

GriffithREVIEW

— S E L E C T I O N S —

BEYOND VICTIMS: THE CHALLENGE OF LEADERSHIP

Chris Sarra

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Chris Sarra

DR CHRIS SARRA is the founder and Chairman of the Stronger Smarter Institute. Chris grew up in Bundaberg in Queensland and is the youngest of ten children. He experienced firsthand many of the issues faced by Indigenous students throughout their schooling. Encouraged and supported by some teachers and mentors, Chris successfully completed a Diploma of Teaching, a Bachelor of Education and Master of Education and a PhD in Psychology with Murdoch University. His published thesis is titled Strong and Smart – Towards a Pedagogy for Emancipation Education for First Peoples and autobiography Good Morning, Mr Sarra.

In the late 1990s Chris took on the challenges of Indigenous education as Principal of Cherbourg State School in South East Queensland. Under Chris' leadership the school became nationally acclaimed for its pursuit of the Stronger Smarter philosophy, which significantly improved the educational, and life outcomes of its students.

GRIFFITH REVIEW ANNUAL LECTURE

Beyond victims

The challenge of leadership

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, let me start as I should by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land upon which we meet, the Turrbal nation of the north and Jagara nation of the south. I offer this acknowledgement, not in a piecemeal way, but rather in a serious way, in which I offer myself to this forum in this place, with pure motives and an authentic need for strength and courage, as I lay out my intention to challenge both white and Aboriginal Australia to understand and embrace a new style of leadership.

It is past time.

As an educator I am reasonably content with the part I have played in changing expectations of Aboriginal children. I would not pretend for a moment that we are all the way there, but we are a very long way from where we were in education.

That said, I watch with some dismay, Australia repeat a pattern which, for more than two hundred years, has probably delivered more failure and sorrow than success. This is not a black or white issue. This is an issue for all of us. And my sense is that if we can understand some of the fundamental aspects of a 'high expectations relationship', then we truly can transcend the challenges we face together.

While many have warned me that there is a great deal of risk in saying what I have to say tonight, even more yearn for things to be said. I know that

when one pulls back the curtain and says publicly what is often only spoken of behind closed doors, people get angry and defensive; particularly those who recognise their own behaviours. While I accept that some get people will get angry, I hope even more will welcome the opportunity for frank discussion and to transcend the toxicity that stifles our relationship today.

To my supporters and detractors alike I say this: Argue the merits of what I say, but don't twist my words. Don't cherry pick details and quote them out of context or pretend that this very serious discussion can be reduced to just a few phrases.

Being subject to public attacks is one of the costs of leadership, and, while it is often hurtful on a personal level, this is not a reason to avoid leading when it is required. Leadership means putting the needs of others, the greater good if you like, ahead of your own comfort. It includes an obligation to call things as you see them; to put one's beliefs out there to kick around; and, in so doing, offer some solutions.

It has long been said that leadership is characterised by three traits: courage, compassion and commitment. Many leaders are courageous and work hard, but often lack commitment to lead for all. Others have compassion and commitment to a cause, but not the courage to call out bad behaviour. History's great leaders exhibit and balance all three traits.

Tonight I trust you with frank insights from someone who is very much an insider. Some might experience my truths as brutal. I have no wish to wield words like weapons. I have made many tough calls across my career to date, but have always done my best to play the issue not the person. While my truths may be brutal I have no interest in 'pitchfork politics'.

I also have no interest in playing to any particular constituency. Some of my great friends and supporters will disagree with some aspects of what I have to say tonight. Disagreement is welcome and should be welcome. We can often learn as much from those with contrary opinions as those who share our view. Instead, so often, we have become a land of outrage. Beliefs which aren't our own are shouted down and denounced, often by those with bruised or out-of-control egos. It might make some of us feel good, but it does not help us reach sane, commonsense solutions. Criticisms and constructive feedback offered with pure motives are not reasons to get angry and abuse others; rather they are gifts to

reflect upon for the purpose of growing, evolving and being the best that we can be.

Without frank discussion – the willingness to speak what we know and believe in our hearts – nothing will change. If honesty offers a chance for all of us to transcend the current challenges we face together, then clearly being honest is worth the risk. To be silent and to lack courage here is collusion with the toxicity that contaminates our society.

