

“Closing the Space Between Us”

Easing the Crisis in Indigenous Health and Education

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I am torn as I stand here tonight between sharing what I know is happening to Aboriginal communities and wanting to be there as the sun rises tomorrow.

In Barunga, a Jawoyn community in southern Arnhem Land, they will walk tomorrow along a heavily trodden sandy track through the trees to bury a very young man who died way too soon. He is the son of an Aboriginal teacher, Lorraine Bennett, a woman my family thinks of as one of our favourite people in the world. My words tonight are in honour of this young life and of his wonderful mother who has taught so much to so many other children, even mine.

When my son, Will, now 12, and daughter, Claire, now 13, were considerably younger they sent Lorraine books, the right books, the ones she said she needed. This inspiring teacher with the beautiful smile used those books to start the first preschool in Wugularr, 120 kilometres south of Katherine.

Lorraine works now for the Sunrise Health Service Aboriginal Corporation which has the huge job of bringing health to people scattered across vast distances in Arnhem Land. Lorraine directs the early learning and health education project supported by Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth trust. She understands that if we are to create a brighter and more hopeful life for all Australian children then we need to create the change that can only come through education. If we are to overcome the crisis in Aboriginal communities around this country we have to educate ourselves to understand the truth.

Over fifty years of world wandering has deepened my appreciation of the extraordinary journey made by Aboriginal people to be here today as the world's oldest continuous culture.

I am not romanticising the past but it is essential to acknowledge the strength, the beauty and the value of Australia's Indigenous cultures to understand the scale of the crisis afflicting so many of our 460,000 Indigenous people.

Wherever you live in Australia you need to find out the longer timelines of the history of this land and its people to understand what is happening now.

Here in Victoria, it was plagues of sickness following European occupation that ravaged the Wathawurrung people on this land of theirs. Not since the arrival of those European illnesses has Aboriginal culture as a whole faced such a grave threat.

There is a genuine emergency today in the heartland of this country but it is not mentioned once in over 500 pages of legislation rushed through our Federal Parliament to try to legitimise the illegitimate takeover of the rights of Aboriginal communities. Eerily, it is hard to find mention of children in those 500 pages of legislation.

The federal intervention, approved by both major political parties, almost completely misreads the real trauma and the greatest threat to Aboriginal lives.

What is killing most Aboriginal people 17 to 20 years before their time is a plague of chronic illness known as Syndrome X. This is a new Black Death cutting the heart out of several generations of Aboriginal people. It is both physical and mental sickness on such a scale that Aboriginal communities are now shrouded in a seemingly endless procession of funerals and mourning.

In the 1980's, travelling widely in the remote communities, I used the phrase "a health emergency" to describe for governments and our nation the accelerating plague of diabetes, renal disease, strokes, hypertension and heart disease. Syndrome X has been gathering terrible force. Governments, state and federal, have held numerous inquiries, health strategies have been plotted time and again, but no Government has invested adequately in the integrated program of health, housing, work and, in particular, education that can end this preventable cluster of chronic illnesses.

Look at it this way. Over 70% of your family's good health is determined by your socio-economic status: your education, the money you earn at work, the quality of your home and the health care you access. Aboriginal people, on the UN's measurement, have the second worst quality of life on earth, outdone in squalor and disadvantage only by the poorest rural Chinese.

Here in the midst of a Golden Age for most Australians, when the wealth of this Aboriginal Land has built an astonishing federal surplus of over 17 billion dollars this year, we still have hundreds of thousands of Aboriginal people, the owners of this Land, living in dire poverty. They are by far the most disadvantaged of Australia's two million people living below the poverty line. I have seen children who wander around looking for food. Thousands of children are not even enrolled for school and many teenagers wander aimlessly. Whole communities have been denied their human right to adequate food, housing, health and education. As a result we are now witnessing the very rapid disintegration of so many Aboriginal families, in remote, rural and urban communities.

Aboriginal people have barely wiped the tears from their eyes when there's news of another death, especially young men who see no future in their own country, ashamed middle aged men in the grip of alcohol and illness who know they can't support their families and broken men who die in the long grass or sometimes in a police cell.

