocacy and rights work and develop standards, rather than by welfare departments, then they could operate with greater independence.

**MB:** Child welfare quarantines you

to work with only a small percentage of children and to work very narrowly with children in the care system. They don't fund to make sure children's rights are complied with, or to work with all

the stakeholders. The fact is that every state is different around the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle and the courts have magistrates with no cultural training and no cultural standards who make cultural decisions about children. So SNAICC and the AICCAS still need to do a lot more advocacy, especially in some states, where there is a view that the Aboriginal Child Placement

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Principle is placing children more at risk.

All of our SNAICC members demonstrate that self-determination does work and we've got to produce the research. Our evidence at VACCA is that when Aboriginal children in care are connected, our placements don't break down and our children are at school. We are getting better outcomes. Yorganop demonstrates that too, and our early years services.

**JP:** The movement to create SNAICC came from the 1979 Aboriginal Child Survival Seminar hosted by VACCA. There was lots of talk about whether SNAICC should focus exclusively on the child protection issues and agencies or include the early years kindies and childcare. The early years services were part of SNAICC at first, then they got excluded by an AGM and then they got back in for the last 10 or 12 years and are now a central part of SNAICC. I wonder if the debate was because an original vision was that AICCAS would do early years, family support work and parenting type support work, that their child and family welfare services would become so broad that child protection would just become a small slither of what they did. But I think the AICCA agencies became a bit captured by the child protection systems which fund them and they do that work well. At the same time an Aboriginal early years sector developed. So there may be an argument now that you don't want the AICCAS to grow that big and their role could be more about coordinating with those other services instead of trying to do everything themselves.

**MB:** Governments are looking at how we can all work together better,

but funding has created divisions in the Aboriginal community between child and family welfare services and the early years services. It's a silo approach, when most of us actually work together on the ground. Aboriginal child and family welfare services couldn't work without the Aboriginal early years sector. We send our children there, they take our kids and give them cultural grounding on such a daily basis. But the Commonwealth really struggled with the AICCAS because they couldn't really control them as they were statutory bodies driven by the states and territories and the Commonwealth couldn't make the statutory bodies amalgamate with the early years services.

In 1997 a lot of the MACS members came to the SNAICC Townsville conference and put forward their case to be full SNAICC members. I'd only just got onto the SNAICC so it was interesting to hear the discussions and see both sides of the argument.

The intervention wasn't our way of doing things and it was sad that we were so focussed on the NT that we let WA and NSW off the hook when there are a lot more children at risk in those states

The AICCAS were concerned that the Commonwealth was only really interested in the early years and would use early childhood services as an excuse to move totally away from the AICCAS. Maybe a lot of us were not truly focused on what was on the best interest of children, and how we could we work together and we were all being very defensive. Over the years common sense prevailed and now we have the early years on board. I think we have developed a good policy framework for the AICCAS but I don't think that we have a good policy framework for the early years yet, or challenged the states enough.

**JP:** Part of the challenge is being a peak body focussed on children, as compared to a peak body like NACCHO which is focussed on a sector. If you focus on primary health care provision it is easier to quantify where things end and start, who are the organisations that do it and who are your members. Whereas when you

focus on children and organisations that work with Aboriginal children, it's far broader and the organisations you work with are much broader.

**MB:** Children are affected by the whole cycle - homelessness, justice housing, health, employment – and how does SNAICC get involved in all those areas? SNAICC has been brilliant in using the existing networks. The

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future challenge will be to strategically align where we want to go. We tend to focus on what we are doing well, and it is hard to do things like looking at human rights it when you have got so many priorities and things to do.

**JP:** SNAICC is still very poorly resourced, it's pathetic really. The Commonwealth core secretariat funding pays for one part-time policy worker, an executive officer and some administrative costs.