There is no pleasure for any of us as we reflect on the futility of the billions spent to somehow ‘fix’ Aboriginal Australia. After all these decades, after billions spent to close the gap, after apologies and reconciliations, despite most Australians wanting things to change, to realise we have got the very foundation of our relationship wrong. In order to ‘fix’ Aboriginal Australia, we have to ‘fix’ white Australia, at that foundation. This means fixing the relationship we share.

My intention from here is not to entice you into a sense of despair, but rather a sense of hope. I’ve seen high expectation relationships in Australia and they are something brilliant to behold.

IN A DRAMATICALLY remote part of Australia on the APY Lands (Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yankunytjatjara), Hughie, an old Aboriginal man, sits at the foot of ancient hills on his country under a crisp yet brilliant blue winter sky. His face is unshaven, his hair all dusty and his clothes somewhat disheveled, but what is crystal clear and diamond bright in his eyes, is a profound sense of love in his heart, and hope for the children around him. Around him the dust is shifting thanks to the active and ever shifting bare feet of more than a hundred Aboriginal children from the local school, Indulkana. The principal, Paula McGuire, has insisted that as part of their school program they must spend some time on country learning with local Elders. She scans the area with a confidence anchored in part by knowing that back in their school the children’s classrooms are just as intellectually rigorous, but in a different way, with walls adorned with rich Standard Australian English text in print alongside high-quality examples of student work. The classrooms at Indulkana School are as intellectually stimulating as any other one might see in metropolitan or provincial parts of Australia.

In many remote schools in Australia that is not the case. At Indulkana it is

clear there is no need to choose between strong in culture or smart in modern Australian ways. Paula McGuire knows children can have both; she works tirelessly with her team and the community to ensure they are afforded this human right to be strong and to be smart.

Back on country it's hard to know exactly what is exciting the children most at any particular point of the afternoon as they speak rapidly in their own traditional Aboriginal language. Speckled amongst them are all of the school's white teachers, Aboriginal teachers and teacher aides, and a handful of young white students up from Adelaide, all sharing in the sophisticated knowledge and enchantment that surrounds them. The children meander from one place where some old male Elders sit by a smoky fire and teach them how to make spears, to the next where some old ladies sit cross-legged as they have done for generations and teach them how to weave. From here they can get painted up for the dances they will learn and perform later; they can learn how to make a *wiltcha*, an ancient yet enduring and traditional form of shelter; they can explore and wander up onto the ancient hills that hug their camp, or they can just sit and yarn.

'Look at all these children!' Hughie beckons with enthusiasm. 'Look at them all here happy and learning on my country! One minute they sitting here listening to us old people...and next minute they running all over these hills having fun.'

He pauses for a moment to bask in the euphoria of what is occurring all around him.

'This makes me so happy!' he beams as tears of pride and joy mingle in his glinting, timeless eyes.

Many might hear me proffer the term, 'high expectations relationship' and not really have a clue what I mean. Some might think of it as some nebulous, aspirational concept that is probably, at best, somewhere in the distant future, or at worst, merely a pipe dream as our differences seem poles apart. The relationship between school and the community of Indulkana is manifestly a relationship with the First Peoples of Australia based on respect and high expectations, and one where two diverse worlds are brought together.

This is no pipe dream. This is the stronger, smarter, high expectations relationship I believe in. It is a relationship that offers tangible insights into

how Australia can transcend the challenges we face together as Aboriginal and white Australians to become a truly great nation with nothing to be ashamed of.

As a basis for this discussion let me start with the Stronger Smarter philosophy which has been articulated, after much practice, in schools and communities and reflect on what are the key overarching philosophical framework elements that guarantee success.

The Stronger Smarter philosophy honours a positive sense of cultural identity, and acknowledges and embraces positive community leadership, enabling innovative and dynamic approaches and processes that are anchored by high expectations relationships. High expectations relationships honour the humanity of others, and in so doing, acknowledge one's strengths, capacity, and human right to emancipatory opportunity.

Doing things WITH people, not TO them.

While some might dismiss my intent here as either too romantic or too ambitious, let me assert that the knowledge and skill required here is relatively basic. This is not to pretend for one moment that the path forward is easy. In my conversations with school principals and teachers, time and time again I've made it clear that we actually know what we need to know in order to transcend the challenges we face in Aboriginal education.

