

**Australian Institute for  
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies**  
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**Keynote Address**

***'Yours in the Struggle:  
Aboriginal leadership  
and the next generations'***

**By**

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**Abstract**

Pat Anderson feels privileged to have held leadership roles in the Aboriginal world for many years.

Today, a new generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders is emerging. New ways of carrying on the work of improving the lives of Australia's First Peoples are emerging with them.

In this paper, Pat reflects on the different experiences of these different generations and considers some of the challenges that the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander movement faces today.

The biggest challenge faced by the new generation of leaders relates to the next generation of children. Ensuring that children born today grow up safe and healthy, and that they receive an education that prepares them for participation in a global, interconnected world, is critical for the future of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across the country.

Good morning everyone

I acknowledge and pay respects to the Ngunnawal People, their Elders past and present who are the traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today.

It is a pleasure to have been asked to address you this morning.

I have been asked to share my thoughts on the theme of this conference: 'Young and Old: Connecting Generations'.

I want to approach this topic from two different perspectives.

First, I feel very privileged to have held a leadership position in the struggle for education, health, justice and self-determination for Australia's First Peoples.

My generation grew up in the 1950s, '60s and '70s, came to maturity in the 1980s, and if we were fortunate, began to play a wider role in the 1990s and often in various senior positions.

But today, a new generation of highly educated Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders is emerging.

As they do so, some of our new leaders may find themselves under attack for not being 'real' Aboriginal people because of their education, or their confidence, or their background or all of the above.

In talking to you today I will urge you to reject these narrow characterisations of what it means to be an Aboriginal person, and to support the new generation of leaders as they reinvent the struggle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander equality and justice on their own terms.

I will also reflect on the different experiences of the generations in the Aboriginal movement, particularly by unpacking some of the assumptions behind my generation's participation in what we called – and what we still call – 'the Struggle'.

Last, I'd like to approach the theme of 'young and old' from a different angle, by talking about what I believe to be the greatest challenge that our new generation of leaders face today.

Our greatest challenge must be the next generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

This does not mean abandoning all other ways forward.

However, ensuring that they grow up safe and healthy, and that they receive an education that prepares them for participation in a global, inter-connected world is, I believe, absolutely critical for the future of our communities across the country.

But let me begin back in mid 2008, in the United States.

Barack Obama has won his party's nomination and is running for President.

His youth, oratory and optimism are capturing the whole world's attention.

It appears that, against all odds and expectations, that the world's most powerful country is about to elect a black person to lead it.

Jesse Jackson, the senior African-American civil rights activist who had been part of the struggle in the 1960s and close to Martin Luther King, is being interviewed on Fox News about Obama and his extraordinary campaign.

Unfortunately, Jackson doesn't realise his comments are being recorded as he leans over to a fellow guest and mutters about how Obama is 'talking down to black people', before finishing with some very unflattering comments about what he would like to do to the Presidential candidate.

There was scandal of course, and apologies, but soon the campaign rolled on.

Fortunately, I think you could say it all ended well.

A few months later, Obama was elected President.

And at his victory rally in Chicago, Jesse Jackson was there in the front ranks of the crowd, tears of happiness on his face.

This story, I think, says something about the relationship between generations within a political movement.

Even where members of different generations share similar objectives, there can be mistrust, miscommunication, even resentment stemming from the very different experiences and backgrounds of the different generations.

I'm not suggesting I have experienced any 'Jesse Jackson' moments with the new generation of Aboriginal leaders in Australia.

But it is clear that in Australia there is a whole cohort of younger Aboriginal leaders – men and women – are coming through.

They are turning up at the conferences and giving papers, they are occupying senior positions in Aboriginal organisations or government or research organisations, they are negotiating policies on behalf the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community.

They are the ones who increasingly are taking the struggle forward.

Of course, there are some differences between what I see as my generation and theirs.

For a start, they are way better educated than we were.

A few months ago I was invited, as Chairperson of the Lowitja Institute, to talk at a conference about health research,

As I looked out at the audience of academics, researchers, PhDs and thinkers, I saw something I would not have seen even twenty years ago: I saw a lot of black faces.

Today we have twenty-five thousand Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university graduates around the country<sup>1</sup>, and we take it for granted – but we need to remember too that the very first Aboriginal university graduates were Charles Perkins and Margaret Valadian and that was in 1966.

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<sup>1</sup> Source: Reconciliation Australia (<http://www.reconciliation.org.au/home/latest/five-fast-facts--recognising-indigenous-achievement-in-higher-education>)

This is something to celebrate.

