

## **ACCEPTABLE LOSS: ACCOMPLISHING THE MISSION**

### **REDFERN ORATION**

**RACP CONGRESS, 24 MAY 2011**

**DARWIN AUSTRALIA**

**DR KERRY ARABENA**

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land where we are meeting this morning, the Larrakia Nation. I pay my respects to your Elders and to those who have come before us. I would also like to acknowledge other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the audience, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, it is indeed an honour to address you this morning in this, the Redfern Oration named after one William Redfern.

I want to share with you two related ideas during this oration. The first is to explore how the increasing use of military language, particularly in the health arena, frames how our professions perceive Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. You will hear in this oration that this use of militarised language is an extension of one of the four major discourses that determine the policies, the allocations of resources and the intended health impact.

Secondly, I want to discuss the proliferation of ideas and actions used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples that sit outside of these four dominant discourses. It is in these discourses that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are pushing back against the use of military language and resisting being framed by Australians as either competent or lacking competence; whether we need to be controlled or whether we can take responsibility; whether we are affected by the problems or whether we are the problem; or whether we are one of you and able to be included, or we are different and need to be excluded.

I am talking about language in this oration because I believe that language constructs our relationships, our identities and our future together as peoples and as a nation in an immensely powerful way. The message I want you to take home is this: there are many better and more valuable ideas and contributions that can inform and change the circumstance of our peoples than those that currently populate the narrow confines of the public discourses in a popularised and anti-intellectual media. Narrow discourses prevent genuine dialogue and need to be discarded so that we might find new common ground in alternative discourses through which to explore nation building.

But before I get to the body of my talk, by way of providing some context for the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in this country, I want to tell you of the common ground between William Redfern, who came to Australia after escaping the death penalty for his role

in a Mutiny over issues of pay after four years of imprisonment in England,<sup>1</sup> and the First Peoples in Australia – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have similarly been denied, and fought for equal rights and equal pay in Australia. Bill Patten, that courageous NSW shearer and trade unionist; the Gurrindji pastoral workers who walked off Wave Hill station; the strikes in Yarrabah and on Palm Island in the 1950s; the mutiny in the Torres Straits during World War I; the thousands of hard working Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who still campaign to have returned to them – the wages stolen from them and used to build Queensland’s hospitals, roads and dams; and, finally, the fight for compensation by the people whose lives were so savagely impeded by forced removal and institutionalisation – the Stolen Generations. Just like Redfern these brave Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people knew that there are some situations where you have to stand up and demand equality irrespective of the consequences.

Just as William Redfern spent four years languishing in prison, so many of my people spend what should be the most productive part of their lives behind bars in the soulless institutions that sadly have changed little since Redfern’s time. In both adult prisons and, increasingly, in youth detention centres, we are tragically over-represented. William Redfern escaped the death penalty. For more than 260 people since the 1988 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Report, prison has been a death

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<sup>1</sup> Wikipedia.

sentence.

Common ground also exists between William Redfern and the Gadigal peoples of the Eora Nation in particular. William Redfern owned Gadigal peoples' land, which now bears the name Redfern, a suburb in Sydney.

Redfern is firmly entrenched in the minds of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as one of the heartlands of the Aboriginal rights movement in Australia. Redfern is now the precinct for national achievement by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples: both the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples and the National Centre for Indigenous Excellence, national companies established for and by Australia's First Peoples, have established permanent offices in Redfern.

Down the road from this precinct is Redfern Park, a place in which Prime Minister Paul Keating delivered the Redfern Speech. Of course the subject matter was profound: acknowledgment of the crimes committed by European settlers against Indigenous Australians. Stated simply and eloquently, the emotional appeal of recognition resonates with us all still. In 1992, as a descendant of the colonizers, the Prime Minister personalised his response and owned it. With his statements '...that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the disasters. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us. We failed to ask, "How would I feel if this were done to me?". As a

consequence, we failed to see that what we were doing degraded all of us.'

He asked us to consider extending the opportunity and care, dignity and hope to the Indigenous people of Australia – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. He spoke of justice denied, of consciousness, of actions that are morally indefensible and of a stain on the history of this nation. He spoke of the need to open our hearts and minds to the commonalities we have to this shared, if tragic, history; to the common things that need to be done.

