

Dungala Kaeila Oration

Wednesday 17 August 2016

Rumbalara Football and Netball Club, Mercury Drive,

Shepparton, VIC

5.30 pm

Thank you for that kind introduction, Paul. Thanks also to the Kaeila Institute for inviting me to deliver the 2016 Dungala oration.

I also thank Uncle Col Walker for your warm welcome to country.

I too would like to start by acknowledging the Yorta Yorta people, Traditional Custodians of the land on which we gather today, and pay my respects to their elders past and present. I extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples here today.

I'd also like to acknowledge:

- the Elders here today;
- the business leaders and representatives;
- Bridget McKenzie, Senator for Victoria;

- Suzanna Sheed MP, Member for Shepparton District;
- Dinny Aden, Mayor, City of Greater Shepparton;
- other Victorian and local government representatives;
- our hosts:
 - Glyn Davis, Vice Chancellor, University of Melbourne
 - Justin Mohamed, Paul Briggs and Felicia Dean from the Kaiela Institute.

I do not exaggerate when I say you do me a great honour to invite me here to speak.

Like many of you, my roots are in the country.

I was born in Stawell and spent my formative years there and in Mansfield and Ballarat.

Expectations for what I might do with my life were modest. I became the first person in my family to finish school and I did most of my secondary years at a technical school, not a high school.

Yet today I have a privileged position in our society and the capacity to help shape Australia for the better.

The reason for that is education.

As an economist, I care deeply about getting the economic fundamentals right – because it's the economic success of individuals that will see us close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

But the pursuit of economic success is not something one can separate from the social and cultural dimensions of our lives – something this community understands well.

I get a very real sense of the Indigenous history in this region – a deep connection to country, a pride in Aboriginal culture and strong bonds of family.

That does not happen by chance.

There must be a conscious decision to preserve that which is important and is a characteristic trademark of strong inter-generational leadership.

As Noel Person said in his 2014 Dungala Kaeila oration:

“There is no other tribe in Aboriginal Australia who has produced more important leaders than the Yorta Yorta.”¹

It is evident that the legacy of men and women like William Cooper, Geraldine Briggs, Merle Jackomos and Sir Doug Nicholls still influence the Yorta Yorta people of 2016.

They were men and women who lived the reality of dispossession and oppression but refused to allow it to defeat them or their community. Instead they became champions of Aboriginal rights and advocates of reconciliation with non-Indigenous Australia.

¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z9a7dVtz6hc> from 2.25 min

It was Pastor Sir Doug Nicholls who gave a stirring sermon at his church in Northcote which asked his parishioners why they should care about Aboriginal people.

Firstly, as a man of the cloth, he believed in everyone being equal under God.

He also believed that Aboriginal people were part of the Commonwealth of nations.

And, thirdly, because, and I quote:

“We want to walk with you, we don’t wish to walk alone.”

My message to you today is that the Australian Government cannot walk alone as it shapes the future of our nation; it wants to shape it for, and with, all Australians.

And I am here today to say to Indigenous leaders that the Government wants to find new ways to work with you to ensure we are shaping a future that is inclusive of Indigenous Australians.

As former Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Mick Gooda said at the recent Garma Festival:

“Engagement with Indigenous people needs to improve before any long-term change can happen.”

This point reinforces the Prime Minister’s belief that we must move from policy which does things ‘to’ Indigenous people, to policy which does things ‘with’ Indigenous people.

Mr Turnbull’s words acknowledge the fact that Government policies and programmes, while well intentioned, have often resulted in a loss of control and autonomy for Aboriginal people.

As we near the 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum, it is a time to reflect on the self determination that emerged from that critical vote, but also to acknowledge that the Government structures that supported it have, over time, eroded.

Government action has, too often, been seen as top down and disconnected from the aspirations of Aboriginal people and the day-to-day realities of living in communities.

This disconnect all too often translates into missed opportunities. However here in the Goulburn Murray region, leaders have been working with us to turn this disconnect around.

The Government is determined to respond to this leadership with a positive conversation on the future opportunities that can come from delivering on your vision for your region. We recognise that it is the power to make decisions from a position of knowledge and confidence in your own responsibilities, rights and accountabilities that is critical.

In February, the Prime Minister delivered the eighth Closing the Gap Report to Parliament.

We all felt the disappointment of having to report again that, while achieving good outcomes in some areas, we are falling short, sometimes well short, on other targets.

The report does, however, give us valuable insight into: where the need is greater; what strategies are most effective; and where we can take heart from long-term gains.