But I am aware – as many of you would be – that this experience of education brings some difficulties with it.

Bluntly speaking, there is a kind of lateral violence directed at young, educated Aboriginal people that says ‘you’re not a real blackfella’ merely because they are educated.

This is the kind of thinking that says, either explicitly or implicitly, that ‘you’re not a real blackfella’ unless you are living on a fringe camp, or living in poverty.

Of course, we’ve heard this from the mainstream before.

There has always been this apparent need by many in mainstream Australia to see ‘real’ Aboriginal people as those who need to be helped: by implication anyone of us who could stand up for ourselves and walk, talk and chew gum at the same time was some kind of imposter.

Not ‘real’, in other words.

We are familiar with that view from outside.

But it is even more damaging and hurtful when it comes from within the Aboriginal community: *'you talk different, you've been to university, you live in the city'* therefore somehow *'you're not black'*.

I would say to anybody who hears this directed at themselves: you don't have to take that.

You can develop some answers to that, ways of putting those people back in their box.

And the best way to do this in my opinion is to reinvent the struggle for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander equality and justice on your own terms, and on the basis of your own experience and your own skills.

You don't have to have been in the sixties and on the barricades – literally or metaphorically – to be a genuine leader for your people.

That's the first – and most important thing – I'd like to say today.

Now, though, in the interest of contributing to dialogue between the generations I would like to unpack some of the assumptions and language of my generation of Aboriginal activists.

For us, growing up in the 1950s and 1960s, a key concept was that of 'the Struggle' with a capital 'S'.

We used to sign letters to each other, 'Yours in the Struggle' and some of us still do, but I think I am not the only one who sometimes feels a little self-conscious about this language.

However, clumsy or not, the notion of 'the Struggle' expresses something important that many of us share.

In particular, it is linked to two important ideas: that of collective action on the one hand, and of the ability to change the world on the other.

Collective action is based on the idea that we Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are all in this together – it is not just about 'me', it is about 'us'

There is also a recognition that we are part of a much bigger movement for social justice, both here in Australia and internationally, and so we are linked to non-Aboriginal Australians who ally themselves to our cause, as well as to Indigenous and oppressed peoples across the world.

In the 1960s and 1970s, in particular, we were influenced by what was happening in the United States Civil Rights Movement.

Through the radio, we were informed of the words and actions of Martin Luther King, Malcolm X, and later the Black Panthers and all the other manifestations of the African American movement for justice and equality – and we felt a kinship with them.

It exposed us to new ideas: I distinctly remember seeing a copy of *Ebony* magazine for the first time and thinking ‘this is fantastic’ – before then I would never have thought in my wildest dreams that there could be a magazine by black people, for black people, reflecting a black person’s view and experience of the world.

I remember reading the slogan ‘black is beautiful’ and feeling that this was a profound statement at the time because I didn’t think many of us thought of ourselves in that way.

And all this reinforced our view of collective action – that we were all in this together, and that we would only change things by working alongside one another.

And this is the other aspect of this notion of ‘the Struggle’.

It is the feeling that through collective action we can change the world – but that it will not be easy.

Nothing will be given to us as Aboriginal people unless we fight for it.

We grew up knowing that the Government wasn't just going to wake up one morning and decide to give us land-rights, or fund community-controlled health services or legal services.

There is a fundamental optimism behind this view.

It is a belief that we *can* change the world.

This is not a naive view.

Our experience told us it was true.

For myself, for example, growing up on the Parap Camp in Darwin in the 1950s, I saw the Half-Caste Association, demanding full citizenship rights and an end to policy discrimination on the basis of race, as well as fighting numerous local battles over discrimination.

And we knew that there were other organisations across the country working to the same end – organisations like FCAATSI (the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders) and NAIDOC (the National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee).

It took many years, but these things were achieved with the 1967 Referendum and the 1975 *Racial-Discrimination Act*.

So as we matured, Aboriginal people like myself saw how our collective action – against sometimes fierce opposition – could change the world.

This was what we meant when we signed our letters ‘yours in the Struggle’.

No doubt this view is still around today, but I think it is weaker, less widespread.

I will leave it to those who write the histories to analyse why this might be so, but I have a couple of thoughts to share with you, which are related not just to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander politics but to broader, global changes.

First, politics in its broad sense seems to be much more focused today on individuals and personalities rather systems and issues.

