

POWER OVER OUR LIVES – BARRIERS AND OPPORTUNITIES: A KIMBERLEY PERSPECTIVE

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I would like to acknowledge and thank the original owners the Gadigal clan of the Eora nation for making me welcome on their country

In thinking about the theme of this conference, *Learning from the past – thinking about the future*, I considered what is the best way to paint a picture of Kimberley Aboriginal Peoples' aspirations. History is a fundamental starting point. I will give you a quick glimpse at our history. Then I will talk about our aspirations, our vision for the future, and what we are trying to achieve in the Kimberley.

It is in this context that we need your support in achieving equality. I believe that developing partnerships with the wider Australian community, including the philanthropic and corporate communities could be our best investment towards achieving our vision.

The Kimberley Land Council – as a people's community-based organisation – has taken an important leadership role. Our bosses (Elders) ultimately control the organisation. They have not only struggled to be legally recognised as the traditional land owners in the Kimberley, they have taken a holistic view and continually brought our social and political issues to public attention, and put them in front of governments.

In some parts of the Kimberley, our people only walked off the desert and come face-to-face with non-Aboriginal people for the first time in the 1960s, that's just over 40 years ago. Many of these people are still alive and recount stories of first contact. Boxer Yankarr, an old Walmajarri man who came to live in Fitzroy Crossing, told the story of how he was forced to leave his country. Boxer had been walking from waterhole to waterhole in the country south east of Fitzroy Crossing.

Travelling with his family, they had recently speared cattle. These men had never seen white men before and did not understand the repercussions of spearing cattle. Because of the cattle spearing, some stockmen tracked Boxer's family. Boxer said:

“The stockmen followed the tracks along the north side of the area for quite a long way. It was late afternoon. The sun was almost gone down and darkness would soon be coming. That's when the stockmen reached our camp. The children were swimming near the camp there. There was big mob of us – my young brother and I Juluk's brother and lots of others. Those stockmen had followed our mob and found us. They held up their rifles and shot them. They shot my father. They shot my grandmother's brother as he was trying to escape. They shot Juluk's

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father.” (Yankarr: 1992)

After such massacres, those not killed were chained in donkey chains and walked hundreds of kilometres to stations where they were forced to work for rations. As well as forced removal from country, our people moved towards pastoral stations for many reasons. The waterholes we were dependent on had been taken over and ruined by the introduction of cloven-hoofed animals. The environment began to change and it was harder to find the once abundant native foods, many of which had been wiped out by the feral animals that had quickly invaded the country.

Some people migrated towards the stations in the hope of reuniting with family members who had gone ahead. Of the many people that remained on their homelands, the police and station men rounded them up and forced them to work on stations. These events marked a change, a horrendous change where access to our land was suddenly denied. And so the struggle for traditional landowners to exercise their traditional rights began in earnest.

The Land Council grew out of this struggle. In the 1960s and 1970s, around the time of the 1965 equal wages for pastoral workers decision, and as a consequence of that decision, our people were kicked off the cattle stations that had been superimposed on our traditional country. Once we were evicted from our country, we were cut off from our ability to protect our cultural heritage – we became exiles.

In the 1970s, at Noonkanbah, a mining company wanted to drill on a sacred site – a site that has been part of our cultural belief system that sustained us as a people for millennia. The protest and struggle around this event saw the coming together of all Kimberley Aboriginal People, and many non-Aboriginal supporters, in the fight to protect those things that are sacred to us.

Our elders articulated their concerns about our lack of place in Australian society, and our lack of protection in the legal system – in short, our lack of ability, or power, to protect what is most important to us. The Kimberley Land Council was formally established in 1978, to represent the rights and interests of all Kimberley Aboriginal People, and to fight for our rights in land and waters.

The KLC played a major role in our social and political development. It fostered the development of Aboriginal resource centres to service our communities and the emerging out-station movement. The KLC supported other organisations, including the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre, to represent different facets of our wellbeing and our survival.

The Mabo decision in 1992 held out great promise to Aboriginal People. The legal fiction of *terra nullius* had been laid to rest and, for the first time, there was recognition of our inherent rights in native title. At this point we began a new and, in many ways, more difficult journey. We became a Federal Government-recognised native title representative body under the *Native Title Act*. While this provides a (inadequate) funding base for us as a community organisation, this status has many strings attached.

The KLC had, until this point, been different from most Aboriginal organisations in that we had always taken a holistic approach to building our nation. We don't see any one factor, in isolation, as being the answer to our people's plight. We support programs, policies and other organisations that focus on a broad range of areas, such as health, housing, education, the maintenance of language and culture, employment and service provision.