The current Closing the Gap framework is coming up to 10 years old and many of the targets about to expire. We should not be fearful of where we go from here but rather seize the enormous opportunity this presents.

This is our chance— Government and Indigenous people—to take the lessons of the past decade and work together to reset the agenda, to focus our efforts to truly close the gap in the outcomes for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

A high proportion of what we fund has, at best, a weak evidence base of how it affects Indigenous peoples. We must gather evidence which shows we are improving the lives of Indigenous Australians. And if that evidence tells us otherwise, we must change our approach.

We need to put our minds to many questions—what did we get right and what did we get wrong? And why?

We need to commit to the economic development for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples based on accumulated knowledge.

We know that the keys to self-reliance, independence and improved social outcomes are: higher levels of employment; Indigenous business ownership; and the opportunity to use and develop culture, knowledge and land assets to generate wealth.

How do we get there?

Through partnerships.

Supporting the work of the Rumbalara Football and Netball Club to continue its trajectory – 20 years ago 80% of the players were unemployed, compared with 20% today. Supporting the work of the Academy of Sport, Health and Education, or ASHE, and Melbourne University partnership. Supporting the work of Algabonyah Community Cabinet acknowledging what is happening in

community, involving local businesses, educators and importantly, supporting families and supporting the recently launched brokerage roles.

How do we draw a greater focus on the early childhood years which can be such a driver of inter-generational change?

One way is to set targets.

While not everyone is a fan, well-designed, evidence-based targets developed in partnership with Aboriginal people are a powerful way of focusing Government action.

For a national agenda such as Closing the Gap—with far-reaching, long-term implications for Indigenous policy—genuine engagement, partnership and collaboration with Aboriginal people are crucial.

A collaboration and partnership built on honesty, respect and on shared responsibility and accountability.

For the last three years, Indigenous leaders here in the Goulburn Murray region have been at a forefront of developing the Indigenous-led Empowered Communities, or EC, initiative.

At its core, the EC initiative is about governments backing Indigenous leaders who want to introduce positive changes in their communities and regions. It's an initiative that puts Aboriginal culture and participation front and centre in the decisions of Government.

It requires shared understanding of community aspirations and priorities, community need, and current service delivery and program support in a region.

Leaders in the Goulburn Murray region have identified economic parity as their first priority—employment parity, business parity and education parity.

They are taking a true leadership role in driving priorities in their region.

A great example of this is the region's Employment Accord between governments, businesses and Indigenous organisations that was signed on Monday.

The accord commits to raising Indigenous employment in the region to a level proportionate to the local Aboriginal population.

I commend the collaboration across the community, and am excited for the opportunities it will create for your region.

Working together is how we will make the biggest difference and I've asked my regional office staff to work with you on how the Commonwealth can also support this worthwhile initiative.

Of course, Empowered Communities also bring significant challenges.

Governments and Indigenous leaders and organisations have to make changes to the way we behave and work.

Some of it will not come easily.

Jointly setting priorities and making decisions about service delivery and discretionary investment has inherent risks and we will have to be upfront about these and how they are to be addressed.

We will also have to accept, from the outset, that we won't always get it right, that we'll need to learn together as we go, and adjust what we're doing.

As our Prime Minister says, we must be agile and flexible.

It is wiser to acknowledge that fact and adjust our settings than to waste resources by seeing through a policy we know will not deliver the results we seek.

As you may know Richard Eccles in my Department is the champion for three Empowered Communities regions—Central Coast, Inner Sydney and yours here in the Goulburn-Murray.

My Associate Secretary, Andrew Tongue, is the champion for the two Kimberley sites and the Cape York, and I have personally agreed to take on this role for the NPY Lands region.

Having senior public servants in these roles is indicative of the level of commitment to empowering communities, and to addressing any issues or blockages within Commonwealth and state governments.

I see our role as leading initial engagement with Indigenous leaders in the regions, discussing mutual expectations and setting the scene for our ongoing relationship.

I will travel to Alice Springs later this year to meet with the leaders and community there and I look forward to this new and important chapter in my own journey.

We must remember that Empowered Communities is not another government program. This is an Indigenous-led initiative.

This means the Government has to find a way of being actively involved without taking over the implementation.

Government will need to allow the space for Indigenous leaders, participating organisations and communities to develop their own Empowered Communities governance and arrangements for collaboration.

For this to work, models will need to be backed up by appropriate authority, including cultural authority, and a willingness of Indigenous leaders to take responsibility which may require considerable time and patience.

Through Richard's engagements with the Goulburn-Murray Aboriginal Community I know you believe additional, or more effective, investments in education, employment, health and social inclusion are needed to make a difference locally.