The solutions are actually simple, yet the work is always very hard.

We know money is not always the answer and evidence abounds here. In some places its true that more money is required, while in other places resources are quite substantial. In every case though what is required before anything else is hard work – the kind of hard work that requires a high personal commitment and can sometimes come at a high personal cost.

A part of what makes the work so hard is relinquishing long held, stifling beliefs and attitudes about Aboriginal students. Unless this is done, we cannot hope to engage in new and more honourable ways of thinking and behaving in the relationships with those Aboriginal students and their parents. And unless we create these new relationships, the failure will continue. It is almost as if many teachers and principals have to unlearn all they believe about Aboriginal students, look past the black faces in classrooms and start to see students. When they start to see students, as curious as any, they can

make honourable choices about what education outcomes are good enough. Having re-established educational outcomes that are honourable and worthy of pursuit in any school, it then becomes worth remembering we are in a relationship with Aboriginal children here. At *this* point we must observe and be receptive to cultural complexities that enhance or stifle our pursuit of those more honourable outcomes.

AGAIN, WHILE THE Stronger Smarter approach – a strength-based approach, intent on doing things with people not to them – might seem somewhat exotic and erudite, it is this very approach which underpinned the hard work and resulted in the following results at Cherbourg State School:

- Unexplained absenteeism reduced by 94 per cent within 18 months;
- Real attendance improved from 62 per cent in 1999 to 94 per cent in 2004 (without touching welfare payments);
- Year 7 diagnostic reading tests went from 0 per cent at state average in 1998 to 81 per cent (n=17) at state average in 2004;
- 58 per cent improvement in Year 2 literacy within two years;
- and
- Five local Aboriginal teacher aides completed teacher training while studying and continuing to work at the school.

Evidence shows this type of success has been replicated in numerous other schools and communities that have embraced the Stronger Smarter approach and it is my belief that this view can be extrapolated to reflect on the broader societal relationship between Aboriginal and white Australia. It is worth restating to those interested in the pursuit of excellence for Aboriginal children and communities: the solutions are simple, yet the work will always be hard.

THE FIRST PILLAR of the Stronger Smarter philosophy compels us to come to grips with our beliefs about ‘...a positive sense of cultural identity’. This cannot be done without first flushing out the dynamics of our relationship and, more specifically, those contained within the dominant conceptual binary of ‘mainstream’ and ‘other’. Put simply, there is mainstream Australia and there is

the rest, with dramatic undertones suggesting it would be best if we just look, behave and speak like those in the mainstream. The notion of ‘othering’ is not new to intellectual discourse and I have discussed this in greater detail in earlier works. For the purpose of this paper it is useful to revisit some of this conversation given the intense and persisting subscription to the notion that the only way forward for Aboriginal Australia is to become ‘mainstream’, whereby that sense of being mainstream means surrendering being Aboriginal and, further, acquiescing to the notion that being Aboriginal means being inferior.

For the purposes of my PhD research I conducted thirty forums, involving more than two hundred people, at which I asked participants to offer adjectives or words to articulate mainstream Australian perceptions of Aboriginal people. I was always cautious to point out at each forum that I was not after their ‘personal perceptions’ but rather, how they thought mainstream Australians would describe Aboriginal people. Below is a list of the words and phrases that were presented at *every* forum:

Alcoholics, Drunks

Boongs, Coons, Niggers, Black Bastards, Gins, Darkies

Got it Good, Well-kept by government, Privileged

Welfare dependent, Dole bludgers, Handout Syndrome

Lazy, Won’t work

Aggressive, Violent, Troublemakers, Disrespectful

It’s always shocking to reflect on such research and it is a reflection I don’t particularly enjoy. I’d like to imagine that if I conducted similar research today I might get quite a different response. Some might wonder why there is nothing positive listed here. On many occasions there were positive references to Aboriginal people as being artistic, family oriented, sporty, but for the purpose of this discussion I will focus on those words presented on *every* occasion.