Just a few years ago at Barunga we buried one of the Jawoyn's great modern leaders. The late Bangardi Lee was just 53, young enough to be my brother. But in these parts I meet few Aboriginal men my age. Mr Lee died after suffering but never complaining about his handful of Syndrome X chronic illnesses. This thoughtful man knew that education was the key to a better chance of health for all of his community and he had asked Ian Thorpe and myself to lend a hand to try to improve the staggering 93% illiteracy in this zone of distress. As he was lowered into the ground, in the Aboriginal custom we pressed our sweat onto the coffin and I whispered a

promise that I would do as he asked and do what we could until these children, the Children of the Sunrise, had the same opportunity as my own.

When my mother was a country child, growing up on the land near Singleton in the Hunter Valley, she lived opposite a shanty settlement of very poor Aboriginal families. She told my brothers and I that as she walked barefoot to school she came to see that it was wrong that Aboriginal children were then denied a chance to learn in that same school. In my family we felt the same way to know that in the whole of the Northern Territory only 62 Aboriginal children completed high school in government schools in 2004 as we worked with Ian Thorpe to build an early learning and health education program. My son, Will and daughter, Claire, were unsettled when they learned that Aboriginal children had so little. They, too, knew it was wrong. It was the unfairness they couldn't bear.

"I know why these kids find it so hard when they start school", Will said. "They never see a book at home." Yes, bookless homes, scores of communities without a library or a pre-school this is part of our failure. Claire and Will truly could not imagine a childhood without books, without that world of pure joy and discovery that is opened up through reading.

Yet every Australian literacy study confirms that by Year 3 many Indigenous children have fallen eighteen months behind the national literacy and numeracy standards. The strugglers continue to deteriorate and by grade seven lag five years behind. How will these Australian children make their way through life with the literacy level of a six-year-old?

If they can't read or write properly how will they ever find their way out of the maze of poverty and poor health? How will they get a driver's licence to move with freedom in the wider world or ever hold down a well paying job? Almost certainly non-readers will become dependent on others for simple but sometimes critical functions. In the Jawoyn communities, Bangardi Lee used to say how distressing it was for his people to turn to outsiders, even to write letters begging for help from Canberra.

Closing the gap in life expectancy between Aboriginal people and the rest of Australians is our greatest national challenge. The key is to close the gap in education.

It is no coincidence that in regions like Arnhem Land where the median age of death of Aboriginal men is around 46, much lower than the national average of around 56 for Indigenous men, you also find these illiteracy rates as high as 93%. The explanation lies in the complex chain of factors that produce disadvantage beginning at birth and developing into a loss of control over individual lives and even the destiny of whole communities.

In the case of some children the disadvantage starts in utero. American scholar, Paul E. Barton, found that of fourteen major factors contributing to the racial gap in educational achievement, eight of them occurred before the child reached school. Of great interest to me was Barton's finding that hunger, nutrition and low-birthweight were important contributors. He is not alone in these findings.

Syndrome X, that cluster of illnesses devastating Aboriginal lives, was for a long time explained by some as the consequence of a weak gene. I heard the same racial excuse used thirty years ago to explain the disproportionate amount of these illnesses among Native Americans or Afro-Americans I was filming at the time for

Four Corners. But this theory has been shattered in recent years. Professor John Bertram of Monash University and a team that included the Menzies School of Health Research in the NT and the University of Mississippi examined autopsies of those who had died of the Syndrome X illnesses. They found a fascinating constant. It crossed over races but it hovered around hunger and poverty. The common factor was being born a dangerously low birth weight baby.

Young Aboriginal mothers are often malnourished and have untreated infections. In utero their unborn baby develops too few nephrons in the kidney. These are the tiny filters. You don't catch up on nephrons. The hand you are dealt at birth is what you will live and die with. With too few nephrons the kidney of the Aboriginal child struggles and overcompensates, with an increased risk of scarring and ultimately early kidney disease, then premature death. I wear another hat as a Trustee of Jimmy Little's Foundation which is committed to helping Aboriginal people on dialysis get back to their country when they are battling through the last years of their lives. Australian hospitals are now seeing the start of an avalanche of patients requiring costly dialysis but many Aboriginal people won't get this treatment and they too will die years before their time.

This is the epitaph we chisel on their tombstones. Born into disadvantage and died that way.

A leading Aboriginal scholar, Professor Ted Wilkes and Dr Fiona Stanley of the Telethon Institute report in their landmark Western Australian assessment of Aboriginal health a disturbing pattern of hunger, poor nutrition and a high incidence of smoking and drinking even while those young Aboriginal mothers were pregnant. 49 per cent of Indigenous mothers smoked through pregnancy and 23 per cent continued to drink alcohol. These are two more of the major causes of those dangerously low birth-weight babies.

