

**SPEECH BY JACKIE HUGGINS  
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FOR THE ANGLICARE NATIONAL CONFERENCE  
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RYDGES CAPRICORN RESORT, YEPPOON**

***“CONNECTIONS WITH THE AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY: BEYOND THE  
COMFORT ZONE”***

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today and pay respect to those who have gone before us.

Thank you Steven, and thank you to Anglicare for inviting me to take part in your national conference for 2005.

I'm sure that my presence here this afternoon and the topic Richard and I have been asked to address signals that Anglicare wants to hear some of the tough things that need to be said.

It may not sit comfortably with all of you, and we may as well be upfront in saying that.

An organisation with the history, profile and status of Anglicare has clearly found a formula that sits well with the community. You don't want to compromise that and you don't want to divert your energy or resources into areas that may not provide the kind of results you're justifiably proud of.

Indigenous disadvantage is a tough one – there's no denying that.

NGOs, including churches, government, business and Indigenous people ourselves carry the heavy burden of past failure, wasted resources, wasted lives.

But I'm here to tell you that it's time to take this stuff on in a new way. It's time to look at where we've failed and to use those lessons, along with more recent successes, to engage with Indigenous communities in ways that will undoubtedly generate change.

Reconciliation Australia is a not-for-profit, civil society organisation. We are a leader, but one of many players seeking to make a difference.

Partnerships are critical to our success. The wider the message spreads and the more people and organisations that engage with us in the change process, the more effective we can be. There are many pathways to reconciliation, and room for creativity and differing views and ideas along the way.

In particular these days, our partnerships are with high achieving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations working on the ground to deliver the central objective of the process – equal life chances for all Australians.

At the same time, we broker and help build relationships between Indigenous peoples, corporate Australia, governments, other not-for-profits, and international experts and supporters to take on the work of reconciliation.

And if Anglicare isn't up to a challenge like ours, then who is?

If you won't take it on, you'll let far less capable organisations off the hook. And that's just not on. Not any more.

A few weeks ago, I spoke at workshop on the latest report on Indigenous disadvantage prepared by the Australian Productivity Commission. Some of you would have seen the media coverage of this second, two-yearly report covering all the interrelated areas of disadvantage in our communities – health, education, employment, substance abuse etc.

The report is critical because its regular, it is developed by a highly credible instrument of government and it's driven by all Australian governments through COAG.

I was invited to speak at the workshop as Co-Chair of Reconciliation Australia. And what I focused on was how disadvantage, particularly crime levels, substance abuse, and the repetitive, public portrayal of our disadvantage affects the reconciliation process.

The high incidence of violent crime and substance abuse in our communities is what many Australians associate with Aboriginality.

It defines us.

To the point where people will argue with alacrity that we are somehow genetically predisposed to violence and drunkenness or that this behaviour is part of our culture.

It allows people to blame us for the problems we experience or to shrug us off as a lost cause.

This infuriates me, and let me tell you that I don't enjoy going to funerals any more than the next person. But the fact is that it's not unusual for Aboriginal people to attend hundreds of funerals in a year.

In fact it's commonplace.

Our life expectancy is 20 years less than that of other Australians. We have the lowest life expectancy of any other Indigenous peoples of the world. Lower even than our Maori, Canadian Aboriginal and Native American brothers and sisters.

Something is drastically wrong here.

The Productivity Report provides a whole lot of these shocking statistics on Aboriginal disadvantage and these are things you need to hear. But the trouble is Australians have heard the numbers so many times before, they're numb to the human significance.

Too often, they're so numb that their first impulse is to blame the victim.

And some of these numb people would be among the first to donate to your appeals. And while I have no problem with this (I donate too), I am concerned when people pride themselves on being compassionate but somehow cannot extend that compassion to Indigenous Australians living - and dying - in their own backyard.

So here we are, yet again, talking about a level of disadvantage and dysfunction that could see another generation of Indigenous children grow up too damaged to create functional families and communities themselves.

