

**Indigenous Affairs and Public Administration:
Can't We Do Better?**

**The Australia and New Zealand School of Government and
the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet
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Charles Perkins Address

by

Leila Smith

**Knowledge Translation Manager,
Lowitja Institute**

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Thank you Uncle Chikka for your Welcome.

I'd like to acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land that we are meeting upon tonight, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and their Elders past and present. It is our Elders that I want to focus on tonight. I want to pay respect to their experiences and show how that helps us understand where we are today, and how it shapes the emerging and future generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professionals.

My nan, Beryl Smith, is from Wiradjuri country. Our family is from Erambie Mission on the outskirts of Cowra in central NSW.



Growing up at Erambie, Nan's whole life was controlled. There is one road in and one road out of Erambie Mission, and the first house, which acted like a gatehouse, was the white mission manager's house.

Nan's house was inspected regularly by the manager's wife and Nan needed his approval for any guests coming to stay and any travel she wanted to do.

In 1960, my dad, Tom Smith, was 9 years old. His father was working on the railways at Petersham Station when he was hit by a train and killed. Because it was a workplace accident, Nan was entitled to compensation.

She got the compensation, but the Aboriginal Protection Board took the money and told Nan that she could have it only if she wrote to them, and told them what she planned to spend it on. If they agreed it was a good idea, they would hand it over.

That was the extent of the control. It shaped the way she thought too. She romanticised the Mission, the nice manager and his wife, and was comforted by the structure and rules.

When my Dad and his friends came home and talked about land rights, she said 'don't you come in here spouting that land rights rubbish'. She banned it in her house. Her mind was colonised, and she saw this herself in her later years. She admitted to me: 'That was wrong of me to think like that. 'I'm trying to make up for it now by going to Land Council meetings'.

The way we think and act is shaped by the values of policymakers and the spaces they create.

It was the next generation, my father's generation that really broke these shackles. He was part of the first cohort of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander teachers, doctors, public servants, and business owners. They were the trailblazers and included influential people like Charlie Perkins, Gordon Briscoe, Mick Miller, Helen Milroy and many others.

Education played a big role in this of course.

When Dad was a student at Young High School he was having trouble studying. With his father gone, Nan was doing night shifts as a cleaner, and Dad had younger siblings to look after.

His teacher, who was also the principal, asked him to stay after class one day. Then the principal gave him something: it was a key. A key to the school. He knew that Dad was struggling, and said that Dad could stay there and study after school if he locked up on his way out. For a principal, in the 1960s, in regional NSW, to give a teenage Aboriginal boy a key to the school, that is a powerful demonstration of faith. Dad went on to pass his HSC, graduate from university and become a teacher himself.

His principal really went out on a limb for him. Imagine if something had gone wrong and the Department found out that an Aboriginal student had a key to the school and was given permission to stay behind after the teachers had gone home for the day.

We can all have a profound impact on the lives of others who come under our guidance. If we believe in someone we can inspire them to realise their potential.

While our education system is a powerful enabler, we still have a long way to go to make that system work for us, for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

When I was in year 12, there was a group of us Aboriginal students talking outside in the school carpark. One of the girls had just received the news that her final grade for a class had been voided for non-attendance. She turned to me and said 'well Leila, it's up to you now, you'll have to be the one who makes something of themselves for the rest of us'. This Aboriginal girl is smart, strong, and bold, and she is doing exceptional things now after a period of academic and personal struggles.

But her resignation that academic and professional success is not really for us...that is a real and consistent belief.

For the non-Indigenous people in the room tonight, I want you to imagine what it might feel like if you were in high school and everyone around you believed that only one non-Indigenous person from your cohort, if at any at all, would finish year 12 and go to university. Imagine how that could limit your aspirations and your motivations.

Just like Nan's mind was closed to a world beyond the structure of the Mission, our minds are being shaped by policy narratives and attitudes that say success and achievement is really a white space. One or two of us might break through, but that would be it.

When I was at high school in Canberra I was a bit of a nerd. I was a straight A student. I had braces. I even played the clarinet in the school band. But in achieving this, and when I was in these academic circles and spaces, my Aboriginality was never acknowledged, nor celebrated. It was treated as something very separate. For a number of reasons, my motivation and application to my studies went down in year 11 and 12, so too did my grades.

I got into university through an alternative entry scheme for people who showed promise, but their final scores were not high enough to be selected for the course. When I got to university, I arrived at the Tjabal Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Centre at ANU. A space where I could hang out with other Aboriginal students and study and support each other. It was like two halves finally came together.

After that first year adjustment period, my grades gradually went back up and I was awarded first class honours. That mark got me on the Aurora Study Tour and into Cambridge University on a Charlie Perkins Scholarship, both of which are supported by the Commonwealth Government.

We need to explore and unpack what it is that we really value. Policies reflect this and influence behaviours and mindsets. How much do our policies value academic excellence?

What about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, voices, and identity?

Do some things matter more than others?

There was a Review of Higher Education Access and Outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People back in 2012, when I was at the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association. Part of the Terms of Reference for that review was to provide recommendations to achieve population parity. So that the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students in higher education, matched the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Australian population.

Critics said that it couldn't be done. But later that same year the proportion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander first year medical students did just that, it reached population parity.

You might say 'enrolment is one thing, but what about completions'. Five years on, at the Indigenous Doctors' conference last month, many of these students have now graduated.

In this photo, this is just some of them in the photo receiving their graduation stethoscope awards.



I want you think about proportion of Australian postgraduate students at Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard who are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander. What proportion would you think that would be? This year, that proportion is 2.8 percent.

There are 16 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students which account for 2.8 percent of all Australian postgrads at Oxbridge and Harvard; and all got in solely on the basis of their academic merit. A lot of these guys were students just like me, their final 12 mark was unremarkable, but they took off at university.

There is an emerging generation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander professionals, researchers, technicians and business owners.



This photo is a group of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander students, including myself, who were on the Aurora Study Tour that visited these universities in 2012. The same time that Higher Education Report was released. Many of us went on to study at these universities and have now graduated.

From this one group, 4 were accepted to Oxford, 3 to Cambridge and 1 to Harvard. Another topped medicine at UWA and just missed out on a Rhodes Scholarship. In the last five years 25 out of 25 have graduated from Oxford, Cambridge and Harvard.

That time of hearing 'you'll have to be the one who makes it for the rest of us' might actually end. If it was to end, these photos here: this is what that would look like. The generation before mine, our Elders,

which include Charlie Perkins and many others in their generation, they held the line for us. They were the trailblazers. These students in the photos they are the *trail-guides*, so too are the many others who stand beside them in the public service, the universities, our community organisations, and the private sector.

We're moving into a new phase now, I want to finish tonight by calling on you to help this emerging generation (my generation) understand and appreciate the experiences, achievements, and lessons learned from those who've come before us.

This will help us deepen our understanding of the importance of the past.

So that we can learn from the spirit, courage and cultural values of the trailblazers.

So that we can do more to combine both excellence and cultural strength. This should be our legacy to our own grandchildren and generations to come. Thank you.