

EMBARGOED UNTIL 25 JULY

**SPEECH BY PROF. MICK DODSON
DIRECTOR RECONCILIATION AUSTRALIA FOR THE
RECONCILIATION: TAKING THE NEXT STEP UNCHEON
25 JULY 2006**

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Ladies and Gentlemen:

Good afternoon

Thank you for that introduction Jackie. I'm grateful to have you and other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people here today, people who contribute so much to Australian life in so many ways.

It's my honour to be on the ancestral lands of Joy Wandin-Murphy and the Wurundjeri people. My greetings to all of the Wurundjeri. I pay my respects to your elders and thank you Joy for your warm welcome and please accept my and my family's condolences for your recent loss.

Thank you also to Chip Goodyear and to BHP Billiton for hosting this luncheon. Reconciliation Australia has a great partnership with BHP Billiton and, as Chip has said, its main product, the Indigenous Governance Awards, are providing many important, inspiring lessons about the way forward in reconciliation.

In the last couple of weeks, I've been on the road with other judges visiting this year's finalists for the governance award – eight organisations offering another set of good news stories of top-shelf Indigenous achievement.

Stories I'd like to be reading about in the newspapers.

I've been traveling with fellow judges, people like Heather Ridout from the Australian Industry Group and Gary Banks from the Productivity Commission. People who know what good governance looks like and who are just bowled over by the extent of it, the strength of it across Indigenous Australia.

These stories are very important for us because they provide a completely different picture of Indigenous people to what we normally hear or see reflected in mainstream Australia.

My work on these Awards has changed my view of the world, changed my approach to what I do. It's given me hope where I had little left.

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What these people are achieving and how they do what they do has come to inform everything I say and everything I stand for in promoting the wellbeing of my people.

Success is now my guiding light, as it must be for you Prime Minister and for all Australians who want to see it replicated across the country.

I'm here today, Prime Minister, to talk about hope and possibility.

There are too many people without hope.

I'm not one of those people.

I am never without hope.

I'm here because I believe in reconciliation and what it can deliver for my people, and this country.

Ladies and Gentlemen:

In a few minutes, the Prime Minister will be talking about the role each of us here plays in forging the kind of relationships that underpin reconciliation. The days when corporations or governments could sign nicely worded statements of commitment and say they'd done their bit for reconciliation are over.

Because we now know what reconciliation looks like in all its different settings. Generating success is what it's all about and that means building respectful relationships on which action-oriented, result focused partnerships are founded.

I congratulate the many people here today who are already doing that.

You are important people, from the corporate sector, from sport, the media, the police, non-government and community organisations - all over - and I congratulate and thank you for taking responsibility for reconciliation in many different ways.

Your actions make it impossible for others to say they don't know what reconciliation means or how to get involved.

As an Aboriginal man, I have a particular responsibility to take action. I need to do more, my brothers and sisters across the country need to do more. Until our children grow up with the same chances as other Australian kids, the same life expectancy, the same opportunities, we all need to do more.

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Ladies and Gentlemen:

I'm here today to tell the Prime Minister that I am ready to walk alongside him in taking the next steps towards reconciliation.

I believe that you, Prime Minister, are here for the same reason.

In May last year, when you spoke at the National Reconciliation Planning Workshop in Canberra, your words gave hope to many people.

You said:

“In the name of the Government, I say we will reach out. We will meet the Indigenous people of this country more than half way if necessary because at the end of the day we need together to achieve (reconciliation).”

I trust the goodwill in your words.

Today is an opportunity for you, Prime Minister, to flesh out those words from last year.

To tell us what more than half way looks like.

To encourage us to take responsibility for extending the pockets of success by demonstrating your trust, and your respect in us and what we do.

I know from my international work and from what we are learning in Australia about good Indigenous governance that confidence gives Indigenous peoples remarkable strength to overcome disadvantage.

And I see how confidence grows when people and their cultures are treated with respect.

The recent COAG meeting accepted that overcoming the disadvantage experienced by Indigenous Australians calls for national, long term commitment.

You Prime Minister and your colleagues have acknowledged on many occasions now that the only way to do that is to support Indigenous people in identifying local problems and shaping their solutions.

This is a big change on the part of government, a positive change that takes us much closer than ever before to realising the respectful relationship at the heart of reconciliation.

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What this change should mean is that Aboriginal people are actually supported in taking the responsibility quite reasonably expected of us. And that where we are already taking responsibility, that it is recognised, encouraged and nurtured.

But to realise the potential of today's gathering, you and I Prime Minister, must be honest with each other and acknowledge that this promising approach is struggling to deliver.

We are seeing serious problems in the bureaucracy's capacity to make it work.

There are serious questions about whether the shared responsibility framework is being played out on the ground in a way that gives Indigenous people a real chance to make decisions that affect our lives, although we know from all the evidence now available to us that this is a fundamental pre-requisite for building healthy communities.

How can we build our confidence and assume responsibility while we continue to be represented as a people, as a culture, on the basis of the worst, most heinous behaviour perpetrated by some of our most damaged citizens?

While national discussion about the ugliest parts of the saddest Indigenous communities is played out by powerful people on both sides as some kind of culture war.

