

**Speech by Jody Broun**

**Co-Chair Elect**

**National Congress of Australia's First Peoples**

**7 June 2011**

Good afternoon to all of you, Wandiwah, in my language. I would like to begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are on and pay my respects to the elders, those in the room and but also those that have passed and our ancestors that had such wisdom and that we are building on now. I want to acknowledge my Co-Chair, Les Malezer. We have a strong model and we are going to be working together really strongly to implement the dream of the Congress.

I put up one of my paintings because I went through some that I had on my laptop. This one's called "The Brough Line" and it is about the division among Australia's First Peoples that occurs when politicians get involved in some of our business. It was done in 2006 I think that one. I will just leave that up there, but there are a couple of others to come as well.

I want to acknowledge that in this room we have got many First Peoples represented. We have groups from all over Australia and we have around 120 delegates. I reckon we have one hundred different language groups represented which is fantastic. So I want to say welcome to all of you and I am really proud to be in this room with you.

It's in the spirit of unity that the Congress must be built and it's got to be a unity that's defined by our similarities and not by our differences. It is fantastic to be here today at what I think is the beginning of the new era for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia. One in which we take a strong independent stake in our future, one in which we come together as Australia's First Peoples to set our path, and one in which we are equals in the relationship with government and other partners.

I feel excited and I feel privileged and extremely honoured to have been elected the female Co-Chair of the Congress and I thank all of those members who voted for me. I feel particularly privileged when you look at the calibre of the other candidates and indeed the calibre of all the people in this room. It is just amazing to have the strength of the people and the skills and experience that is in this room. I hate to think how many years of experience in Aboriginal affairs is sitting in this room. So I do thank you for giving me this opportunity and having the belief in me to lead the Congress for the next two years and I intend to ensure that the Congress lives up to your expectations.

There are many significant dates and events in the history of Australia's First Peoples. Obviously January 1788 was significant, the Mabo decision, the '67 referendum, the apology to the stolen generations, Cathy Freeman winning gold at the Sydney Olympics and now the first national Congress meeting 7 June 2011. Yay, we are here! And by tonight we will have an elected board from the delegates. I do want to congratulate all of you on becoming delegates to be part of this historic event and to be part of this Congress. I think this is the start of something beautiful and to quote those Aussie horn bags: "I can feel it in my waters"!

But we will have our work cut out for us and there is a lot to do. Les and I will be very busy over the next couple of years.

I am an Yindjibarndi woman from the Pilbara in WA and most of my family including my mother live in Roebourne but are really actually spread throughout the Pilbara as well and with connections into a lot of places in the Pilbara. Our country is more inland than Roebourne. We were located there early in the last century. My mother was stolen from her family at Mulga Downs Station when she was about six. So as a family we share that experience with so many other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. She was placed in Sister Kate's, the orphanage in Perth. She found her family again by coincidence when she was in her twenties when she was living in Wittenoom. I won't read the next bit because I know I will cry. Last year, as she was getting towards seventy, she wanted to show us some of those significant places in her country and where she was taken from and where she was born. I went there with my second son. So we went to those places and it was really moving, obviously very emotional too for her as well as us.

But mum was no victim she bought us kids up fairly strictly. I got a hiding I think the only time I ever wagged school. I didn't do it again. Because mum had been a nurse's aid we had to make our beds with those hospital corners, you know with the ones that you fold and then you tuck under and you can't get into the bed because it's so stiff. Consequently I hate my bed with anything tucked in; I am always pulling it out. But she was very strict on education and part of that was obviously that she didn't have a great education and was sent out to work very young.

I went to teacher's college when I finished year 12 and my first job after a six month stint relief teaching in the public school system was working at Clontarf Aboriginal College as a foundation staff member. And you will see that word "foundation"; it has also been a factor in a lot of the jobs that I have had. It was about my commitment to education, fifteen to nineteen year old kids who had been expelled or excluded or suspended from every school they had ever been to. It was about giving them back their education and engaging them again in education. I wasn't a lot older than most of them. We had to get our bus driver's licence so we could get them to and from school.