But at least we are here.

And organisations like yours, as well as doing some excellent work in troubled communities, are doing so with a new awareness of the need to actually engage with Indigenous communities, rather than doing things FOR or TO us.

Getting community engagement right means doing a lot of things properly. As far as Indigenous Australians are concerned, a lot of it is about building relationships - human relationships that involve confidence and trust and respect and understanding.

Perhaps we can best illustrate the significance of community engagement through examples of where there's a lack of it. Looking at where it doesn't happen and the consequences of that.

There was a lot of that in the past when engagement with Aboriginal communities was virtually non-existent.

Things were done to us.

We don't have a lot of say in decisions today but people don't tend to ignore us like they used to.

Community engagement needs to be about more than allowing people to participate in decisions that affect our lives. It's about giving people the power to make those decisions.

Australia has been on a slow learning curve when it comes to acknowledging that church organisations, or government or business or anyone else trying to develop community projects without the close, constant and respected involvement of Indigenous people are on a road to nowhere.

I often find myself at conferences like these as the sole Indigenous voice, or one of very few, trying to explain things that should really have been understood by now.

The rhetoric at least about community engagement in this country is changing and well-overdue insights about putting control into the hands of Indigenous people provide a foundation of common ground.

But if these insights are to amount to anything in terms of improved outcomes for Indigenous people and progress towards reconciliation between black and white Australians, they must be backed with very different structures and practices from what the Churches are used to.

Very different ways of engaging with communities.

Conference like these can support communities to build material prosperity by promoting the right kind of engagement. They can be enormously empowering for the people who participate precisely because they provide opportunities to exhibit best practice and worst practice.

Research around the world is clear now about the main ingredient in overturning disadvantage in Indigenous communities. That ingredient is good governance and it only comes about when Indigenous people are given real power to make decisions about policies affecting their communities.

In 2002, Reconciliation Australia brought this research to Australia when it staged the first national conference of business, government, education and community representatives to talk and learn about Indigenous governance. Some of you may have been there.

The upshot of that groundbreaking conference was the development of a partnership between Reconciliation Australia and BHP Billiton focusing on three main action items, the first of which was the scoping of what has become Australia's most significant research into what works and what doesn't in Indigenous community governance.

The Indigenous Community Governance Research Project involves the Commonwealth, Northern Territory and Western Australian governments, and is jointly administered by Reconciliation Australia and the Australian National University, with the active involvement of 13 Indigenous communities around Australia.

It is overseen by an International Advisory Committee composed of international and Australian experts, Indigenous leaders and government policy makers.

What our research project is doing is looking at different models of governance and distilling the lessons on what makes some organisations work so well. Already the research is providing important insights into the reality of the environment in which Indigenous organisations operate.

One of the most important insights is the breadth of responsibility they carry, often with limited resources.

Most Indigenous organisations play a wide range of roles within the community, including management and service delivery as well as broader socioeconomic, political and cultural functions.

To do this, organisations must reflect how decisions are made and authority distributed within the community. It is not just the organisations' staff and board members that are affected by its governance, but all members of the community. And research around the world shows that organisations are most effective when their structures reflect the community's needs and priorities.

The research is certainly uncovering problems but the process is also about sharing things that work – people's achievements in the face of adversity, their ingenuity and persistence and commitment.

Just a few weeks ago, in Melbourne, BHP Billiton and Reconciliation Australia announced the first set of winners in an awards scheme that complements the Indigenous governance research.

I had the honour and the pleasure of being there and meeting all the finalists, and I can tell you there are a lot of high achieving Indigenous organisations out there.

There's a lot of good news and BHP Billiton has done something very important by supporting us in uncovering and telling that news to Indigenous Australia, and the rest of the community who too often hear only stories of despair and dysfunction.

But if our new insights about Indigenous governance and community driven decision-making are to amount to anything in terms of improved outcomes and progress towards reconciliation, they must be backed with very different structures and practices from what we're used to.