Twenty years on, the aspirations in that speech, the hope in people's hearts and minds, is yet to be realised.

This is why I want to talk to you today about changing the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are framed by Australian society, especially in and around and among the members of the health professions. This framing of people, particularly the increased use of militarised language in that framing, in my view, is a major impediment to this nation achieving the unity so needed to address the major issues of our times.

I have titled this talk **acceptable loss – accomplishing the mission**. Both military phrases, both powerful ways of shaping the wider Australian society's view and response to Australia's First Peoples.

We are a country at war but we are a country drawn to peace. What I cannot understand is why we use the language of war to achieve peace,

and why the language of war is seemingly being used against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to make us peaceful civilians.

Now is the time to speak of these things. All over Australia, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities are taking charge of our own lives. We have more resources, better education, technological advancements; we have a depth and diversity of experience with which to enrich national life and identity.

If these things offer hope, so does the fact that Australians are now better informed of our cultures and achievements; better informed of the injustice that has been done, and better informed of our dreams and aspirations than any generation before.

William Redfern, ex-criminal sentenced to death, provided leadership by daring to imagine a transformed future in Australia and offered his new country preventive medicine, immunisation and public health care.

Paul Keating provided leadership and stewardship to his country by simply asking Australians to imagine what it would be like to be dispossessed; to imagine what it feels like to be unacknowledged as a proud people, whose genius and resilience maintained a culture here over 50,000 years. Paul Keating reminded Australians of how it might feel to have survived two centuries of dispossession and abuse.

Each of these men, in their own way believed deeply that we all want to move in the same direction – toward a better future for our children and

grandchildren.

The problem that I am increasingly identifying is that this noble and universal sentiment – of wishing for a better life for one’s children and grandchildren – is being abused and distorted by the use of language to differentiate between children: whose children and grandchildren might get the better future; what types of children and grandchildren will benefit; how must those children and grandchildren behave; and where do they need to live in order to benefit? Indeed, how they need to ‘become’ a certain something to qualify.

Turning my attention now to the first of my ideas for elaboration today, there is no doubt that how language depicts/describes something has far-reaching consequences, and it is my view that the increasing use of specific military language and concepts in public policy concerning First Peoples influences how Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are perceived by health professionals. I want to talk particularly about the military concept of acceptable loss.

My friend Dr Rosemary Aldrich examined speeches and documents delivered by Federal politicians since 1972 and found two things: firstly, that four key ideas about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people pervade official conversations.<sup>2</sup> These four ideas concern frames of control and responsibility; capacity and competence; the nature of the problem;

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<sup>2</sup> R. Aldrich, A. Zwi & S. Short 2007, “‘Advance Australia Fair’: Social democratic and conservative politicians’ discourses concerning Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and their health 1972–2001’, *Social Science and Medicine*, 64:125–37.

and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as ‘not us’ or ‘the other’.

Secondly, Dr Aldrich found that policies enacted by these Federal politicians — after all, enacting policies is what politicians are elected to do — have been consistent with these four key ideas. If language used in the policy environment represents Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as not competent, irresponsible, the source or cause of the problem and ‘not us’ then it is no wonder that policy emerging from that environment entrenched a limited view of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.<sup>3</sup>

The first time I ever really noticed the use of specifically military language in health was the framing of the Northern Territory Emergency Response (aka the Intervention) in 2007, when the former Minister of Aboriginal Affairs, Mal Brough, led the charge to replace the language of practical reconciliation with the rhetoric of ‘securing the ground’. This was in response to the findings of the *Little Children Are Sacred Report*, which stated that children were vulnerable to sexual abuse due to the cumulative effects of poor health, alcohol and drug abuse, gambling, pornography, unemployment, poor education and housing, and general disempowerment. The combination of these issues was found to lead inexorably to family and other violence and then on to sexual abuse of men and women and, finally, of children.<sup>4</sup>

Now, let me preface this part of the speech by saying that I am not

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<sup>3</sup> R. Aldrich 2007, ‘The Language of an Intervention’, *New Matilda*, 162, 2 October. Available at: <<http://www.newmatilda.com/home/articledetailmagazine.asp?ArticleID=2499&CategoryID=221>>.