**MB:** It's the SNAICC Resource Service funding that keeps us afloat and has allowed us to build our profile. But I would go on record saying SNAICC's biggest asset has been you, Julian. I can say that and it cannot be deleted that from this interview. We have had very good executive officers. For people to work the hours on that money and deliver so much, to work so respectfully with us as Aboriginal people and as an executive. We've had really good non-Aboriginal staff with commitment beyond what was asked of them. We've had a lot of Aboriginal staff pour their heart and soul into SNAICC and love the Executive. We are all family and we remember people fondly. The Linda Briskmans who contributed with her book about SNAICC, *The Black Grapevine*, all of the material that SNAICC produced over the years which are still on people's shelves and gets referred to all the time. We have seen amazing growth of people. Kenny Bedford did the first *Through Young*

*Black Eyes*, an amazing product, and other people have taken it forward. We've had lots of good people work here and we many executive members

go through. And you can't fault anyone on their passion and commitment. Most National Executive members turn up for every meeting, read their papers, know what's on and contribute to the conversations. SNAICC is as good and powerful as its executive, and it's an executive that doesn't bad mouth the organisation and stands strong. I think SNAICC always had positive support

and respect from our membership.

**JP:** There must be some things we haven't done so well...

**MB:** I think that we put neglect on the agenda and we've been able to get the Commonwealth, and we've been on the Australian Families board, having those alliances and networks. But the NT intervention has been difficult – we pushed government to do more in the NT and we did the media work around trying to get it changed but they haven't done what we advocated. We would have like to be more involved and we tried very hard. The intervention wasn't our way of doing things and it was also sad that we were so focussed at times on the NT that we let WA and NSW off the hook, and there are a lot more children at risk in those states. In the NT there are 280 are Aboriginal children in out-of-home-care, but in WA there are 1080 and in NSW there are 4300! But government focused only on the NT. So when you look at the sheer number of kids in NSW and Qld. You would have to say we need to do more. But our biggest failing is I'd love to have done a lot more work around getting racism addressed and how it impacts on children.

**JP:** There's been a big media reaction recently to a suggestion that child care centres may want an Aboriginal flag in their centres

**MB:** I believe we are still in a very racist time. Introducing culture takes nothing away from an early years centre.

I was given a video from a MACS showing Aboriginal children on a Monday morning walking out with the Aboriginal flag, singing a song they had made up about how important the Aboriginal flag was to them

One of my most significant memories of SNAICC was being given a video from a MACS showing Aboriginal children on a Monday morning walking

out with the Aboriginal flag, singing a song they had made up about how important the Aboriginal flag was to them. That centre was doing so much for their children saying: 'This is something we should be proud of.' I'm disappointed that some people see respecting Aboriginal culture as wrong for the early years services. It would worry me if we don't respond to these comments, even if we just write to that person, or the papers, to do something to allay Australia's fears and respond to how important the Aboriginal flag is.

Our therapists at VACCA tell us kids will draw the Aboriginal flag, it's what keeps them safe and makes them feel good, it's the Aboriginal flag. If kids are saying the Aboriginal flag is important to them, why wouldn't the early childhood centres and others see that as something children need, not as something adults are forcing on them. It's what children know makes them feel safe. If you have one little sticker on the wall and an Aboriginal child sees it, they know they can go into that place and feel culturally safe. While it may seem symbolic, that Aboriginal flag really sticks out for miles, it means so much more than people realise.

**JP:** How do you think we went on the international stage?

**MB:** There were a couple of trips to the United Nations in Geneva. Going overseas highlighted for me that we were not as bad as other countries, where they talked about children entering slavery, pornography, prostitution and being trafficked opened up a different dimension for me. You can't represent children without really knowing what's actually happening for them and the magnitude of what we didn't know in Australia about children struck me. I first went to the UN in 1998 after the *Bringing Them Home Report* was launched in 1997. So they were really hungry to hear about it. But I landed there with nothing, So I rang you and you said 'no' to me.

**JP:** Which was the only time I ever said no. It was my third day on the job!

**MB:** And I'd been on the job about six months...and mine wasn't a job, I was volunteering, sent overseas with ... nothing! And I was asked to talk at a UN convention about the Stolen Generations. I felt really we let the Australian Government off the hook, when they gave a very bland report about all these wonderful

things they were doing, when they had done nothing really. It was a great opportunity missed, we should have thought about it a lot more I hadn't prepared enough. But it was at the end of the year when we were all tired from the amount of work in our own organisations. I would have like to

I know more now, not because I've travelled, but because the Executive brings their knowledge to the meeting

have done a better presentation, and I do think we neglected United Nation and I do worry about what we do internationally.

