

2019 National RAP Conference Narelda Jacobs' Keynote Speech – 25 October 2019



"No one can be the voice of Aboriginal people but Aboriginal people." A running theme at the last day of the #2019RAPConference, aptly voiced by Narelda Jacobs

I've been buoyed by the openness of the Australian conversation, especially in the last 12 months or so. Speaking to friends, colleagues, people in professional or social settings, there seems to be a societal shift that's creating a safer space for people to find their voice and use it.

Discrimination is being called out. Whether it be overt or casual racism, unconscious bias, lateral violence. The strongest message often comes from the most quietly spoken.

We can thank the reconciliation movement for helping to create that safer space and to give dignity where it's due. But let's not kid ourselves, we know we have a long way to go because there are a lot of people with racist attitudes, as casual as they may be. And it makes us angry.

Rosie Batty made an observation last week – her white privilege wasn't lost on her. As a struggling single mother, she had done it tough enough, but when she was struck by unspeakable tragedy she was respected and listened to. She almost felt a sense of guilt that so many Aboriginal women before her weren't shown the same respect.

I've compiled a video of several issues that have been explored over the last year. The content will make you angry, frustrated, sad. It contains confronting images and images of people who are deceased – but behind the most confronting images are families who fought for you to see it. They want you to see it. I'm going to ease you into it with something that got the entire country talking.

VIDEO

Climbing Uluru

I'll let you draw your own conclusion over whether Pauline Hanson's racist.

One thing is certain, the Anangu's wish will come true at 4pm today, when no one will ever be allowed to climb the rock.

What I loved most about that clip was the fierceness of those young women to stand up against Pauline Hanson, their body language said more than their words. They were actually gaslighted by the Senator but didn't back down.

While we're at Uluru, the Uluru Statement from the Heart has been very topical, especially in the last week. It seems Minister Ken Wyatt has taken an enshrined voice to parliament off the table and he'd like further consultation while mapping out a plan for the referendum on constitutional change.

Wasn't the Uluru Statement from the Heart enough consultation? And what's the problem with having an enshrined voice to parliament? It's apolitical, not aligned with any political party, it doesn't matter who's in government.

A recent survey had about 70% supporting an enshrined voice and 2 of our most eminent judges Justice Murray Gleeson and Justice Robert French have both said they can't see any issue with having an enshrined voice.

If we don't have an enshrine voice, it will be a wasted opportunity. We might never get the chance again.

Joyce Clarke

There's a grieving family and community in Geraldton who will never get the chance to see Joyce Clarke again.

Her family phoned police last month as a last resort. The very people they called on to help, shot her dead. She was known to police, she had just been released from prison, her mental health issues were known to police. Officers should have been more prepared.

The internal police investigation is ongoing. The officer involved has taken leave. One thing has already changed for Geraldton.. police officers will now be wearing body cameras. It warmed my heart to see Joyce Clarke's family leading the recent student strike for climate change.

Naomi Williams

Naomi Williams family, rejected a written apology from the local health district, saying the response wasn't good enough. Preferring any apology to be made face to face and they'll accept it when there is culturally safe care and treatment of Aboriginal patients.

The manager of the Tumut hospital acknowledged that there is a perception in the local community that the Hospital is not a safe place for Aboriginal people and that some drive to other hospitals to avoid it. She accepted that many among the Aboriginal community have not previously felt heard about these concerns. She recognised that there is now an opportunity for change.

The Coroner handed down her findings July 2019, her recommendations include:

- Ensuring Aboriginal Health Liaison Workers are available 24 hours.
- Employment of indigenous health workers equivalent to the number of indigenous residents.
- Developing culturally safe health care.

Naomi Williams was sent home with 2 panadol when antibiotics would've saved her life.

Ms Dhu

Ms Dhu could've also been saved with antibiotics.

Ms Dhu died in 2014. An inquest was held a year later.

It took another 3 years for some the recommendations to be acted on.

One of those was the creation of a 24 hour hotline to make sure all Aboriginal people taken into custody had a welfare check and access to legal advice. It's called the Custody Notification Service, where arresting officers call the number, which then notifies the Aboriginal Legal Service.

