

**“Contradiction, Confusion and Ironies in Aboriginal Affairs.”**

**Mick Gooda  
Chief Executive Officer**

**Cooperative Research Centre for  
Aboriginal Health**

**Indigenous Health Research  
Program**

**3<sup>rd</sup> Anniversary Seminar –**

**Brisbane**

**June - 3 - 2005**

Thank you Jannelle for a great introduction.

Before I commence let me acknowledge that we are on Aboriginal land here today, and the traditional owners of this country. Allow me to acknowledge that on this day of all days it is even more important than usual that we pay that respect. I am from the Gangulu of the Dawson Valley in Central Queensland and on behalf of my family can I salute you mob for your continuing struggle.

Being a traditional owner of a capital city is one hell of a hard ask. These people have generally borne the brunt of colonization more than most. Being the first contacts also makes you the first to start to lose the old ways so it is for these people that today has special importance.

I would also like to acknowledge Professor Michael Good. When Michael and I first met we discussed the possibility of us being related with our names being so close and I had to explain that while most people think my name Gooda is an Aboriginal version of something complimentary as in my Dad may have been a gooder ringer than most others. Or in the Pilbara where Cooda is the name for brother, it is in fact just a garden variety English name on my father's side whose forebears emigrated here about six generations ago.

So Michael, if we want to claim each from the Pommy perspective I'm OK with that even to the point of not quibbling about a vowel here or there.

Michael I would also like to thank QIMR for the opportunity to speak on such an occasion to reflect on where we have come as a nation in the 12XXX years since the High Court Decision on Native Title, the day when the fiction of terra nullius was finally put to rest.

I remember actually working for the Department of Aboriginal Affairs based in the Torres Strait at the time when the Mabo hearings were taking place. A few of us from the local office would wander down to the Magistrates Court to listen to the goings on, only to leave a short time later totally bored with the antics of the lawyers from one side and then the other arguing about the meaning of each word on ancient documents and scoring points off each other. At the time we thought we had better things to do than participate in an exercise that made watching grass grow seem like the height of adrenalin inducing excitement.

But how wrong we were.

Fastforward about three years when the High Court handed down its historic decision and now there was real excitement. Backyards were

going to be lost, people forced off properties and the mining industry totally shutdown some said.

On the Aboriginal side the decision was almost seen as a Nirvana, we would be delivered from poverty and never again would we be treated as second class citizens. Such was the value placed on the formal recognition that this land was occupied prior to 1788.

Happily, those promoting the former view of loss were proven to be wrong. Sadly, those with the Nirvana view were also proven wrong. Native Title has not delivered too much in the way of material wealth for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people apart from the recognition of prior ownership. Some would argue that because the acquisition of Native Title is still within the confines of the legal system, the only windfall of any significance has been for the technicians, the lawyers, anthropologists and the historians.

Twelve years on the landscape has changed dramatically and when I was pondering the subject of my speech I was moved to think about the ironies of Aboriginal affairs in today's climate and how would Eddie Mabo view these changes.

But first, I think I need to establish my background. As I said at the beginning today, I am from Central Queensland with my

grandmother's country in the Dawson Valley around about where Woorabinda is today.

As is the case in many Aboriginal clan groups, the Gangulu has a matriarchal lineage and I only have to go back to my Grandmothers generation to establish where our country is located.

I have been involved in Aboriginal affairs for almost thirty years, first and foremost working in my own community by involvement with organizations such as the local housing cooperative, the legal service, education committees and the Dreamtime Cultural Centre.

I joined the Public Service in the early eighties and worked for the Departments of Social Security and Aboriginal Affairs, ATSIC, the Western Australian Government, the Aboriginal Legal Service in Western Australia and now with the Cooperative Research Centre for Aboriginal Health.

As Janelle said in her introduction, I have had the privilege in working all over Queensland, Canberra, Victoria, Western Australia and now the Northern Territory. I think I have the dubious distinction of being the last employee of ATSIC, and I haven't decided whether this would be an advantage or disadvantage to include on my CV.