<sup>4</sup> Pat Anderson & Rex Wilde 2007, *Little Children Are Sacred Report*.



critiquing the set of measures established in the Northern Territory Emergency Response. On the basis of the evidence some of the measures are relatively uncontroversial. On the other hand, there are those that warrant hard scrutiny from the people who will be affected by them and their advocates. Nor should my analysis of the militaristic discourse framing the Northern Territory Emergency Response be interpreted in any way as a denial that the issues addressed in the *Little Children Are Sacred Report* did not warrant investigation, action and the flow-on of resources — everyone deserves to be safe and to access the infrastructure and resources that promote safety in our communities. There is nothing controversial about delivering high-quality, well-resourced primary health care and access to community policing when required.

With deliberate statements about ‘securing the ground’ from the responsible politicians, military personnel were brought in to deliver health and wellbeing services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in ways not seen before in this country. ‘Securing the ground’ is a military strategy that can work well in emergency situations. Australian military forces have ‘secured the ground’ in places like Bali after the bombings, in Timor and the Pacific after the civil unrest, and in the many areas in our region affected by earthquake, tsunamis, floods and other natural events.

The discipline and rigour of the military in these emergency situations is necessary and highly valued. However, applying the ‘securing the ground’ principle to the circumstances in the Northern Territory was, in my view, a serious mistake. I lived in Northern Territory communities for eight years.

The desperate circumstances of those living in the NT, for whom the Intervention was designed to transform, could hardly be considered an emergency. But it was talked about by politicians as if it was new event, some previously unanticipated and unknown catastrophe requiring a crisis response, which therefore permitted the use of emergency measures, and the trading off, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Island residents of the Northern Territory, of human rights one against the other – extraordinary measures for extraordinary times.

However, as we all know, there had been countless reports and failures to act by governments prior to 2007. These circumstances are the consequence of long-standing and chronic problems resulting from poorly designed policy and poorly executed strategy. The ‘securing the ground’ campaign heralded another phase of an improbable Australian experiment in first colonising and then bringing democracy to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The military strategy of ‘securing the ground’ did little to narrow the gap between the promise of our ideals for people living in the Northern Territory and the reality of those people’s lived experience.

The effect of this ‘wave’ of military language couched in military strategy was, in very subtle ways, also to frame what the ‘acceptable loss’ was in the campaign against child abuse. Even though the *Little Children Are Sacred* report never identified Aboriginal men as the only or even the major perpetrators of sexual abuse, the inflammatory message that many Aboriginal men were paedophiles shifted perceptions about the causes of Indigenous squalor and successfully re-framed the history of the Stolen

Generations by stating that Aboriginal people themselves were responsible for their own misfortune and, even worse, that the children had to be taken from their parents to protect them from filth, violence and paedophilia. Once again our men, framed as paedophiles and perpetrators of violence, became the acceptable loss to our society. And we, who work in health, often frame people as acceptable losses with remarkable ease and devastating effect.

To extend this argument further, the hitherto mentioned tradeoff of human rights – specifically the suspension of the Racial Discrimination Act to permit aspects of the Emergency Response across the NT – was clearly also considered an acceptable loss. You can imagine the outrage of the general public when in Australia, in 2007, the elected national government believed that the deliberate loss of the human right to not be discriminated against on the basis of race was an acceptable loss in its quest to meet other human rights obligations to children.

Acceptable loss refers to the negative outcomes that are considered tolerable against the achievements of a particular strategy or tactic. It's a phrase comparable to that ugliest of recent military jargon, collateral damage. The current deaths of young Australian men in Afghanistan are considered to be acceptable losses in the face of the international security imperatives created by the Taliban insurgency and al-Qaida. While it is an honour to serve our country and die so that we might be free, as a mother I cannot frame these defence force personnel as acceptable losses to accomplish the mission, just as I do not want my children framed in the

same way. The implications of the term may be summed up as: ‘What are we willing to lose to achieve a goal?’.

The magnitude of the numbers of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people that we would accept as a loss is staggering. What that does to our society is staggering. And yet, we do it every day. We factor acceptable loss into most of the affairs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. I have heard people say in all phases of project or program implementation or in the development of policy positions: ‘Don’t worry about the drunks, you need to worry about the kids’; ‘But don’t worry about the kids who have fetal alcohol syndrome, only worry about those we can get to do well in school’; ‘Don’t focus your attention on old people, focus on the 0–4 year old age group’. Investing in all children is thought to give Australia a bigger economic and societal return than investing in Elders. Constructing older people as the acceptable loss is only permissible in a society that favours the young and is not conceivable in societies founded on Elder wisdom traditions and principles.

