

WA HUMAN RIGHTS AND EQUAL OPPORTUNITY COMMISSION FORUM

August 10, 2009

June Oscar

Let me acknowledge Noongar people – Traditional Owners of this land

And in saying that I want to also acknowledge that Indigenous people from throughout Australia - whether we are Bunuba from the Kimberley, Noongar from the south west, Yolngu from Arnhem Land or Kooris from the south east of the continent – we share a similar story.

It is a story of colonisation; the threat of losing our cultural authority to manage our societies; and the despair that has come from that disempowerment. It is a story of grief and trauma and the continued pain of living with grog, drug and violence.

It is a story that academics and journalists write about us as though we are victims of history that we can do nothing about. And within their stories about us is an acceptance that the paternal hand of government will determine the nature of our welfare and even the nature of our rights.

Tonight I want to tell a different story. It is about how Aboriginal people can be the authors of our stories and not passive and powerless subjects in stories told and written by others.

Tonight I want to talk about how the leaders of the Fitzroy Valley in the Kimberley are working together to create a pathway of hope and community vitality and resilience. And as I told Minister Graham Jacobs a couple of weeks ago in Fitzroy Crossing, if our journey of social reconstruction could be measured as a one kilometre track, we have only travelled the first metre.

The start of the journey has depended on the leadership of the Aboriginal community but the journey from this point on will largely be shaped by a partnership that we can

build with governments. And it is this critical issue that I want to talk to you about tonight.

Before I go on let me thank Commissioner Yvonne Henderson for convening this forum and allowing the people of Fitzroy to screen this film and tell our story. I also recognise that there are important people in the audience: ministers of the Crown, other members of parliament, government officials and community leaders.

You are the audience that I speak to tonight for you are the decision makers, policy designers and opinion makers who have the power to create a new partnership and establish a new paradigm so that the people in the Fitzroy Valley – so distant in time and space from Perth – can enjoy a life that is rich in purpose and happiness.

The film that you have just seen places the story of the alcohol restrictions in Fitzroy Crossing within a context of the women and men working together to bring peace and harmony to our community so that we as a community can plan our social recovery and build a sustainable society where our cultural richness is paramount.

The key issue for us now is how we build a sustainable future from the fragile social order that we have achieved over the past eighteen months.

Alcohol restrictions are just a small toe hold into the enormous challenges we face. It is not the answer to our problems. It was never intended to be. Its purpose was always to give us breathing space from the trauma and chaos of death, violence and fear; breathing space to think and plan strategically.

I know the concept of paradigm shift may be over used and trivialised by people who can only really imagine incremental change.

But when I talk about paradigm shift I mean it in the true meaning of the concept. If we are going to win the peace we have created, we need an absolute overhaul of the existing relationship between Fitzroy Crossing Aboriginal communities and government.

The last thing we want on the back of the positive profile that Fitzroy Crossing has achieved is additional investment by governments in the things they have always done. More programs, more bureaucrats and more coordination to manage additional funding. That would be disastrous because it would simply create confusion and undermine the authority of the Aboriginal community leaders who have achieved so much in the last eighteen months.

Let me try and explain the current level of chaos that Aboriginal people in the Valley have to deal with in their relationship with governments: a state of dysfunction that Indigenous people experience with throughout Australia at one level or another.

In simple terms there are two broad forces at work in the valley.

On the Indigenous side there are four language groups – Bunuba who are the traditional owners of country around Fitzroy Crossing, the Gooniyandi whose country lies to the east and have a close traditional relationship with Bunuba, and then there are two desert peoples, the Walmetjari and Wangkatjungka who have moved to the Valley over the past few decades.

Together we number approximately 4, 500 and we deal every day with issues and rules that define our co-existence. We deal with customary law, the complex relationships of family and community and our religion and beliefs. Within this complex social and cultural reality we deal with the extraordinary array of our community organisations that receive public funding and deliver services. We also deal with our land holdings – a number of Aboriginal owned pastoral stations, outstations and communities as well as native title claims and determinations within the context of a land management regime that has been imposed on us.

Against this reality is the work of government which has legal obligations to provide services on the basis that the people of the Valley are Western Australian and Australian citizens. There is a hospital, public housing, schools, essential services and local government services.

Government responsibility to provide good government in the form of skill development, employment, health services, education and child protection does not interface or connect in a formal sense with the cultural and social reality of the Valley.

In essence government approach to service delivery is fundamentally assimilationist and a recipe for continued disaster.

What is required is a new relationship that structurally connects the Aboriginal cultural and social domain with government's responsibility to provide good government. In Fitzroy Crossing there is already the beginnings of an Indigenous partnership with government:- the Fitzroy Futures Forum made up of the four language groups.

Instead of the many individual State and Commonwealth agencies providing services and making decisions without real accountability to the community there is potential and need for a regional body – made up of community and government – to support sustainable development.

A sustainable development approach should contain the following elements;

**One, Empower individuals & families to respond to the challenges that are being thrown up to them.**

For example community needs to understand the disastrous impacts of alcohol such as Foetal alcohol Spectrum Disorder plus ELT and work together to develop ways of managing this serious issues in our community.

We need to understand the critical importance of economic development and livelihoods and work together and with government to ensure our education and training system is capable of educating and training our young people.

**Two, Clarify the institutional structures to be built upon cultural & social values**

**systems of the local regional Aboriginal peoples.**

In this we need to develop new systems of funding and accountability so that decision making is effective and resources properly invested for sustainable development.

**Three, Adapt existing deliverable programs to the new paradigm in order that the public sector manner of doing business is effective.**

For instance why should it be necessary for an independent Aboriginal cultural health organisation to operate independently of the State Government Hospital and community health system? They should be enmeshed as one seamless health service that is accountable to the Fitzroy Valley community.