Then I was the Director of Aboriginal Housing at State Housing and it was a huge learning curve. It was about policy and program delivery but also about engaging communities. I worked with communities right across the state. How important it was for people to be involved in decisions about what affected their community came up as an issue again and again, as did employment, involving people in the provision of that housing service. I then did a short stint as Director of Equal Opportunity in Public Employment which was more of a mainstream role getting employment for diversity groups right throughout the public sector.

Then I came to NSW to take up the role of deputy Director-General of DAA and then Director-General later that year. I also did some things like running a community based education program in South Hedland, which again was one of those things where there is a gap. Here is all these kids truanting and what are we going to do about it? Sometimes we have to offer an alternative: we can't just say, "everyone fits in this hole and here is one system and it meets everyone's needs." That will be a theme in some of the things I have got to say. Through all those roles I have continued to learn from community and to be inspired by the resilience of people and to understand how important it is that they take control of their lives and are involved in decisions that affect them.

Last night I met many of you for the first time and caught up with some people I haven't seen for years, which was fantastic. I was encouraged by the level of energy in the room and I know talking to other people, they were as well. Even though many people were tired, they had travelled all day, they might have got up at four, you know I think the people travelling from Brisbane got caught in fog, and were stuck at the airport for hours and hours but they were very excited and stimulated about the potential of the Congress and excited to be part of it.

Obviously we have all got our own reasons for joining the Congress but overall the message I heard was that people wanted to be part of it because that they believed in that unified voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander People. There is obviously many differences and much diversity in the communities we represent and in our individual views and that's a good thing. But that can't be what defines us. Division has been and is used against us to destroy progress whether at the community level or the national level. The old principle of divide and conquer has been used successfully to disassemble communities and structures. It has been used and is still used by columnists and governments and now as a significant barrier in many of our communities.

We are charged with changing that. We have to present a unified Congress, build consensus through the Congress and model that behaviour and adhere to that principle and I firmly believe that. I think from what I have heard today everyone in this room agrees with that as well. It was interesting to hear from Jackie Pata this morning that that is also the key message of the Congress of American Indians. This Congress meeting, the first national meeting of delegates will help to shape the direction and agenda for the Congress for the next two years. It is critically important that you, as representatives of Australia's First Peoples, have input into that process over the next three days openly and enthusiastically and that you determine the future of what is your Congress.

I personally have several priorities for the year ahead and these include building an active membership base, establishing a secure financial future, negotiating agreements with government that recognise the role of the Congress, and achieving success in a number of policy areas. Obviously the highest priority is to increase membership and you have heard that from virtually everyone today. It is vital to the future of the Congress both in terms of the legitimacy and in shaping the positions that the Congress forms on various issues that they accurately reflect the views of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from across Australia. I have heard from many of the people I know that they didn't know about the Congress and they would like to join. There is significant work to be done in promotion of the congress. I expect that Les and I will do a lot of that over the year to raise the profile of the Congress and its objectives and attract new members.

But it's not just up to us; it's up to each you. Promotion and attracting new members is critical and I throw a bit of a challenge out to you. Someone said something about ten members each, I reckon people in this room can go out there and get a hundred each. One hundred new members each by the end of the year we will have twelve thousand members and that's the challenge I throw out to you as delegates. I am sure you didn't put your hand up to be delegates just to come and sit in this room for these three days. So go out there do the promotion, get some more members. I am sure within your communities and families and acquaintances I am sure you know more than one hundred people that you can sell the concept of the Congress to.

I am sure that there are people out there who firstly maybe didn't know about the Congress; I have come across people in my associates who didn't, and people who don't normally become involved in organisations for one reason or another. Getting them involved I think is very important. We can help you with information and support to do that as well. Hopefully from over these three days we get some media and that will also help to promote the Congress and raise some people's interest. I know when the Co-Chairs were announced we did receive quite a lot of media attention. It wasn't all positive, was it? But at least there was a reaction and that went a long way to raising the profile of the Congress.

