

Towards embedding a narrative of high expectations and positive thinking into the policy framework regarding the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children

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Acknowledgement

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Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of Country, the Cadigal peoples of the Eora nation, upon whose land the University of Sydney now stands, and where our Conference is being held.

I also acknowledge that Warrane, known to the world as Sydney, has been home to twenty-nine Eora First Nations peoples for more than sixty thousand years.

I pay my respects to their Elders, past and present, and emerging, and to Aboriginal Elders of other communities who may be here today.

Purpose

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The primary goal of this presentation is to provide an, admittedly, all-too-brief review of how one might move towards embedding a narrative of high expectations and positive thinking into the policy framework regarding the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

In doing so, my sincere hope is two-fold - firstly, that I do justice to those whose work I refer to, and secondly, that the presentation prompts fruitful analysis on how we might best go forward from here.

Indeed, my plan is to speak for no longer than 20 minutes, to leave time to provide the best possible opportunity for discussion of the issues raised.

Background

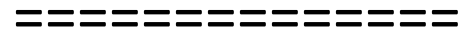
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Background



In late November 2017, I attended a National Schools Forum at Melbourne University in my role as a member of the Education and Youth Affairs Policy Committee of the Victorian Branch of the Australian Labor Party. My membership of the Education and Youth Affairs Policy Committee arose for me to represent the Victorian Branch's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Policy Committee, of which I have been a member for some twenty years, sometimes serving as its Secretary.

A brief diversion



A brief diversion



Let me say that when I first joined the ALP Victorian Branch's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Policy Committee, there were no Indigenous members. Now, most of the Policy Committee members are Indigenous, as also are both its President and Secretary, and the Victorian Branch is presently developing an affirmative action policy with the aim of enhancing the participation of Indigenous members of the ALP at all levels of Party organisation. The implementation of such a policy should result in our Branch joining other States in having Indigenous representatives in our own Parliament, and Federally.

A personal note

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A personal note



It is, perhaps, not surprising that it is the Victorian Branch's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Policy Committee that I have been involved with more than any other. Many Jewish people, such as I, feel a strong affinity for the causes that Indigenous people are still fighting for today. This was underlined by Noel Pearson, in the course of his delivery, a few weeks ago, of the 2018 Sir Zelman Cowen Oration on Indigenous Self Determination and the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

About the Sir Zelman Cowen Oration



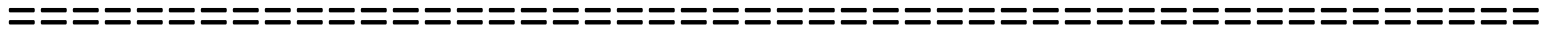
About the Sir Zelman Cowen Oration



Noel Pearson specifically made mention of the activism of William Cooper of the Yorta Yorta, who not only advocated on behalf of his own people, but when he read about Kristallnacht in late 1938, wrote a protest letter and then organised a march from his home in Footscray to the German Consulate, and Yad Vashem has officially recognised William Cooper's actions as the only known private protest about Kristallnacht anywhere in the world.

Aside from both of our peoples historically suffering the most serious discrimination, with its dreadful consequences, Noel Pearson also made several references to the deep links between people of our faith and Aboriginal people, not the least of which resides in our respective peoples' deep spiritual connections to land.

Reflecting now upon the subject of Noel Pearson's oration



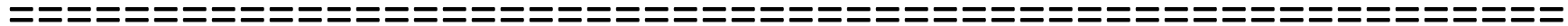
Reflecting now upon the subject of Noel Pearson's oration



A key point that he made was an appeal for Australians to be given the opportunity, via a referendum, to constitutionally enshrine an Indigenous 'voice' to the parliament prior to conducting any plebiscite on becoming a republic, and in preference to simply legislating to that end.

This is a view reported as being also held by leading Indigenous academics Professor Marcia Langton and Professor Megan Davis.

Returning to the National Schools Forum at Melbourne University



Returning to the National Schools Forum at Melbourne University

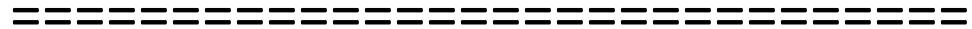


The Forum was led by the Shadow (Federal) Minister for Education and Training, the Hon. Tanya Plibersek, and facilitated by the Hon Mary Delahuntly (previously Victorian Minister for Education).

A range of topics were discussed, but of particular interest to me was an impassioned speech on the topic which is the subject of the current presentation, from Dyonne Anderson, President of the National Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Principals Association, previously Director, Service Delivery, of the Stronger Smarter Institute.