Clearly this is not an accurate reflection upon who we truly are. Anyone who imagines it is some kind of accurate reflection of us should really question their ability to connect with the humanity of others. This isn’t to deny that we have elements of these traits and behaviours in our communities, as all communities do, but it is to affirm that those descriptors are not part of ‘Aboriginal’ cultural identity. These are stereotypes that have been cast upon us historically.

Confronted with this phenomenon it becomes imperative that we observe and understand the source of such toxic perceptions, given their ability to influence behaviour and somehow manifestly emerge as some form of reality for some. As unpalatable as it might seem there is no escaping that the greater source of such toxic perceptions is indeed white Australia.

This is not to lay the blame for the current state of Aboriginal Australia entirely at the feet of white Australia, but it does take us to one of the central and most crucial points of this entire paper: Aboriginal Australia must not be dominated by mainstream Australia's perception of who we are. We, as Aboriginal people, must be able to reject absolutely the negative stereotype of being Aboriginal that we have been consistently bombarded with. Only then can we understand, assert and define who we are based on our terms, by the truth of our strengths: our courage, our dignity, humour in the face of despair, our broad sense of family, and our sense of spirituality and ancient connections to country.

While false stereotypes exist, their dynamic presence has a dramatic effect. It typecasts an entire group of Australians as people to be feared or despised – in academic theory they become the 'feared/despised other'. Such dishonorable posturing undermines not just the humanity of Aboriginal Australians; it ultimately undermines the humanity of all Australians.

It is against this background that tolerating poor conditions in some Aboriginal communities becomes explainable. Put simply, if it is only hopeless and despicable Aborigines then why should we bother trying to make a difference to their wellbeing and functionality of their communities? If it is only despised Aborigines then what is the big deal if a police officer is found to 'cause the death' of one of them? If it is only Aboriginal communities then why bother injecting quality teachers and health workers, when we can eventually just blame the community for such appalling dysfunction?

The casting of Aboriginal Australians as a hopeless, feared or despised other, has enabled such disobligning cycles of chronic neglect and draconian intervention. Intervention in terms of dispossession and alienation from land, neglect in terms of leaving people to die; intervention in terms of Assimilation policies, neglect in terms of provision of adequate infrastructure and quality service provision. More recently, in this disobligning cycle I speak of, casting Indigenous Australians as hopeless and despicable enables

the Northern Territory intervention in which it is assumed that people are so hopeless that we had to send in the army to 'fix' them and we must, paradoxically, 'empower' people to spend money appropriately by quarantining their income. Time will tell whether or not we will indeed transcend beyond this cycle together.

As a way of transcending this cycle and the toxic dynamics they manifest, let me offer an intellectual concept devised by friend and philosopher Roy Bhaskar of the London Institute of Education, which offers some deep insights that enable us to better contemplate a more harmonious Australia. Bhaskar discusses the concept of the Concrete Universal, which has four dimensions. At its base is the notion of a core universal human nature: we are all of the human race and this should ensure unquestionable grounds for human rights.

At a higher level this basic core is acted upon, or mediated through, a variety of 'differentiae' such as gender, sexuality, age and ethnicity. The core and the mediations result in a 'concretely singularised individual'. The fourth dimension to this concept is that of 'processuality', or the rhythms of time in action. The key to understanding the importance of the concept of the Concrete Universal is that it is part of a stratified ontology, or stratified insight into our sense of being. Put simply, each of us has layers or stratifications of being. The notion of 'processuality' also allows one to recognise at differing times in the life of the individual, the mediations or the individuality or the core humaneness can be of greater or less salience. If we can accept the terms of Bhaskar's insights then we have hope of being liberated from those toxic dynamics that are quintessential to the binary of mainstream/other, whereby the mainstream is somehow superior. Put simply, all of us are set free from the pressures of being one or the other, as it becomes the case that we can be content with who we actually are, knowing that at some times we actually can have strong resonance with a sense of being mainstream and at other times, in other contexts, we can have equally as strong resonance with a sense of being other.

By way of a quick and easy example, during the football season, I cheer loudest during round matches for the Cowboys, who are my NRL team. I cheer for Queensland during State of Origin matches, and cheer for Australia when they play tests against New Zealand or England. For those who are non-devotees to the greatest game of all, let me offer something deeper, more

personal, and hopefully more insightful.

