

# SNAICC NATIONAL CONFERENCE

27-29 July 2010, Alice Springs



**FOR OUR CHILDREN**

Local Strengths,  
National Challenges

**AMPE ANWERNEKENHEKE**

Rlierrke Akwete  
Aneye



Men's work and men's business in the historical, cultural and modern policy context. Embracing our humility, integrity and dignity as men in society to change the way we think, feel and behave towards women *By: Grant Sarra*

**Keynote presentation by Grant Sarra to the SNAICC National Conference Thursday 29 July 2010. Grant Sarra's speech can be heard online at [www.snaicc.asn.au/policy/conference](http://www.snaicc.asn.au/policy/conference)**

**Grant Sarra has thirty years' experience working in areas that deal exclusively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community aspirations, problems and issues relevant to public and private sector organisations and projects throughout Australia.**

Grant says that he is an experienced (but not expert) Indigenous executive, change agent, trainer, workshop facilitator, project manager and report writer. Grant was nominated for the National Human Rights Medal in November 2000 in recognition for the development and delivery of

Strategic Indigenous Awareness Program: To understand the present, we must understand the past and for his services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Grant is a prolific writer and speaker on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander issues, with an excellent track record for producing tangible results in the process of driving large scale cultural change and building organisational effectiveness, efficiency and capacity to deliver culturally appropriate, community sensitive and business-minded outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, and public

## Introduction

**I acknowledge my presence on the land of the Central Arrernte people - the Traditional Owners and Custodians for Mparntwe – Alice Springs. Despite my formal education, career background and humble achievements – I humbly acknowledge that I am just a boy in your presence and on your country!**

I also acknowledge our Elders who have past – without their wisdom, strength, determination and leadership – I, and many others, would not be what we are today and our Elders who are present today – without your continued wisdom, strength, determination and leadership – we will continue to struggle in our future!

The title of my presentation is “Men's work and men's business in the historical, cultural and modern day public policy context” so I will of course speak to this throughout the course of my presentation but I will also need to put this into context with a range of other problems and issues that I feel need also to be raised.

I need to say up front that as one Aboriginal person, I do not have the right, or responsibility and nor am I obligated to speak on behalf of all Aboriginal people across this country.

We are an extremely diverse people and this is something that needs to be understood and respected by not only non-Aboriginal people but also those Aboriginal people who espouse to be our leaders – that is the lore.

I have had a troubled time this week trying to prepare myself for the various things of which I have had to participate and I have particularly struggled with trying to get my head around what I wanted to speak about this morning.

The reality for me is that there are so many problems that continue to affect the day-to-day lives of Aboriginal families (Grand Parents, Mothers, Fathers, Uncles, Aunties, Son's, Daughters, Nephews and Nieces) the current generations of Aboriginal people.

If these problems are not understood in a more dignified and humane context, clearly

defined and properly considered in a public policy context of accountability, effectiveness, efficiency, leadership, governance AND in seriously analysed the context of cultural diversity, community relevance, sensitivity and appropriateness - community by community, throughout Australia – we will continue to make the same mistakes, deliver the same ineffective outcomes, waste more and more tax payer money – and sadly continue to destroy the beauty, richness, strength and knowledge of our ancient people and culture.

If we value and or care about the health and well being of our ancient people and culture in this country - we need to change the way we have been going about our business - we need to move beyond ignorance, fear and denial and we need to grow into our own adolescents as a nation.

If we don't change our current attitude and approach to just taking Aboriginal children away from their families, without a proper cultural analysis and consideration of the environmental factors that influence the day-to-day lives of Aboriginal people living in urban, rural and remote communities throughout Australia - the



**SNAICC: Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Inc.**

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sad reality for the many young Aboriginal children, through no fault of their own, is that they will continue to be born into a society where they are immediately affected by the ongoing inter-generational oppression, trauma and psychological scarring that stems from the historical through to contemporary impacts of colonisation.

