



The Hon Ken Wyatt AM MP

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Member for Hasluck**

SPEECH

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INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA A NEW WAY OF WORKING

OE&E...

If I were to ask you what Indigenous disadvantage looks like in 2020, what would you say?

For many young Indigenous Australians, the lens of disadvantage frames their early years.

For decades we have strived to close the gap – to banish Indigenous disadvantage to the history books.

We have made modest gains in some areas, but for far too many Indigenous Australians we have fallen behind.

This isn't through lack of good will and intention.

This isn't through lack of funding and programmes.

I would argue that many of the resources are there – but what we have always struggled with is the failure to realise sustained and improved change.

Therefore, what is the most pressing issue before us when we look at how to approach Indigenous affairs?

For me, it's ensuring that the next generation of Indigenous Australians aren't framed by disadvantage – but by opportunity.

Social opportunity. Economic opportunity. Corporate Opportunity.

This is why we need a new way of working with Indigenous Australians.

This new way needs to start with the voices of all 800,000 Indigenous Australians.

Before the end of the decade this number will grow to 1 million – a testament to the world's longest living continuous culture.

For 60,000 Indigenous communities lived independently and self-determined without the interventions of the industry that has developed around it.

A rich culture that all Australians should take pride in.

This new way needs to ensure that these voices are not just heard – but that they are empowered to make decisions and shape their own future and implement the programmes and services.

One of the perceptions that we must challenge is that there is a single voice for Indigenous Australia.

That a loud voice speaks for all.

While loud voices can contribute to progress. They can also stifle debate – and debate is healthy.

If we want to empower through shared decision making, if we want to ensure joint accountability and equal responsibility for outcomes we need to challenge the structures and institutions that have prevailed in our way of thinking for so long.

This is a fundamental shift that will take time and require courage.

But it is one that, here in 2020, is necessary.

To answer my question from the start, Indigenous disadvantage continues to take many forms.

In Ampilatwatja, a remote community in the Northern Territory, there lives just over 400 people, 91 per cent of whom are Indigenous.

Last year I visited Ampilatwatja to hand over the deed to a Native Title claim – when such a handback occurs we are not only acknowledging the deep connection Indigenous Australians have with our land, we are empowering them to set their own direction and to create the opportunity for a better, more prosperous future.

It was a day of celebration – and shortly thereafter, I travelled a couple of hundred metres down the road to meet some Elders.

Three men, living in what at best can be described as a tin shed.

Three walls and a roof.

Exposed to the elements – the harsh heat of summer and the coldest depths of our desert's winter.

It was remarked to me by a member of our travelling party – “how is it that possible that in a first world nation, we have Australians living like this?”

This is one image of Indigenous disadvantage.

Disadvantage is when a child doesn't get to school in the morning.

Disadvantage is when women are victims of family violence and fearful of those who are meant to love them.

It speaks to the need to do better.

It speaks to the need to work in partnership with Indigenous Australians – because disadvantage won't be overcome by government alone.

The three Indigenous voices of the Elders I met in Ampilatwatja must carry as much weight as any other – this demonstrates the need for an Indigenous voice

Their wants and aspirations should be given as much of a chance to succeed as any other Australian.

If we are failing to ensure adequate living conditions for some of our most vulnerable Australians then simply put – we are failing to hear their voices.

That's why we are developing an Indigenous voice.

It's more than a voice to Parliament, and more than a voice to government.

It is an acknowledgment that at a local level right through to our nation's capital - the views of Indigenous Australians matter.

It will be a voice for the youngest Indigenous Australian through to our Elders, Traditional Owners and Leaders.

It is empowerment.

It is saying clearly that government and the bureaucracy does not know best. It can not be a Canberra designed approach in the bubble of Canberra. We have to co-design with Aboriginal communities in the same way that we do with State and Territory governments and the corporate sector.

It is sending a very clear message that views from the ground will be listened to and respected.

Because we know, that we achieve better outcomes when Indigenous Australians are at the table and part of the decision making process.

We achieve better outcomes when Indigenous Australians own the programmes and are tasked with delivering for their communities.

Partnership is not about sharing blame – as some might suggest.