I know that you are also acutely aware of the importance of building economic opportunity for your people.

Economic empowerment and participation in the real economy—through having a job or owning a small business—is a crucial step to solving social issues.

For this to happen faster, we need to find a way to rebalance the scales between welfare and economic development initiatives; the latter presently only receives around one third of PM&C's expenditure.

This is important because the target of halving the gap in employment outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians remains one of the most challenging of the Closing the Gap targets.

Although new jobs are being created, employment figures continue to flat-line. An additional 96,500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people would need to be in jobs by 2018 to halve the employment gap.

At the same time, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are also around four times less likely to own their own business than other Australians.

For some Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, being able to choose how to use their land will be the catalyst to ending inter-generational disadvantage.

For others, economic empowerment will require Government to work in partnership with the private sector to stimulate spending and create demand for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander businesses.

Jobs remain fundamental to having our First Peoples participate in the real economy.

It is why Andrew Forrest was asked to advise the Government—to undertake a review into employment of Indigenous Australians.

Andrew, being Andrew, took an expansive approach to interpreting his Terms of Reference—and we expected nothing less.

What he created is a blueprint for action well into the future.

A blueprint that covers the spectrum from early childhood, through education, welfare, training and employment—these are the opportunities for Indigenous Australians to exist and flourish in “the market”.

Through PM&C programmes, we assist Indigenous Australians into employment opportunities and, since September 2013, more than 41,000 employment placements have been made.

A big driver is the new Employment Parity Initiative, where we challenge big business to reach parity in employment.

Partnering with some of Australia’s largest employers, the Initiative aims to get an additional 20,000 Indigenous Australians into real jobs by 2020.

Eleven of Australia’s biggest employers have committed to the Employment Parity Initiative, including Woolworths, Accor Pacific, Compass Group and MSS Security—securing more than 7,200 new jobs.

These companies have enormous buying power and we will be working with them to increase the rate of purchasing from Indigenous enterprises and build stronger Indigenous procurement policies into their own supply chains.

The Government's own Indigenous Procurement Policy is also a driver of Indigenous employment—particularly as Indigenous businesses are 100 times more likely to employ Indigenous people.

This policy has seen contracts with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander-owned businesses increase from around \$6 million in 2012-13, to more than \$195 million in 2015-16—and that is just in its first 11 months of operation.

The policy is designed to help Indigenous businesses get a foot in the door—after that it's down to them to be competitive enough to win Commonwealth business, which must always be about value for money.

The policy also has minimum Indigenous employment and supplier use requirements for contracts valued at over \$7.5 million.

In the past we asked our major suppliers for Indigenous participation plans. As a result, we got lots of plans, but not a lot of Indigenous participation.

This is a new, mandatory approach. Major suppliers can choose between employer and supplier use targets.

Targets can apply to the project or companywide, but they will be in the contract and enforceable like every other element of the contract.

To date the response from business has been positive and pragmatic. In fact, many companies are ahead of Government and have been working to include Indigenous businesses in their supply chains for quite some time.

We will also be working with the states and territories and leveraging our activity and spend, to realise a larger benefit for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

This is key, as state and territory governments accounted over half of all spending on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples in 2012-13.

But there are many other elements of the Indigenous Affairs work programme designed to assist people get a foot-hold in the 'economy'.

We are working on innovative options to significantly increase access to home loans. And I understand here in Shepparton, you have a long history of working towards increasing home ownership.

We've also set aside funding for economic development opportunities.

The \$115 million Indigenous Entrepreneurs' package will create more opportunities for Indigenous businesses and, in turn, employment.

We want to encourage Indigenous innovation, which creates a pipeline of opportunity.

There is also no more training for training's sake.

Increasingly our support for training is conditional on a guaranteed job—no more young people with six certificates, all for occupations where there is no demand.

But it's not enough to have programs and policies, we have to make them work.

We have certainly been influenced by Andrew Forrest's recommendations, but by far the greatest influence on our approach has been what Indigenous Australians are asking of us.

And that must be the predominant theme of our work programme moving forward. Honest and open engagement.

We also need to move beyond a transactional approach to business, to one of true partnership.

From one where the relationship is characterised by applications being submitted and considered against program criteria; contracts

set; funds delivered; and reports provided— in other words, Indigenous people operating in the bureaucrat's world.

We want to move to a new approach with a focus on data; on evidence; on true community engagement; on flexibility; on accountability to the people being affected—an approach where bureaucrats operate in your world.