At birth, these children will have already become part of an ongoing cycle of trauma and scarring and this cycle will become further compounded by inter-generational poverty, family dysfunction, and various forms of abuse, racism, and general historical socio-economic disadvantage - we must change our system, attitude and approach and we must leave our egos behind and we must change the way we think, feel and behave toward each other so that we can get on with the real business at hand – restoring the strength, pride and dignity of Aboriginal communities and families so that they themselves can keep their children safe and free from harm.

## Setting the Scene

Today, I would like to try and humanise our understanding in some small way.

In 100 years from now no one person in this room will be around – but hopefully we will still have a healthy land and environment for our future generations to live.

All people here today are unique and special – we all have a brain with which we think, a heart with which we feel and hands, feet and mouths with which we demonstrate our behaviours. We have all become socialised to think, feel and behave based on where we have come from and to be treated poorly in one's past almost inevitably results in one thinking, feeling and behaving poorly in one's present.

I want people to take the time to acknowledge that the Aboriginal families and their children that you deal with today have evolved successfully in this country for thousands upon thousands of generations within a subsistence economy. I want people to recognise that our Aboriginal families and their children have only been afforded the opportunity to progress and prosper within a modern day monetary economy over the past 43 years since the 1967 Referendum – which finally counted us as citizens in our own country. You should also recognise that for the best part of these 43 years Aboriginal people have been the subject of ongoing subsidised training and have primarily held subordinate roles within the bureaucracy.

I want people to consider – How we survived

for such an extended period of time and why it really is that we, as an ancient people, struggle to survive in a modern day context?

I want people to think about where they have come from as modern day Australians in the bigger picture of humanity - 300 years ago – by skin, by blood, by ancestry.

I want people to put themselves into our shoes to know what is really like to be black in this country.

While I have been here this week I have taken the time to feel the strength and spirit of this land, observe the changes in the winds and the clouds in the sky, the coming and going of the sun, the path of the Emu as it passes through the night sky and the behaviours of the birds as they have come and gone outside my room.

I have also taken the time to observe the beauty and strength of the many Aboriginal women as they have made their way to and from the various workshops. And at times, from a respectful distance, I have also observed the sadness in their eyes and faces and I have felt the pain and frustration in their hearts.

I have noted a high presence of security around this venue in the evenings and I have also noted that local people in this town seem to be treated just like many other Aboriginal people around this country – being slowly marginalised further to the extreme edge of mainstream society – almost out of mind BUT NOT YET OUT OF SIGHT.

I have noticed a lot of our people continuing to live in absolute appalling conditions and I have also noticed a lot of people here not knowing how to respond to this situation.

And I have asked myself again – is this deliberate and if so, why - when we live in such a prosperous country? I have also asked what value do we place on the ancient knowledge, wisdom and culture of our people.

I have also observed the presence of many non-Aboriginal people at this conference who are very genuine, willing to engage in a real way and prepared to listen and learn from the wisdom, knowledge, advice and direction from many of our people as they have presented at various presentations.

I have felt their genuine sincerity and compassion to do the right thing and I also listened to their frustration trying to argue for change within the western system in which we operate.

All said and done, I have observed things that I

have been observing over the past thirty years of my career working in Aboriginal affairs – and it has made my heart ache – to tell you otherwise would be telling you a lie.

We need a change of system, attitude and approach in this country but I know and most of you here will agree – we are the informed and converted souls who already want to do the right thing. That said, we need to recognise that our greatest challenge in this process, as a partnership of people who care, may well be to better educate the broader mainstream society, who appear to remain ignorant and oblivious, toward the real plight of Aboriginal families and their children.

For our part we need to continue to change the way we think, feel and behave toward each other as black and white Australians so that we can continue to grow and move beyond fear, denial, guilt and blame so that together can get on with the real business at hand – **restoring the strength, pride and dignity of Aboriginal communities and families so that they themselves can keep their children safe and free from harm.**

We need to come together and value each others' contribution if we are truly going to change this appalling state of affairs.