I will talk later about those last few months of my time in ATSIC because it is important there be some context around those comments.

However, I cannot let this opportunity to go by without talking about the CRCAH. After my ordeals in ATSIC coming to the CRC was akin to having an early release from a life sentence. After the trench warfare that typified ATSIC here I was surrounded by twelve Partners, including QIMR, who made up an organization whose main aim was to improve the health of Aboriginal people, surely one of the most confronting tasks in Australia today, people like Michael, Janelle, and David Kemp.

These twelve Partners include research institutions such as QIMR, Melbourne University, the University of Queensland. Government Departments such as the Federal Department of Health and Aging and the Northern Territory Department of Health and Community Services and last but not least two of the longest established Aboriginal Medical Services, the Central Australian Aboriginal Congress based in Alice Springs and Danila Dilba based in Darwin.

These Partners can be divided into two categories, Researchers and the Users of Research. One of the main concepts behind the CRC Program is to ensure that the research agenda is relevant and of utility to the end users. In our case that means the Health Sector

generally and Aboriginal Health Sector in particular as well as Government agencies.

We have had to modify our thinking around the establishment of the research agenda. Instead of casting a wide net to capture what researchers are doing in a typical Expression of Interest exercise with a process of narrowing down those EIOs till the Board of the CRC finalises its priorities, the Board will now make its priorities known as almost the first step. This will involve the Board prioritizing concept papers so that our Program Managers and Program Leaders can develop these into full Research Proposals with the confidence that funds will be available thus creating a fair degree of certainty for our researchers and an added possibility of leveraging additional funds from other sources.

Fundamental to this approach will be the collaboration between researchers and the users of that research. Some of the criteria the Board has endorsed include:

- Industry and stakeholders utilisation of outcomes;
- Development of Indigenous people, communities and organizations capacity;
- User engagement and support;
- Transfer and dissemination plans;

- Collaboration of multiple CRCAH partners;
- Relative value and absolute cost of the proposed project;
- Prospects for leverage of external funds.

The CRC considers that engagement with Users, in particularly the Aboriginal community, is an absolute non negotiable in every step of this process. This is because of the overwhelming evidence that involvement of users in research will produce far better results. Even the mining industry these days reckon it is good for business to engage appropriately with the Aboriginal community. They have moved on from the feel good to the pragmatic. Again it is good business to have proper engagement with the Aboriginal community.

This brings me to some of the ironies we now have in Aboriginal affairs in this country. We have now come to a point where we now have the mining industry leading the way by showing how to properly engage with Aboriginal people who not so long ago were seen as the arch enemy to any development whatsoever.

Now what about this new approach in Indigenous Affairs. In a nutshell it was about coordinating the efforts of Governments at all levels in addressing the issues that confront Aboriginal people on a daily basis. I don't think I have to go into the statistics about where we are placed as a people in today's society.

So in an effort to aid in this coordination ATSIC was abolished and the ATSIC programs were 'mainstreamed'. The effect of this for people on the ground was that where previously ATSIC would have provided a community one grant for CDEP, Family Violence, Housing, Infrastructure and say an arts centre, these programs are now with at least four different agencies. All of whom will issue four letters of offer, with four reporting regimes and four different performance standards.

And then to coordinate the unraveling of this mess the agency coordinating the Governments approach in Aboriginal affairs then creates a position called Manager of Red Tape Removal. When I first saw this position advertised I thought surely someone is having a lend of me. But there it was.

I am also bemused by the recent announcement by the New South Wales Government that they will give Aboriginal names to significant landmarks. They were not talking about replacement names but a system of dual names as is the case with Uluru and Ayers Rock.

One of the places considered for dual naming is Mount Kosizosko. There was the expected uproar with a spokesman for the Polish community making a statement that the Government had no respect for tradition. I read this and wandered 'after Mabo and the efforts of

countless people to understand our position as the first peoples of this country does anyone really understand'. It worries me.