I remember seeing, a few weeks back, the media coverage of the ‘Convoy of No Confidence’ of truckers and others protesting the Federal Government’s policies here in Canberra, and seeing people holding up placards describing our Prime Minister as ‘Bob Brown’s Bitch’ and ‘JuLiar’.

I will leave aside the question about whether this level of personal abuse would be applied to a male Prime Minister.

The key aspect is the personal attack, of which these are just extreme examples.

In the past, we might have had equally unflattering views of the political leaders of that time, but these were beside the point – we were not out to ‘get’ any particular politician, we were out to change the system within which they operated and under which we lived.

Our placards might have been less attractive to the media, but they expressed what we demanded: ‘Land Rights Now!’ or ‘Justice for Our People!’

As well as this change to a much more personally focussed public debate, I think there is also, broadly speaking, less optimism amongst poor people (at least in the Western World) about changing their situation.

The recent riots in the United Kingdom (once again, as so often, triggered by a case of police brutality towards a black person) unleashed what was obviously a great deal of stored up anger and frustration.

But it seemed to me that, lacking the confidence and analysis that said ‘we can change the world’, this anger dissipated into looting and random violence.

Although the world of remote Aboriginal Australia is very different, I see a similar sense of disconnection and powerlessness.

Many of our communities are marked by disengagement, breakdown of structures of communal authority, and a widespread despair about an ability to make a difference at any level, local or wider.

So, what is the implication of this new world for the next generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders?

First, let me say that I am not advocating some nostalgic return to the 'good old days' of the Aboriginal struggle.

The world changes, and the way we go forward on the journey to achieve real equality and respect in this country will change too.

We know change and know how to adapt.

We are good at it.

We are the oldest living culture in the world and we have adapted in order to survive.

We know about change.

The new leaders, then, will redefine the struggle in a way that matches their own experience and knowledge and skills, recognising that the methods, arguments and images of the past do not necessarily work today.

And for this younger leadership – your experiences are different.

Not less valid than mine, but different, as was the case between Jesse Jackson and Barack Obama.

For example, in the 1960s, I think it was a shock for many white people to see on their TV screens for the first time the state of dispossession and sheer poverty in which so many of our communities were forced to live.

Now, those images are replayed over and over, every evening on the news and current affairs programs.

All too often, the message seems to be that this is all our fault.

I have a sense that non-Aboriginal Australia is sick of seeing it – they just want someone to fix the problem.

This new situation needs some new thinking and new strategies, and dare I say it, it needs a new relationship between us and the government of the day, a more mature, respectful relationship.

Perhaps the changes to the Constitution will be catalyst for this.

Despite the need for change, I would respectfully suggest that part of the challenge that the new generation of our leaders face is rebuilding a sense of collective action and optimism about being able to change the world.

But I remind myself that these ideals have never disappeared amongst our peoples.

You can see them at the local level all the time.

You might go to a local community meeting, and there in the back of the room you will see a small group of four or five Aboriginal women, usually in their middle to senior years, not saying much but exerting a quiet authority – and you know that it is this group of women who are watching over, and encouraging and guarding the success of an early childhood program for the community.

Or you might be on a small piece of Aboriginal land in remote northern Australia where a family has set up a training camp to get young people into work, and it comes complete with hot showers, a laundry, good food and an urn of tea bubbling away – once again you know that people are exercising their authority and their determination to make a better world not just for themselves but for their family and for the next generation.

We all know those local level examples, where that collective, community spirit and that practical optimism about changing the world still exist.

Even the very notion of the collective and what it might mean in the 21<sup>st</sup> century perhaps needs to be examined – a ‘collective’, even a ‘community’ might be very different things in the world of the internet, Facebook and Twitter.

But I would suggest that sponsoring, facilitating, linking up and spreading examples of Aboriginal confidence and capability is a key task for the younger generation of leaders.

In addressing themselves to this task, I think there is one particular area that needs particular and concentrated attention.

I don’t think it will surprise anyone when I say that I think the key focus of the new generation of leaders is the next generation of children.

Whenever I say these words, I feel this distant uncomfortable echo.

I remember back in the 1950s how non-Aboriginal people would say “no, we can’t do much about the adults, the best we can do is concentrate on the children”.

Of course, they failed miserably at doing anything about either the adults or the children.

So, I feel a bit like a 1950s white patrol officer when I say that we have to concentrate on the children.

I don't say it because I think that is the only thing we should be doing.

Certainly, in the field of education, we need to recognise the critical importance of adult education as well – not just for its own sake, but also because educated adults (and especially educated women) are much more likely to have healthy children and to see the value of education for their children.