I want non-Aboriginal people to imagine themselves in this scenario, and in so doing, I want you to think about how you can raise the awareness and understanding among your own people – the people who make up 97.4%. We need you to work with us – because we only make up 2.6% of the population.

## To help you understand the plight of our people:

Today, I will take away your wages, I will take ownership of your assets, I will take away your right to make decisions about your life and the lives of your children, I will take away your identity, I will take away your language and from this day forward everyone here in this audience will have to get on with each other – despite your diverse backgrounds, beliefs and views of the world. **I will take away your identity, your language and your privileges.**

You will live like this, under my control for the next week, I will stretch this out for another twelve months, three years, and I will extend this throughout the course of your natural life. When I move on, as I will, someone else of my ilk will replace me and they will continue this process for the next three generations.

During this time - If you need any help in areas of health, education, housing, mental illness, early childhood, family support and any other areas - you will need to come to me for funding and support and if I agree, I will send someone of my ilk out to fix the problems you have created. **I will take away your dignity.**

I will accumulate wealth and prosper from the exploitation and investment of your assets and I will live a comfortable, peaceful, happy and harmonious life.

Out of respect for you as human beings and under the grace of my god, I will establish a Parliament, a Government and a series of Departments to eventually deal with the problems that you now impose upon my society. I will frustrate, infuriate and demoralise you - but you will have limited scope, if any at all, to do anything about your situation because you will remain under my control. **I will not let you participate in my society.**

Someone, either of your ilk or mine, will now and then, drop off sly grog and drugs and you will start to take advantage of this situation - as you will have nothing else to do in your community and this will for a short time relieve you of your boredom. **I will intoxicate you and I will addict you. You will become dependent upon me.**

When this occurs, you as people will start to act out animalistic traits and I or someone of your ilk, will provide more grog, drugs and we will add pornography to your shopping list. When this occurs - the women in your society will no longer be safe. This sounds like any mainstream major city on a Friday or Saturday night but that is not relevant - **it is you and your people who have the problem.**

You will start to struggle looking after your children and keeping them grounded in their culture - **so I will take your children away.** You will be upset and hurt initially but I will help you to understand in time that this was for their own good. With the amount of alcohol and drugs you consume you will eventually move on with your life. **Your children will be much happier this way - at least I think they will be.**

I will promise to produce yet another government report to find out for you.

To deal with the growing number of problems that you now present within our civilised society - I will put together a panel of experts who will help me and my government to assimilate you into the new world that presents itself before you. My panel of experts will consist of highly qualified people professors and Doctors from Canada, America and England because **there will be nothing of interest that you could**

**possibly provide to me to help alleviate the problems you face every day of your lives.** My government may however, call upon you from time to time, to consult with you about your problems and issues - but I won't remunerate you - because you are not the experts. **I will however, take it on board.**

We will introduce self determination, economic independence, we will spend lots and lots and lots of our taxpayers dollars on legal experts of my ilk, helping you to come to grips with the fact the waves of time and history have washed away your connections to your traditional lands AND you will do this in the presence of a High Court Judge of my ilk, who himself or herself could not tell you where they actually come from 300 years ago.

I will eventually introduce a process called "Wrecked and Silly Nation" I mean Reconciliation and this will help you to become valued and better accepted into my society.

I will eventually say Sorry for taking your children away, BUT NOT ALL OF THE OTHERS THINGS, and only 33% of my mainstream society will actually get what this is all about.

I want you all to stand up with me now on our National Day - Australia Day, show solidarity and I want you to come together with me and celebrate our great Australian culture!

I could go on and on but I know that many of you know what this is all about - **Aboriginal Australia - this is your life! I WANT YOU ALL TO MOVE ON NOW - I SAID SORRY NOW YOU NEED TO GET OVER IT!**

And I have only scratched the surface in this scenario! But now we are going to Close the Gap - What Gap do we actually need to close is one of a number of important questions for us all to think about. Who are the people who actually write policies for our people and do they actually know who they are themselves, (where have they come from, where do they belong)? I hope so because they are the ones dramatically changing the lives of our people. Shouldn't they know where they actually come from first before they start dictating to our people what we need and or should be doing in our lives?

