

'Stepping Up To The Plate'
A speech by Dr Lowitja O'Donoghue AC, CBE, DSG
Opening of the National Congress of Australia's First People
Homebush NSW, Wednesday 8 June 2011

Brothers and sisters, let me begin with acknowledgement, thanks, commendation and congratulations. This gathering is, indeed, cause for celebration.

Firstly, I wish to acknowledge this place as Aboriginal land – always was, always will be.

I thank Norma Ingram, Chicka Madden and the performers for their welcome. Such protocols are important to me – indeed, I'm sure, to all of us here today. They're about basic respect for people and place. They fit together. They are a part of what the Pitjantjatjara people – my mob – call *ngapartji ngapartji*. In other words 'you give, I give...we share'.

I also thank the National Congress Co-Chairs Sam Jeffries and Josephine Bourne for their invitation to speak to you here today. I am honoured to be giving this opening address. I know you will also hear from many other speakers over the course of this gathering and I'm delighted to be in their company.

I take this opportunity to commend all of those whose efforts have brought us to this place today – the selfless women and men who spoke up for a national voice for our people, who shaped this National Congress, and have held it in their capable hands until now: the Steering Committee, the Ethics Council and the inaugural National Executive, including Co-Chairs Sam, Josephine and, earlier, Kerry Arabena.

Lastly, I congratulate all of you selected as delegates for this first national gathering, charged with taking the National Congress forward. This has not been by chance. It has been through a rigorous process that required you to 'buy in' and 'step up'. A process that found you ready, willing and able to meet the challenges ahead.

As I look around the room, I see many familiar faces and friends. While I know that this speech may be reported in the media, I want you to know that it is not to them but to you – my people – that I speak today. You, whose individual and collective greatness is entirely capable of moving me to tears.

In a year or two, I will turn 80 years of age – a milestone that, shamefully, too few of our people reach. In terms of our average life span, this old girl's odometer clicked over for a second run more than a decade ago.

During my lifetime, I have been bestowed with numerous honours and received many accolades. I have a string of letters after my name that, while I never set out to acquire them, give me a certain amount of satisfaction – especially when I remember a particular matron back at Colebrook Children's Home who never missed an opportunity to tell me that I would 'never amount to anything'.

Little would make me more proud, however, than to see the National Congress succeed and for one of its first achievements to be helping to achieve true and lasting recognition of and protection for our people.

But more on that later. For now, let me focus on the National Congress and what it means to me. Far more than a shiny piece of plastic nestling in my purse – yes, I am a proud member, number 1865 – it means that our people have new reason to hope.

Much of my message to you here today revolves around something that I fear has become unfashionable, perhaps even a dirty word, to some in our community. In our desire to have our diversity understood and accepted, some of us have forgotten that unity matters.

About 15 years ago, while still the Chairperson of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), I was interviewed at length for the Australian Biography project¹. I had been talking about even earlier times, the heady days of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) in the lead-up to the 1967 Referendum.

I spoke of the way we came together for a common purpose of improving the conditions for our people everywhere. I recalled that, back then, there was little federal funding for Aboriginal affairs so we financed this fight ourselves, also drawing upon the goodwill and donations of good-hearted non-Aboriginal people.

To get to our meetings, we hitchhiked and pooled our money with a tarpaulin or blanket muster. We stayed in caravan parks or, if somebody was fortunate enough to have enough money to pay for a hotel room, we all camped in there together. In Canberra, that was often at Brassey House, now known as the Brassey Hotel, where the staff kindly turned a blind eye to the fact that the numbers in the breakfast room of a morning often far outnumbered the number of guests they had registered!

These were interesting and exciting times – hard too – but times of real unity and solidarity amongst our people.

The Australian Biography interviewer remarked that I seemed wistful, nostalgic. It was an insightful observation. To this day, I don't believe we've ever recaptured that unity. Just what accounts for that leaching of something so

fundamental and good, I can't say. But I'll be frank with you: I am placing considerable hope in this National Congress to help recapture it. Not for the sake of a placard or slogan but because, through unity, we will achieve much greater outcomes.

So many good things are happening in our communities. We are kicking goals, opening doors and breaking through the glass and brown ceilings. And, yet, the times when we wholeheartedly and unanimously celebrate these achievements are relatively few.

Sometimes, unfathomably, we gloss over the good. Or we snipe or think to ourselves 'who do they think they are?' Sometimes we let personal insecurities cloud our judgement. When honourable, hard-working people amongst us make mistakes, we're quick to crucify them and slow to forget.

Perhaps we do this unconsciously but the effect is just the same. It undermines and disheartens worthy individuals and destabilises our organisations and communities. It dishonours the work of our heroes, past and present. They didn't build what they did for us to tear it down. We're better than that. Let it stop now, let us consciously decide that we will celebrate, nurture and support each other instead.

In some ways, this is a cautionary tale directed at each of you. Already, the National Congress has its detractors. Even before it was out of the showroom and on the road, there were those who made it clear that they'd like to see it in the scrap yard.

