

## **ADDRESS TO THE NATIONAL RECONCILIATION PLANNING<sup>1</sup>**

**SENATOR AMANDA VANSTONE\***

We are at a point in history when Australia is embarking on a ‘new conversation’ in Indigenous Affairs.

In a conversation based on an almost universal belief that the approach of the past 30 or more years has not delivered the results that we would have hoped for.

Sure there have been many gains but we all know that this can’t be as good as it gets.

Reconciliation Australia has taken an important facilitation role by helping to provide an environment for this new conversation continues to develop.

I am sure that this workshop and the convention to follow will play their part in this process.

I thank Reconciliation Australia for the opportunity to be here today.

This new conversation needs to engage the entire community.

It must be a conversation that doesn’t rule particular views out of bounds – we need new ideas and we need to know what people are thinking as hard as that might sometimes be.

There is no place in Australia for non-Indigenous or Indigenous people, acting as censors over what can be said or what can’t be said. There is just no place for that.

There has been a shift from the theoretical and ideological to the real and the practical.

And this new conversation must be more than just words – it cannot be an end in itself.

It must make a real contribution to better outcomes - that is the objective.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, their families and communities must be at the centre of the new conversation. They must be given a voice. The conversation must be with them, not about them

And, having been asked to contemplate their future, we must listen and follow through with actions and outcomes.

For many this will be the first time they have been asked to say what they in the community want for their future. The first time to tell us what they think will work. And the first time that they have had a hand in shaping their own, immediate and longer term future.

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<sup>1</sup> Address to Reconciliation Australia Conference, Old Parliament House, 30-31 May 2005.

\* At the time of delivery, Senator Vanstone was Minister for Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs.

Who would have thought that in 1971 when John Lennon sang ‘Power to the People’ - that in 2005 a right of centre government would be going direct to the local people to ask them to shape their own future.

I am pleased that the three levels of government are here with me on the one podium today.

Because we share a common challenge to produce better outcomes.

A challenge that requires new and better relationships between governments and Indigenous Australians; between and within the three levels of government; and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

A few weeks ago I travelled to the United States and Canada.

I spent time with Stephen Cornel, Manly Bagay and Neil Sterritt who have been working with Reconciliation Australia on governance issues in Australia.

I visited eight reservations and met many Native Americans and Canadians.

The experience and the length of contact between Indigenous people and western society is different in many respects from the Australian experience.

But we can learn from them and we shouldn’t forget that they can learn from us.

Our new conversation needs to include these other countries.

We should be open to new ideas.

But when we search for those new ideas, we won’t find any silver bullets – there are no simple answers.

But some of the fundamental issues that we are confronting are also at the forefront of thinking in the US and Canada.

It was encouraging to find that the new way of working that we’re beginning to adopt here in Australia struck a very strong chord with many of those that I talked to. The basics are in common.

For this workshop, I want to put five of these basics on the table. They are about empowering local people, tackling poverty and dependency, understanding and celebrating what works, governments at all levels getting our act together and lastly getting the rest of the Australian people on board.

### **Empowering the locals**

Too many Indigenous Australians have been marginalised for too long.

Too often well motivated people, assume to speak on their behalf. They became the powerful ones, not the locals.

We have got to put an end to that. We need to give the locals the voice.

It amazes me that some would argue against this. In my view, it is paternalistic in the extreme to suggest that local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not able to present their views to governments directly. It suggests that they have no capacity to make that contribution.

Our shared responsibility approach is based on local people identifying the problem and defining their own solutions. This is a simple but profound notion which is being embraced by communities as they enthusiastically

negotiate shared responsibility agreements with the government.

Our first 52 agreements are the beginning of a new way of doing business in Australia.

In Yalata in South Australia my state, the community will set up a new scout troop to build confidence and leadership skills and improve community safety.

In Muswellbrook in New South Wales, we are supporting the Hot Wheels program, which will offer driver's licenses, mechanical skills and job opportunities in return for a commitment to no alcohol, no drugs by the participants.

This is a fundamental change in the relationship with Government. It puts a lot of pressure on us.

While I have great respect for the public sector, the ideas coming out of these agreements would not have come out of the Public service. Not from a desk in Canberra.

Government departments are now beginning to work in a 'whole of government' way as facilitators and enablers rather than taking the old paternalistic approach of "we know what you need".

Canberra generated solutions don't work. We need to think- Canberra funded, not Canberra run.

As the old structures that stood between governments and local people are dismantled or change and respond, we will need to support the development of sound governance arrangements and leadership in local communities.

The one size fits all approach will just not work. Local communities will need to develop their own models of governance that fit culturally.

We need to identify and develop future leaders and we need to build the capacity of communities to manage their own affairs.