### **Understanding the Environment we are dealing with**

Every day in the life of Aboriginal people we are forced to deal with a cocktail of problems that influence our daily thinking, feeling and behaviour within our environment:

Cultural sensitivity, cultural diversity, accountability, deaths in custody, psychological scarring, intergenerational trauma, anger, bitterness, mistrust, apathy, ignorance, fear, insecurity, discrimination, racism, paternalism, fractured kinship systems, government policy, cultural values, identity, dignity, pride, communication barriers, court systems, police, limited resources, western law, customary lore, new technology, wealth generation, geographical isolation, access, equity, participation, unacceptable levels of unemployment, capacity building, stolen wages, welfare, substance abuse, domestic violence, governance, colonisation, dispossession, stolen generations, child abuse, community factions, confusion, Native Title and fighting to protect our ancient cultural heritage and our right to receive equity from developments on our lands.

And we continue to wake up and have to put up with stories on mainstream television and pick up mainstream newspapers that are filled with ignorant opinions and commentary about the status and plight of our people.

I am personally sick to death of hearing middle class Caucasian Australian men, blurting out rubbish about how we need to forget about the current generation of Aboriginal people - the older generations and focus on the younger generations - the young children. I have no problem with focusing on the young children - that after all is our children's natural human right in this country. What annoys me is that it is this generation of middle class Caucasian Australian men that have prospered the most at the expense of those Aboriginal people who they now seem to think will just die off.

How dare they be so inhumane and how dare they look down their noses at our people in our modern-day society.

And our Parliaments and our Governments, under the grace of their God, continue to bury their heads in the sand because in this country we believe in a fair go, freedom of speech, we value the multiculturalism and we have said Sorry to our Aboriginal people.

### **Moving forward - Dealing with some of the key problems**

Have we come far enough under the western system of government? I personally think that we have.

Review our western approach to Aboriginal service delivery

If we are to continue looking overseas for innovative solutions, programs and ideas perhaps

we should take the time to investigate and honestly appraise those other Commonwealth Nations that have been formed under the British Monarchy – and again, under the grace of their God – take a very close look at the real plight of the Indigenous people in each of those places.

We should leave our egos behind and move beyond, fear, ignorance and denial, move beyond us and them and seriously ask ourselves, based on what we discover in these other Commonwealth Nations, ask ourselves this question – IS IT REALLY AN ABORIGINAL PEOPLE'S PROBLEM OR IS IT MORE A CONSISTENT PROBLEM ASSOCIATED WITH POWER, EGO AND GREED ASSOCIATED WITH THE MONARCIST/WESMINSTER SYSTEM OF GOVERNMENT.

### Creating real value for money

We need to stop chopping and changing - we must be prepared to invest in the long term future of our communities by maintaining a consistent partnership approach with our communities and we must establish a real and genuine bi-partisan approach.

To achieve true value for money and sustainable outcomes, governments in addition to considering the financial cost effectiveness of projects also need to be prepared to work in partnership with Aboriginal community leaders so that they can mutually appraise the capacity of individual service providers to deliver sustainable outcomes against their history and background of diverse and complex social, economic, geographical, cultural challenges and circumstances.

At the end of the day, it will be the community who has to work with the service provider - so it stands to reason that they should at least be given a say in who they feel best fits their needs.

For instance, some of our remote communities like the Doomadgee in Queensland, Wadeye in the Northern Territory, and Jigalong in Western Australia, to name just a few, will require a concentrated and consistent effort over an extended period of time if real and sustainable change is to be delivered. Government and service providers need to understand and accept that while it might take four years to achieve a specific set of outcomes in some of our urban and rural communities, it could take upwards of ten or more years to deliver the same set of outcomes in some of these remote locations.