I am not talking about those who have legitimate, thoughtful suggestions on ways the National Congress model could be improved. I have no doubt at all that it can, should and will be improved in all kinds of ways over time; we should expect the third or even second National Congress to be considerably different to this one.

I am talking about a tide of naysayers who are standing by, waiting and even hoping for this organisation to fail. Their reasons are varied; some quite benign, others more disturbing. Old-fashioned racism may factor, and arrogance too. Some may view the National Congress as a threat to old status quos or new ones that have emerged since ATSIC disappeared. Sadly, others may be so beaten down by life's challenges or past disappointments that their ability to comprehend real potential and promise has atrophied.

To all of these people, I say simply: Think again. In my opinion, the reasons why the National Congress **could fail** are far outweighed by the reasons why it **should succeed**. There are many such reasons here at this gathering.

Some elements of the media have led a brazen and destructive charge against the National Congress. How ironic that some of those for whom this organisation has the least application might feel so threatened by it.

I appeal to such detractors to give the National Congress a fair go. In fact, I challenge them: Would you have the courage to submit to the same rigorous process as those involved in the National Congress? How would you fare? And do you, too, have what it takes to be a builder, not a wrecker? To sacrifice a front-page story or political point for thoughtful analysis, debate and collaboration.

The National Congress, as it stands today, is the result of extensive nationwide consultations. A maker inevitably leaves his or her mark on their creation. Our people have spoken and our fingerprints are all over the National Congress. We can expect to be judged on our part in its creation and its success or otherwise. As a result, this is an organisation that:

- * Is a company, limited by guarantee, at arms length from government.
- * Has built-in gender equity at all levels of representation.
- * Sets new levels of excellence and expectation (unrivalled in Australian society, whether in government or the public, private or community sectors); and
- * Has a structure interwoven with the golden threads of our communities; talented individuals and representative organisations across all spheres.

Some people regard me as a radical, others see me as quite conservative. I would say I'm both, as well as a pretty open book. My mixed feelings about the demise of ATSIC – for example, my belief that it was an organisation set up to fail, as well as my disappointment in some people and events of the past – are on the public record and I see no need to re-hash them here. Suffice to say that over the past six years, I have despaired over the absence of a national Indigenous voice, a vehicle for our self-determination.

I will concede that, as the National Congress was being fashioned, I wondered at times whether our community had the goods when it came to electing the best people. Then, when the notion of an Ethics Council emerged, I questioned what right anyone had to judge any of us by standards not applicable anywhere else. I asked myself if the imposition of gender balance was really necessary. And when the proposed multi-tiered structure was revealed, I found it complicated.

Having now had time to metabolise all of these things, I have arrived at a point where I am comfortable with the National Congress as a **working model**. I venture that it is, as my friend Paul Keating last week described the national *Native Title Act 1993*, 'necessarily complex'ⁱⁱⁱ but nonetheless inspired.

I am excited, for example, to see what emerges from the blending of individuals – many of you leaders in your fields – with representatives of sectoral, state and territory and national organisations constituted in various ways.

And I have no doubt that gender balance would not have been achieved organically any time soon. Let it be declared, here and now, that the old 'Boy's Club' is officially dead – in this forum at least. I thank my brothers for supporting our sisters in this. I think we can be proud that, together, we've done something that no-one else has had the guts to do.

I would like now to make a few humble suggestions and issue a few challenges to you as delegates. Some are borne from my own experience; others are just common sense.

I say that you should expect the going to be tough and, regrettably, for things to get personal from time to time. The path you have chosen is not for the fainthearted. Some of your biggest critics will be your own people, so steel yourselves.

A people's movement will necessarily take time to build. I hope you will encourage membership of the National Congress – both within your own families and communities but also far beyond them.

Of course, an organisation with 100,000 inactive members may as well have none. It is not enough to say blithely, 'I'm a member of the National Congress' and do no more. That is having one foot inside the camp and the other foot out, ready to cut and run when the going gets tough. Every one of our people needs to decide: Are you out or are you in? And if you're out, run your own race and let the rest of us run ours.

I am not the first person, nor will I be the last, to observe that the National Congress will only ever be as good, energetic, dynamic, staunch and fearless as all of its people – elected representatives, delegates such as yourselves, members and staff. And none of us should wait for the administration to do all of the heavy lifting.

Others have their roles to play too, including governments, opposition parties and public servants.

The Federal Government has said that it will work with the National Congress, including on measures to close the gap in Indigenous life outcomes and opportunities. The National Congress must also work with governments of all persuasions on this, **and everything else on our agenda.**

Common features of all of ATSIC's successful negotiations with Government – yes, there were some – were the ability to sensibly argue our position, hold our ground and maintain a good measure of diplomacy (even when it was hard to do). These will also hold the National Congress in good stead, especially when governments – themselves facing challenges – begin looking for easy ways out. Don't give them those outs. Send a message that the National Congress is here to stay.

One of the criticisms I have made of ATSIC is that, on a few occasions, it got too close to Government – for example, where Australia was represented as a country at international forums. We dealt with this at the Working Group on Indigenous Populations (WGIP) in Geneva by asking for and securing separate seats for ATSIC representatives, apart from Government and public servants.

