



Growing Up

NATIVE TITLE

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AS A YOUNG ABORIGINAL MAN born in the 80s, my experience with native title differs from the common narrative. Growing up at the height of *Mabo* case and the ensuing native title process, mine and my brothers' upbringing are littered with memories of driving countless hours, sitting in meetings or listening through the door from the outside. These opportunities presented us with sustained opportunities to meet our families and grow up with strong connections to our peoples. We also gained a radical insight into the inner workings of the native title process, and the conflict that protracted negotiations (especially in the early days) often provoked in our communities. Whilst we were too young to understand the larger political and social forces at work during this time, the significance and enormity of this era is engrained on our collective memory.

Connecting with other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who also grew up as part of this generation, I know that my experience is not unique. 25 years after *Mabo* decision, there now exists a significant community of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with personal stories of growing up in the era of native title.

Many of us have completed or are currently completing tertiary education and many have developed strong working histories with invaluable experiences in the public, private and tertiary sectors. Considering our upbringing and current circumstances, it may be reasonable to assume that our generation is heavily involved with native title in our communities. However, the reality is that many of us are farther from the native title process now than we have ever been. Why is this so? Is native title not seen as a valuable form of engagement that would satisfy both our personal and career ambitions? Did our experiences of growing up with native title plant seeds of dissatisfaction or discontent? Or are there larger forces that go unexamined in what has become for some, a lucrative industry? Some of these questions have already been examined by older generations with a much longer history working with and/or for government, private corporations and our communities.

Firstly, in order to attain tertiary qualifications and professional experience, a great many young people have relocated from their homelands to the cities and towns where greater opportunities exist. This is not new. However, as the

world and our communities become more closely connected through digital communications and online platforms, the opportunity for younger generations living off-Country to remain linked to their communities is very real. Furthermore, most (if not all) Native Title Representative Bodies and Native Title Service Providers (NTRB/NTSPs) are located in these larger urban sprawls; I will return to this later. All things considered, it could be argued that the mobility of younger generations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people has the capacity to improve, rather than impair, our opportunities to be involved in native title. So I return to the central question, why is our generation largely absent from the native title process?

One theory that often gains traction is that young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are disengaged or disinterested. Stories of failures in education and unemployment exist not only in the mainstream media, but in our own communities. In the recent study, 'Gender and generation in native title', Buchanan identifies:

A key generational concern in light of the distinctive demographic profile of the Aboriginal and Torres



Above: Youth forum participants, including AIATSIS Council Member Geoffrey Winters at the 2016 National Native Title Conference.
Credit: Andrew Turner, AIATSIS.

Strait Islander population is ensuring succession in cultural and corporate leadership. Underlying this concern is the fact that “there are fewer “older” Indigenous people available to take leadership and mentoring roles, and there are growing numbers of unemployed younger people with low educational outcomes.”¹

There is no questioning the concerns or experiences of the person or people interviewed in this study, as these are local concerns and conditions vary greatly. However, it is incumbent upon us to question the story that facts and figures tell, as data and statistics have the ability to hide truth as well as uncover it. In this instance, the number of young people with low educational outcomes and who may be unemployed has indeed increased. But so has the number of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people attaining tertiary qualifications and entering employment.² These trends are symptomatic of the general population growth of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, with youth the largest population demographic. Is it not reasonable to conclude then, that most (if not all) social, economic and educational (among other) indicators measured by participation will increase? Another important distinction not made in these studies, and of particular importance to our communities, is

that being uneducated is not the same thing as being unintelligent. Too often data collected on or about our communities is threaded with carefully selected opinions to create a narrative of disinterest, in this instance, with native title.

There is a widely held perception that places young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the issue, when in fact, this generation is a significant part of the solution. Is it possible that the perceived lack of interest in native title (and other vital community services) among young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is symptomatic of the internalisation of a larger deficit discourse connecting youth with disengagement? Even though there are many youth whom are, or want to be, engaged with their community. Isn't it also possible that some community leaders hide behind sentiments of youth disengagement in order to remain in positions that perhaps, they should have stepped down from long ago? These questions are asked simply to provoke deeper reflection on the central issue: Where is our generation represented in native title processes?