I know there has been talk about the need for a national representative voice. If one does emerge, I expect it will be far different from ATSIC. The National Congress of Native Americans for example, is not a construct of government. It raises most of its funds from non-government sources – not all tribes choose to be involved. It doesn't speak on behalf of particular groups and only takes forward issues on which there is a consensus. It's a lean organisation with about eight staff.

It is pro-active, constructive and effective. It is not a gatekeeper. It is a facilitator – helping governments and Native Americans to work together well at the local level.

## **Tackling Poverty and Dependency**

The proposition I put it to you is that social programmes alone often fail to solve social problems – they ameliorate the symptoms.

Many of the social problems faced by Indigenous Australians are caused by poverty, dependency and the despair it brings.

Economic programs and policies are also required to tackle social problems.

Most Australians achieve economic independence through having a regular job and hopefully owning their own home.

In urban and regional centres, it is a matter of assisting Indigenous Australians to capture opportunities in the local economy. Many have already done so.

But we can do more.

It is more problematic in remote areas. There are opportunities for business development in these places, not as many and not as obvious. We need to remove impediments to business development and ensure that Aboriginal owned land can generate economic returns should the community chose to do so.

I assure you that the nature of Indigenous Land Tenure is not up for grabs inalienability and Native Title will remain the core.

Of course, there won't be jobs for everyone locally in most of the remote communities. But with a decent education young people will have the chance to establish themselves in the towns and cities if they choose. Educated young will have a choice.

We need to aim for Indigenous Australians to become a part of the real economy. A separate protected economy created by government will not last the distance.

### **Focusing on what works**

We spend a lot of time focusing on failures and undertaking research into why things don't work.

We need to spend more time identifying what works and why it works.

There are well-governed communities. What are the key elements that make these communities work?

There are many successful indigenous families. There are plenty of individuals succeeding in education, employment and business across the gamut of Australian life. What has made them achieve against the odds?

Some government programs work well. What makes the difference? We must find out.

There is a lot to be learnt – it's right in front of us.

Young Indigenous Australians must be sick and tired of hearing about the problems.

They, like every one of us, need positive reinforcement.

At the moment, we have the balance wrong and it needs to change. We need to focus on what works.

When I addressed the Press Club earlier this year I called on the media to give more attention to the positives. That challenge still stands before them.

### **Governments getting their act together**

We need to do better, the States, Territory's, all of us.

I have been in Parliament for twenty years. This is the first time, across

governments and across party lines, where everyone wants outcomes rather than political gains.

And the days of buck passing are disappearing.

We need a bipartisan approach and this is beginning to happen in very tangible ways.

Most states and territories have contributed to development of Shared Responsibility Agreements.

For example, at Aroona in South Australia, the State Government has signed up to a shared responsibility agreement that will involve young people in healthy activity. And in Coober Pedy an agreement providing incentives for kids to go to school. The Northern Territory government has signed up to an agreement to establish a mud crab business in Darwin.

We are now formalising this new era of co-operation through bilateral agreements for better co-ordination and improved service delivery. The Prime Minister signed the first of these with the Northern Territory government a few weeks ago. More will follow.

It is a bright new beginning but we have a long way to go. We have to work together.

We need systemic change that will normalise life in Indigenous communities.

We need to arrive at a time when communities look forward and do not depend on special programmes for the basics. A time where the mainstream delivers the goods.

### **Getting the rest of Australia on board**

I reckon a very small percentage of Australians have actually met an Indigenous Australian. It would be lucky to be one in ten that have actually met an Indigenous Australian.

When we are still developing our national identity Indigenous Australia must help us define who we are.

On the other hand the hurt to Indigenous Australians that arises from ignorance somehow damages and diminishes us.

The National Museum of the Native American contains a remarkable story.

While it covers the history of European contact and stories of conflict and dispossession it puts this in the context of a rich and vibrant history that extended over many millennia.

The presentation of contemporary native America is perhaps the most compelling feature. It is uplifting and inspirational. – it shows the resilience and adaptability of indigenous culture.

This is a story that needs to be told and understood about Indigenous Australia. After all it is this unique heritage that helps to define who we are as a modern and confident nation in today's world.

Telling this story as the Governor General has called for, will help Australians to understand and to encourage them, to become more involved.

Many Australians want to do more than just sympathise. They want to make a contribution. We need to facilitate this and encourage more to do so.

The Government provided \$20 million for the Indigenous Communities Volunteer Program. This is an important vehicle but we need to seek out other opportunities for more people to be involved.

In the end it will be the Australian people, not governments - that will make the lasting difference.

### **To Summarise**

We need to begin with the premise that what we are doing now is not the best we can do. We can do better, much better.

The days of we'll take away your problem and solve it for you, buck-passing, misunderstanding, negativity, victimhood and defeatism have to end.

This new emerging environment will be refreshing but fraught with difficulty. We cannot withdraw into our respective shells and leave it to someone else or another generation.

We must do better than that.

Let us be optimistic - take the conversation forward in a way that will reverberate for many decades to come.