**JP:** Certainly SNAICC can, and should, do more with our Maori neighbours.

**MB:** A lot of the things they are doing are similar. Cindi Cairo, the NZ Children's Commissioner talked to the VACCA conference about the way elders were taking responsibility for children and standing up for them. There had been a child death in one community, which then turned against the media. The media and everybody else gave them such a hard time and the community then stood up and said: 'Yes, it happened, we own it, we did wrong and we are going to do something to make sure that no child ever dies in our community again.' The media didn't know what to do then, they were disempowered. A lot of Maori people were very proud of this one leader that stood up. Imagine what that would be like if we had the capacity to get Champions For Children, Elders speaking up.

When we went to Canada we stopped off at a family violence forum, it was so good to look at what they were doing, having a Step Back rap festival where young people were encouraged to write a rap song about stopping violence. They engaged families to sign up to end violence in the communities,

At times we almost forget the levels of poverty and hardship that so many Aboriginal families confront. Poverty is still the strongest indicator of who will end up in child protection

to set an agreement. And you learn these things when you travel overseas and see what others are doing.

**JP:** In New Zealand a couple of people said to me that until they had that exposure to SNAICC their impression of Aboriginal people was

that they didn't resist colonisation and were passive rather than assertive against colonisation, and that impression had changed. That's one of the reasons why it would be good for SNAICC to do a bit more international work.

**MB:** When we go overseas we need to have both men and women. to get the balance right in what they are hearing about men and children, and the good work SNAICC has done in getting the message about men and parenting. Hopefully with Steve as SNAICC Chair that will change. I don't use the words warriors or resistance fighters, but our men use those words and the Maori men I met were talking about warriors.

**JP:** That came up at the Family Action Centre conference last year (co-convened with SNAICC). A speaker from a Brisbane alcohol recovery program said men get so sick of hearing 'we were colonised and these fellows took our women and land and we did nothing about it.' So instead he relays stories 'this is where we had a fight and we took out 25 white fellas, and we did this and that.' He said it really changes men's self esteem.

**MB:** Richard Frankland has been working with our young people at VACCA, creating for them images of the resistance fighters. He says: 'these are the people who fought for you, and are still fighting, because there's so much to be fought for'. Our communities continue to fighting for money for our organisations, but some young people think that is all about aggression and a lot of children see community fighting as lateral violence. There is a fear that children will move away from community to avoid confrontation, to avoid being angry and being a victim. So there is a danger that we could lose children to culture.

**JP:** Another challenge we maybe haven't met so well is conversation in the child welfare and child protection

that issues need to be understood through the lens of culture. I think sometimes the other lenses we don't look through are the lens of understanding the broader socio-economic environment that impacts on all children. At times we almost forget

the levels of poverty and hardship that so many Aboriginal families confront. Poverty is still the strongest indicator of who will end up in child protection. We know that any child that grows up in poverty where no parent works is highly likely that they will end up unemployed, whether they are Aboriginal or not.

**MB:** I remember when you first started with SNAICC you did a paper on neglect. I think that's been the strength of Nigel and you, you both actually raised our awareness. We were so into our business, but you raised our awareness about neglect, family violence, family trauma, and institutionalisation. We have all taken a journey in SNAICC around growing to understand the broader issues that children do come into care because of health, unemployment and poverty. That information you gave us was aimed at telling the white people, but it actually informed us, because we didn't know. Aboriginal people don't often know their own data, don't read or access the research, so SNAICC taught us and trained us over the years. I didn't know what the word 'institutionalisation' was the first time you gave me the piece of paper to do a media interview. I knew what that word was, but it was such a big word, and there were many of those. Now they are part of my everyday language. Understanding it, naming it, has been really important for all of us, it has been such a learning journey. I know more now, not because I've travelled, but because the Executive brings their knowledge to the meetings and SNAICC shares that with the papers it presents to the Commonwealth. That knowledge is power. So it makes you stronger advocates when you know the data and can ask the questions. Now I know that 33% of kids come into care because of family violence, so now I talk to the family violence people about these children.