What distressed the researchers the most was that apparently the health education message had never reached these young people or had been ignored. If you work in education we need to make a far more vigorous and creative effort, with messages shaped by Indigenous people, to help especially young teenage mothers understand that it is not only their health that is threatened. It is the future of their child, including the child's intellect and ability to learn.

This kind of education is not part of the Federal Government's intervention in the Northern Territory.

The Federal Government has never adequately funded the vital screening and prevention programs to prevent the epidemics of illness and disease. Led by the ex-Army Captain, Mal Brough, some troops lend a hand on logistics but they should be building up the vital services that have never been provided in so many of these communities. The Volunteer GP's are now paid by the Federal Government to complete health checks to establish an audit of a health disaster that has been assessed numerous times. They will not be there long enough to provide real treatment. When they go home the pattern of chronic illness will remain.

The Northern Territory Intervention patronisingly ignores the good work by Aboriginal medical services, staffed by black and white Australians who can never get the adequate primary health care funding they need.

Mal Brough's Intervention is a show of concern but it offers very little treatment for the conditions or illnesses of poverty that afflict these children.

Most of these children will never access the pharmaceutical benefits scheme because there are chemist shops in Aboriginal communities. They will not access the

medical benefits scheme either because there may be only one GP for a vast area of the Northern Territory.

According to the National Rural health Alliance the number of Australian-trained GP's choosing to bring care to the seven million Australians living in the bush has plummeted.

The Aboriginal Health Services need more nurses, dentists and other health professionals. Their patients are about five times sicker than other Australians. Aboriginal children have ailments hardly seen in our cities in thirty years, including the world's highest rate of acute rheumatic heart fever, scabies, anaemia and other diseases of poverty, and otitis media, middle ear infections which cause serious loss of hearing and become a life long learning disability for over 80% of the Jawoyn children. These infections which are detected in babies as young as three months spread rapidly in overcrowded houses, often with ten, fifteen or more people crowded together, sleeping on old mattresses. There's broken plumbing, stoves and fridges often don't work and there's no one with a real plan to help them find their way out of this maze of poverty and bad health.

Patrick Dodson has stated firmly that only the Federal Government has the level of funding required to change this health disaster. This year, the Aboriginal Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commissioner, Tom Calma decided to lead the Close the Gap campaign to focus our nation on this task at the start of a long federal election season. Cathy Freeman, Ian Thorpe and virtually every significant health organization in this land have joined forces to communicate a hopeful and positive message that within a decade we can make true progress and that with the will and the national commitment we will see that the ten thousand Aboriginal children born this year finally move towards a genuine equality of opportunity.

The Australian Medical Association, using estimates shaped by the health economist John Deeble, has estimated that an additional \$460 million dollars a year is urgently required for primary health care in Aboriginal communities. I have pleaded for the past six years with the Federal Government to create the emergency level of aid that is required to deal with this genuine emergency. Kevin Rudd has put a couple of hundred million dollars on the table for an increased commitment to Indigenous Health. If the Prime Minister wants to see change in the lives of abused and neglected Aboriginal children he should now make a stronger commitment to provide the required level of Primary Health Care. I am not interested in more blaming. Let's stop talking and get this done. In that prized future fund we have the bounty. Now we must have the belief. Let me share with you the proof that it can be done.

A good deal of research, especially by the Canadian scientist, Dr Fraser Mustard, has established that for every additional year of education provided to a whole community of young teenage women, we will add up to four years life expectancy to their first child.

Professor Ken Wyatt, formerly head of Aboriginal Health in NSW and now in charge of Western Australia's Aboriginal health policy, adds another great incentive. Increasing the education of those young women by a single year can also reduce the danger of infant mortality when they give birth by between 7 and 10%. This is what I think of when I say, "Literacy is for life".

What more motivation or sense of purpose can we want to create a very different kind of intervention: primary health care, managed and delivered by well funded Aboriginal health organizations, and education on a revolutionary scale that we have

never provided Aboriginal children. Guaranteed pre-school education for all Australian children would be a great place to start. Go Kevin 07! But come on John! If you are going to fight out this election Prime Minister and offer a plan for the future, radically boost the investment in early learning.