That said, I have no doubt that we are all now very aware of the critical importance of childhood development.

We all know how the first two to three years of a child's life are critical for their development, and how educational attainment is critical to health and empowerment throughout life.

So, with respect I would like to pass on my thoughts about these two critical areas for action for the next generation of leaders.

In talking about these areas, I realise that media and public attention is very much on the children living in remote Aboriginal communities – especially those in the Northern Territory.

But this next generation of children should be a national priority for all our communities, wherever they are located.

So what is needed?

First, we need well-resourced and comprehensive early childhood development programs for all of our children.

There is now a mountain of evidence that malnutrition and emotional mistreatment in the first two or three years of life send a child along a developmental pathway that (if left un-addressed) leads towards poor behavioural development, low educational attainment, increased chance of involvement with the criminal justice system, greater poverty, and a shorter, less healthy life.

Making sure that kids don't get onto this high-risk / low-achievement pathway – or diverting them back towards a positive developmental path should they begin in a disadvantaged place – should be a very high priority.

Because, while we know that the issues of poverty, exclusion, poor nutrition and disadvantage in childhood have a negative effect over the life course, we also know that quality interventions that are well-resourced and expertly delivered, can help counteract these early set-backs.

Children given access to excellent early child development programs that involve parents and communities, will have better outcomes throughout their lives.

This can be measured not just in terms of health and educational achievement, but also in terms of social connectedness, income, and diminished contact with the justice system.

This means we need services that work with families to address deficits in a child's development and through increasing parenting skills and parental social networks.

Sadly – but essentially – in some places these services may also need to address issues of nutrition for young children, as the evidence is very clear about the long-term detrimental effects of malnourishment in the early years.

Similar comprehensive early childhood programs have been run overseas, and there is no reason to believe that such an approach cannot work here – especially given that some Aboriginal health services already provide family and child-centred services to their communities.

But these programs need to be universal, ongoing and appropriately resourced with money and staff: not just ‘pilot programs’ serving a few communities.

The second key critical area for action is education.

We need to make sure these children go on to get a proper education, an education which will grow them up as another generation of leaders for their families and communities, people who can contribute to building a positive cycle of action and confidence.

We need education that enables Aboriginal people to confidently and competently participate in their own culture and mainstream culture, and can help them choose how to actively use this diversity of cultures in their lives.

As a first step, we need to prepare Aboriginal children for learning and get them “ready” for school with high quality, learning-based preschool programs, that seek to involve parents and family in their children’s education at an early stage.

And then we need to get to work on our schools.

We need to get them ready to receive and educate Aboriginal children – particularly in those remote areas where English is not a first language.

In these circumstances, schools need to be resourced and teachers trained to educate children who do not speak English.

We need teachers who can inspire and engage with the children – to say to them, in effect, ‘this is a fantastic journey we are on now, and we are going to travel along it together’.

But if teachers can’t communicate with their students, literally don’t have a shared language and don’t have the skills to cross that gap, they will be unable to excite any child about learning.

And we need schools that promote education that is two-way, that takes account of local Aboriginal life, language and culture.

This idea of ‘two-way schooling’ does not mean that education for Aboriginal children has to be ‘second-best’, a dumbed-down curriculum for people who are assumed to be marginal to Australian life, people who are assumed to be ‘failures’.

Education for Aboriginal children must be high-quality, and it must prepare them for participation in our global, inter-connected world.

This is critical for the regeneration of our communities. And provide the energy for the continuing struggle driven by this new generation of young people

This is one half of the education equation – making sure the services are there to ensure that children are ready for active participation in school, and making sure the education system is ready to educate them.

The other side of the education equation is getting our children to go to school and stay there.

During my time as co-chair of the *Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse*, Rex Wild and I visited many communities and found what we described in our report as ‘miserable school attendance rates for Aboriginal children and the apparent complacency here (and elsewhere in Australia) with that situation’.

Unfortunately, I continue to see a similar pattern today in many places.

Gangs of kids roam the community and it appears to be beyond anyone to get them to school.

They become teenagers without the benefit of an education, without the close support, guidance and control of traditional kin networks, and without the prospect of a job or a better life.

This feeds directly into the negative cycles of disengagement and powerlessness that I described earlier.

The poor school attendance of Aboriginal children has become the focus of a great deal a of public debate in recent years.

Much of the debate centres around the belief that Aboriginal families are not fulfilling their responsibilities to their children by ensuring they attend school.

