

CHANGING DIRECTION

THE HON. PHILIP RUDDOCK MP*

May I begin by acknowledging the Ngunnawal people, the traditional owners of this land. I congratulate ATSIC for organising this conference. The government recognises the important role that ATSIC fulfils as an advocate for Indigenous Australians.

ATSIC is our principal source of Indigenous advice and we value it. And I thank Chairman Geoff Clark for the forthright and constructive approach that he has taken with me and other Commonwealth ministers. At this conference we are gathered for one common purpose – securing a fair and just future for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Of course we will have our differences and there are some issues on which we will agree to disagree. But there is much common ground and we should not allow those few things that are not agreed to incapacitate relationships and impede progress.

I believe that the reconciliation movement is allowing people to grow and to learn. And there is a yearning out there, a real desire to mend the legacy of the past. There is an emerging sentiment for change – we need to harness that and put those sentiments into effect.

Today I want to outline a way forward that draws on the views of those committed individuals who, over the past few years, have been prepared to challenge the status quo. I make no apologies when I say that this government takes a practical and businesslike approach to everything that we do. The question is how we deal with these issues and how we move on as an inclusive society.

The question of rights is prominent in the conference agenda. We all know that the rights debate is an issue on which the media spotlight often shines. Ironically, the differences often overwhelm the substantial areas of agreement.

When I met with the ATSIC Board late last year I was taken through a presentation of Indigenous policy and advocacy that had, at its heart, the pursuit of five rights. These were the rights of Indigenous people:

- To maintain their distinct identities as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples;
- To enjoy life and security in their own country;
- To a sustainable livelihoods;
- To appropriate social services; and
- To be heard.

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I endorse these absolutely. There is no disagreement. But why do we always come back to focusing on the words? I know that when some talk about the rights agenda they are talking about a separate nation within a nation. So far as we, and I believe most Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, are concerned that is not on the agenda.

So, I guess it is what people mean by the words that they use. Some people use words like self-determination loosely. I am all for individuals being able to determine their own destiny, but in terms of the Australian community, I am not about separateness, I am about inclusiveness. Inclusiveness that respects, supports and encourages Indigenous cultures and recognises the special place that Indigenous people occupy in this country as the first Australians.

When some people talk about rights, they talk about structures, they talk about bureaucracy, they talk about separate entitlements. That's all well and good. But it is the debate of the past – modern commentators are challenging those paradigms. When I visit Indigenous communities people tell me that the important rights for them are:

- The right to good education;
- Decent health;
- A reasonable standard of living in a house that they own;
- A safe and secure environment for their families;
- The right to a job.

And the right to:

- Protect, develop and celebrate Indigenous culture;
- Own land for cultural, social and economic purposes;
- Contribute to the preservation of the environment.

At this conference, when we are considering future directions for Indigenous policy, we must start with a frank and honest assessment about how we are performing in delivering those basic rights to Indigenous Australians.

When I cast my eye over the Indigenous policy landscape of today, I see a scene far removed from that which existed in Indigenous affairs when I first entered parliament in the early 1970s. There has certainly been improvements in the provision of infrastructure:

- Infant mortality has been substantially reduced; school retention rates have increased;
- Many Indigenous Australians now occupy skilled jobs;
- A large part of the continent is now Indigenous owned. Indigenous culture and art are widely respected and reconciliation is a popular cause.

But, there is a widespread feeling that there should be more to show for all the efforts of the recent decades. And surely there is something fundamentally wrong when, for example, infant mortality and Year 12 retention rates are where the non-Indigenous population was in the '50s and '60s. Epidemics of family violence, petrol sniffing, child abuse and social malaise are all too prominent. People are arguing that we need to make a transition from life circumstances constrained by the socially and economically debilitating scourge of welfare dependency.

We must aim for a future in which Indigenous people can share equitably in the social and economic opportunities of the nation. But to make better gains we need a far stronger focus on encouraging and supporting individuals to:

- Become self-reliant;
- Take responsibility for themselves and their families;
- Contribute constructively to their communities and the wider society.

The government has entered its third term in office determined to increase the rate at which progress is made. We want to make inroads into:

- the 20-year life expectancy gap;
- Into the 20 per cent plus unemployment rate;
- into poor literacy and numeracy standards;
- Into the stock of sub-standard housing and infrastructure;
- Into the unacceptable, seemingly endless state of disadvantage.

These are challenges we are facing up to. They are responsibilities we recognise and accept in partnership with Indigenous communities and their leaders and with other levels of government. But it requires community partners with sound local leadership and effective community management for the reality to match the rhetoric.