Indigenous children are so disadvantaged that we need a literacy brigade of well educated people to rapidly lift the rate of learning. After I made this proposal two years ago at the Garma National Education Conference in the Northern Territory, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs responded by inviting the so called Grey Panthers to visit some remote communities in their caravans. This, as every teacher knows, is simply not enough.

The most disadvantaged students, in fact, require the highest standards of teaching. Some retired teachers and principals would have those talents and many others with appropriate cultural training could support these badly undermanned schools. The real champions of Indigenous education like Dr Chris Sara believe that the first step is to retrain principals to retrain their teachers to believe that Aboriginal children can reach the same standard of learning as the rest of Australian children. But as with health workers, we need to fund an adequate education force equal to the great national task ahead of us.

I escorted the Federal Education Minister to one of the remote communities to show her that this can be done.

At Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth Trust we have had some good support from the Federal Education department for our seven year effort to help improve the health and education of all Australian children.

Ian has been a true champion, visiting many of the remote communities, encouraging the children, their parents and their teachers. He is a strong man, with a big heart and a very fine mind. When asked how long he will persist in this work, he says, until we get the job done.

Charles Perkins told me many years ago that for Aboriginal people the road to equality would be a very long and hard one. We have to remain relentless and find the best in one another. Aboriginal people have been teaching me this for years.

Our strategy at Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth trust is to focus on the well being of the young mothers, with early learning for their infants and a highly successful program of support for literacy at the primary school level.

Our Literacy Backpacks are tackling those bookless homes and supporting the NT teachers by closing the space between the school and the home. First we raise funds from the public. \$200 can fund a child's Literacy Backpack for a year's worth of good reading. We seek support from companies like Credit Suisse Australia, Kessler and Vodafone to help resource a good school library with books tailored to the Accelerated Learning strategy favoured in the remote area schools. We enrol the kids in the Scholastic or Wombat Book club so they have the same encouragement and enjoyment as my children did as they make their own selections of reading. Instead of forcing truant kids to walk around picking up rubbish and other punitive, humiliating versions of this so called "tough love" approach of the NT intervention, the teachers we work with give the children an incentive to learn, to find themselves in the book. If the kids make good progress they get vouchers to purchase any book they like from the Katherine Bookshop. It's owner, another spirited woman who believes in education, says many of these Aboriginal families are now saving and spending hundreds of dollars to provide more books for their children.

In the Literacy Backpacks the children take home a selection of reading for the whole family, for their younger brothers and sisters as well. They also carry home Aboriginal newspapers like the Koori Mail and the National Indigenous Times. Magazines on nutrition, cooking and baby care are very popular among the women. It's incentive. It's what these families are looking for and when children see their parents reading a newspaper or a magazine about contemporary Indigenous issues they know that learning is not a "gubba thing" just for white fellas..

To see people reading in those once bookless homes is a great satisfaction for teachers like Lorraine Bennett. Many of these Aboriginal schools in the Jawoyn communities are seeing significant measurable increases in the reading performances of the children.

Some of the girls used to ask my daughter Claire, "What are you going to do next?" "Well high school first," she'd say. "I want to run fast like Cathy Freeman, swim fast like Ian, and then go to University like mum and dad." I like to see our kids together, the boys running wild with Will and sharing their stories. Australian children sharing dreams.

Most of these children have never been far from their homelands. Learning and finding out what they truly need to know, those life empowering skills, will allow them to travel and come home. The greatest sense of progress is to hear children we know now talk of going to high school in Darwin or Cairns. It's always hard to leave home and not every kid can handle that journey. Many Aboriginal leaders would love to see new residential high schools built to let children from several different communities share their school week together and then go home for a long weekend. At the moment scholarships and a very long journey is the only way. If they can make it, their mothers and fathers glow with pride.

It is so important to most of these parents to see that Indigenous culture is as prized as everything else in the school syllabus. Ian Thorpe's Trust supports Aboriginal people to train the children in music, art and dance. Where possible these talents can flow into viable work and business that allows people a real chance to move from away from life limiting welfare dependency. In Wugularr, the Aboriginal actor, Tom Lewis, and local men organised the rebuilding of a Cultural Education Centre where young people are now trained in many forms of cultural expression usually shown off proudly at the annual Walking with Spirits festival.