Returning to the before-mentioned opportunities in larger cities, a final question to consider: as the generation that literally grew up with native title, are we represented adequately in our NTRB/NTSPs? As many more young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people graduate

with tertiary qualifications, it would appear at face-value, to be the perfect fit. Yet scores of non-Indigenous professionals continue to occupy this space. Traditionally the domain of non-Indigenous lawyers and anthropologists, ecologists, scientists and land managers are swarming in ever-increasing numbers to these organisations. To be clear, no one is questioning the qualifications of individuals, whether non-Indigenous or otherwise, to be involved in this work. Looking from a larger perspective however, it is wrong not to question the continued rates (or lack thereof) of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in these organisations? These are long-standing concerns in our communities. Megan Davis in a recent publication highlights,

The post-ATSIC exodus of Aboriginal people from the public service created a knowledge and skills deficit and crippled the quality of decision-making and outcomes... [F]or in the place of Aboriginal drivers now preside the all-powerful, all-knowing, risk and innovation-averse career bureaucrats.

This is particularly relevant in the native title context considering the role these organisations play in representing not only us, but our most vital asset, our Country.

In response to many of these concerns, AIATSIS held a youth forum at the 2016 National Native Title Conference. Delegates at the youth forum found commonality in their experiences with the native title process, both at the community and representative levels.³ Many participants expressed concern about being disengaged with their own native title organisations and representative bodies despite being claimants or rights holders.⁴ Significantly, many delegates expressed deep concern that they were not involved with the management of their rights and interests.⁵ This includes strategic community development, and the creation of opportunities that native title rights and interests are likely to promote or prohibit.⁶ Furthermore, many young delegates expressed that

they feel shame and fear from both senior group members as well as non-Indigenous native title 'professionals', if they attempt to speak up.⁷

These narratives of alienation from the processes of native title are both frequent and consistent. However, the desire among young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to make positive contributions to the livelihoods of their communities is also frequent and consistent. There is a high degree of confidence that our generation possesses the education, intelligence, passion and innovation necessary to create new possibilities, whilst representing our communities with respect, integrity, and strength.

The desire is not to displace senior cultural and community leaders, but rather, to complement their experience. Mentoring and supervising the development of young community members, carefully selected by senior cultural people, is ingrained into the fabric of our systems of traditional governance. There are strong elements in our communities that are of the opinion that it is up to us to create our own space and make our voices heard. Whilst there are slithers of truth in this view, it is also a lazy response to larger issues. Furthermore, this view flirts dangerously with the notion that those with the loudest voices have the right to be heard. This distinctive western leadership approach however, is incongruent with our traditional forms of governance and leadership.

As we reflect on *Mabo* and look to the future, there are many matters that require fresh perspectives. Chief among them is embedding young generations in every part of native title processes. Whatever the forces that conspire to dislocate young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from these significant political, legal and cultural processes, the time is now to find ways to overcome. Some PBCs have already taken steps to address these issues in their own community and should be applauded for doing so. However, additional questions go unaddressed. Are NTRB/NTSPs doing enough to recruit and retain young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people? How are communities facilitating the sustained transfer of



Top & Above: Youth forum participants at the 2016 National Native Title Conference. Credit: Andrew Turner, AIATSIS.

both cultural and corporate knowledge from old generations to the new? And are our leaders taking a back seat, presenting opportunities and supporting young people to step up and speak up? Conversely, it is time for young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders to take up the challenge. Agitating for a generational shift must be met equally with willingness and enthusiasm to stand up for our communities and each other.

The Native Title Youth Forum will take place again at the 2017 National Native Title Conference in Townsville. These forums are vital opportunities for people to connect and share experiences. The work to rectify this generational imbalance however, must happen at home, wherever that may be. Ask yourself, if you could send one of your young people to this forum, who would it be? There is an obvious next step that too often, doesn't get followed through. Perhaps with sustained support, the generation

'grown up' with native title can drive a new era of success, resurgence and strength in both our communities, and nationally. It is time to expect big things from your young people!

- 1 G Buchanan, 2015, *Gender and Generation in Native Title*, AIATSIS Issues Paper series, Vol. 6, no. 3. <<http://aiatsis.gov.au/publications/products/gender-and-generation-native-title-director-demographics-and-future-prescribed-bodies-corporate>>.
- 2 Creative Spirits, *Aboriginal Students in Higher Education*, <<https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/education/aboriginal-students-in-higher-studies-at-university>>.
- 3 T Pearson & S Little, 'Report on the Indigenous Youth Forum', *NNTC Report on the Indigenous Youth Forum*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, October 2016, <<http://aiatsis.gov.au/publications/products/report-indigenous-youth-forum>>.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.