This is not the type of engagement that builds trust or confidence.

It is not the basis for the constructive partnership on which the Australian Government's policy position is based.

Policies that have failed us in the past should be left in the past.

What we need now are approaches that respect and support us in making necessary changes ourselves.

Prime Minister, you know what I am proposing to you today.

You know because I've told you.

You know that I will not be satisfied if all that you are able to tell me is that your approach is the right one and that it will reap rewards over time.

You also know that I am not about to ask you to ditch it all and start again.

You know, too, that there are things that we will need to discuss over time for our partnership to be strong and respectful – things to do with land, the stolen generations, constitutional arrangements, other matters.

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But without forgetting those things, there are ways we can move forward and that's what we're here to talk about today.

What I am asking you to do is to give your policy approach a real chance to succeed.

I'm here to suggest how you can do that, and to make a commitment to you that I will help you in every way I can. I know many other Indigenous people who will be there too, men and women who lead communities with abundant capacity and determination, and great courage.

We'll back you.

I'm not saying it's a simple ask but I make it because I believe you may be the best placed Prime Minister in Australia's history to do what needs to be done, for the sake of my children, my grandchildren, my great grandchildren and yours. This chance may never again come to pass for a very long time, if ever!

What this great, national effort must involve will be as clear to you as it is to me:

- Putting in place government machinery that can make it happen
- Investing the dollars, now and for the long-term, and making sure they're spent where the rubber hits the road
- Honest, independent evaluation of outcomes involving the people who's lives are being affected, and
- Making this commitment on a bipartisan basis across jurisdictions and independent of the electoral cycle.

What I propose, Prime Minister, is a vision for the working group announced by COAG earlier this month. To allow it to succeed where so many others have failed, the working group must focus on a long-term plan that provides the necessary authority, the appropriate framework, to support Indigenous-led solutions within communities.

The group needs to include in its membership experienced people from beyond the public service in order to build a strong social coalition for action across all sectors. It may report in six months, as COAG wanted, but its work will go on for much longer.

We know from some of the work government has done in economic reform that this highly focused partnership model can work and its great strength reinforces

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your own great strength in making complex things happen and explaining and promoting them to the Australian people.

Complex things like providing national authority for locally driven solutions that generate success in Indigenous communities.

In education, for example, what is the common element of every successful model where Indigenous kids are finishing school and dreaming of a brighter future for themselves?

What are we seeing at Kalkaringi and Thursday Island and Gumala Mirnuwarni?

We're seeing:

- intense community involvement
- local decision making
- locally controlled resources; and
- respectful support by non-Indigenous parts of the community.

If we want this kind of success replicated, we need governments to understand that there are no systematised, centralised solutions. No silver bullets.

And when we recognise the ingredients of success in education, and provide the national framework for it to grow and flourish, we expose ourselves to a much broader plan for success.

Because when you improve education you improve life choices. When you improve housing you improve health, you improve employment you improve wellbeing, and so on.

The strategies I'm talking about don't need to be invented. They're covered in countless reports and studies from within our own country including the Roadmap for Reconciliation. There are also countless others from around the world that we must not ignore.

We have all the evidence we need to show us how best to get the results we're looking for. What we need is a path through all the historic, attitudinal, political layers that obstruct the passage from knowledge to outcome.

This level of commitment comes at a price but let's stop pretending that there's ever been an investment in Indigenous Australia sufficient to make the kind of progress we are talking about today.

Let's stop pretending that there has ever been an investment based on need.

Based on a vision of success.

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An investment in results means hundreds of millions of extra dollars every year for at least a decade and perhaps more. We all know that.

And it's time we started telling the Australian people about the economics around not investing in this national effort because as parts of corporate Australia already know and are acting on, if a popular, well resourced government doesn't do it now, the cost will skyrocket out of our reach.

And accepting that success comes at a price will also bring a new level of honesty in evaluating our efforts and responding to what we learn along the way.

We've never done that because we've been afraid of what honest evaluation of well meaning, under-resourced efforts like the COAG trials might uncover. If we make the big investment, we're going to want to measure the bang, and to do that we need to be upfront in our objectives.

Many of us are aware of international standards that target outcomes in poverty, primary education, infant mortality and other measures of disadvantage.

We have people in Australia living in third world conditions.

Indigenous children born today can expect to have a life that is 17 years shorter than other Australians.

We can change that.

Other countries have done it.

So let us now be prepared as Australians to focus ourselves on closing the life expectancy gap, and to be measured and accountable on the success of our efforts.

And if, Prime Minister, we commit to taking these steps together, we will tell the Leader of the Opposition and leaders from across the political spectrum and across the country, black and white, that the time has come to stop using politics as an excuse for failure, and for lives lost in the process.

You'll go back to COAG having taken the other leaders at their word about long term commitment to closing the gaps, and having turned those words into something meaningful.

And together we will tell the Australian people what we are doing and why we're doing it.

Because it is morally right. Because it is economically sound.

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And because it is in all of our best interests.

The Aboriginal culture is something precious we have in Australia.

We will respect that culture and will invest in the success of our First Peoples.

The time is right to take this next step.

Together.