When I stand on the land of my father's people, my people, at the village of Miglianico in the province of Abruzzo, Italy, my sense of being Italian resonates strongly for me. When I stand before the graves of my father's parents, speaking Italian with my half-brother, Gulio, my sense of being Italian continues to resonate strongly and he embraces me as such. At my core I am human and the resonance of my Italian ethnic differentiae is dramatically enhanced by processuality which sees me in my father's country, Italy, in that moment in time. Significantly, my sense of being Aboriginal or Australian is not relinquished here; it simply does not resonate so strongly.

When I am at home fishing in the Burnett River in Bundaberg, knowing my people have done this for many thousands of years, my sense of being Aboriginal is very strong. In this place, in this point in time, I often look across the river to Paddy's Island, a place where many of my ancestors were massacred and wonder what life must have been like for them before, during and after the slaughter of so many. At my core here I am human and my sense of being Aboriginal resonates very strongly, enhanced by the sense of time and place that locates me here. I have not relinquished my sense of being Italian or my sense of being Australian.

As I reflect on times when my sense of being Australian resonates more strongly I think of Rugby League, of barbeques and the beach. In a deeper sense I think of when my mum's house in Bundaberg was completely flooded by the devastating January 2013 floods and a 'mud army' of volunteers who I didn't even know turned up to help my family clean and rebuild. At my core here I remain human and as before my humanity is shared with those around me. My sense of being Australian resonates strongly here, given the time, place and context. In such times, when tragedy strikes, we stick together as Australians and we just get in and help. It's what we do. In this circumstance I have not surrendered my sense of being Aboriginal or my sense of being Italian.

You may be interested to know that neither the Australian flag nor the national anthem enhance my sense of being Australian. While I accept it may do so for others, the Australian flag simply invokes thoughts of the shameful Cronulla riots and offensive bumper stickers that say things like, 'Fuck off, we're full'. I suspect the Australian flag would enable my sense of being

Australian to resonate more strongly for me and for many others, if it was free of the Union Jack. If our national anthem was like that of the New Zealand/Aotearoa and embraced an Indigenous language verse, then I'd be much more proud to sing along and let my sense of being Australian hum. The prospect of changing the flag or the national anthem is ambitious at best, but let me suggest this as a means by which we can contemplate ways to let our sense of being Australian resonate more strongly together, while accepting, embracing and celebrating the sense of 'otherness' that indeed we *all* share.

Understanding and embracing the notion of a stratified ontology not only liberates Aboriginal people from the toxic dynamics of being forced to be mainstream, it is indeed an intellectual concept that is emancipatory for white Australians. Many white Australians have experienced this also, perhaps unknowingly. Many have experienced a strong and very powerful sense of 'spirituality' when visiting the graves of their ancestors in England, Scotland or Ireland for instance. At their core they remain human, while the differentiae of their ancestral ethnicity, enhanced by the processuality of their time and place, are the very dynamics that 'fill a hole inside them' as they sometimes describe. Importantly they have not surrendered their sense of being Australian, but their sense of humanity is enhanced.

THE SECOND PILLAR, if you like, of the Stronger Smarter philosophy signals the need to embrace Aboriginal leadership. Again this is not so straightforward. In my own assessments of Aboriginal leadership over time one can observe three categories of leadership: those who focus on being the victim; those who focus on booting the victim; and those who focus beyond victim status, or what I would call 'stronger smarter leadership'.

Before I go on, let me first challenge an unspoken convention amongst Aboriginal Australians. The convention I speak of here is one in which we are encouraged to refrain from practices of 'lateral violence' and do not attack each other publicly. I am deeply committed to upholding the essence of this convention and as such I am not out to make any personal attacks here. I am, however, deeply committed to challenging ways of thinking and behaving that I consider unhelpful and contrary to the conduct of a high expectations relationship. It does not serve any of us to leave such ways of thinking and behaving unchallenged.