Today there are many Indigenous communities where that capacity just isn't there. Tragically, all too often, community capacity has been misappropriated in the pursuit of personal and family power and advantage. Meeting these challenges is broadly defined as building community capacity.

After two centuries of cultural disruption, it was unrealistic to expect to immediately resurrect Indigenous social control and good governance upon the withdrawal of missionaries and managers – or upon the restoration of traditional lands. The pervasive effects of alcohol and welfare dependence have undermined much of the progress achieved over the last two decades. Alcohol now accounts for much of the violence, injury, imprisonment, job instability, poverty, malnutrition and premature death of Indigenous Australians - elders, women and children too are its victims.

The issues I have outlined so far serve to highlight the need for Indigenous leaders who are prepared to take on the hard debates - not simply in terms of advocacy for their people, but just as importantly as advocates to their people – those who are prepared to call it like it is. Many of the upcoming generation of Indigenous leaders have moved beyond the culture of blame and victim hood that led so inexorably to a mindset of passive hopelessness.

They have recognised the importance of acting on and emphasising personal responsibility. ATSIC has a crucial leadership role to play. In our election commitments we undertook to work with the chairman and board of ATSIC to develop a more effective arrangement for ATSIC at the national and regional level. Now, more than a decade into the life of ATSIC, it is an appropriate time to question the status quo - to establish whether the arrangements in place today are the best to meet the aspirations of Indigenous Australians.

So, where to from here? When faced with difficult questions like those that confront this conference, there is always a temptation to resort to abstract concepts or to look for scapegoats.

What I want to put on the table today is a five-point agenda as a focus for debate. These are suggestions that I have drawn together from views expressed by many commentators over the past year or so. They are put forward in a spirit of frank and honest debate, not a pre-determined prescription.

First, how do we shift the policy emphasis towards individuals and families? There has been a tendency to focus on the needs of community organisations rather than the individuals who are meant to benefit from programmes and services. Community organisations need to be able to demonstrate that they are able to deliver good outcomes. One proposition is that in future, whenever we think of a new programme or initiative, we should design it as a measure directed towards benefiting individuals. For example:

- Should we give more emphasis to individual home ownership than to community housing grants?
- More emphasis to the needs of the unemployed individual than to those of CDEP organisations?
- More emphasis to individual entrepreneurship than to community enterprises?

Second, what is the single most important thing we can do to replace welfare dependency with economic independence, in order to liberate the individual from poverty and disadvantage? For most Australians, including most Indigenous Australians, that means having a job. (self-employment in business is fine, but that will only ever be an option for a small minority of Australians). What we need to do is target Indigenous students intensively in primary schools to ensure that they have the chance to acquire essential skills for longer term economic independence. That is what the national Indigenous English literacy and numeracy strategy is all about. An important element of

the strategy is school attendance, since Indigenous absenteeism rates are several times those of other children. This is where Indigenous parents have a critical role and responsibility. So do state and territory governments in terms of how the school system itself performs and how it supports parents.

Third, I would suggest there is the need to recognise that there is a partnership of shared responsibility between governments and Indigenous people. Governments and outsiders alone cannot effect the necessary changes. Indigenous Australians have rights, but rights and responsibilities are inseparable and there is a view that the responsibility of the individual has not been given sufficient attention. The disempowering rhetoric of victimhood has not helped.

Fourth, we ought to make substance abuse a central focus of our attempts to improve Aboriginal health. How the money is channelled (whether through community controlled organisations or otherwise) is far less important than how it is targeted.

My fifth and final proposition concerns the way Indigenous-specific programme resources are distributed. We need to make sure that general programmes and services are catering to Indigenous people so that Indigenous-specific resources can be targeted to areas of greatest need. In this context the government will be responding to the Commonwealth Grants Commission report on Indigenous funding in the near future. All too often Indigenous programmes are used as substitutes for entitlements that Indigenous people should have to the services provided to other Australians. We need to send a clear message to states and territories which I believe can do a lot better. ATSI and the government have been pressing the issue of access to programmes with states and territories. We are also doing this with Federal agencies that also have a major role.

Much of what I have said today is an attempt to reflect the new sentiment that is emerging in Indigenous affairs. We need now to convert that sentiment into action. For my part, I will offer my support and encouragement. I will work with others because I sincerely believe that we need an inclusive approach, one that recognises and respects differences rather than an approach based on separateness and division.

