

“Protecting Culture and Protecting the Future for Our Children”

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I would like to begin by acknowledging the Kurna people, traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we meet and pay respect to their Elders, ancestors and creator spirits, their families and children.

All of us know how important it is to tell our children stories. Telling stories helps children learn. More importantly, telling our children the true stories of our families and our peoples helps them form their identity. Our past, our personal stories, make us who we are. So too do stories of peoples.

The following is from a poem by an Indigenous American elder, Leslie Marmon Silko:

I will tell you something about stories
They aren't just entertainment.
Don't be fooled.
They are all we have, you see,
All we have to fight off illness and death.

You don't have anything
If you don't have stories.

Their evil is mighty
But it can't stand up to our stories.
So they try to destroy the stories
Let the stories be confused or forgotten
They would like that
They would be happy
Because we would be defenceless then ...¹

Our stories are the source of our survival and our resilience. My story, my Aboriginal cultural story, is central to who I am. Without a story or a culture we are just animals, or worse, cogs in the machinery of the world economy.

¹ Leslie Marmon Silko, *Ceremony*, New York: Penguin, 1977.

Our Aboriginal cultures are the longest continuing culture in the world. They are sophisticated and holistic – linking spirituality with politics, education, economics, land care, and the law.

Our stories since colonisation have been dangerous and subversive remembrances. Even remembering our law, our dreaming stories, was a subversive practice, let alone our tales of massacres, resistance, dispossession, living on the mission and the ‘welfare’ coming to take away our children. Unlike Hollywood, we tell stories to survive, not just to entertain or sell products. We have lost some of our stories because of the brutality of colonisation but we are finding them again and learning new stories, modern stories of surviving the policies of assimilation and establishing our own organisations in law, health, education, child care and child and family services. And heroes such as Molly Dyer and Mum Shirl and the founders of SNAICC inspire us to work towards a new story

So when we consider the future of our children – it is all about finding that new story to tell.

This has been a significant year for Aboriginal communities throughout Australia. This year has seen many important anniversaries for Aboriginal and Islander communities in Australia; a celebration of past stories that we would have hoped marked a positive turning point in our relationship to our colonised environment.

The tenth anniversary of the release of the *Bringing Them Home Report* – which told the stories of the Stolen Generations, the fiftieth anniversary of NAIDOC – which celebrates Aboriginal and Islander cultures in Australia and the fortieth anniversary of the 1967 Referendum which gave defacto recognition of the citizenship Aboriginal and Islander people.

But it’s not only the big story we need to consider. The real story is that of Aboriginal people on the ground.

Aboriginal people constantly seek to make a difference in the lives of their community. Our leaders are found in all walks of life and some of the most inspirational are those not known. These are the mums and dads who in spite of socio- economic disadvantage, in spite of the trauma they may personally have experienced are still able to focus on doing the best possible for their children.

It is their perseverance that we must honour in all that we do and it is their perseverance that continuously guides us towards creating a better environment for our children.

The story of SNAICC is one that has tried to place due regard to those many stories of perseverance and resilience in communities. We have sought to honour those stories by fighting for Aboriginal rights and children’s rights throughout our history. We fought and won the battle to have an inquiry into the Stolen Generations. We continue to fight for Aboriginal and Islander specific services for children and families. We have learnt from our battles and have responded accordingly. And we now seek to assist mainstream

services in becoming culturally competent, not so that they replace our services, but so that they can compliment our services and be accountable to Aboriginal and Islander communities.

I thank the Minister and the Opposition Spokesperson for their addresses to us.

I particularly want to thank the Minister for his Indigenous Children's Services Plan, which is the result of 4 years of consultations between us at SNAICC, Aboriginal people on the ground and government.

The key plank in the plan is the acknowledgement that it is the role of government to support Aboriginal families in meeting children's cultural and development needs. This is the key to delivering beneficial services to our children.

Culture is critical to children's development needs. Culture is about identity and children who are strong in their sense of identity have greater resilience. This, we hope, will be a turning point in our story

A service system that values Aboriginal and Islander culture and is culturally competent is one which can lead to a better future for our children. Holistic services and cultural inclusion are critical to creating an early years environment that supports the development of our children.

At SNAICC, we have always said that Aboriginal and Islander services need to take control of the narrative so that the story of our children doesn't become another tragedy.

We aren't acting out of some ideology but real knowledge and common sense.

It is just common sense to say that families who feel they have some control over their lives will have a better sense as to how to look after their children. People who feel disempowered see the future as determined for them – they become helpless and focus on immediate gratification rather than sowing the right seeds for their children's future.

It is just common sense to say that families who are strong in their sense of identity and culture are better able to provide their children with good self-esteem.

It is just common sense to say that staying connected to land – which is our connection to our ancestors, our spirit – will provide our families with that sense of having a place to stand, a place to be.

So while we welcome the Minister's move in our direction in the area of the early years we do remain puzzled at the child protection end of the spectrum, particularly given the Federal Government's response to child abuse issues in the Northern Territory. There seems to be a miss-match here. We have the view that the 'emergency measures' may put culture at risk and have a negative effect on communities and they still don't address the issue of creating a culturally-competent child protection system in the Northern Territory.

We also believe that there needs to be a better plan for protecting our children, not just in the Northern Territory but throughout Australia. SNAICC has been advocating such a plan since 1995 and that plan is based on the common sense understandings about the role of culture and communities have a sense of control over their future.