It also needs to be recognised that in remote locations it will take a long time to build the trust and confidence of the community and it will also take a long time to develop the

necessary level of cultural understanding, competency and capacity to be able to work in an effective partnership with the people in these communities.

Showing leadership as men – moving beyond the humbug

Over the past few years I have been told of a number of situations where men, who are seen to be leaders in some of our communities, are allegedly using stand over tactics against women and other men in their communities and claim that this is their right under customary lore.

As men we have had to deal with some very difficult and inhumane situations and we have been confronted with many complex challenges as we have struggled to evolve into the modern day monetary society – but that does not mean we should let go of our lore.

To me, the lore of our people comes from the land and it is deeply entrenched in our knowledge and understanding of our natural world, our physical world and our spiritual world – our dreaming.

Our lore as this relates to our natural, physical and spiritual worlds has been there since our time of creation – it never changes and it should never be exploited.

To me, our lore was, is and always will be about our absolute honour and integrity. As part of our lore we must expect that of others. We must always embrace a holistic outlook for the survival of our families and our people as a whole – **our lore is not about I, me, or my - it has always been about we and therefore we should never become opportunistic in our behaviour.**

As men we are born to a woman – our Mother - and we are reared by our Mothers up to that age when we start to become our man.

Our women will always be the givers of life and they will always be the primary carer and nurturer of our children - be they boys or girls up until that age when boy becomes man and girl becomes woman.

As men, we must never forget and or disrespect our connection to our Mothers and by lore we should never disrespect or abuse our women – to do so is a serious breach of our lore and in this modern world it is signal to other men that it is okay for them to abuse our mothers, our aunties, our sisters, our nieces, our wives and our daughters. **That is not part of our lore.**

Despite the many different and complex challenges we now face - our lore is still strong

and whilst it has never changed in the context of our natural, physical and spiritual worlds - we perhaps need to take stock of where we are now at as men in our current society.

### Today our lore needs to deal with:

unacceptably high levels of unemployment, which leads to boredom, which leads to various forms of substance abuse, alcoholism, glue sniffing and petrol sniffing and the appalling mistreatment of ourselves and of our women and children;

- racism and discrimination from mainstream societies;
- the psychological trauma, scarring - the by-product of being removed from our traditional lands and placed, along with many other men, women and children from other tribal groups, on the traditional lands of other Aboriginal people;
- Changing from a subsistence-based economy where it was appropriate to receive a rightful share of food from our young men (who we taught to hunt in the first place) to that of a monetary-based economy where it not really appropriate for us to now expect our young men to hand over the rights to their motor cars when it is they who will be making the repayments to the bank in which they secured their loan.

Our lore needs to take into account the advent of technology and the sociological issues such as easy access to other people's land and the problems associated with other people's access and potential exploitation of our land, people, culture and environment.

As men we may also become proud and loving fathers of young girls – our daughters. We will love our daughters unconditionally as we do our sons. But at that time when our daughters become young women – we know, out of respect and sensitivity to the changes in a little girl's life, it is at that time when we need to take a polite step back from our beautiful young girls and allow them to become beautiful young women – that is women's business and that is part of women's lore.

As men we need to acknowledge that our brother's children are children and our sister's children are our children. They too will look to us for love, care, guidance and direction at various times throughout their lives – we need to act with honour, dignity, and humility and show absolute integrity in their presence. **We are their role models.**

To my audience today, (but also to Aboriginal men in this audience) I want you to think

about what it would have meant if we as Aboriginal men were as abusive toward our women and our children and as disrespectful toward our old people as the some sections of government and the media would have us believe.

### If that was the case - **HOW DID WE SURVIVE AS A PEOPLE IN THIS COUNTRY FOR IN EXCESS OF 2000+ GENERATIONS?**

At this point in our history, we perhaps need to consider the bringing together of all our lore men and women so that they can be afforded an opportunity to assess where we have come from in the past 223 years, consider what and how we need to adjust our lore in response to the sociological changes to our environment and formalise what it is that we as Aboriginal people need to now know about our lore and our customs as we progress into our modern and evolving world – **that will continue to be our Constitution!** It may also help other Australians to understand what it means to spiritually connect and belong to these lands.