**Four, Allow indigenous models and paradigms to develop through a process of dialogue & negotiation.**

This to me is the critical element that will enable us to move to the paradigm change that supports sustainable development. We must agree on a process that builds a partnership between government and Aboriginal people of the Fitzroy Valley.

It will be difficult for both Aboriginal people and government because genuine partnership that is based on cultural recognition, real Aboriginal decision making and mutual accountability has never been tried before.

And because it is new and overwhelmingly challenging to the existing order of government, we will need to look to international experience to crack through the paternalistic, assimilation approach to complex cross cultural issues that are destroying Aboriginal peoples.

This I argue is where urgent public investment should be considered.

In recent years I have become familiar with the social crisis of my own community within a global context. I have been to Africa and United Nations forums representing Indigenous people and women's interest and I have been extraordinarily impressed by the capacity of international expertise to build bridges between communities and between governments in order to achieve sustainable development.

The solutions to the problems of my community and in many other places in Australia are beyond the capacity of Australian governments to address using the same old administrative and paternalistic intervention strategies.

In Fitzroy we need to invest urgently in a process of dialogue and negotiation to build a bold and determined partnership so that fundamental issues of community and family functioning can be confronted. We need to do basic things like change our pub culture so that drinking can be incorporated into normal social life and not places of destruction.

In Fitzroy we need to build on our capacity for personal engagement and conflict resolution so that we can enhance and enrich our community. There is rich international experience in community and nation building and we as a state and a nation would be foolish to ignore that experience on the basis that Australian government's commitment to closing the gap can be achieved through old methods of top down government programs and token Aboriginal consultation.

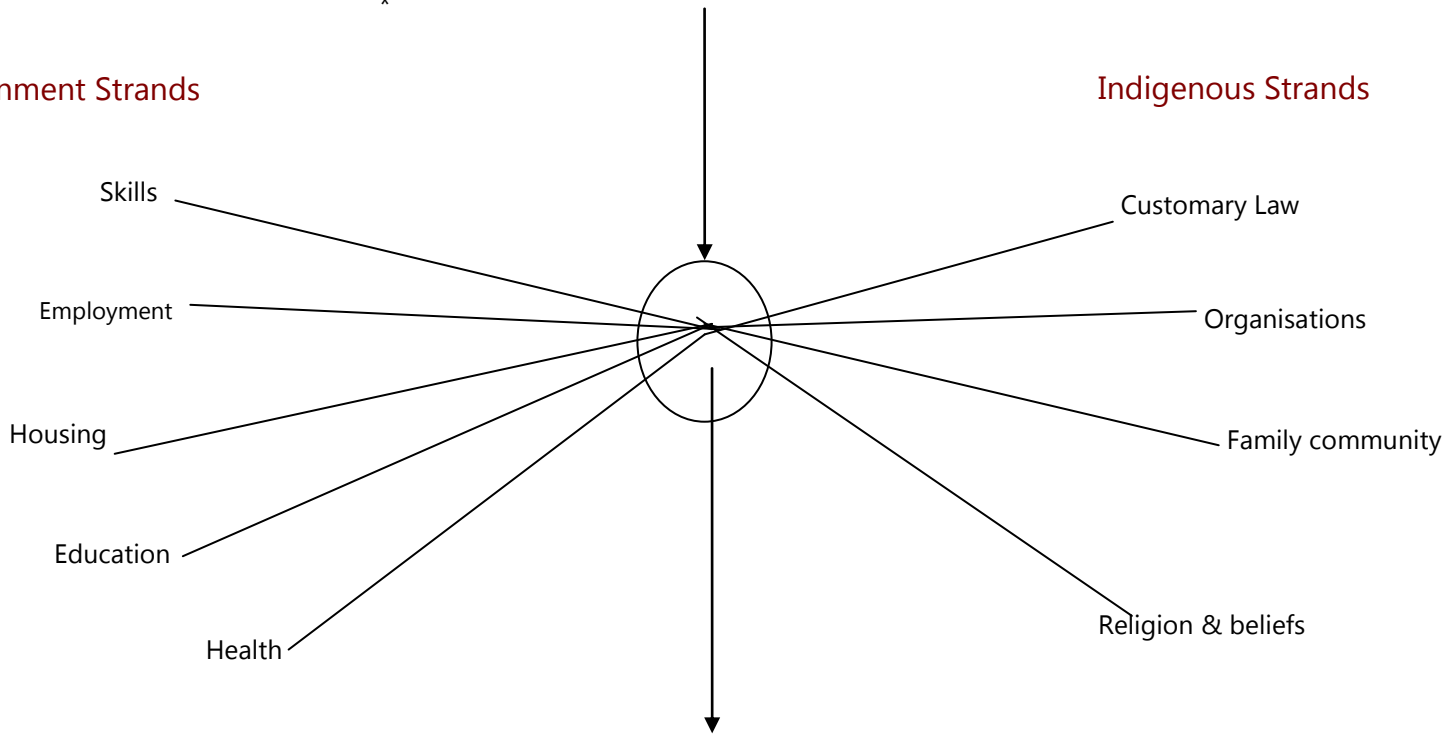
Thankyou

## Matters to be worked through by Government, Aboriginal Community leadership & Agencies

- Pub culture
- Personal engagement
- Programme modification
- Re-expression of & redelivery of programme
- Community enhancement & enrichment
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### Government Strands

### Indigenous Strands



AGREED OUTPUTS ON THE WAYS FORWARD  
BASED ON DIGNITY & RICHNESS FOR  
COMMUNITY LIVELIHOOD, SUSTAINABILITY &  
COMMUNITY DIALOGUE