Partnership is about striving to achieve – together.

As one.

Indigenous Australians should look to government as a partner – not as a foreign institution looking to dictate and command how things should be.

This is real change – and change for the better.

I know, from firsthand experience, that local communities know best.

I know, that local communities have the power to challenge norms and to set new directions, to break moulds and to ensure that today's children have greater opportunities than those who have come before them.

When I was a child, a petition was started in our local town – calling for me and my family to be removed.

This was the Australia of the day. An Australia where I'd have to be given permission to venture into Perth – even permission to marry.

It was an Australia where my mother had to seek government approval to buy me a new pair of shoes.

But – it was also an Australia where good-will prevailed – where my neighbours saw no sense in forcing my family to leave.

It was an Australia where our community came together to challenge the norms of the time.

It was an Australia where my mother, a child of the Stolen Generations was accepted in her community, by her non-Indigenous neighbours.

Emblazoned on the wall of the National Gallery of Australia, in our nation's Capital, are the words of Charles Perkins, who's life mission was the advancement of justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

“We know we cannot live in the past but the past lives in us.”

This is true – this is not the Australia or the experiences that I define myself by.

It is part of who I am – but it has never limited my ambition or dampened my drive and purpose in life.

It demonstrates the power and care that we have for one another at the community level.

And it demonstrates – in the strongest way – the need to work with each other, to shape our future.

It is why the Morrison Government is shifting how we approach policy and programme development.

I said when I took on this portfolio that policy would not be made in my office.

But it would be made with Indigenous Australians right across the country.

And we are staying true to this commitment.

Through the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap, to the development of the Indigenous voice and new frameworks such as the Indigenous Early Childhood

Strategy - we are partnering with Indigenous Australians and giving them an opportunity to inform and shape their own future.

Genuine co-design takes time, trust and respect.

And why are we doing this?

Because we want to see a better Australia for everyone.

For a child born today, be in in Perth or Alice Springs, I want them to go through life feeling equal – being equal – sharing the hopes, dreams and aspirations of their peers.

Not to be looked at differently because the colour of the skin they are born into or treated differently because of their heritage and identify – we want Indigenous disadvantage to be an afterthought to Indigenous empowerment.

As I said in my Maiden Speech to Parliament ten years ago this month:

I have always been inspired by Nelson Mandela, who reinforced the importance of education with these words:

Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor, that the son of a mine worker can become the head of the mine, that a child of a farm worker can become the president of a great nation.

I stand before you as the son of a railway ganger and a domestic worker who was a part of the stolen generation – I also stand before you as an equal.

As the first Aboriginal Australian to win a seat in the House of Representatives, to be made a member of the Commonwealth Executive and to serve in our nation's Cabinet. On merit. Not through quotas or other mechanisms.

I want the next generation of Indigenous Australians – stepping through the school gates to know they too can be part of the great Australian success story.

This is my mission. This is my philosophy.

To change the way in which children feel, dream and aspire.

To change how they are looked at by their peers and the nation.

To change their expectations, to grow their ambition, to fuel their optimism.

We can all empower the next generation of Indigenous Australians. It's on all of us as leaders.

I want to leave future generations with the hope that they can aspire not only to be equals – but to be remembered as the greatest of Australians – on the sport fields, in the science labs – in courtrooms and yes, in the Parliament.

I want Indigenous Australians to look to our institutions and feel as though they belong and that they have a path to get there.

And in setting out these pathways we need to ensure that Indigenous Australians have equal opportunity and access to education – because if we get education right – then we set ourselves up for better futures.

We need to continue to unlock the economic potential right across this nation.

This is key to ensuring lasting prosperity, and key to transforming communities and ensuring that they are able to take advantage of emerging opportunities in industry to create meaningful long-term jobs.

Today, the estimated value of the Indigenous Asset Base is just under \$6 billion – as government, we need to create the environment for Indigenous Australians to capitalise and benefit from this economic security.

That's why I want to see real progress made on outstanding land deals, much like the Jabiru legislation that passed the Parliament last week – empowering the Mirarr people to transform Jabiru from a mining town to a tourism destination.