Another way in which our professions frame acceptable loss is through stereotypes and prejudices: ‘Aboriginal people won’t care about aged care services, most of them die when they are young anyway’; ‘Young Aboriginal women are supposed to have children when they are teenagers – it’s cultural’; and a thousand other ways in which our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander society is compartmentalised into what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. What is not deemed acceptable, is not fundable, is not resourced and becomes the acceptable loss.

One example of how these discourses directly affect health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can be found in an analysis of policy frameworks that emphasise and focus program implementation and resources on women, often to the exclusion of men. Child and Maternal Health is an area where we focus on the biological aspects of the mother's health, as a carrier of a child to ensure optimal child health outcomes. By not acknowledging the social roles of men as fathers, and the quality of the relationships between men and women that will ultimately affect the quality of life of the child, we frame men in a policy implementation context – men as the acceptable loss.

One has to question just why these frames which exclude men and represent women and children as needing rescue have emerged in the past five years. Is it the return to the new 'paternalism' for which Tony Abbott called in 2006?<sup>5</sup> What purpose does it serve politically? At what cost for the men, women and children objectified, numbered, rendered personless by mass media and political conveniences? Why did it take a 'crisis' – child victims, vilification of men, and withdrawing a basic human right from some Territorians – to get services that most Australians take for granted?

Our society loses because the roles and responsibilities of men as fathers are absent in the policy, program, resourcing chain – they are not valued, they are not seen as contributors. What our men then lose is an appreciation of their capacity for nurturance and their position as heads of

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<sup>5</sup> T. Abbott 2006, Speech notes for the launch of Australia's Health 21 June 2006, Department of Health and Ageing, Australian Government, Canberra.

our households. This absence shakes the very foundations of our families and communities – the absence in policy and programs falsifies gender roles and responsibilities in our communities, and accomplishes the colonial mission that was started more than 200 years ago.

### **The Colonial Mission and the First Peoples Mission**

Even though I have an unyielding faith in the decency and generosity of the Australian people, it concerns me deeply that accomplishing the mission is so heavily framed in configurations of national identity, belonging and ownership that is framed by Eurocentric values delivered within modernity. Accomplishing the mission in one Australian context then is not about forging relationships with Indigenous peoples, but instead about resisting and minimising the recognition that is provided to our cultures, our history, our capacities to contribute and our on-going connection with land.

A failure to recognise and embrace the cultural characteristics and the cultural capital of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is one of the major barriers that excludes us from the wider Australian society.

I have just described the impact of the increased use of militarised language, which strengthens and reinforces the four dominant discourses in Australia and frames what, and more importantly who, are the acceptable losses, and raises questions about just whose mission was being accomplished through these policy positions?

This takes me to the second idea I wanted to discuss with you during this oration. The proliferation of ideas and actions used by Aboriginal and

Torres Strait Islander peoples that re-embrace our notions of Indigenous citizenship. We are reviewing our governance practices, assessing our agreement making, creating spaces to practise sovereignty, asserting our Indigenous knowledge and practices, and supporting our land rights and responsibilities, and celebrating our success. Our push back against these discourses is already happening. What we need to do is ensure our voices are heard and that we, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, are able to assert our rights for the same opportunities without being made the same. We do this to accomplish our own mission, which is that as much as possible, and within the commonly held values of our forebears, that no one is constructed as an acceptable loss.

Two powerful initiatives happening at a national level are the new vehicles for the proliferation of our ideas and our aspirations. This is because we, the people, are increasingly more than willing to find meaning in something greater than our individual effort alone. Not for profit, not for personal gain – but because we value who we are, where we have come from, and all we can be given the opportunity.

First I will discuss the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples – another in a long line of national infrastructure set up to deliver that promise which has been so hard fought: that we are all equal, all free, and all deserved of a chance to pursue our opportunity and experience happiness. It has been established as an independent organisation intent on leaving a legacy. The second national vehicle I want to discuss is the Lowitja Institute, the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health

Research Institute — a capacity-building agency for and by the people. Both intent on innovation, and both concerned with establishing a foundation of greatness, not as a given, but greatness which is earned.