I believe that if we are able to secure and develop our own economic resource base, we may be able to function once again in a holistic way, and address the issues that are our priorities. We want to develop our capacities and our leadership; our governance structures and processes that contribute to Australia's wealth.

Other Barriers to Achieving Power Over Our Lives

Education is a fundamental right of every child, education gives children choices in life. Like your children, our children need an education to survive in this society, to have basic power and control over their lives. It is not acceptable that in 1998, 32% of our young people finished year 12 compared to 73% of the wider Australian community. We want meaningful employment and training opportunities for our young people; so they can take their place in the community, become the leaders of the future, and provide for their families.

The majority of Kimberley Aboriginal people work for the dole. These jobs are usually in mundane unskilled areas, which provide little job satisfaction. The per capita income for Aboriginal people is around \$120 per week. The per capita income for non-indigenous Australians is almost three times this amount.

We want an end to grinding poverty and ill health. It is not acceptable in Australia that this continues. Diabetes-related illness and mortality are 10 times that of the non-indigenous population. We want the possibility that we might live for as long as other Australians and not die 20 years earlier. This fact alone is a stark reminder that there is much to be done, and in a hurry.

We can go on about the statistics, but we need to look to the future and begin rebuilding from the historical facts that have shaped us. We have a vision that our children will continue to speak language, have core values that respect this land and its people, our culture and heritage. This vision includes being free to maintain and strengthen our law and culture, on our own terms and in our own ways.

We want to share in the wealth of our country, and to use that wealth to help build our communities, our governance structures, our nations. Our land, after all, maintained our wellbeing for millennia. It is not acceptable that our people continually experience the poverty and 'starvation' of welfare dependency. It is clear that any approach to date in the administration of Indigenous affairs in this country has not worked. Whichever term is used to describe the approach – protectionism, assimilation, and practical reconciliation

– *terra nullius* and a denial of our humanity runs through them all. They have threatened to destroy us, yet we are still here.

In the face of these failures, if we are to survive, let alone exercise power over our lives, we have to get on with it. This brings me to the possibilities of partnership and relationships with others, such as philanthropic and corporate groups. We do not want welfare; but we do want you to work alongside us, and we do want your support in reaching our vision. We need to work together if we are to make a difference.

Supporting organisations that have a long history of working with people on the ground is a good starting point. We are seeking to run a number of projects in the Kimberley that build partnerships. These are the Aboriginal community ranger program, under the “Kimberley Healthy Country Project” and the “Saltwater Country Project”.

The Kimberley is a relatively pristine and rich environment, but there are many serious land and sea management issues that are not being dealt with. For example, management of the impact of tourism, commercial exploitation of the seas and coastal areas, protection of painting and burial sites, the pollution of waterholes, and fire management, to name a few. Biological and ecological diversity is high, and many species are endemic. Natural and cultural values are of international significance. But these culturally significant areas are largely unmanaged and unprotected, and ecosystems are being increasingly damaged or changed.

We continually express our concern about this, and our desire to employ our people in meaningful employment on our country. We can add a wealth and richness to Australian society that will benefit Australia. We need an approach that does not create welfare. We have suggested that a foundation or trust could be established to resource such a program. It would receive funds from government grants, fees from contracts, benefits from agreements with mining companies and other resource developers, and donations from philanthropic organisations.

With significant investment in the foundation or trust, much of the running costs could be funded from interest earned on the investment. On our estimates, this program would provide a cost-effective way to create employment for Aboriginal People in the important area of land and sea management, and would create direct environmental, social and economic benefits to the whole community.

Conclusion

We need a different approach than the welfare approach that has been taken in the past, and we would like your support in building our nations and managing our country. This is essential for us to survive as peoples, let alone to realise and exercise power over our own lives. There is much potential and many opportunities in the Kimberley for partnerships based on mutual respect and trust. And there are organisations, like the Kimberley Land Council, that

have been working on the ground for many years to further our aspirations and gain recognition of our rights and interests.

We are a proud people but we are not stupid. We have a vision and we want to pull our nation out of the gutter and take a fresh breath of life. We know we can't do it alone and we are willing to graciously accept help from those who are prepared to walk alongside us; those of you who have skills and resources and are prepared to step out on the edge. We do not want you to carry us, and we don't want you to walk in front, just walk along side us, so one day when you have gone we can walk on alone.