SOME YEARS AGO, it was my belief that when school leadership and community leadership walk in partnership, then positive results would emerge. My views had to evolve. It was not enough to simply walk in partnership. Nothing changed if leaders continued to collude with a sense of 'victim status'. The dramatically low expectations that are killing our children remain in place while 'victim status' is maintained. During a government review I conducted last decade, one school couldn't get Aboriginal students to turn up by its 9 am start time. The collaborative response from school and community leadership was to make school starting time at 10 am, effectively lowering the bar of expectation. Some will argue that the maneuver of delaying the school starting time from 9 am to 10 am is being culturally receptive to the needs of students, when it is clearly my argument that such a strategy is simply collusion with 'victim status', low expectations, or Aboriginal children as a hopeless and pitiable form of 'other'. My evolved belief is that school leadership must work in partnership with positive community leadership and this partnership must be anchored by high expectations.

Over the years, Australian governments, for their part, have either affirmed or denied their role as victimiser, depending on the politics of the day and in turn Indigenous communities have affirmed or attempted to shed light on their victimisation, depending on the counter-politics of the day. Some Aboriginal leaders have found success in encouraging victimhood, leading a cause that renders Aboriginal people powerless to act on their own behalf and therefore at the mercy of those in political power. They are encouraged to see themselves as victims, victims who should be compensated in some way or every way by the victimisers for their historical grievances.

Psychologist Dr Ofer Zur observes:

In claiming the status of victim and by assailing all blame to others, a person can achieve moral superiority while simultaneously disowning any responsibility for one's behaviour and its outcome. The victim 'merely' seek justice and fairness. If they become violent, it is only as a last resort, in self-defence. The victim stance is a powerful one. The victim is always morally right, neither responsible nor accountable, and forever entitled to sympathy.

Leading through victim status entails pushing for preferential treatment. Now all leaders, Indigenous and not, will do this to some extent, on behalf of their constituency. But in this model, Indigenous communities are likely to be

seen as mere receivers of service rather than creators of emancipatory processes. Under this type of leadership things continue to happen 'to' Indigenous communities, not 'with' them since adhering strictly to victim status means that Indigenous people are not responsible for their own lives. They become what Malcolm X called 'zombies' marching to the beat of someone else's orders.

One is left wondering about the so-called 'benefits' of such a toxic and dysfunctional relationship. Aside from the ability to lay blame and responsibility for change somewhere other than with ourselves, it becomes clear that in such a relationship, white leadership might enjoy and feel nice about the perception that they are being culturally receptive, and Aboriginal leadership might enjoy a misguided notion they are reinforcing their sense of cultural identity (which is actually a negative stereotype as discussed earlier).

Another so-called benefit might be that circumstance where, as an Aboriginal person, I can avoid being challenged intellectually or about my behaviour simply by saying, 'You're just picking on me because I'm black!' or 'You're being racist!' Most white people I know would rapidly recoil at such a 'defence' as they are understandably precious about being called a racist. I know as well as any Aboriginal person, that indeed sometimes we do get picked on just because we are black and people are being racist, but not all of the time.

In the interests of a healthy and high expectations relationship Aboriginal leadership must purge this default defence mechanism and embrace questions and criticisms from white Australia. I am not suggesting for one moment that we do not call white Australia on their way of thinking or behaving if we genuinely smell that filthy stench of racism, but rather we commit to making the time for embracing and dwelling on their feedback, criticisms or lines of question. Like many of you I have watched in awe of the patience, wisdom, and humility of our old people as they display remarkable tolerance of white Australians.

For white Australia the challenge here is to show courage, not to run when we play that race card so readily. If your questions are in fact legitimate and in the interest of high expectations, call our bluff and hold us to account. Your lack of courage here serves no one; not even you. Whilst you might enjoy the short-term gratification of avoiding conflict or a difficult conversation, your prospect of developing a sustained level of

respect is diminished.

It is worth reiterating the point here that our prospects of engaging each other in the hard conversations that inevitably we must have, are far better if we get the relationship right from the start. As I suggested earlier in this paper, we get the relationship right by acknowledging and embracing the humanity we share and building our ability to challenge each other upon that.

THERE ARE THOSE who have discovered that while being the victim is compelling at some levels, it is not always politically attractive. Therefore, another group of Aboriginal leaders have found political traction by blaming the victim.

This type of leadership is deeply problematic for a range of reasons. At one level it dismisses the genuine complexity of the victim narrative, which on many occasions has validity worth understanding. One can surmise that this form of leadership perhaps dismisses such complexity because it has not completely understood, let alone experienced any part of it.