The proliferation of ideas auspiced by these two organisations is incredibly important. In this century, our challenges will be new, and instruments with which we meet these challenges may be new. But those values upon which our traditional societies were built and upon which our success as countrymen and women depend — discipline and community, honesty and hard work, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and love of country – these things are old; these things are true. They have been the quiet force of progress and given hope to those even when there was no hope apparent. These values have been evident throughout our history and are the mainstay of our shared human culture. These values have underpinned our resilience when all other indicators suggested we should falter. What these two organisations have demanded, then, is a return to the truth and the certainty of these values.

Both the National Congress and the Lowitja Institute have been born from among our modern intellectuals with ancestral connections to country. I am so proud of my association with these two organisations, and am so proud that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been the architects, the designers, the campaigners, the consulters, the doers, the makers, the choosers, the facilitators, the explainers, and the implementers of these new voices.



And while our effort should be to engage with and direct resources to people in poverty, we do have cause for celebration. Among our number are professors, lawyers, barristers, judges, teachers, health workers, doctors, nurses, academics, politicians, dancers, athletes, public servants, people who are trained in governance and business, entrepreneurial thinkers and actors. We have people in powerful decision-making positions. We have chief executives and chairpersons; we have marine biologists, social scientists, rangers and researchers; we have people working in corrections, youth agencies and as lecturers – representing us locally, nationally and internationally. We have done our teething in health, education, academia, natural resource management, in regional autonomy, leadership development, organisational management, youth empowerment, media marketing and public policy, land purchasing, business development, economic development, human rights and political strategy. Some of us have been in the game now for at least 20 years and are in positions to mentor others. We are the emergent leadership. We are modern intellectuals with ancestral and cultural connection to country. And we will be taken notice of.

In this context then, First Peoples' leadership and influence, and the consequent public discourses, take on quite different connotations. Our national architecture is not afraid of diversity or a divergence of views from among our number. Our Indigenous philosophic traditions are capable of accepting and nurturing a diversity of views, each equal to another. We now have national agencies capable of harnessing people's collective views,

and have framed national discourses that are traditional and innovative, collaborative, entrepreneurial and visionary.

The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples has been established after five years of consultation around the country on what people could expect and take for granted in a new national representative voice and we built an organisation responsive to those needs. The first strategy was to register the Congress as a company, allowing for entrepreneurial thinking and action. The second concerned gender equity among all representatives; consequently there is a constitutional requirement that there is equal number of men and women in all of the representative structures of the organisation. Thirdly, we wanted to ensure that the decision-making by the Company Board operated in the best interests of the members. We established an Ethics Council to help the organisation make the critical decisions and review company policies and processes. Fourthly, we devised robust democratic architecture that will stand the test of time, and have facilitated the first national independent election for representative positions in the company.

Underpinning all of these strategies are cultural understandings that provide a rock solid foundation to our future. The most significant has been to erase from the conversation the notions of State and Territory representation. Rather, we have refocused our membership on the fact that we have more than 200 nations of people.

Second we have been cognisant of our Elder wisdom-based traditions – Dr

Lowitja O'Donoghue will deliver the opening plenary. We also have a principle of mentoring, with a constitutional requirement that Board members mentor young people into roles and responsibilities, and we have seven generations of representatives in the Congress delegation. Come the first week in June 2011, the delegates of the Congress will decide on policy issues upon which to engender action. To do this, and for the first time within the context of our own company, we will have people with far-ranging experience in different portfolio areas collaborating together, to formulate new ways of looking at issues and delivering results not possible from within the current dominant discourses of Indigenous Affairs.

I, for example, would be interested to see how the issue of teenage pregnancy could be better dealt with. The negative incentives are very powerful: the receipt of baby money; the lack of buoyant market economies; the transitions between years 10 and 11 and year 12 and university or employment; access to public housing and a higher amount of money in the welfare payments; entrapment; the way young people are socialised; the use of alcohol and drugs; young women's empowerment; and sexual education and reproductive health all contribute to these negative incentives being taken advantage of. What could happen if members invested in health, housing, education, land rights, economic development, and traditional owners, parents and young people could set up a dialogue around this and other issues? What would then happen if we were inclusive of the diversity of people's lived experiences and able to express what should happen in these instances with clarity, opportunity

and purpose? Who would listen to our collective voice and enable that collective action? Would you? Indeed, you must.