As good as the hotline is, we can hardly celebrate a breakthrough. The hotline was recommended 28 years ago by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. NSW has had the hotline for 15 years and that state has had no Aboriginal deaths in custody when calls were made.

But perhaps the most ground breaking change were law reforms announced a month ago that stops people being sent to jail for unpaid fines. We can congratulate the WA state government for that.

Ms Dhu's family were granted 1.1 million dollars in compensation, all they wanted was for people to be held to account.

Tanya Day

So too Tanya Day's family.

Coroner is still considering her findings after last month's inquest. She's looking at whether systemic racism played a part, why she was removed from the train in the first place, why she was taken into police custody, why Aboriginal support services didn't attend. It's expected to be a landmark ruling.

Tanya Day – daughters say she should've been left alone to sleep on the train. Police breached guidelines requiring better checks. There was no care & empathy. Ambulance officers didn't question extent of injuries, despite the massive bruise on her forehead.

The Victoria Government is planning to remove public drunkenness as an offence. Her family want a criminal investigation.

KAK Studio 10

Studio 10 was investigated by the media watchdog and exonerated of racism only because of the balance provided by Yumi Stynes.

Studio 10 was hurting after that episode and realised no one can speak for Aboriginal people but Aboriginal people.

I have found myself sitting on that panel next to Kerri-anne and I can't wait to have my chance to chat to her on air about changing the date.

Interesting point – is what the lady Kerri-anne was sitting with in Alice Springs didn't say. Highlights to me the way we need to understand what Aboriginal people are really saying and hear the things that aren't said. When Kerri-anne said "was I being your voice?" "do you forgive me". She showed great dignity in not wanting to embarrass her guest.

Adam Goodes

There are few Australians with more dignity than Adam Goodes. A champion of fairness. Who from the outset said "please don't blame the young girl, it's not her fault".

The Final Quarter made me feel ashamed and guilty for not following this issue as it was happening.

The AFL CEO Gillon McLachlan apologised to Adam Goodes for doing nothing after the documentary, but the booing happened in 2015.

AFL's now considering its position on the Uluru Statement from the Heart. And this week we saw the Indigenous Players Alliance declaring more support for Aboriginal players, acknowledging their unique challenges before, during and after their careers. Strong men Des Headland, Gavin Wangeneen, Michael O'Loughlin, Che Cockatoo Collins and Kevin Caton standing shoulder to shoulder saying Aboriginal players need support.

This really spoke to me because I have been too quick to think talented young men are wasting their opportunities, rather than looking at intersecting issues they face – family and community pressures.

Racism in all its forms is ugly, it's uncomfortable. It's so uncomfortable, it's just easier to ignore it.

Andrea Pickett was murdered by her estranged husband. In the year before her murder she went to the police multiple times, they failed to act on breaches of VRO. Last week her sister gave a speech at the FDV conference and one thing stood out for me. 4 days before her murder she reported a breach – a handwritten letter had

been placed under her pillow with a machete on top. Her sister said as she left the station that day she remembered something else but when she went back in, a policeman was playing with the machete. Andrea didn't bother going further making the comment "they're not going to do anything" 4 days later she was dead, leaving 13 children. It took police 4 hours to find her youngest daughter who was hiding in the house.

That was 10 years ago. The grief shared by her sister was as if it were yesterday. The cases I've presented are extreme. We know we're not all racists and most of us are fair minded and treat people with respect. So you may have a feeling of helplessness right now.

But by being here you're already doing something. You're among 2.7million Australians whose workplaces and educational institutions that have Reconciliation Action Plans. Workplaces, school and institutions who are changing their culture, creating safer spaces.

I think those of us who call out racism are true heroes.

It's up to all of us to call it out.

It's fantastic to have apologies, changes to guidelines, new policies, law reforms. It's a shame it takes someone to die for these positive changes.

I can't help but think if hospitals, transport systems, police stations had Reconciliation Action Plans, Tanya Day, Ms Dhu, Naomi Williams, Joyce Clarke and Andrea Pickett wouldn't have died at all.