This is certainly true in some cases and developing parental (and community) responsibility is very important – I will come back to this in a moment.

But I would not like us to forget the responsibility of the state in allowing this situation to develop.

The fact is that – especially in remote areas of the country – successive governments over generations completely failed to provide any adequate education for their Aboriginal citizens.

For example, during the time of the Stolen Generations, the state was quite willing to intervene dramatically, and often catastrophically, in the lives of Aboriginal families, but this intervention did not necessarily extend to providing education to those children taken away.

Until recently, in many remote Aboriginal communities, schools were nonexistent.

This is not a phenomena of distant history – for example, in 1996 only one Aboriginal person completed Year 12 in the whole the Central Australian region.

Things have improved slightly since then, but these historical levels of neglect have led to multiple generations of Aboriginal people with poor or non-existent education, and little or no chance of getting a job or actively participating in any society.

Under these circumstances, when so few Aboriginal families see the benefits of education, it is hardly surprising that they do not make going to school a high priority for their children.

Under these circumstances, what I find surprising is how many Aboriginal families do continue to see education a priority for their children.

For example, Aboriginal people that we spoke to in the course of the preparation of the *Little children are sacred* report were clear about the benefits of education, and many were worried if children in their communities were not attending school.

In fact, every community we spoke to identified kids not going to school as a priority area for action.

Given this attitude, and given the history in many places, it seems unfair to turn around and start pointing the finger at Aboriginal families and decrying the fact that they are not fulfilling their responsibilities.

Nevertheless, the absolute priority is the child – and this means that, by hook or by crook, they need to go to school.

Developing parental (and community) responsibility is therefore critically important.

In addressing this, we have to go beyond a simplistic punitive approach.

Simply withholding welfare benefits – for example – from those parents who do not send their kids to school – won't work as a stand-alone strategy.

Those families that are least likely to send their kids to school are often chaotic, disengaged and the least likely to respond – or be able to respond – to an approach that begins and ends with punishment.

Instead, we need to work with communities and families to strengthen their ability to ensure that children go to school.

This might mean, for example, re-establishing local systems of authority, such senior men and women to work with parents, the school, the police and the justice system to ensure that families send their kids to school.

Such systems are being developed in some communities, for example in Cape York, and in my opinion they point us in the right direction, rebuilding community authority to address social issues.

But in the end, the buck cannot be passed ... that state simply has to exercise its responsibility to future generations, and make sure that all kids are going to, and staying at, appropriately resourced schools.

These, then, are what I see as some of the key challenges facing the next generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders: building a new sense of collective action and confidence in our communities, and a focus on early childhood development and education.

This seems a lot for anyone's plate!

But let me say that I have a lot of confidence in the new generation of Aboriginal leaders and their abilities.

Their education gives them a tremendously powerful tool for thinking about and solving the kind of issues I have described.

Some people of my generation felt they had to suspend who they were in order to get an education.

This was the price.

And even though I didn't feel this myself, I can remember the painful chasm that seemed to open up between me and some of my family when I began to get an education as a young child.

That was in the 1950s but that attitude has not gone away and that accusation – from our own mob – of being 'not a real blackfella' still gets thrown around.

So we have to leave that kind of thinking behind.

Let me leave you by returning to where we started, with President Barack Obama.

He too faced accusations of being ‘not a real black man’ when he was running for President – he was too young, he hadn’t been on the barricades in Memphis the 1960s, he wasn’t from African-American slave ancestry, he was too educated.

Despite this, he persisted.

He – and his generation of black American leaders – reinvented the struggle, the way forward.

The election of a black man to lead the United States is a remarkable symbolic moment, not just for that country, but around the world, and here in Australia.

And it also happens that he has thought and written about some of the themes I have shared with you today, such as powerlessness and its generational effects.

Let me leave you with his words from his book, “Dreams From My Father”:

*I know, I have seen the desperation and disorder of powerless: how it twists the lives of children on the streets of Jakarta or Nairobi [or] on Chicago's South Side, how narrow the path is for them between humiliation and untrammelled fury, how easily they slip into violence and despair.*

*I know that the response of the powerful to this disorder – alternating as it does between a dull complacency and, when the disorder spills out of its proscribed confines, a steady, unthinking application of force .... – is inadequate to this task.*

This describes so well the process we experience in Australia when it comes to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

In my view, addressing that powerlessness and how the nation-state responds to it is truly the biggest challenge for the next generation.

Thank you.