I think if the Congress Co-Chairs had been announced and there was no media I think we would have been sadly disappointed. So it was great that we actually got that level of attention. I am a firm believer that we have got to increase our membership base making sure that they can contribute to positions that we form and I suggest there are several ways we can do this. Co-Chairs and Directors can host member forums in various locations, we can do surveys like the one we have currently got out there. The newsletter I think is going to be monthly via email. In that newsletter we could have policy shapers. So just one question that we can ask people to get engaged in or even to think about, they have kitchen table discussion, to quote from other people.

Then there is that whole realm of new technology. Perhaps Les and I could do a chat room once a week or something on the internet. There are pod casts and Skype and all sorts of things. I don't know how most of these things work but I am sure I can learn. I want members to feel that they have a stake in the Congress, that they have a role and they can contribute to the direction of the Congress. I will be getting out to the community and I hope that as delegates if I am coming to your location I can connect up with you and you can help me in that work.

I think what was really important out of this morning's speech was the discussion about the youth commission. I am not sure, is there anyone under 25 in this room, put your hand up. That's good, there is obviously no one under 18 though and I think we do really need to maybe extend a little bit down into that youth group and look for emerging young leaders and build that and not necessary that they become members but let's look at that cohort and not leave them out because at 16 a lot of them are already out there a lot of them are active a lot of them have got kids, they have got views on things and we should be engaging with them as well.

The financial security of the Congress is the second point I want to raise and you heard from Lindon Coombes that we have only got that limited funding and we really need to do lot of work around that over the next couple of years. We really need to do that, that's really got to be the basis of the work we do and there are some options and some ideas that we might want to take forward. One is donations and membership fees. Then there is the question of associate members. For example Tranby College has Friends of Tranby. We might want to do that sort of thing.

So there might be a way we can engage with other people who might who want to support us as a Congress. I have already had non-Aboriginal people coming up to me and saying, "How can we support you, can we be members? Is there a category?" Obviously we don't want them to be voting and things like that but can we garner that support? We won't be able to survive on income from membership fees alone, nor from donations. I think we have got to be fairly honest about that. We are going to have to get a significant sum of money to survive.

Philanthropic and corporate contributions are another potential source that we need to investigate. We could do things like negotiate an agreement for percentage of royalties for a period just to establish an investment fund. So there is that on the table, the \$200 million investment fund that we could talk to government about. But maybe we do want to keep completely separate from government funding.

Another idea might be to look at the properties that were assets of ATSIC and bought with ATSIC funds. They have now been divested to various government agencies. Perhaps the rent from those properties could come back as revenue into the Congress. So there is some different ways we could do that. One of the things that I struck on this morning from Jackie was that we can actually be independent from government control without losing that government support.

As Lindon says, there is that unfinished conversation about the investment fund. We are not in an unusual circumstance; a lot of organisations, particularly when they start they don't actually know where they are going to get their funding from. They have to do some negotiation along the trip. It's not all set in stone, I know when I was Vice President of the Institute of Public Administration Australia for four years our funding base was fairly insecure as well as a very small council - I think we had a thousand members. There were membership fees; they only contributed a bit but we had to also run a lot of forums and training and that's where a lot of our main income came from. I don't think we have got necessarily that same avenue but they were in a similar circumstance of having to get in kind support from other organisations of having to get a building, a small amount of money from Premier's Department otherwise they wouldn't exist.

So there is some work to be done in this area. The partnerships with government are particularly important and not necessarily just with government, but I think we do need to formalise that relationship with government. While there is bipartisan support for the Congress I would want to see that we have got formal agreements in place, establish the role and where we are positioned in government decision making processes and I think that will be really important. I would like to see Congress represented at key government forums like ministerial councils and there are a lot of ministerial councils out there on various topics. After these few days when we all work out what sort of policy issues you want us to take forward we can actually start targeting government about some of those. For too long there has not been a cohesive and united voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people at the national level and we need to fill that role with credibility and integrity.

The Congress needs to be an indispensable part of the nation's government. The other thing that Jackie Pata mentioned this morning about that annual meeting with the President, Les Malezer and I were talking and we should also be seeking an annual meeting with the Prime Minister. So that will be on the agenda as well.

