

Australian Indigenous Governance – the human perspective.

Sydney, 11 September 2004.

Indigenous Health and the Treaty Debate: rights, governance and responsibility.

University of New South Wales.

Catching the Fast Train:

I want to begin by acknowledging the Dharuk people as the Traditional Owners for this country.

Today I want to talk to you all as human beings – individual people who are made through history, both personal and collective, politics and events that have the power to change and to shape.

Let me tell you a story. This is a story that has haunted me since I heard it.

We were all meeting at Tranby here in Sydney, it had been a hard meeting where we had been discussing, once again, the struggle, where we were at, what we needed to do and so forth. Backwards and forwards we argued, laughed, got angry with each other, then a joke, an observation about someone which made us all laugh and then the debate the dialogue, going backwards and forward again. We had battled hard and we all felt exhausted and perhaps even demoralized by the difficulty of the situation and our inability to accommodate all the differing points of view.

A few of us stayed back and we were sitting on the steps having the final cup of tea for the day and reflecting on the day. Most of us voicing our concerns and worries about the few days and why we couldn't move forward,

in our view of course. Old Uncle Joe McGuinness – bless his soul, he’s gone now, was there with us, not saying much, listening, drinking his tea and eventually one of us said to him, “Uncle, why does it have to be like this, why are we always fighting?”.

He said, *“You see in the beginning – in the beginning of our struggle with government and white people in this country – there was this fast train going and it was the only train going, you know, and we all knew that we had to take it or we would be nothing – get nothing. So we all grabbed our gear, as quickly as we could, everything we could find, and rushed to the station and jumped on that train before it left us behind.*

But you know – and, this is the hard part – we all turned and looked back through the window, and back at the platform as this fast train was moving, we could see this one port – this lonely port that – in our hurry to get aboard – we had left sitting on the platform.

That port, that little port, was our spirit, our essence – small and precious”.

Uncle stopped telling the story and turned to speak to us all and said, *“You know the only way to get that important thing back, is to stop this stinking train and get off, and walk all the way back to that station and pick up that port – reclaim it. Bring it with us. That is the only way for our people to be whole again”.*

I believe this story is a parable for our time. A message that describes to each one of us what we have to do for our health, health in its widest

application, our rights and ourselves, both as individuals and as the collective, as separate nations of peoples. In my view, our very survival depends upon us, more than ever, of retrieving the port. What might be in the port has different words for different people but it is the missing part of ourselves. We need to be reunited with this, our essential selves.

This is a real challenge for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in Australia today – and perhaps, indigenous peoples in other places in the world too, especially those of us who have been colonized. How do we as individual human beings, with our families and communities reclaim our place in the world today?

I have to leave this question hanging in the air with you – because there is no quick answer. Or, to put it another way, it is a question that indigenous peoples need – now more than ever – to talk about together.

We all need to sit down and share this deeply moving story from our Uncle – open up this locked, poor-bugger port of ours in private and in close and closed company. Once we have had time together to talk openly about those important things inside, we will once again regain the health and strength to govern our lives, our families, our communities, our world.

As Steve Biko famously said: *The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.*

We now need to decolonize our minds. Implicit in the Biko statement is that our minds are our most powerful tool for freeing ourselves from oppression. To free ourselves from oppressive situations – to free our spirit.

Retrieving that port, therefore, examining its contents and claiming it will not only make us whole but, I believe, set us free.

We need to heal, to be healed and to be whole again so we can take responsibility for our own lives and the future of all our peoples. If, as individuals, we can regain our selves, the essence of who we are and thus decolonize our mind, the collective, all of us, benefit from the efforts of each of us as individuals as we undertake this profound journey. The nation state can only benefit from this epic struggle.

Issues of governance, a word that we all hear continuously these days, are connected to this self knowledge, this freedom.

This talk seems to imply that we don't know about governance. It seems to imply that we lack sophistication, that this is a Western concept that we know little about or something that we intellectually struggle with, we don't understand and therefore need help, that government needs, once again, to step in.

Let me say to people who may have this view, we know lots about governance we have been on this planet, on this country, a long time. But in the past we had structures and systems which worked for us. But then, our minds were free, we were in charge of ourselves, our destinies, our lives, all

aspects of us as sovereign peoples. Claiming back this sovereignty, decolonizing our minds to reinstate our forms of governance is part of our journey, this necessary quest, we need to undertake, to be whole again.

We need to relearn this old lesson now but from a position of whole individuals. I invite all indigenous peoples of Australia to be involved in the journey of retrieving that old part sitting on the platform. Our very survival as peoples depends upon us doing just this.

However, once we move beyond ourselves we are forced to consider issues of governance and, for indigenous peoples all around the world, this question has also consistently led to the discussion of fundamental ideas, such as sovereignty or its articulation in terms of a treaty or a bill or charter of rights. Once the individual is healed, each indigenous community and the nation that encompasses all indigenous peoples in this country, must also be involved in a similar journey of healing with each other.

I don't propose to discuss the details how such a new formal relationship between the Australian Government, others today will do that, all citizens of Australia and the indigenous citizens of this country might be forged in a new and mature form of our nation state.

However, I will impress upon you that any process of negotiating a meaningful and effective codification of relations between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples of Australia will be challenging, traumatic and time-intensive.

In terms of our health, such formal negotiations over sovereign rights should assist the articulation of clear and effective institutional arrangements for the provision of health and other services, overcoming the adversarial nature of state and territory government relations with us, establishing indigenous rights I law and through establishing the rights of peoples giving individuals a greater sense of their own strength within the system and a lessening of a sense of helplessness or powerlessness.

A fundamental change in responsibility for indigenous health must occur at all levels in Australia: the individual, the community and at the national level – that is, at the level of the Australian government. Only then will Australia be whole again. It was before colonization.

First, I invite all the indigenous peoples of Australia to be involved in the journey of retrieving that old port sitting on the platform. Governance – and all the responsibility that comes with it – is a human problem for us to solve and enact. We need to relearn this old lesson now from a position of whole individuals.

Secondly, I also invite all the citizens of Australia to support and bless an enduring and respectful relationship that can be codified with the First Peoples of this country. In this way, I believe, that Australia will finally grow up as a nation – become mature and confident and find our true place within this complex and troubled world.

Thank you.