One of the greatest changes has been the abolition of ATSIC as the peak representative body of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in this country.

This comes at a time when elections were held in Iraq, a country where we sent our soldiers to fight for the introduction of democracy.

Do you notice the irony here. Think about how the Coalition of the Willing took over Iraq and introduced an advisory body of Iraqis to oversee this move to democracy.

In Australia we had the ATSIC representatives looking on helplessly as our Coalition destroyed our representative body and replaced with guess what - an advisory body.

Now I am not one to be too concerned about the appointment of 'experts' because we can all relate to the experience of elections not necessarily throw up the brightest or the best but to have a body appointed by Government to represent my views is somehow repugnant, and no matter how much the Government protests that this is an advisory body only, in the absence of any other

representative structure, I bet the views of these people will be taken as representing the whole Aboriginal community.

I cannot complete this story without an examination of the role our mob played in the abolition of ATSIC. I cannot say that all of the responsibility for this abolition should be laid at the feet of Government or the opposition.

I went to Canberra from Perth in early 2001 to assume the position of Deputy CEO. Whilst I had worked in Canberra previously, this was the first time I had worked at this level and as in all industries there is a pecking order within the public service. At this time the general view of ATSIC from senior bureaucrats was that if the Prime Minister could get rid of it he would but at that time its abolition would have meant amending the ATSIC Act when there was a hostile Senate in place. ATSIC was considered as a bit of a protected species.

So what happened in the intervening period. Sadly the behaviour of the Board , the elected leadership must bear a significant part of the responsibility here.

Remember the Chairperson Geoff Clark was facing serious allegations of sexual assault for some time and although these allegations were finally dealt with in his favour, at the time I believe the Commission was almost mortally wounded. How could it represent women who

suffer one of the highest rates of domestic violence and assault when the Chairman was precisely these charges.

Geoff in all honesty should have followed a long established convention of public figures of standing down from his position when serious allegations of wrong doing arise. Remember Neville Wran in the eighties and George Pell more recently.

However, at the time the Deputy Chair was one Sugar Ray Robinson and as a colleague noted at the time if Geoff stood down all that would happen is that a suspected rapist would be replaced by a convicted rapist.

Geoff then got into a blue in a pub in his home town Warrnambool. While I have some sympathy for his position in this case, he was again facing criminal charges. He then sought funds to fight these charges of around \$250,000. To put this into some perspective, the Legal Service in Western Australia which services all of that State, had at its disposal around the same amount for the entire year to engage outside Counsel for serious cases and appeals. Another problem was that his appeal for funds was made directly to the Board who decided to provide some support. Not every Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander gets the opportunity to put their case to the Board and the terms snouts in the trough was mentioned to me on

more than one occasion. In the end Geoff withdrew his application this time but the damage had already been done.

This was the impetus for the Government to implement the concept of 'separation of powers' in ATSIC. This would have meant the elected arm setting and deciding on policies and high level budgets but not making individual funding decisions.

Minister Ruddock basically said that there would be a separation of powers and implored Commissioners to develop their own version of this doctrine or the Government would impose theirs.

In the end Commissioners did not come to the party and ATSI was born on 1 July 2003 and the majority of ATSIC staff and funds were transferred to this new body.

During this period you might recall the ATSIC Review was underway and had yet to be finalized. Geoff Clark was convicted of a minor charge from the Warrnambool incident and was suspended and Amanda Vanstone who had replaced Phillip Ruddock, entered into a negotiation phase with the Board.

Mick Dodson was brought on to lead these negotiations and when he and his team presented what he thought was an excellent position

the Board then went into a closed session and made three fatal decisions.

To give Geoff Clark \$85,000 to fight his suspension;  
Launch a High Court Challenge to the creation of ATSI and  
To remove the ATSI Delegations from the CEO.

