



Dhungala Kaiela Oration 2017

From the margins to the mainstream: Indigenous recovery in rural Australia

By Professor Marcia Langton

Shepparton, 5 July, 2017

Here in the heart of Yorta Yorta country, the Rumbalara Football and Netball Club is an exemplar of leadership, teamwork, and achievement. It is more than a hub for regional sports competition and training. It is a school for empowerment. The Yorta Yorta people, like Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples across the country, are well experienced in the disempowerment that arises from decades of philosophically bankrupt Indigenous affairs policy settings. Not content to accept this as their fate, old and young leaders have developed a blueprint for their empowerment. Led by the indomitable Yorta Yorta leader and strategist, Paul Briggs, a team of local people have contributed to the design of the *Empowered Communities: Empowered Peoples Design Report*. This Report presents the nation with a powerful vision and a means of ending Indigenous poverty and disparity. It presents an original and highly practical approach to engagement between regions like the Greater Shepparton region with state and federal governments so that governance and funding are effective and efficient. It presents a sound methodology for achieving outcomes in overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.

The Empowered Communities Report opens with a contrast of failure and success: the 2015 Closing the Gap scorecard with its litany of failures are detailed, and then the successes of the NRL and the AFL are presented in stark contrast.

This is worth reading out loud:

“Two days later, on 13 February 2015, the Indigenous All Stars and National Rugby League (NRL) All Stars met for another annual reckoning on the Gold Coast. The Indigenous All Stars defeated the NRL All Stars 20 to 6.”

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The Report continued:

“The following Friday, on 20 February 2015, the AFL Indigenous All Stars played the West Coast Eagles: West Coast has come from behind to record its first win of a new season over the AFL Indigenous All Stars in an entertaining exhibition game at Medibank Stadium in Perth. The Eagles trailed by 10 points at half time but injected young legs into the game after the break to kick three goals to none in the second half and win 7.7 (49) to 5.11 (41). The match was played in front of a sell-out crowd of close to 10,000.”

We know the statistics cited in the Empowered Communities Report to draw our attention to the obvious disadvantage; yet we also know that could tip the scales towards parity if all Aboriginal people performed their everyday lives like these champions. The report gives us these figures to think about:

Indigenous players make up 9 per cent of the AFL and 12 per cent of the NRL—despite comprising only 3 per cent of the national population. The stark under-representation of mainstream Australians in these two football codes are two Closing the Gap targets facing the nation.

And herein lies the logic of the *Empowered Communities: Empowered Peoples* blueprint for Indigenous success. These examples show “what is possible when the talents and potential of our people are able to flourish.” The report goes on:

It shows what is possible when entry barriers are low and access is on merit, not background. It shows what is possible when the institutions involved actively welcome and support Indigenous participation—like these football codes do. It shows what is possible when they honour the dignity of their Indigenous players by being vigilant in combating racism. The lessons to be drawn from this success are not trivial.

If these traits could be equally devoted to the challenges of development, and the factors driving success with individuals, families and communities applied to wider social and economic participation in Australia, the gap on Indigenous disadvantage would soon close.

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The Empowered Communities leaders have set an ambitious but necessary reform agenda, and it is the implications of this approach for the Goulburn Valley people that I will attempt to identify tonight.

The Aboriginal leaders of the Greater Shepparton area who have embarked on this road to recovery have an understanding of the history of the exclusion that led to our disempowerment and the need to accelerate policy reform to reach parity in Aboriginal socioeconomic status.

During that long period when Australian governments were determined to “assimilate” Aboriginal people, and regarded those of us who lived in rural areas as “outcasts,” the damage caused to our societies might have seemed irreversible, a destruction so prolonged that any recovery seemed impossible. Since 1972, with the official end to those genocidal policies, a resurgence of Aboriginal agency has led to the growth of Indigenous organisations and social enterprises, and recently, Aboriginal-owned businesses. With the migration of non-Indigenous people from rural areas to the cities and large urban centres, the growth of the Indigenous sector has been an important part of the rural economy.