In a break at the Forum, Dyonne alerted me to a forthcoming joint conference of the Te Akatea New Zealand Māori Principals Association and the National Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Principals Association, which was to be held a few months hence in New Zealand.

About the New Zealand Conference



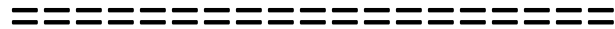
About the New Zealand Conference



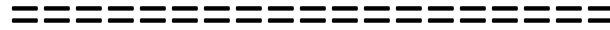
As Leanne Otene, Lead Conference Convener, noted, "the primary goal of this conference was to bring together Māori, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Educators as well as friends and partners to have an open dialogue, under one roof to discuss the issues facing our Indigenous peoples as we seek to ensure our children's educational, spiritual and cultural needs are being met in our school systems".

Speakers covered a broad range of issues of importance to their children's education, but time and time again, arose the importance of students having knowledge of, and pride in, their background, and possessing an expectation that they will succeed at the highest possible level.

Conference Outcomes



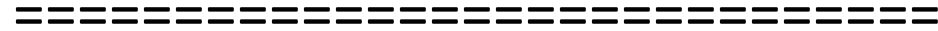
Conference Outcomes



One of the really nice outcomes of the conference was how Tammy Anderson, Aboriginal principal of Briar Road Public School here in Sydney, which has 105 Aboriginal students and nearly 40 Māori students, connected with Myles Ferris, principal of Te Kura o Otangarei and president of Te Akatea. This liaison enabled Ms Anderson and Mr Ferris to work towards setting up a virtual classroom, where children from Ms Anderson's school can connect with a teacher from Te Kura o Otangarei to teach them Te Reo Māori.

As a meteorologist, I was most interested in Heke-nuku-mai-Busby's presentation on how celestial navigators of days past used to apply their knowledge of the atmosphere's processes to locate land by clouds generated by convective processes many kilometres before the islands themselves became visible.

Conference Outcomes (continued)

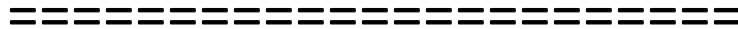


Underlying how important it is for there to be respectful communications between schools, communities and the bureaucracy was Keri-Milne-Ihimaer's speech on her experience as Principal of Moewara School.

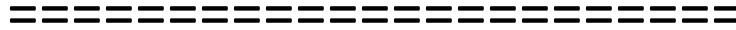
Justice Joe Williams attributed much of his success during his later adult life to gaining a scholarship to a top private school, where he was taught by some of the most caring and talented teachers one could ever hope for.

Dr Rae Si'ilata, outlined to the conference how the most successful approach to bilingualism was for students to be taught in their mother tongue during their formative years, and only later, to be taught in the national language. Such an approach is shown to build confidence and has the side-benefit of students developing a highly sophisticated appreciation of how languages are structured, which flows on to an enhanced academic performance, especially in the later school years.

This year's Sambell Oration



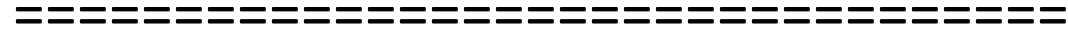
This year's Sambell Oration



The background to this year's Sambell Oration, delivered some weeks later by Professor Chris Sarra, highlights the "low expectations and deficit thinking (that) have for too long framed Indigenous education" and how implementing Sarra's positive approach regarding the education of Aboriginal children might also "unlock the potential of other Australian children".

Professor Sarra refers to policy intent - some people think that "policy success lies in making Aboriginal Australians just like everybody else ... The policy intent here has always been about taking Aboriginal Australians from surviving to complying. We must instead plot a course that takes us from surviving to thriving".

This year's Sambell Oration (continued)



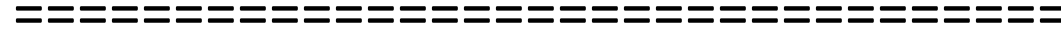
Enabling this move requires all of us, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, to understand that our sense of identity is not entirely defined by our sense of Aboriginality, nor our sense of being Australian.

As individuals we are so complex that in fact we are both, and we should not have to be locked, coerced or assimilated into being one or the other. We are Aboriginal; we are Australian; we are human ...

Sarra continues: When I stand in my father's village of Miglianico in Abruzzo, Italy, and speak Italian with my half-brother Giulio while standing at the graves of my Nonna and Nonno, my cultural sense or mediation of being Italian resonates very strongly upon my core humanity ...

And then he says: When I am at home on the land that holds the footprints of my traditional Taribelang and Gurang Gurang ancestors, I lean into my sense of being Aboriginal, and it resonates strongly because of the time, place and context.