Prior to being on SNAICC I didn't know how to ask for the data or analyse it, or what questions to ask. It's been a massive learning curve and I have been very fortunate to be CEO of VACCA and have SNAICC as a resource to learn from. When we met Minister Ruddock, he wanted to know all the evidence and reports, and we were able to give him a really comprehensive

report. He was dumbfounded that an Aboriginal organisation actually had the data, the evidence.

**JP:** Eight of us sat there at the meeting and he just sat at his desk and didn't look up, just sat there looking at his brief.

**MB:** He was really trying to unnerve us. He was talking to Connie and using these great big words and she didn't stop, she just kept talking.

**JP:** Did you enjoy working with any of the bureaucrats?

**MB:** There were a couple I thought were very challenging, gave good advice, we had honest conversations with and told us the lay of the land. They were the ones that I really enjoyed. There were some really good, passionate people, Melinda Tynan helped us get the resource service, Jeremy Knott ... I remember all the arguments you both had and I'd sit there and be thinking 'Do I need to separate these two?' But he never personalised it. I think we were in the right place, in the right time, during the right era. People may say we could have done more, but we were able to enjoy good relationships with a lot of bureaucrats and advisors.

**JP:** I don't think this government or the previous one have the right bureaucratic structure to work well with Aboriginal communities. The Indigenous Coordination Centres network doesn't appear to be achieving anything really. We had a small agency ring recently from WA, a good agency in child and family support, who were desperate to get some training in early years for their Aboriginal staff, a major priority area for the government. There is money in DEEWR to fund these activities but for ten months they struggled to get anybody to support them to get funding. These Indigenous Coordination Centres appear to play

absolutely no role in helping small agencies access the mainstream dollars and support them to achieve their goals. They have lost the understanding of how to do good long term community development and they don't have the structures in government or the policy tools.

**MB:** Once you could write to the Minister and get a response, but not now.

**JP:** You went to the consultations on the national Indigenous

We used to stay in the very cheap motels, they were funny times. I remember one of our chunkier executives saying 'Muriel, come and see my shower, I can't fit through the door'

representative body in Adelaide, what are your thoughts on that?

**MB:** I am quietly optimistic with Tom Calma. I think we have to have confidence in someone to lead it and I just personally have reservations about how those final people will be chosen. Everyone is nervous about that. But they are looking at an interim body and with a peak forum that they will consult. I did speak about resources for the peaks, but they say they already fund peaks to provide that. There was a view the peaks wanted that forum. I said the peaks don't want that forum because then this forum will think it can do service delivery and it can tell the service system what to do. One fellow wanted the forum to get involved in service delivery, but I said it's for policy, to inform budget, to get feedback and understand the issues, the priorities, the challenges for the service system, and not to have to go begging cap in hand like we did with the previous National Indigenous Council. They were exclusive, not inclusive. The issue around the issue of who and what are they representing, of what is representative, there were many questions.

**JP:** And the national Apology?

**MB:** The actual Apology was

There's more that you don't know than you do know, and if you are patient and persist, the knowledge and wisdom will find its way to you - you don't have to rush to look for it

absolutely brilliant. There's no way anybody could describe what that felt like. It was a bit sad that SNAICC didn't get the recognition though. There's a view that it was Mick Dodson that got it, when a lot of that work that got the enquiry up was by SNAICC, but at no stage does

anybody mention SNAICC. But you know Brian Butler and Nigel de Souza had an instrumental role, even when the enquiry was handed down. But the Apology was significant, a really important time, and I think the Prime Minister showed leadership. I think we have to nail him a little bit harder about what he said in his apology.

**JP:** I read it again recently and it's a terrific speech. Prime Minister Rudd focused on sheeting home responsibility for what happened to parliaments. Parliaments made these laws and that's why it's right for the Federal Parliament to take responsibility and apologise. It countered the other view that these policies were just benign practices that other people, churches and welfare administrators were responsible for. He

'You fund them peanuts and you want them to do everything.' These inequities make you really angry

made the point that the policies were racially based and that Parliaments were responsible for racially discriminatory practices. At the same time they still haven't done anything about the racially discriminatory elements of the NT Intervention and suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act. There's this contradiction between his words and sentiments in the national policy and their most high profile policy prescription for Aboriginal people.