To successfully deliver this agenda we need to focus more strongly, at every stage, on building the evidence base and evaluating our initiatives.

We must be mindful that Indigenous Affairs cannot be viewed through a one-size-fits-all lens.

Government must be able to deal effectively with all Indigenous people—from those living in remote communities with a predominant Indigenous population to regions like your own, where Indigenous people may comprise a relatively small share of the general population. In many of these remote communities there is a strong

focus on Indigenous-specific funding to respond to a range of social and economic issues.

In the Goulburn Murray region we see a thriving regional economy and the opportunity for economic parity for Aboriginal people is very real. Responding to this opportunity and ensuring that everyone can share in the prosperity of the region must be our greatest priority.

This understanding is essential to the quality of our engagement with communities on the ground.

We need to come to discussions with communities with meaningful information that empowers them to make good decisions about where and how to invest.

We also need evidence and robust evaluations to demonstrate to the public at large that we are achieving results in many areas, and changing direction to ensure resources are ending up where they are most effective.

Arguably, change is needed by all parties.

This community focus is certainly part of the solution—a fundamental part—but it is not contradictory to the notion of national priorities.

We need to be pragmatic.

There are issues of national concern—where local action is to be the locus of how we deal with them, but where national policy reform and innovation is needed.

We are continuing along the important journey to constitutional recognition. Indigenous-led consultations are currently underway which will culminate in government receiving the recommendations of the Referendum Council next year.

The Four Corners programme on the youth detention centre shocked the nation. But it united us in outright rejection of this type of mistreatment of children in the supposed ‘care’ of the state.

I believe Australians expected their Government to move swiftly and decisively to get to the bottom of it, to expose the failings in the youth detention and child protection system in the Northern Territory and to ensure it will never happen again.

I've spoken a lot about economic development, but let me be clear, economic development and social policy are not mutually exclusive.

We need a balance and we need to acknowledge the role of social determinants to understand what is driving outcomes.

Despite strong commitment by governments to improve early childhood education, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are twice as likely as other children to arrive at school developmentally vulnerable.

We know that regular school attendance is directly linked to a student's performance. It accounts for up to 20 per cent of the gap in performance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous 15-year-olds.

The gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students in NAPLAN tends to widen as children move through the school system.

In 2015, 78.7 per cent of Indigenous students in Year 3 achieved National Minimum Standards in reading compared to 95.6 per cent for non-Indigenous students.

At Year 9, the gap widens, from 71.7 per cent for Indigenous students compared to 93.6 per cent for non-Indigenous students.

This pattern is even more stark in very remote areas.

To date, efforts to increase school attendance have largely focused on very remote areas, where some communities report less than 50 per cent average attendance, with only 23 per cent of students attending school 90 per cent or more of the time.

However, even in urban schools with high overall attendance there are children and families with very poor attendance patterns.

Progress in this area has been frustrating, with little progress over many years, and causal factors that go well beyond schooling.

However in this region there is a very good example of local people working to address this.

The Rumbalara Aboriginal Cooperative wanted to make sure primary school children were equipped to get the full value from their early school years—with all of the opportunities that we know follow from this foundation.

The Bush Kinder project targets attendance and addresses numeracy and literacy skills for the children who need it most. We are already seeing the benefits, including greater engagement by parents in their children's schooling.

The research on investment in education, and early childhood in particular is well documented and supported by the maturing data from the Closing the Gap.

It is very clear that economic and social benefits are two sides of the one coin.

Much of the return on investment is through better health and therefore lighter burden on the health system; better education and therefore less investment in remedial education; better employment prospects and therefore less reliance on welfare; reduced crime rates and therefore fewer people in the justice system.

What all this equates to is greater self-sufficiency and productivity² but most of all, happier, healthier lives.

We are at the point where, through collaboration, we can make the decisions to set this type of positive cycle in motion.

When Paul Briggs spoke at the National Apology breakfast here in Shepparton in February, he spoke of how we can no longer be passive bystanders, ‘complicit in the crime of ambivalence and inaction’.

² http://heckmanequation.org/sites/default/files/F_HeckmanDeficitPieceCUSTOM-Generic_052714.pdf

His reason being that the Apology gave all people permission to learn and seek knowledge ‘on how we construct a future’.³

Whether Government, Public Service or the Indigenous leaders of Australia, we must look to the future and clearly communicate its challenges and its opportunities.

We are not prisoners of a predetermined path. We can and must carve out the type of future we want and, importantly, how we get there—and even more importantly, how we get there together.

³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zjma4Rsda5M> from 14.41 min