Each of these had its own special significance. The first outraged the public and I include a significant number of Aboriginal people. The second outraged the Minister who thought she was in the midst of a negotiation process and the third outraged Government because there were ongoing investigations into mismanagement of ATSI funds and to proceed with these ATSI delegations needed to be exercised.

I don't want to place all of the blame on Geoff here but as you can see a pattern had been set. A comment that resonated with me was that while you often hear about people shooting themselves in the foot very rarely do you hear about them taking aim.

Once these events occurred we then had a relatively new Leader of the Opposition making the announcement that upon taking Government he would immediately abolish ATSI. This was all the Prime Minister needed to put into effect his long held ambition and about 3 weeks later he made the announcement that the

Government would move to abolish ATSIC immediately. And so he did. When the time comes to write down what happened at that time it will be important that there are views articulated that are free from the spin that will be put from all sides.

But if nothing else I am an optimist, a glass half full person. And as I travel around the country the spirit of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people never ceases to amaze me.

I am moved by the story of the Western Desert Dialysis program. One of the most tragic stories of Aboriginal ill-health is the hundreds of people from remote communities and outstations across the country who are forced to leave their homes permanently to undergo dialysis in regional centres.

Many of these patients are senior members of our communities and holders of vast amounts of cultural knowledge and consequently their removal from communities is extremely disruptive not only for themselves and their families but for the whole community and threatens the survival of cultural practices so essential for the maintenance of our spiritual and emotional health.

Many people forced by renal disease into regional centres see the move and dialysis treatment as little better than a death sentence.

So people in the remote western desert community of Kintore decided to address this issue by proposing an option for home dialysis which would allow one or two patients at a time to return to Kintore from Alice Springs for a two or three week period.

Both the Territory and Commonwealth governments were less than enthusiastic at this initiative from the Western Desert people and it initially failed to attract any government funds.

Western desert people decided not to accept the government's funding knock-back as the end of their dream and established the Western Desert Dialysis Appeal.

Western Desert artists donated paintings to the appeal and in 2000 \$1.1 million were raised by auction to progress that dream.

The NT Government then purchased a machine for home dialysis which allows patients to travel back to Kintore for treatment for short periods.

The first of these patients returned to Kintore last September and there have been eight more since.

While I am pleased to report to you that the NT Government recently offered recurrent funding for two renal nurses to support patients, total Commonwealth contributions until this time have amounted to purchasing a sink for the Kintore Dialysis room.

The Cooperative Research Centre I head up has supported the Western Desert Dialysis project and assisted in an evaluation of its effectiveness.

That evaluation report, though not finalised, is indicating some real health and economic benefits from the project.

These include improved health promotion opportunities in educating Western Desert people on renal health and earlier presentations for treatment as people lose the terrible fear of dialysis.

A reduction in emergency evacuations of patients from Kintore after they have returned there from Alice Springs without medical authorisation has also seen economic benefits for the NT Government.

The predicament of the Western Desert dialysis project presents us with a test of the Commonwealth's sincerity to respond meaningfully to Aboriginal community-based health initiatives.

If the new Commonwealth arrangements are not able to ensure the long-term sustainability of such demonstrably valuable community-based initiatives then the new arrangements will have failed.

The Alice Springs Indigenous Coordination Centre is presently negotiating a Shared Responsibility Agreement with the Western Desert dialysis mob and we await the outcomes of these negotiations with interest.

Finally I want to leave with the words of a bloke named Sandy Davies. You have probably never heard of him but he is a one of those unsung leaders who typifies struggles around the world. Those who do not seek the limelight but can be counted on to be at the barricades doing the hard yards. At a recent meeting he said:

'Brothers and sisters, we are on the canvas at the moment with this mob but we have been there before, and I have seen about six Prime Ministers and a dozen Ministers for Aboriginal Affairs come and go and geus what?? We are still here and we will still be here long after this lot have gone'