The second national organisation is another national company, the Lowitja Institute, named after Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue. This company is a continuation of the 15 years' worth of activity carried out through the Cooperative Research Centre program, which has invested more than \$20million into health research that directly benefits Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Over the course of 15 years, our work in service innovation, health promotion and wellbeing, administration and governance, support for training and development, and our research and policy impact has delivered a continuous quality improvement model used by more than 160 Aboriginal health care centres across Australia; training workshops and tools and resources for helping people with mental health problems accessed by more than 600 service providers; and the online Aboriginal Patient Quality Improvement Toolkit for Hospital Staff which is accessible to all hospitals in Australia. We have published textbooks, written more than 230 peer-reviewed articles in journals, won major awards and sponsored 35+ postgraduate students, the majority of whom now work in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health.

We are Australia's original innovators and inventors – this is a tradition we continue still. Who can forget the ingenuity of the Bush Mechanics? There are many instances where Aboriginal and Islander people successfully embrace new technology and often take the lead in Australian innovative policy and practice.

Aboriginal medical services have pioneered some of the most innovative methods of delivering primary health care in the world, and were at the table in 1978 when the Alma Ata declaration was made. Here in the NT it has been AMSANT that has been one of the most vocal advocates for the introduction of e-health, an innovation that will benefit all Territorians, black and white; mobile telephony has been embraced by Aboriginal people across the country, old and young from the streets of Redfern to the back blocks of Cape York, with mobile messaging even now being introduced as an essential health promotion tool by small Aboriginal and Islander organisations in Far North Queensland; the adoption of sustainable water use energy; and the research currently underway into possible Aboriginal burning practices being used as carbon mitigation puts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at the forefront of innovative thinking and design in Australia. We have not had eight Australians of the Year for no reason.

This innovation makes us leaders in our own fields and recognisable achievers and contributors to society at large. Our way forward into Australian society will come about from our own actions, and a change in the way we use discourses to frame our contribution. In this, the final part of the oration, I want to share some signposts that mark the journey toward a dialogue so needed to reconcile this country – one in which we take responsibility to contribute, and invite the contribution of others. This dialogue then mitigates against any group of people being the ‘acceptable loss’ for the greater good. Evoking excellence in our society, therefore,

requires a deep appreciation of the necessity for diverse thinking, and of competence in co-creating a society that is safe and accepting on the one hand and honest and challenging on the other.

From these dialogues might come new discourses that are drawn to peace without the use of militarised language, that do much, much more than structure us as simply disadvantaged, and allow us to each have our own individual life pattern and responsibilities and choose the way in which we contribute to Australian society as collectives, in ways that are richly diverse. We cannot doubt that we have been given the intellectual vision, the spiritual insight and even the physical resources we need for transitioning our mindsets, our language, our views of each other and who we can be together that is demanded in these times.

In the end, then, what is called for is nothing more, and nothing less, than what all the world's great religions demand – that we do unto others as we would have them do unto us. Let us be our brother's keeper, Scripture tells us. Let us be our sister's keeper. Let us find that common stake we all have in one another, and let our politics reflect that spirit as well.

For we have a choice in this country.

It is not enough to give health care to the sick, or jobs to the jobless or education to our children. But it is where we start. It is where our union grows stronger, that is where the perfection begins.

Regardless of what combination of policies and proposals get us to this

goal, we must reach it. We must act, and we must act boldly. We no longer have an excuse for caution. Leaders no longer have a reason to be timid. And Australia can no longer afford inaction. That's not who we are – and that's not the story of our nation's improbable progress.

Never forget that we have it within our power to shape history in this country. It is required of all of us here today to be mindful of how our own language either reproduces the dominant tired anti-vision discourses, or engages with the new paradigms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leadership, community and identity. We can and must learn the lessons from William Redfern's life: it was not in his character to sit idly by as a victim of fate or circumstance, and neither should it be ours. For we are a people of action and innovation, forever pushing the boundaries of what's possible. Now is the time to push those boundaries once more, we here, together, today.

Thank you.