Our hope is that a sober discussion of these issues can occur after the election. A discussion based on evidence and Aboriginal and Islander expertise. Our challenge is to provide the evidence-base to support what we know works and lay those facts before government.

We need to get deadly, not only in our advocacy for a better future for our children, but in how we gather and harness the evidence to argue our case.

One of the projects we did at VACCA, involved Aboriginal film director, Richard Frankland making a film with some of our kids which some of you may have seen at the conference. The children came up with their own lists of warriors and why they are important to them and interviewed some of these people for the film. The children talked about what their culture means to them, what they feel when they see the Aboriginal flag, what their messages are for other Koorie youth today and who inspires them and why. It focused on how Koorie kids' lives can be turned around when culture and the resilience of Aboriginal communities.

The enduring message throughout the film is that being strong and proud in culture and knowing where you belong helps give Koorie youth today the strength to face challenges.

International research and practice also demonstrates the resilience of culture.

A recent study from Canada by Michael Chandler and Travis Proulx for the International Academy for Suicide Research has pointed out that as measures for self-determination and culturally-based services increase, youth suicide dramatically decreases. Being on your own land, having a form of self-government, having Indigenous health services and policing, all combine to create a sense that there is not only a proud past – but a promising future for young people.

This is the opposite of mainstreaming. Assimilation and mainstreaming is not only morally wrong, it doesn't work. All the evidence proves this.

Even the prestigious medical journal, the Lancet pointed out earlier in the year how detrimental the Federal Government policy of mainstreaming is for Australia's Indigenous peoples.

But, self-determination needs to be more than a word, it needs to be resourced, it needs capacity building; it needs respectful dialogue and community development.

I think this is where we, or more particularly, governments, have gone wrong in the past. It was assumed that people who had been systematically disempowered, marginalised and denied rights would be magically able to navigate the strange alien cultural world of colonised Australia and create a new self-determining future. But we are in the midst of a real story – not some fairy tale.

Unfortunately, self-determination was poorly resourced and not enough thought was put into building the capacity of Indigenous communities to exercise their self-determination. And I mean exercise. When you don't use your muscles for long periods of time your body becomes weak and, in some situations, unable to lift or move. Our self-determination muscles had been unused for decades and we needed the right exercise plan to restrengthen them. We needed personal trainers and physiotherapists to help us rebuild our muscles so that we could exercise our rights and our responsibilities.

Too many communities were just given a bag of money and then left to their own devices. Too many communities became dependent on welfare rather than given the resources – in terms of education and training, as well as finance – to action their rights. Only when you can action your rights can you re-learn how to act with responsibility. Only when you can see that the future is in your own hands can you be motivated to see beyond the next welfare cheque.

This is why I say – like many Aboriginal and Islander leaders before me that we want rights not welfare.

But with rights comes responsibility. And we should know this from our stories. My heroes – the warriors of the past had to fight hard for those rights. They were taken in defiance of the dominant culture not handed out to them, like welfare.

We need to learn from our traditions and stories if we are to meet the challenges of the present and create a better future for our children.

Traditional Aboriginal and Islander life was community-focused and holistic with a deep underlying spiritual dimension to maintain our lives in community. Each person had their role. Each person had their rights and responsibilities. The economic was not separated from the spiritual. Work was a spiritual act, subject to the ancient laws and traditions established by the creator spirits, and not just an economic act of survival. Current social theory talks about the notion of 'social investment' as a method of empowering communities.

Well in our case, the 'social investment' had already been made by the creator spirits of the land. Those spirits invested in us and made us custodians. By basing the rhythms of our economies on the rhythms of the land our economic security was assured.

Invasion and colonisation was a process of dis-investment and it created the conditions for social and economic dysfunction which our communities continue to suffer from today.

In order to create a new story for our people there must be a new partnership and a new paradigm.

The critical question when it comes to the future of our children is what will achieve sustaining change. This means – appropriate policy input into government, proper investments in Aboriginal and Islander led solutions and being aware that Aboriginal and Islander services won't succeed if they just replicate mainstream.

We need a social investment strategy for Aboriginal and Islander children and families which:

- **recognises that colonisation** has impacted negatively on Aboriginal social and economic capacity,
- builds on the **strengths of Aboriginal culture** and
- respects the **self-determining rights** of Aboriginal communities in order to **re-build our community capacity**.

If Governments treat us on the basis of our self-determining rights as peoples instead of treating us as passive recipients of welfare as client communities, the debilitating effects of poverty can be overcome.

If we can lobby government to not mainstream us but work in partnership with us and invest in our own vessels to navigate the waters of modernity, we can find ways to avoid the rocks of family dysfunction.

Our hope is that we are all up to the challenges to reverse the trends and restore rights and capacity for Aboriginal and Islander families and communities.

Where we go to from now depends on your role, each and every one of you, in the coming chapters of this story. Let us not have our stories confused, or worse, destroyed. I hope this story becomes one of freedom for Aboriginal people and I suspect if it does it will also be a story of redemption for the non-Aboriginal people in this land. I hope it becomes story of truth overcoming denial, justice overcoming oppression and hope overcoming despair. It is the story of all our Aboriginal and Islander agencies. It is the story of all of us.

And it is a story I am looking forward to telling to my children and my grand children one day.

Thank you and I hope you continue to enjoy the conference.