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Independent Scholars  
Association of Australia

*The Lucky Country 50 Years On*

***Fifty Years  
on the road to health and justice  
for Aboriginal and Torres Strait  
Islander people***

**By**

**Pat Anderson**

**Chairperson,  
the Lowitja Institute**

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Good morning ladies and gentlemen,

.I acknowledge and pay respects to the Ngunnawal and the Ngambi Peoples, traditional custodians of the land on which we are meeting today.

I would like to thank the Independent Scholars Association of Australia for inviting me to speak today, and like Julia Horne, to share some personal reflections with you about the last fifty years on the long road towards health and justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

I would like to start with the past, and give you my impressions of what the world looked like for a young Aboriginal woman growing up in Darwin in the 1960s, at the time when Donald Horne was writing *The Lucky Country*.

I then propose to move on to look at today, and reflect on the contemporary policy and political scene in our post-2007 'Era of Intervention' – and how this is affecting the First Peoples of this country

Last, I would like to look to the future, to the prospects for positive change and the emerging cohort of young Aboriginal leaders.

Of course, in the short time I have with you today, there is no way to do justice to the full depth and scope of the last fifty years of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander history.

I will therefore be talking to you very much from a personal perspective, and concentrating on one particular theme – education – as a way of unpacking the changes we have seen – and the changes we have failed to see – in the last half-century.

Let me start by taking you back to Parap Camp in Darwin, where I grew up in the 1950s, with my mother, my father and my five sisters.

My mother was one of the Stolen Generations, taken as a young girl by white men on horseback from her Alywarre family in the country north-east of Alice Springs, sometime in the early 1920s.

She was brought to Darwin, a thousand miles from home and family, and grew up in the Kahlin compound,

along with girls and some boys from across the Northern Territory.

If you want to learn more about life in Kahlin compound, I highly recommend the *Bringing them Home* report about the Stolen Generations, and the book by Barbara Cummings called *Take this child*<sup>1</sup>.

If you read this book – or if you could have spoken to my mother or any of the children who grew each other up in the Compound– you would quickly see through the myth that Aboriginal children were taken away from their families for their own good, to provide them with the education and training that would help them “better themselves” (as it was put back then).

(There’s a whole language associated with this period – a point Julia also made this morning).

The training my mother received did not go beyond needlework and the jobs needed to keep the compound clean and tidy.

She was not taught to read and write.

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<sup>1</sup> Cummings, Barbara, *Take This Child...From Kahlin Compound to the Retta Dixon Children's Home*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, 1990

Instead, she was prepared for domestic work and, when she was old enough, she was lined up with the other girls by the Superintendent of the Compound, while non-Aboriginal women came to choose who they wanted to work for them as domestic servants in return for board and lodging.

My mother was sent to work on a farm near Darwin, and there she stayed for several years, working in the homestead and doing maintenance in the yards and looking after children.

Eventually, she met my father – a Swedish sailor who had jumped ship in Perth.

Once married, they went to live in Parap Camp in Darwin

This was the world in which I and my sisters grew up.

Critically, and unlike my mother and so many of her generation, we grew up with an education.

On Parap Camp, going to school was non-negotiable – it was unquestioned and simply expected of us, not

only by our parents but by the mainstream system as well, which would ensure that we attended.

The schooling we received had its deficiencies – I remember in particular being told as a primary school child about how Captain Cook had ‘discovered’ Australia, and even at that age I remember thinking ‘hang about, that’s not true!’.

It was my first lesson in how Aboriginal experience can be systemically denied and written out of history.

But nevertheless, unlike my mother, I was allowed to learn to read and write, and for me this formed the basis for everything that came after.

Because, by the 1960s – the period that Donald Horne was reflecting upon in his famous book – we were entering a period of great change globally, and a time when within Australia the campaign for our rights as Aboriginal people was intensifying.

In this period, I got another education: a political education.

This education was underpinned by two important principles: that of collective action on the one hand, and optimism about our ability to change the world on the other.

In terms of collective action: we knew that we were part of a much bigger movement for social justice, across Australia and internationally.

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

And although Darwin was an intensely local place of less than 10,000 people, nevertheless through the radio we knew 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.

Sadly it was only a bit later that I became aware of the Native American and Canadian situation and recognised them as being Indigenous, like us.

These movements 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.

But our notion of collective action was also reinforced closer to home by the support of non-Aboriginal people and organisations.

For example, the wharfies in Darwin used to donate a shilling a week from their pay packets to help the Aboriginal kids in Darwin.

One of the things this fund was used for was to have a Christmas party for the kids living in the Aboriginal camps of Darwin – I remember getting my first book from one of these parties when I was about 11 years old, a copy of Jane Austen’s ‘Pride and Prejudice’, complete with my name written inside it.

So, we knew that there were people in the non-Aboriginal world too who were our allies and supporters.

This collective, international view of the world, reinforced our optimistic view about the future.

We were confident that, working together, we could change our world.

We were not naive – we knew it would not be easy.

We knew 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.

We knew that as Aboriginal people nothing would be given to us unless we fought for it.

As the title of this session says – luck had nothing to do with our successes.

Nevertheless, there was a fundamental optimism about those times for us.