In Queensland I have collaborated with the Aboriginal educator, Ernie Grant, on his "My Land, My Tracks" project. This is a teaching aide to help orient children to find out who they really are and how they fit into the longer timelines of Australian history. My experience with communities like Yarrabah and Kuranda, near Cairns, indicates that all forms of learning rapidly improve when Aboriginal children are more secure in their cultural knowledge and can value and respect their elders and their heritage. With Ernie Grant I share a passion to see Indigenous Studies elevated in importance in all levels of Australian education. As much as I learned at University I have made an effort throughout my professional lifetime to expand and deepen my appreciation of what it really means to live in this Aboriginal land. This can be a personal journey for every Australian.

What is missing in the Federal Government's intervention into Aboriginal community life is any real empathy, any sense that we are walking with them, listening and learning. I am sorry but the words do matter and there is a coldness and insensitivity about this new policy of assimilation. There has been little meaningful consultation with the Aboriginal community leaders. Some were so upset they travelled to Federal

Parliament but still couldn't meet with those planning this radical upheaval. Very few Aboriginal people that I know in the Northern Territory agree that traditional lands should be under federal control through five year leases, evolving possibly into 99 year leases. Most are opposed to ending the permit system. Many more are fearful that John Howard's Northern Territory plan, in the name of protecting children, is attempting to take over most aspects of running their families and communities.

In the name of ending welfare dependency we see the return to white management and clearly discriminatory practices. It is hard to see how this punitive approach will provide the training or even the right atmosphere for Aboriginal people to make their own moves to something better.

Claiming to "save their children" does not disguise the truth that this policy once more treats Aboriginal parents as incapable of looking after their children. It shames men and women, all of them, regardless of their behaviour. It is a return to the Mission mentality of subservience and inferiority. I thought we had agreed to leave that behind.

We must be honest here. The NT legislation is blatant discrimination. One set of rules for someone else. The legislation set aside the provisions of the Racial Discrimination Act. It also ignores the recommendations of the UN Committee against Discrimination urging Australia to uphold the right of Indigenous people to consultation in the decision making about their lives. The First Australians do have a right to autonomy that is once more being denied. Yet once more we are hearing that old misguided argument made when Aboriginal children of the Stolen Generation were denied their rights. We have to save the children, is again the cry.

The NT Intervention is an ideological power-play by a Prime Minister who has never believed that Aboriginal people have an exceptional, sacred right to their Land, the entitlement of Native Title legally established by the High Court. This is a Prime Minister, according to his biography, that told his Treasurer that he would not walk in a Reconciliation March with Cabinet. I have tried to work cooperatively with several of Mr Howard's federal ministers and know some want far better than this for Aboriginal people. But our federal parliament in a failure of will and judgement has ridden along with this intervention and watched the steady erosion of Aboriginal rights for over a decade.

The Federal Government's refusal to say SORRY effectively ended Reconciliation. The Governments 10 Point Plan undermined Native Title. This was followed by the denial of the Indigenous Right to Self-Determination, the abolishment of ATSC and the isolation of Indigenous leaders who do not support assimilation. Then came the cultivation of a new Conservative agenda to remove or weaken the teaching of Aboriginal culture in schools. For an animist people who see the Land as their Mother the final and greatest insult is to see the Federal Government take control of the community land on which they live.

After many lifetimes of denial of who Aboriginal people really are, came many more lifetimes of struggle to win respect for their Culture and see them treated as equals.

It is a shameful Big Lie to present the abuse of these rights as in the best interests of Aboriginal people.

The NT intervention is replete with treachery and a looming sense of greater tragedy to come if it is allowed to continue as planned. Thankfully the outcry from many has softened the initial order for mandatory sexual inspections of Aboriginal children.

But the health organizations that do the hard work of caring for all of these children say nothing has yet been done to fund that essential primary health care or education on the scale required.

After all of the battles for justice and civil rights, that long road trudged by true Australian heroes like Jack Patton and William Ferguson, the historic claims by Vincent Lingiari, Eddie Mabo, the Wik people and others, are we now going to watch in silence as Aboriginal people once more see their lives taken over by Government managers.

It is forty years since the moral force of Australians expressed clearly in the 1967 referendum our belief in human equality.

It is time to speak up and insist that whomever wins the coming federal election our federal government must invest some of that future fund in the real future of a great society, health and education for our children.

These are the Children of the Sunrise.

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