Taking forward a policy agenda from this meeting though I think is clearly really important. We could take on a very broad range of issues. When you do the survey online you see how many issues we could potentially touch on. While all of them will be worthwhile we need to determine the ones that we can lead on and also have success in. We can't be experts in everything. Lindon showed you our staffing structure. We are quite a small organisation, we don't want to over-reach. Let's talk about the areas that we can make the most difference in and add the most value to.

There already are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups with expertise in different areas that we can draw on as well. Let's let them be the experts in those things but we can support and add value to the positions of those organisations and advocate lobbying on their behalf if that's required. We need some wins, we need to quickly demonstrate the value of the Congress and make positive and tangible contributions to the wellbeing of Australia's First Peoples. I think that's critical and I think that's one of the points that was made earlier - about people sitting back a bit to see what happens before they join up - so we do actually have to show some successes. So to that end I would be working with the board to agree on three or four actions that we can take this year that will have an impact and show the value of the Congress.

In terms of policy priorities, constitutional recognition obviously is work that we are already involved in and I think you know if you think back to the 1967 referendum the impact that had on Aboriginal people across Australia; a successful referendum on constitutional recognition can have a profound and lasting effect. Similarly if it's not successful it could have a profound and long lasting effect so we have got to be very careful. But it could also mean the recognition of the sovereignty of Australia's First Peoples. I agree with earlier comments, though, that we don't need that sovereignty to be bestowed upon us because we already have it.

Something I have already been asked about a lot in media questions is the NT intervention and where Congress stands on that issue. I think it's really important that there is some discussion at this meeting about where the Congress takes that position. I don't think it's any secret that successive governments have failed in addressing and remedying Aboriginal disadvantage. You know you read documents, you read books, you read reports that go back forty years that go back sixty years, they are still saying the same things. So I still can't quite be convinced that there was an emergency because it was already well known.

I am particularly concerned that Aboriginal disadvantage is often a political football and I want that bipartisan agreement for the Congress and also a commitment to solving those issues with us and in partnership with us. The circumstances of the Alice Springs town camps and I think for that matter a lot of other town camps has made the focus on the Northern Territory. This has meant that there is not a focus in some other places that have similar circumstances so we shouldn't fool ourselves about that. It is a significant issue that we will need to respond to and hold government accountable for. Is there anyone here who's from the NT, from Alice Springs particularly? It would be good if I could speak to you at some point over the next couple of days. We know the PM is out there at the moment doing a tour of Alice Springs and she is going to other communities around that area. I hope she is listening to all groups, not just a few, I think that's really important. And we will be asked what our position is on this matter. I am a firm believer that communities have the right to have that strong voice of speaking for themselves. That means that we need to make sure that at every point, government listens to community and that community has the capacity to speak. I can't speak for individual communities but I can definitely support their voice and support their voice being heard. I am planning to be in Alice Springs and Tennant Creek in a couple of weeks actually with the constitutional recognition expert panel. But I will factor in some of these other discussions with community people.

A big area for me is cultural protection and maintenance. Our culture is really important to who we are and the recognition of Aboriginal peoples' role in preserving and maintaining country and culture is really important and people need to get paid to do that work. Maintaining culture is actually a job. There is a view that people can't expect to live in outstations and be paid by government to be out there. And I say, "why not?" Australia needs to invest in the maintenance of the cultures of Australia's First Peoples. That means giving people an income to be on country and maintain their culture. Rock art is obviously one area that whitefellas, I suppose, can see needs protection and this particular painting of mine I have on screen now is called "Bulldozers on the Burrup". Language and stories and law also need to be protected and continuing the practice of culture is necessary for that. As I said I think individuals and groups should be recompensed for that maintenance of culture because it is such a strong and important part of Australian heritage and that's why I am saying Australia needs to invest in it. But it is Aboriginal heritage first and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to be recompensed to maintain that culture.

I have a favourite poet and I often use his book, Bill Neidjie, He is a Northern Territory old guy, his poetry is more stories I suppose and this is a quote from his book.

"Our story is in the land and is written in those sacred places. My children will look after those places. That's the law. Dreaming place you can't change it. No matter who you are. No matter you rich man, no matter you King, you can't change it."