Empowering them to realise their economic potential.

The Morrison Government will continue to invest in programmes that build Indigenous skills and capabilities.

We will continue to look at our employment services to ensure that economic participation and business development are boosted.

Through the Indigenous Procurement Policy, which recently hit the \$3 billion milestone, we will continue to support supply chain participation for Indigenous Australians.

And through Closing the Gap, we will work with other jurisdictions to realise the economic potential for all Indigenous Australians.

From the Prime Minister, through to all of my Cabinet Colleagues, we all share the responsibility to realise a better future for Indigenous Australians – we are all Ministers for Indigenous Australians – and through our new approach we will realise improved employment, education and health outcomes.

And we share this responsibility with every Indigenous Australian – we welcome their input, ideas and visions – it's our task to create the environment to realise their dreams and ambitions.

That is the role of government – one that empowers, allows self-determination and supports enterprise.

This is government saying we trust Indigenous Australians to make decisions that will lead to improved outcomes.

It is saying to our children – that we trust you to define your own path.

What I've spoken about today challenges decades of thinking.

Empowerment means a redistribution of influence.

It means that new voices are heard.

How do we ensure that this new level of empowerment delivers results?

Our first real challenge – is acknowledging a diversity of views and opinions.

As Indigenous Australians we acknowledge our Elders and our Traditional Owners, but we do not uniformly include them in our organisations at the decision making levels. This has to change.

We all need to commit not only to a new way of working – but to a new way of thinking.

This means partnering with decision makers and those responsible for delivering programmes and projects, and ensuring that we capture hopes and ambition of people, at a community level.

This is something that everyone in this room can do – indeed, many of you are in various ways – but it's fundamentally changing the way that we all do business with Indigenous Australians.

To achieve real progress we also need honest debate.

Debate that is unencumbered by partisan positions that show little respect for the matter at hand.

For far too long our people have been subject to lateral violence, which compounds systemic racism experienced by some in our community

Perpetrated from within.

Perpetrated by those claiming to help our people. And most viciously by those on the Left.

When Black Lives Matter protestors took to the streets in the middle of the Coronavirus Pandemic, against medical advice, they put at risk the health and safety of the very people they were marching to protect.

The right to protest is an important one.

But it can never come at the expense of the health of those around you, who we have seen we have a duty and obligation to protect.

As the Minister for Indigenous Australians, this was my message to all Australians at the time.

A time when businesses are closing, loved ones are dying in isolation from family and everyone is feeling the impact of COVID-19 is not the time to protest – no matter the issue.

How was my message received?

“He is clearly only a Token Indigenous Member”

“Coconut”

“You’re not black Ken. You’re blue”

“Uncle Tom”

“Resign palm nut”

This was the response at the time to a Government Minister tasked with the advancement of Indigenous Australians, and their safety during the coronavirus pandemic.

It demonstrates nothing other than division, tribalism, disempowerment and the slowing of progress right across the board.

Be it the left of politics, the right of politics or anywhere in-between – if you dare to think differently, do differently or question the norm – you are torn down. There is never one right answer, complex situations require the ability to test and question ourselves and the way in which we approach policymaking and programme delivery.

We will never find the leaders of tomorrow if they are shouted down or exiled for having a different or new perspective on the challenges we face as a community. Equally, those challenging the status quo must do it respectfully.

The lateral violence must stop.

And it is on all of us to call it out when we see it.

If we do not – the promise of partnership and the progress in our grasp will never be realised.

If we do not – new ideas will never see the light of day, and the view of Indigenous affairs in this country will continue to be seen through a prism of negativity.

If we do not – we will not break free of the negative narrative that has been imposed on Indigenous Australians.

We need to do better.

Politicians – listening to the views of Indigenous Australians.

Governments – co-designing solutions with Indigenous Australians.

Media – highlighting the achievements and finding a way to break down negative perceptions.

Leaders – listening to the new ways of our next generations.

We must all do better.

We must strive towards this new way of working – because we owe it to future generations to seize the opportunity – to break the mould – and to ensure that the disadvantage that has held Indigenous Australians back for too long isn't the defining legacy of today's children.

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