Far from being a burden on the public purse, the economic benefits of government investment in the Indigenous sector, can be seen as an investment in nation building. The attitudes from the assimilation era that cast Aboriginal people as permanently on the margins are changing slowly, as more Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians come to understand that rural Indigenous populations are permanent and growing and Indigenous owned service bodies provide essential services that sustain rural Australia, socially and economically.

The next phase of Indigenous empowerment will depend on increasing inputs in education and enterprise development, by professionalizing the Indigenous workforces and developing of Indigenous sector as a core component of the economy of rural Australia.

The goals of the Empowered Communities 10-year plan are ones that all Australians should be able to agree with:

There are two parts to our development goal. They are each of equal importance, and are to be pursued concurrently and constantly tested to determine whether we are most productively using available resources and opportunities.

First, our goal is to close the gap on the social and economic disadvantage of the Indigenous Australians of the Empowered Communities regions.

Second, we aim to enable the cultural recognition and determination of Indigenous Australians of the Empowered



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Communities regions so that we can preserve, maintain, renew and adapt our cultural and linguistic heritage and transmit our heritage to future generations

The University of Melbourne has a role to play in achieving these goals. The University has developed a partnership with the Goulburn Valley community and signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Kaiela Institute to formalise our partnership with the local Indigenous community to achieve better outcomes. I was recently appointed Associate Provost at the University with some responsibility for the partnership with the Goulburn Valley. So tonight, I want my formal contribution in this role to be a mind map of what success might look like. Some of the indications are good, and we might see success sooner than we might have imagined.

Some years ago, two health leaders from this community approached me and Associate Prof Jane Freemantle, seeking our assistance to enrol people from Shepparton in the Masters course at our School of Global and Population Health. Their goal, they said was to professionalise the local Indigenous health workforce.

The University of Melbourne has become a destination of choice for many young Goulburn Valley people, and the steady increase in Indigenous enrolment in our graduate and postgraduate programs augers well for their futures, their families and their community. Three of the Indigenous graduates who completed the program I mentioned have commenced Doctoral programs and have been appointed as Poche Fellows at the Poche Centre for Indigenous Health in our medical faculty. This community is well served by excellent universities and technical colleges. Monash, La Trobe and Swinburne Universities each have programs and projects here.

These are achievements to be proud of, but I fear that progress is too slow. Last year in October, I was honoured to be asked to work with the Kaiela Institute and some of the young leaders to deliver the Goulburn Murray Indigenous Leadership Seminar. The leadership team is growing and is becoming more and more effective. In just a few years, they will need to consider whether they will step into formal leadership roles and take the baton from the elders. Effective leadership is ever more necessary as the Aboriginal population of Victoria grows at exponential rates. The ABS figures released recently show 25.8 per cent increase in the Victorian population since the last census. The growth rate of the Aboriginal population here in Shepparton is similar. Today, I was given a preview of the excellent work of the Algabonyah Data Unit of the Kaiela Institute. My presentation tonight is distinctly simple and general in comparison to the detailed data collection and analysis of the Unit that has been designed to support the implementation of the Empowered Communities agenda here.



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Noting the progress made so far, and the sacrifices made by those people who have invested in higher education, I briefly examine the data to imagine further success and to consider targets for higher education achievement to build a broad professional Aboriginal leadership and hasten the closing of the gap in this region.

First, though, my strongest advice is that these targets should mirror the actual number of youth who should complete Year 12 or equivalent, who should proceed to post secondary and tertiary education careers, and who should take their place in the professions and business. Also, I strongly advise that the range of disciplines, professions and qualifications pursued should be as broad as possible so that full economic participation by the local Aboriginal people can be achieved. I have in mind professions such as engineering, architecture, business, accounting, commerce, medicine, dentistry, nursing, computer science, robotics, the trades, as well as the more conventional professions which have for some decades been the destination of Indigenous people, such as teaching, law, and the humanities.

Population

There were 3,561 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander persons in the Greater Shepparton statistical area on census night 2016, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. The median age of this population was 22 years. This is similar to the median age for other Victorians and Australians. The newly released data tells us this is a relatively disadvantaged population across several key indicators.

The most striking feature of the latest population data is the remarkable growth in the youth population recorded.