In Darwin this optimism was reflected in the work of the “Half-Caste Association” (again some of the language of those times is challenging to modern ears) but this organisation fought local battles over discrimination, demanding full citizenship rights and an end to policy discrimination on the basis of race.

And our optimism was strengthened by the knowledge 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).

With an education, and with this swelling movement around me, as a young Aboriginal woman in the 1960s, I grew up believing that change was inevitable, and that I would be part of it, that I would participate in it, and that I could help shape that change.

This belief was given further energy and optimism in the 1970s with the establishment of the first community-controlled Aboriginal organisations: Land Councils, legal services, health services and others.

These organisations have been responsible for many great and enduring positive changes in many Aboriginal people's lives over the last fifty years.

So, let me turn from these reflections about what the world looked like for us back in the 1960s when *The Lucky Country* was being published, to the contemporary environment for Australia's First Peoples.

The first thing to say, of course, is that much has improved.

Land rights, our own health services, legal rights and political representation – we even have our own research organisations such as the Lowitja Institute of which I am the current Chairperson: these are substantial achievements which are rightly recognised and celebrated.

And yet, despite these achievements, many of our communities – not all, but many – seem stuck, caught

in cycles of intergenerational unemployment and poverty.

There are still many, many places – especially in rural and remote Australia – where it is a rarity for Aboriginal children to complete school.

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

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 negative cycles of disengagement and powerlessness.

This situation – and the poor school attendance of Aboriginal children in particular – 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.

And 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, their own, or yours or a combination of both.

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** see education a priority for their children.

In some areas, especially remote and rural, one might ask the question – are the schools ready to receive the children?

I have put this question many times over the years – and I know the answer – it is 'no'.

But that's another paper.

Under these circumstances, and given our history, it is unjust to turn around and simplistically point the finger at Aboriginal families, decrying the fact that they are not fulfilling their responsibilities.

This is especially the case as we have also entered a period where the disempowerment of our communities and families has become embedded at the heart of government policy.

If much of the early part of the 20th century was the 'era of assimilation', and the period from the late 1960s was the 'era of self-determination' one could argue that from 2007 we have now entered the 'era of intervention'.

Explicitly or implicitly, this world-view rejects self-determination as a 'failed policy'.

It does not approach our communities as having anything valuable to offer or indeed of having achieved anything in the past.

We are to be the passive recipients of non-Aboriginal "help".

Under the barrage of continually changing government initiatives, few of which have any genuine commitment to local management and control, I know that in many places, Aboriginal people feel marginalized from the decision-making processes in their own communities, even in their own families.

The nation-state now sits at our kitchen tables – just as it used to do.

Many families in remote areas, and in some cases whole communities, have suffered a fundamental loss of hope about the future, and of the pathways to that future that education can provide.

So how do we turn this around?

Are there reasons for optimism about the future?

For me, the significant change the future is bringing is the emergence of a new generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders.

Critically for our collective future, these young people are well-educated and healthier than my generation.

When *The Lucky Country* was published, not a single Aboriginal person had graduated from University in this country.

Today, we have twenty-five thousand of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander university graduates around the country<sup>2</sup>.

This is something to celebrate.

They are the ones who have managed to escape the cycle of poor education, poverty and disempowerment I described earlier.

Most of them have escaped that negative cycle because they are the daughters and sons – or grand-daughters and grandsons – of those who did get an education and did get the benefits from it.

So, what is the challenge, in my view, for this next generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders?

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<sup>2</sup> Source: Reconciliation Australia (<http://www.reconciliation.org.au/home/latest/five-fast-facts--recognising-indigenous-achievement-in-higher-education>)

First, let me say that I am not advocating some nostalgic return to the 'good old days' of the Aboriginal struggle of the 1960s.

The methods, arguments and images of the past will not necessarily work today, and our new leaders will need to redefine the campaign for social justice in a way that matches **their own** experience, knowledge and skills.

The situation they face is different.

It needs new thinking and new strategies.

Nevertheless, whatever strategies or methods we use going into the future, I would suggest that part of the challenge for the new generation of Aboriginal leaders is rebuilding a sense of collective action and optimism amongst our peoples.

We need to be able to base our actions on a foundation of self-belief, on an assurance that **'yes we can'** change the world.

I remind myself that – despite the incredible pressures people are under – the ideals of self-reliance and self-determination have never disappeared amongst our peoples.

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.

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

Another challenge facing this new generation is the question of identity.

They need to grab this debate and make it as they see it.

Take hold of it and not be hurt bystanders.

And I would suggest that our new leaders will also face the challenge of ensuring that the next generation of kids – wherever they may be in Aboriginal Australia, and whatever labels might be placed on them – grow up safe and healthy, and that they receive an education that prepares them for participation in a global, inter-connected world.

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.

I have a lot of confidence in this 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.

And in doing so, they can also draw upon the flexibilities and strengths of Aboriginal culture.

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

We know change and know how to adapt.

We are good at it.

This is our strength.

We are survivors.

The quest, then for this new generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders is to successfully bring together the richness and adaptability of our ancient cultures, with the benefits of formal education.

In doing so, they will enable the next generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples to fully participate in all aspects of the life of the nation as it, too changes.