### **Adopting a commercial business focus**

if Aboriginal Affairs in this country was to adopt a commercial business focus and therefore accountable to shareholders, or had to deliver quality outcomes like I have to as a consultant in order to be paid – based on the respective performances of past and present Labor and Liberal governments State and Commonwealth – they would not be in business.

If I were the Prime Minister of this country or Premier of any of our States or Territories and I bought someone like Barrack Obama to visit any of our Aboriginal communities to show how we have, and continue to treat them on their traditional lands – I would be embarrassed and ashamed - **I would hang my head in shame.**

In the context of what this conference has been all about - child care and family support – **will we still be in business in five years.**

### **Consolidating our approach**

When I scanned the conference program I was impressed to see that there are many positive ideas and concepts that are currently being implemented throughout all parts of the country that deal with kinship care and support, healing, out of home care, remote work and traditional rearing practices, child protection partnerships safe connections to kin and culture - we appear to be on the right path.

In this respect, we need to learn from these best practice examples and consolidate this across our country – where they are appropriate and relevant. **Let's get more culturally efficient, cost effective and business focused.**

### **Moving beyond apathy - value and remunerate local wisdom and knowledge**

We need to commit to a future partnership approach that acknowledges the need, and seeks to reduce other social problems such as high unemployment along with child care and family support. Despite our good intentions up until this point - we continue to fail in many of our dealings with Aboriginal people in this country.

We should therefore value and remunerate local Aboriginal people in their communities for their wisdom and knowledge – employ them as the leaders of their future and invest in their development. This will improve culturally appropriate child care and family support options but also reduce the gap in unemployment. It will build pride, confidence and self esteem and it will also provide young people with their own deadly role models in their own community – **people they can look up to, value and aspire to become.**

Have we come far enough under the western system of government? I personally think that we have.

### **Conclusion**

Archie Roach – *“Our country be dying so have we and people still trying to be free Elders are crying for you and me so why are we trying not to see – time that's all we ask just a little time for the feeling, time that's all we need, just a little time for the healing to begin.*

*If you just give us one more day to try to find a better way together all who gone astray into our loving arms- its up to no one else you see nobody else but you and me to give us back our liberty and keep us safe from harm”*

### **Treaty**

I agree with Archie Roach – a strong, proud and brilliant man who sings of our struggles – I wish I could be Archie Roach – I wish I could sing like him. **All we need is time – just a little time for the healing to begin.**

I think that we have now approached a time in our country's history where we are almost mature enough to develop a formal Treaty.

A treaty that is based on give and take - a Treaty that is based on meeting each other half way i.e. the Australia that we have all become socialised to think, feel and behave has been around for 223 years - if we were prepared to meet each other half way it would mean that a Formal Treaty in this country if it were signed here today, would be 111.5 years. The spiritual reality for me is that I believe that this is how long it would actually take to heal the hurt and suffering of our past and lay the foundation for our future.

Perhaps we might also develop an education system and process that teaches the true, honest and accurate history of this country – beyond fear, ignorance and denial – and beyond guilt and blame.

Perhaps we may also recognise our right as people to evolve from a subsistence economy into a modern monetary economic system where our sovereignty and our right to equity from the developments on our lands are acknowledged and respected.

As part of this Treaty we might also take the time to consolidate a set of universal values which unite all Australians – such as values practiced by our ancestors for thousands upon thousands of generations - **Caring, Sharing and Respect for our land, our people and our environment.**

These are the most ancient values known to humanity – all people come from the land, all people need to acknowledge and respects the lores, customs and practices of neighboring people and all people need to understand and read their environment in order to survive – **these should be the foundation values for all people now living in this country and throughout our world!**

Thank you for your time