Yesterday, I got the feeling that some people were a little afraid to mention ATSIC. I'm not one of them, because I know that lessons unlearned are opportunities lost.

The National Congress can learn much from the experiences of ATSIC and others. In the international context, for example, it must always remember that it exists to advocate for our people, not for Australia per se. While taking a strategic and constructive approach, the National Congress must not be afraid to flex its muscles of independence where required.

For all of the talking that will take place here this week, I also hope there'll be a great deal of listening. You have much to learn from each other. It is important that you come with ideas but none set in concrete, and without personal hobbyhorses that will achieve little for the greater good. After sharing and listening, you will be in a position to decide what issues are truly critical and should be addressed first.

Which brings me to my own personal number one priority – one in which I sincerely hope the National Congress will play a major role. It is something that can underpin the full plethora of other issues that the National Congress will be concerned with. I am talking about advancing constitutional reform, specifically recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Australian Constitution.

The Expert Panel on Constitutional Recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples will advise the Federal Government on this before the end of the year, with a view to a referendum on the subject being held before the next federal election.

Since the 1967 Referendum, Australia has been living a lie. It has patted itself on the back as a fair country, one that treats its citizens equally and, especially, protects the vulnerable.

Don't get me wrong. I am proud to have helped to secure the 'Yes' vote that recognised us as citizens and more than mere flora and fauna. It was important. But it also pains me to know that the Constitution still contains a potentially discriminatory power, which can be used by the Commonwealth against our people or, indeed, any other race. And that it still lacks any explicit recognition of us or our place as the First Australians.

Of course, our founding document was framed in a different era. Many say we cannot judge it by today's standards. Perhaps not but we **can** bring it into line with those standards. This would be good not only for our own heads and our hearts, as per advice from the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists (RANZCP)ⁱⁱⁱ, but also for the nation's soul.

In order to succeed, we need political bipartisanship, which thankfully we have at present. And we need to secure the agreement of the Australian people. A national majority of voters, and a majority of voters in a majority of states – a Herculean task, and one that has seen many more referenda fail than succeed in the past.

Recent debate has swirled around how far we can push the issue of constitutional recognition, where the line is between success and failure? Does it limit matters to mere mention in a preamble that might be inserted in the Constitution? Or can we move beyond relative tokenism to something more meaningful? I strongly hope for the latter.

These will not be easy questions to answer but make no mistake – this is truly a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to make things right for our country. This is something around which the National Congress could play a valuable role; informing and encouraging our people to become actively involved and fully engaged. I hope that today's various sessions on constitutional reform will help us all arrive at a better understanding of the mechanics, realities and possibilities of what lies ahead. In order to move beyond superficialities in a unified way, we first need to have an informed and robust discussion amongst ourselves.

I spoke earlier about doing justice to our heroes. I would like to leave you with words from a couple of my personal heroes, and some others who seem

destined to be. They all go to some of what I have raised for the National Congress here today – pride, responsibility, strategy, the constructive role we can all play, and seizing the day.

First, two quotes from a great friend of our people, South Africa's Archbishop Desmond Tutu. As he said:

My father always used to say, 'Don't raise your voice. Improve your argument'. Good sense does not always lie with the loudest shouters, nor can we say that a large, unruly crowd is always the best arbiter of what is right.^{iv}

and

Do your little bit of good where you are; it's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.^v

And, finally, some wisdom from two sources from closer to home. Coincidentally, they're both musical in origin but those who know me well know that I love a good singalong.

The first comes from the Colli Crew, talented youngsters from north-western New South Wales, whose rap song 'Talk of the town'^{vi} I'm reliably informed is a hit on YouTube:

*Think about the choices that you make.
Take control of your wheel, have no shame.
When you play the game, screw your head on straight.
Step up the plate, step up the plate.
Don't wait til it's too late.*

And, one of my personal favourites – certainly more my own speed – Troy Cassar-Daley from his beautiful song 'I love this place'^{vii}:

*The world outside is a changing thing
One moment you're out, next you're in
I've got a good feeling that we're going to win
If we don't look back on the things that make us sorry
On the road ahead, I can see the sun is shining on your face
I love this place*

Today, I've got a good feeling too. Thank you.

ⁱ Australian Biography website, www.australianbiography.gov.au/subjects/odonoghue/, 22 March 1994.

ⁱⁱ The Hon. Paul Keating, 2011 Lowitja O'Donoghue Oration, Adelaide, 31 May 2011.

ⁱⁱⁱ RANZCP media release, 'Constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians', 31 May 2011.

^{iv} From 'Believe: The Words and Inspiration of Archbishop Desmond Tutu', 2007.

^v From 'Hope and Suffering: Sermons and Speeches by Desmond Tutu', 1984.

^{vi} From 'Talk of the Town' by the Colli Crew, Collarenebri Central School, May 2011.

^{vii} From 'I Love This Place' by Troy Cassar-Daley, April 2009.