The bottom line is this:

1. It must be understood that real progress won't be made unless and until Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are given real power to make decisions for ourselves. Call it self determination, call it whatever you like but it's shown around the world to be the essential ingredient in improving health and other outcomes for Indigenous peoples;
2. Indigenous communities must be supported in building the capacity to do this well, and to engage with organisations like Anglicare, as well as business and government, in the way you are all now saying that you want to engage; and
3. You must all also build **your** capacity and cultural competence to work with Indigenous communities in this way.

In a few weeks, Reconciliation Australia will host the fifth visit to Australia by Professor Stephen Cornell who co-directs the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development at the University of Arizona.

Over 20 years, this project has collected research on what works in building healthy, prosperous communities - what turns around the bleak statistics of disadvantage.

There are lots of lessons to be learned from the Harvard Project that are highly relevant to what we are trying to achieve in Australia.

And the Harvard experience suggests that the Federal Government's new Indigenous affairs arrangements hold promise but only if they involve a genuine transfer of decision-making power into Indigenous hands, something governments find hard to do.

The Harvard research shows that successful tribes think strategically, make informed decisions, assume responsibility for their own internal affairs, and spend time, energy, and resources laying sound institutional foundations on which progress is made. In other words, good governance is a precondition of success.

The Harvard Project consistently finds that governance goes a long way in explaining why some tribes break cycles of poor health, dependency and poverty.

The caution we have to make about the Harvard work, is that while the research holds important lessons and parallels for Australia, for us to think we can import it outright would be inappropriate ... and lazy.

Which is why Reconciliation Australia is coordinating Australia's own governance research project.

Over time, Australia stands to learn a great deal from this project about good Indigenous governance and in the meantime, we are getting sizeable chunks of insight which we are sharing with communities, with our partners and with policy makers.

The project is all about building healthy communities from the ground up. About making Indigenous communities genuinely accountable by giving us real power to set priorities and make decisions.

I mean, what point is there in being accountable if you don't get to make decisions?

What on earth does shared responsibility mean if it doesn't involve any sharing of power?

And where does that leave the myth that so called "practical" aspects of reconciliation are somehow separate from the so called "symbolic" ones – the aspects of reconciliation that recognise and respect difference in priority and approach, and the overarching significance of family and community.

In reality, the practical and the symbolic sides of reconciliation are impossible to separate because that sense of who you are and how you feel about yourself is intrinsic to how you behave and how you shape solutions to problems that affect your community.

The sense of how connected you feel to fellow Australians.

If you believe you're an outsider, you are an outsider.

If you believe you're beaten, then you're beaten.

If you believe that the rest of Australia has no respect for you or your culture, then for all intents and purposes it doesn't.

These things are self-fulfilling and we have to find the symbolic basis, as well as the practical basis, for living together and bringing out the best in one another.

So you see that for Anglicare to really make a difference, you must take into account many new things to help end the cycle of failure.

Governments will only go so far without encouragement, sometimes pressure, from high achieving, trusted organisations like yours. They don't like taking risks or providing the space for Aboriginal communities to make mistakes as we start to make decisions for ourselves.

We're human beings - you have to expect that mistakes are going to happen from time to time.

But you also have to expect that great things will happen. We will succeed. We will prosper, as Indigenous peoples around the world have shown they can prosper when they've been given the chance.

Around Australia, exciting examples are already out there to see in our communities and we're ready to join the points of light.

Instead of funerals, I look forward to the graduations, the birthday parties – for 60<sup>th</sup>, 70<sup>th</sup> and 80<sup>th</sup> birthdays – and seeing my great, great grandchildren for that matter!

My address may have come rather late in the conference program but I urge you to use the rest of your time together, and the follow up period in your communities, to think further about the role you play in all of this because every single topic on the program comes back to this essential challenge for the Australian community.

Take the lead, Anglicare. Take the lead, as you so often do.

Because how you deal with this, what you say, what you do could set the tone for a new, far more hopeful era in Indigenous community support. I wish you well.