It might display commitment and at times a type of courage, but it lacks compassion and the ability to take people with them. It lacks the depth and humanity of the approach of modern history's most respected black leaders, like South Africa's Desmond Tutu, and the late Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela.

Mandela was jailed for saying things that needed to be said; Tutu has been vilified and lied about. But both men transcended the spin and venom of their opponents to change history and the world. They didn't court favour with political or corporate 'white' masters. They didn't abandon the genuine needs and hardships of their people and the complex truth creating them, because acknowledging these truths was inconvenient for their nation's white leadership. They didn't pretend that those central to the complexity of the dysfunction could not be challenged. The same can't be said in Australia, where some leaders are fearless in articulating the shortfalls of Aboriginal people, but lack courage and are being dishonest if they do not articulate the shortfalls of white Australia.

If we are to ever move beyond blame or excuses and to make right the wrong, we must face the realities of Australia's ugly and complex Aboriginal history. What hope is there of white Australia overcoming her ignorance of

this history, if Aboriginal leaders ignore it also?

For two centuries, Indigenous people without a voice have had to endure, suffer and try to recover from costly, clumsy, simplistic approaches to policy reform, many of which have booted the victim by making it seem like it is somehow their fault. Were Friedrich Nietzsche here today he would counsel us to distrust all whom the impulse to punish is powerful. Let me further indulge with such great sources of wisdom by saying, *Better to be humble among the meek, than to share the spoil of the haughty.*

The deeper problem here is that such views proffered by this kind of Aboriginal leadership validate the ignorance of political and corporate masters with the power to make significant change.

One of today's rewards for 'booting the victim' type leadership, is the apparent circumstance in which one can proffer 'big stick' policy approaches that are so obviously expensive to taxpayers, yet so obviously ineffective, and not ever be seriously questioned. It seems as though conventional policy logic, with its empty rhetoric about 'evidence based policy', is completely abandoned. There are circumstances in which the evidence says clearly that policy experiments concocted by 'booting the victim' type leaders are grossly expensive and dramatically ineffective, yet are retained and rolled out to other communities that are powerless to defend themselves.

At the risk of casting as victims such communities that are subjected to clumsy experimental policy approaches, it must surely be confusing to them. I can't help thinking it must be like those in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* who watched the pigs take on the form of those they so despised at the start, encouraging all to shout 'Four legs good, two legs better!' when some seemed to recall a time when we shouted 'Four legs good, two legs bad!'

In the barnyard of the Indigenous Australian landscape I seem to recall a time in this revolution when we all shouted, 'Culture good, assimilation bad!' Today it seems such leaders are encouraging us to believe 'Culture good, assimilation better!'

THE FINAL PILLAR of the Stronger Smarter approach is about high expectations relationships. It is worth restating the philosophical belief that high expectations honour the humanity of others and, in so doing, acknowledge one's strengths, capacity and human right to emancipatory opportunity.

This is about doing things *with* people not *to* them.

This is about policy approaches designed to enable us, as Aboriginal people, to be the best we can be and not those who force us to comply with who they want us to be.

It is also crucial to note the dramatic difference between high expectations rhetoric and high expectations relationships. High expectations rhetoric is that zero-tolerance approach that sees a child sent home when he does not have full school uniform on. A high expectations relationship is where people at the school make time to find out whether or not his family can afford to buy uniforms and perhaps provide one in exchange for the parent coming up to do some one-on-one reading in the classroom.

High expectations rhetoric will see a child suspended from school for swearing at the teacher. A high expectations relationship will try to understand all of the circumstances that caused them to swear in the first place. It may ultimately result in that child being suspended, but it could also result in the teacher apologising to the child for backing them into a corner. It may also result in teaching the child that this way of speaking is not accepted in school. Within the confines of a high expectations relationship, any range of constructive solutions can be negotiated.

Beyond schooling and in a more general sense, high expectations relationships must be firm and fair. There must be compassion and an understanding of the need for carrots. Simultaneously, there must be courage to challenge and execute the use of sticks as required. Those who come to this relationship knowing only about compassion and fairness, without the courage to be firm, will only ever develop a low expectations relationship that colludes with mediocrity and victim status. Those who come to this relationship knowing only about wielding the big stick approach, with no sense of compassion or understanding of the need for carrots, will only ever develop a low expectations relationship that colludes with low expectations perceptions of us as a hopeless and despicable other.