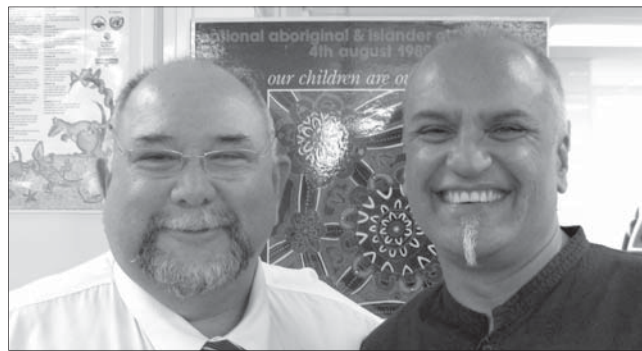
**MB:** Clinton Wanganeen from SA gave a presentation to the leadership forum this March about having Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioners in each state and territory with a mandate to look at government policies that hadn't been enacted for Aboriginal people. He cited an example where a government had committed a ten year funding process to an Aboriginal organisation ceased funding after two years. He took that

written commitment back to the government and said: 'You are in breach of your own pledge' and so they kept their funding. Even though we have an Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner is it only policy? They don't have any real teeth. I think we as Aboriginal people have to be much more astute about our own legislation. We fight in the budget time and then we don't check to see that they have actually delivered on it. A recent example in Victoria was we got last years almost \$450,000 for therapeutic residential care. They didn't fully deliver on it, and we had never asked them how they were going to spend it or when were they going to roll it out. We have worked out that we have to actually chase up that funding and be more astute on keeping an eye on what's promised and implemented.

Because at a Commonwealth level a lot of Aboriginal monies go back every year unexpended. Once upon a time they would let you keep that for infrastructure or services for the next year. Now they take all that money back and it's working out to be millions of dollars. Some of Aboriginal communities don't even know that government's got the funds. There has to be a better system to ensure program dollars are delivered.

SNAICC has raised my level of awareness of knowing what you don't know, and how to find out what you don't know and what you should know ...there's so much you have to keep your eye on. We need to make sure that our members get really vigilant about how their states are rolling out their money.

**JP:** It could be a role for a new national representative body, that they have that monitoring and



The new SNAICC team – Chair Steve Larkins (left) and EO Frank Hytten (right)

accountability role, because SNAICC will never have the resources to monitor it all and we don't have SNAICC versions at a state and territory level. Governments often have a broad bucket of funding for something and a specific allocation for the Aboriginal version. They start on the mainstream version first and leave the implementation of the Aboriginal program until later because they think it's harder and then they leave themselves less time which does make it harder.

**JP:** Will you miss any favourite

He has all the qualities you would want in a SNAICC Chair, he's kind, with a great heart and a passion, he's very professional and knows the business well

hotels?

**MB:** Once the airline got you and I stranded in Adelaide. So we ended up staying in a very luxurious hotel – double king sized beds. So elegant. But we got there at 1am were on a 6am flight out, so we were only there for four hours. I have to remember all the bad motels as well, when we used to stay in the very cheap motels, they were funny times. I remember one of our chunkier executives saying 'Muriel, come and see my shower, I can't fit through the door' ... there was lots of fun and laughing. We had sad times too. We lost Peter Haroa and I still miss him, the big man with that fast car.

There was Dale McLeod was such a strong advocate, Raylene Oui and Margaret Ah Kee. Really good people with good hearts. Harold Furber from Alice Springs, and Rosie Baird, from Darwin – she was very committed to SNAICC and came very year, then we had Natalie Hunter, and Brian Butler, who could forget him! He loved SNAICC with a passion, loved the fact he could see he was



making a difference. Nigel de Souza, Sharon Slater – all those people who contributed to SNAICC in the early days. SNAICC had been going 15 years when I started, so I didn't know the Eric Kyles, Lionel and Alf Bamblett when they were really advocating at the earliest stages – standing up and fighting. I would have loved to have been in the room with them.