This year's Sambell Oration (continued)

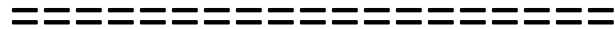


Sarra notes "a contaminated view of being Aboriginal explains how in education we cherry-pick a small number of children from remote Aboriginal communities and send them off to private schools while leaving the majority of Aboriginal children to be subjected to a remedial curriculum that does not comply with national curriculum standards".

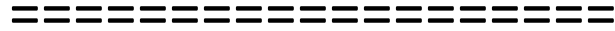
On this issue, Chris Sarra has previously (ABC PM Program 9-Jul-2008) stated: "In some circumstances, from some of the flash boarding schools, the culture of those places certainly is questionable, you know. And I'm not going to sit here and pretend to anybody that that's not the case, that the culture of those elite schools is somewhat remote from those that children experience in communities. And there's a tendency not to stretch too much in those kinds of schools. It's either fit in or farewell".

That some of the issues raised by Sarra in his 2008 interview are still relevant 10 years later, is indicated by the ABC News (25-Nov-2018) Special Report about Indigenous scholarships, although Justice Joe Williams' presentation (quoted earlier) suggests that there are also significant successes.

On Multiple Identities



On Multiple Identities

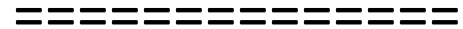


The issue of multiple identities, referred to by Chris Sarra, manifests itself in many different dimensions:

For example, Keren Zelwer, writes that reconciling the discomfort in devoting most of her energy to being a mother whilst labelling herself as a feminist is in realising that “they are not really conflicting at all”.

Naomi Alderman, in her novel “Disobedience”, writes that “even if you are only a little bit gay, or a little bit Jewish, that’s enough for you to identify yourself”.

From Ken Wyatt



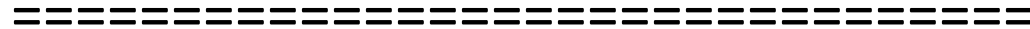
From Ken Wyatt



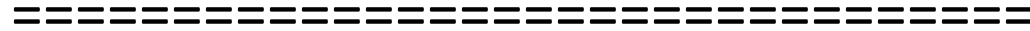
Ken Wyatt, Australia's first Indigenous member of the House of Representatives, recently wrote, "I know what it is like to be denigrated for my race, to be told to leave school and to get a job on a farm because 'Aboriginal kids don't succeed'".

A report by Simon Collins, on Kirsty Johnston's research, noted a similar situation in New Zealand, where "Māori and Pasifika students are disproportionately channelled into non-academic subjects such as hospitality and retailing".

Application to non-Indigenous children



Application to non-Indigenous children



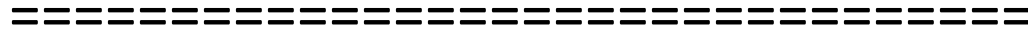
Regarding application to non-Indigenous children, a report by Henrietta Cook found deaf students being discouraged from completing the Victorian Certificate of Education. The report quotes one 17-year-old student as saying, "Here I am in year 11 and I'm sitting down twiddling my thumbs", adding that he was doing more advanced maths when he was attending a mainstream primary school in Bairnsdale.

That this approach has been standard practice for a long time, is illustrated in a report prepared by Monica Dux in which the acclaimed children's author and educator, Paul Jennings, is quoted as recalling that when at teachers' college many decades back, his first placement involved teaching children with intellectual disabilities.

Jennings recalls his lecturer saying, "Don't waste your talent on those kids".

What a loss!

Recalling Chris Sarra's Sambell Oration

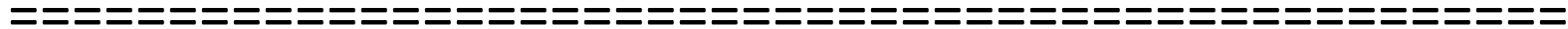


Recalling Chris Sarra's Sambell Oration



Professor Sarra emphasised the importance of "a positive sense of Aboriginal cultural identity, which ... like any sense of cultural identity, is inherently connected with the very essence of who we are ... Any quality educator knows that a student will struggle ... when they lose any sense of their personal value".

Integral to this quote from The Statement from the Heart

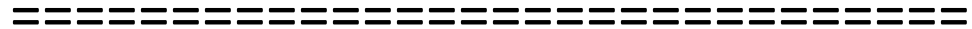


Integral to this quote from The Statement from the Heart



"... We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country ..."