When I read his book it always inspires me and touches me and I think it's great for reminding us how important that culture is and to make sure that it is protected.

On that note, last week there was a professor, someone correct me if I am wrong, I am pretty sure he wasn't Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and Jack Thompson who were advocating for the protection of rock art as Australia's heritage. I sort of find it quite concerning that they are taking over that position as the protectors of our heritage. While I agree rock art needs to be preserved and Murajuga which is in the Pilbara on the Dampier Peninsula is a good example of that is being threatened by the gas production up there and its expansion. I think the estimate is that twenty five percent has already been destroyed and lost. I mean there was a huge petroglyph site at Port Hedland along where the railway is now which was completely obliterated.

I think we need to take that on board; it's our heritage and we have to be making that call ourselves and I think Congress should take a strong stake in that. I think we should share that heritage with other Australians for sure but let's not allow them to commandeer that history and culture or to appropriate it as their cause. It is our cause.

I will just touch briefly on education and employment because I think they are critical to our future as First Peoples and I think the Congress should contribute to direction and our policy responses in that regard. And as I mentioned I have had that background in education so it gives me a strong commitment to that.

However I think the Congress should also have opportunity to contribute to broader policy debates that impact on Aboriginal people including climate change and asylum seekers and those sorts of things. There might be something coming through on Family Law, you know, we might want to have a position on that. We don't need to sit back and be passive recipients of government policy but we should be an enthusiastic player in national debate. We will only be able to do that with dynamic input from our members and we will only be able to do it if we have partnerships with organisations that have expertise in various matters and can contribute to that.

So there's some of the policy issues that I feel should dominate our agenda but obviously that's just me. I want to hear from all of you and we want to hear from all the members and that's why the survey is important as well. Then we can determine from that process which of those we take forward. But what's really important is the voice of Australia's First Peoples in the decisions that government make. Too often it's neglected and not represented at the highest levels. Furthermore I think we are at a point where it is important to take back the right to speak for ourselves. Too often our voice is secondary to those of academics and environmentalists particularly non-Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander academics and environmentalists, which to me is perpetuating that colonialist approach. We have to change that conversation and the nature of the dialogue and take it back from those groups as well.

As an organisation we have to be exemplary in our governance. As we all know the scrutiny of Aboriginal organisations is always more stringent than others and requires us to be highly ethical. That term whiter than white comes up, which is basically the highest standard of ethics in governance but maybe we could call it blackest of black, we can change it. The integrity and credibility of the Congress needs to be built so that governments and other potential partners work with us with complete confidence and certainty.

To the Director nominees, congratulations on putting your hand up. I wish you all luck, it will be really great that tomorrow morning we will know who those Directors are. I am heartened that so many of you nominated, it's great to see so many people willing to take on that role and to be involved. The structure of the Congress is new and the board structure with the two directors from each chamber presents a new model to present those interests of Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander people. I look forward to working closely with the successful six people to take the organisation forward and I think we should not be afraid of this model. Let's go into it completely thinking this is the best model and it's going to make a real difference and I think we have to be working really strongly.

Other people have mentioned that we have got our detractors, as does any model. I don't know of any model that doesn't. I am not going to dwell on that, but what I will say that it makes me more determined to ensure the success of the Congress. As I said before, think not about what divides us but what unites us. Appreciate the differences we bring but remember the similarities and the various strengths and skills that we all bring. To me it's like an orchestra playing a symphony, each member plays a different strand of the same music. Each on its own won't sound that great and it might get lost in that background noise but when they all play in unison it's beautiful, it's powerful and its unforgettable.

I look forward to working with Les and building on the foundation laid by the current board and to create a strong and vibrant and legitimate voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Some of the words that Jackie used this morning about being inclusive, smart and ambitious resonated with me. The role we take on is to represent your voice and the consensus view of Congress members to government and partners and in order to do that we need you to fully participate in the processes. We need you to fully participate over the next few days to help us formulate what that future agenda is. One thing I would like to close on is just that our sense of humour has got us by through some hard times in the past and I think we should maintain our sense of humour in the future. So have some fun as well. Thanks very much.