Certainly we have had very robust discussions over the years. But we had some fun too, we all got tricked or something happened. My funniest memory is probably when Minister Philip Ruddock spoke at the Parliament House launch of *Through Young Black Eyes* – the Executive members had stayed up very late the night before. They all looked very green with their sunglasses on.

**JP:** What about a national policy approach for children in the child welfare area and income management being imposed across all communities?

**MB:** There is always a frustration when there are people who speak the language government wants to hear. SNAICC has to try and work out how they engage those people. I know you encouraged me a number of times to sit down and talk with Noel Pearson. Perhaps that's something in the future that can happen, to engage the people who have got the media rather than let them let them be heard as THE voice. At least send them our papers, have them aware of our view. They can then speak for or against it, but they still know our position. Noel will always be an individual and fight popular opinion, and the media will always try to sensationalise it, and we will always struggle with getting the attention of ministers if it's not a quick fix.

A lot of the things that we deal with are systemic, with years of history and neglect and short quick fixes for a small part of the community aren't applicable to a lot of communities. So governments will blame Aboriginal people rather than the model geared to a small percentage of people. People may think that what is in Cape York is making a lot of difference to a lot of people, but you have a look at the evidence. The danger is when many communities are doing well, but one community has a bigger voice.

What SNAICC needs to do is empower a lot of communities to do the same talk, to say we are doing really good here, to get that advocacy,

and we need to celebrate the people who do get that happening. I've seen it many times, like Alison Overeem in Tasmania getting a voice, getting early childhood up and getting that new centre at Ridsen Cove. SNAICC also contributed to VACCA's growth, and in South Australia too. How do you think I know as much as what I know about child welfare? I've taken a lot of things you do and copy cat them in my own organisation. To mimic from our national body and apply it to our own organisation is good for community. I have also appreciated SNAICC's

You can argue and disagree, but it's all about respect

capacity to come into a state when asked, help out and advocate when things go bad. Some states have been reluctant to take that up option but when asked we have done that, with a flexibility that has been excellent. I think SNAICC was responsible for saving the Queensland AICCAS and I don't care what others say. You came up with a quick \$90M model, a quick mud map that became the blue print for those AICCAS. I don't think anybody would give you the credit for that; everybody was putting their hand up to say that they did it.

**JP:** It wasn't just me; it was the AICCA services that were there. We had a weekend and a small window of opportunity to get something on the agenda. But I think you are certainly right that if it wasn't for SNAICC's intervention some years ago the Queensland government would have closed down the rest of the AICCAS.

**MB:** It was the state and the federal governments. The Commonwealth were red hot to get rid of the AICCAS and we were fighting those state government people who believed AICCAS were useless and not delivering. So it was a really big argument to say: 'You fund them peanuts and you want them to do everything.' These inequities make you really angry. Like when the Darwin AICCA, Karu, tells you they were getting Commonwealth funding but the Territory Government was pulling the strings about what they should be doing, and contributing a mere \$130,000. A pathetic little bucket of money. I didn't realise until recently there was an agreement the Commonwealth was responsible for Aboriginal people in the NT and ACT.

How does that work? It was remiss of me not to know that for ten years.

**JP:** Any advice for incoming SNAICC Chair Stephen Larkins?

**MB:** He's got to take small steps, and he's got to make it his. I think SNAICC is in very good hands. I think incoming SNAICC EO Frank Hytten and Steve will make a perfect couple. Do you have any advice for Frank?

**JP:** Yes, just persist. There's more that you don't know than you do know, and if you are patient and persist the knowledge and the wisdom will find its way to you – you don't have to rush to look for it.

**MB:** My only advice to Steve would be to ensure SNAICC is both respected and respectful. You can argue and disagree, but it's all about respect. Once government wouldn't meet with us because we would attack them, but now we are much more constructive. So I hope SNAICC continues to have both respectful and robust engagement. They need to be prepared to guide this government at the moment. I think they need a lot of direction, and SNAICC is in perfect position to provide that guidance. I reckon that would be your challenge Julian. Isn't it ironic! We were there all those bloody years with all those conservatives, and now we get a Labor government and we're gone.

**JP:** There's other places we can do things...

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