In a high expectations relationship you cannot bring me to the table to explain what you are going to do to me and call this consultation. In this relationship we must be prepared to have robust intellectual dialogue, accepting that while we may not always agree or get our own way, we are deeply committed to co-creating solutions to the often-complex challenges we face

together.

In a high expectations relationship we must have the courage to engage and challenge each other and not run from each other to avoid intellectually robust conversations that must be had. If I display inappropriate behaviour, like verbally abusing you or threatening you or throwing tantrums to get my own way, then you must challenge me and there must be consequences for such behaviour. Whether you are a senior bureaucrat or senior politician, if there is the need to question the efficacy of the policy approaches I proffer, then you must have the courage to question me.

I understand very well that many of you will feel discomfort at the prospect of challenging me. I also understand that for many of you it may well be easier just to let me have my own way, to avoid such conflict or discomfort. Your lack of courage here serves no one! It does not serve you; it does not serve the people of the communities or nation we want to make greater. I am compelled to remind you that any discomfort you may feel about the prospect of challenging me here as you should, pales completely into insignificance when compared to the discomfort of an Aboriginal teenager who holds a rope in their hand, wondering whether it is worth continuing to live in a community where all of his people are treated as sub-human.

In a high expectations relationship we purge the toxic and restrictive binary of same/other and its stifled belief that assimilation to mainstream is the answer. The notion of the Concrete Universal offers us some chance to recalibrate our relationship so that we are first connected by our humanity. When we are first connected by our humanity, then and only then, do we have a chance of transcending the challenges we face together.

MUCH OF WHAT I have to say to you tonight is not new. I have found no reason to change what I say. I have not sought to reinvent myself or my message over that last few years because all along I have been an advocate for an approach that has worked efficiently and effectively, and has been replicated in many schools and communities throughout Australia. Of course I am referring here to the Stronger Smarter approach. I am not asking us to take a leap of faith here. I'm asking us to invest some interest in what we have come to know about the pursuit of excellence with Aboriginal people; not the pursuit of mediocrity or the pursuit of the past!

My sense though is that there are many Australians who may not like the big stick approaches and the pursuit of mediocrity, yet feel a genuine sense of exasperation, like ‘somehow this is not nice but it is the best we can ever hope to do’. I am reminded here of a passage in Martin Seligmann’s book *Learned Optimism* in which he referred to and described an experiment with two dogs, performed some decades ago, not by Seligmann.

Today the ethics of such an experiment would be questioned but it is an experiment that offers some useful insights.

One dog was contained in a box and every time he put his head up he received a mild and unpleasant shock. In another box another dog, on putting his head up, would also receive a mild and unpleasant shock, but on some occasions he would receive a very pleasant reward.

The first dog developed a sense of ‘learned despair’ and as such simply kept his head down entirely, feeling there was no reward for lifting his head up at any stage. The second, however, did not share such a sense of despair and despite the mild and unpleasant shocks now and then, it continued to raise its head, anticipating a pleasant reward from time to time.

It occurs to me that as I reflect on the relationship between Aboriginal and white Australia and the toxic historical cycles of neglect and intervention, this is somewhat like the sense of learned despair that has emerged in Aboriginal communities over the years. Watching politicians and bureaucrats come and go, promising great change, yet delivering more failure and entrenching despair. It’s an analogy that is easy to grasp and offers some insight into why some Aboriginal communities might seem so dysfunctional and disengaged.

But do you know something? This analogy can also be used to illustrate that same sense of despair that may have become learned and entrenched within white Australia as it might genuinely search for a way forward in Aboriginal policy reform. I recognise that on the question of Aboriginal policy reform, white Australia’s sense of despair might be just as entrenched as Aboriginal Australia’s. In recognition of this I offer you this tonight: there is a different way that enables us to have a more honorable relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia. If you don’t believe me just ask Hughie and Paula McGuire from Indulkana.

When we are first connected by our humanity; when our hearts beat closely together; when we share an interest in the pursuit of our excellence;

then and only then, do we have a chance of transcending the challenges we face together.

Delivered 7 August 2014
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