The words of Professor Herb Marsh

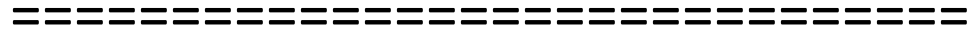


The words of Professor Herb Marsh



The words of Professor Herb Marsh, a leading researcher in Education Psychology, are in the same vein as those of Professor Sarra: “Academic achievement and self-concept are highly correlated and ... over time, better self-concept contributes to better achievement ... which is why academic programs that improve ability but don’t change students’ overall perceptions of themselves are unlikely to be long-lasting”.

A specific example of policy making



A specific example of policy making



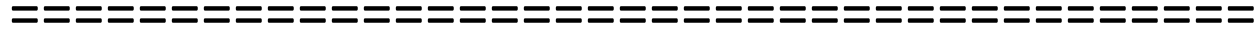
The Australian Labor Party develops policy via a range of vehicles, and I now illustrate the process.

Early on in 2018, in anticipation of the Party's National Conference later in the year, we (individual members, branches and other constituent bodies) were invited to study the Draft Platform, and to suggest amendments.

I, for one, proposed amendments in a number of areas, including an amendment that specifically relates to the subject of this presentation.

That amendment was reviewed by the Victorian Branch's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Policy Committee and also by the Branch's Education and Youth Affairs Policy Committee. Both Committee's adopted almost identical modifications to the originally proposed amendment, and I present, for your interest, that wording which the Education and Youth Affairs Policy Committee agreed upon.

A specific example of policy making (continued)



That the Education and Youth Affairs Policy Committee (EYAPC) of the Victorian Branch of the ALP endorses the following modification of the proposed amendment to the April 2018 Draft National Platform (the original version of the amendment having been previously submitted via the formal process by our member Harvey Stern regarding Chapter 7 Paragraph 59):

In Section 7 "A world-class education for all Australians", Subsection "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians", insert following paragraph 59, an additional paragraph:

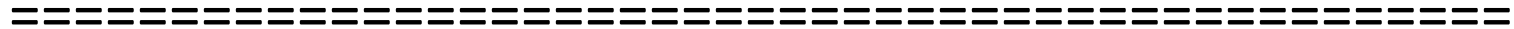
"Labor supports the innovative work towards embedding a narrative of high expectations and a strength-based approach in the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children."

A specific example of policy making (continued)

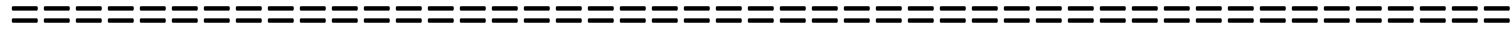


Just because an ALP Policy Committee adopts a position does not mean that it necessarily becomes a part of Labor's Platform. However, one can be hopeful that, with two Victorian Branch Policy Committees adopting almost identical positions on the issue, that the Australian Labor Party National Conference, which is to be held the week after next, will give it the consideration that it deserves.

Now, speaking more generally about policy development



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Stephen Fitzpatrick, in his article, "Reconciling a Policy Mess", writing about the Closing the Gap Program, finds that "the overwhelming conclusion is that long-term failure has been the result of a lack of consistent Indigenous voices in policy making".

Although before continuing, I raise a question that you may wish to ponder ...

Is it enough to aspire simply to 'close the gap'?

Now, speaking more generally about policy development (continued)



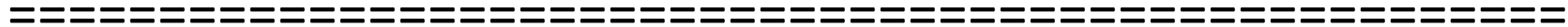
Fitzpatrick observes the abrogation of repeated government promises to do things "with, not to" Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. He notes, reflecting on why the "Closing the Gap Program has been such an underwhelming enterprise", the Government's "rejection last year of the Uluru Statement from the Heart proposal for Indigenous constitutional recognition".

Stephen Fitzpatrick observes that government adoption of the Uluru Statement from the Heart would "put Indigenous Australians at the heart of policy made about them".

One can only hope that our new Prime Minister comes to realise the importance to coherent policy development of implementing the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

If so, a bi-partisan approach may emerge in Federal Parliament towards developing an appropriately worded constitutional change to put to the Australian people in a referendum.

Repeating our quote from the Uluru Statement from the Heart



Repeating our quote from the Uluru Statement from the Heart

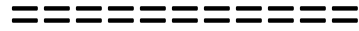


"... We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country ..."

In conclusion

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Our expectation for our students (rather than just simply to close the gap, so as to speak) must be for them to fully realise their absolute maximum potential in whatever endeavours they might choose to embark upon.

And, it is our responsibility to ensure that there are systems and processes in place, as well as having appropriate national and organisational structures, that allow the development of policies that will lead to such outcomes.

Thank you.