	Shepparton INDIGENOUS			
	Male	Female	Total	%
Total Population	1083	1103	2186	n/a
Age groups				
0-4 years	133	119	252	11.5
5-14 years	266	261	530	24.2
15-24 years	216	194	408	18.7
25-44 years	228	277	501	22.9
45-64 years	168	192	363	16.6
65 years and over	72	62	132	6.0

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An additional 252 Aboriginal young in the 0-4 age cohort were recorded, representing an increase of 11.5 per cent in that age cohort.

An additional 530 Aboriginal youth in the 5 -14 age group were recorded, representing an increase of 25.2 per cent in that age cohort.

In the 15 – 24 age cohort, an additional 408 persons were counted, representing an increase of 18.7 per cent in that group.

In the 25-44 age cohort, an additional 501 persons were counted, representing an increase of 22.9 per cent.

In the 45-64 age cohort, an additional 363 persons were counted, representing an increase of 16.6 per cent.

The large increase in the youth population indicates that these population increases can be attributed to natural growth and not merely increased identification as Aboriginal.

This growth in the youth population presents a number of challenges, most important of which is the capacity to ensure that they achieve high educational standards. A total of 782 under 14-year-olds will need to be educated to achieve Year 12 completion or equivalent. A further 408 persons in the 15-24-year-old age cohort with require postsecondary education.

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Will these younger generations have the skills, knowledge and ability to take advantage of opportunities to improve their lives and sustain the culture and identity of the Yorta Yorta people? Without high levels of educational achievement, it is unlikely. There is no valid reason why there should be any disparity in educational outcomes as between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in this town. Fear and doubt are not insurmountable. Effective leadership and teamwork make champions.

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Income parity and poverty

Much of the Indigenous disadvantage scorecard can be attributed to poverty or income disparity:

The Australian employees' average weekly total earnings are:

\$1163.50

The median weekly income for the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households of the Greater Shepparton region is

\$935.00

Even though this data is not strictly comparable, if we assume one breadwinner per household – although this would not be strictly correct – our conclusion must be that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander income in the Greater Shepparton region is 20 per cent less than the weekly average for Australian workers. Data to be released in October will allow a more rigorous assessment.

This income disparity of 20 per cent presents us with a challenge. What would it take to achieve income parity for the Indigenous people of this region?

We know that higher education achievement amongst the Indigenous population closes the gap. Let's look at the data on education achievement for this region.

Year 12 or equivalent completions

There were 227 Year 12 or equivalent completions for Indigenous people in city of Greater Shepparton in 2011, and this represented an increase of almost 18 per cent between 2006 and 2011. In the Greater Shepparton statistical area, there were 315 Year 12 or equivalent completions recorded.

The number of non-Indigenous people who completed Year 12 or equivalent in this statistical area was 18,245.

The parity targets that are the minimum goals, in my view, are the following (slide 17):

- Secondary students – 194 additional students
- Technical or further education – 16 additional
- University – 9
- Year 12 or equivalent – 347 additional students

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Discussion of following data sets and potential for ambitious targets:

People characteristics - Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples
[People characteristics](#) | [dwelling characteristics](#)

People characteristics	Shepparton		Victoria		Australia	
<i>Count based on place of usual residence on Census night.</i>		%		%		%
Male	1,784	50.1	23,622	49.4	322,171	49.6
Female	1,777	49.9	24,159	50.6	326,996	50.4
Median age	22	--	23	--	23	--

In Shepparton (Statistical Area Level 4), 50.1% of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people were male and 49.9% were female. The median age was 22 years.

The community of Greater Shepparton has the opportunity to close the gap and to reach parity targets sooner than other rural regions.

The education targets I propose are just a few of the targets that are possible to imagine. Although, as I say, it is most important to ensure that all children enjoy the right to an education, and the highest possible education that would ensure their success and wellbeing in their lives.

Indigenous people who complete higher education awards close the gap. The data reported has resulted in this finding, and it is, in my view the most important strategy for closing the gap.

In conclusion, I wish the Greater Shepparton community success and in particular, the Kaiela Institute, Algabonyah as the vehicle for implementing the Empowered Communities vision, and the other Aboriginal organisations that make this region more successful than most in overcoming the burden of history.

Thank you.