



Jody Broun

Co-Chair, National Congress of Australia's First Peoples

Speech to the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association National Conference

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Wandiwah

Firstly I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we are on today, the Yawuru people, and thank Di Appleby for the welcome to country.

I pay my respects to elders here today and to our ancestors across this country.

I'm Yindjibarndi from the Pilbara in WA. Most of my family live in Roebourne.

Our country is actually more inland in the area of Millstream and Fortescue River. It is a country rich in stories, history and iron ore.

It's a great pleasure to be able to speak to you today at the AIDA Symposium and to see so many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors and medical students. In fact it's a thrill because when I boarded my flight to get here from Perth, the plane was full of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors and medical students. I have also been learning a lot through the presentations regarding post streptococcal, glomerulonephritis and the like.

I speak to you today in my new role as Co-Chair of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, a role to which I was elected to by the members of the organisation in April this year.

I was attracted to this role because the Congress has been established to provide a national and independent voice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders representing our interests to government nationally and internationally in policy and legislation development and implementation.

This is something I have a strong commitment to and believe is critical to the well-being of Aboriginal people.

Since the abolition of ATSIC in 2006 we have been floundering without that independent and strong voice.

Whatever flaws ATSIC had it ensured Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders were involved in policy decisions that affect them at all levels of government. I have no doubt that the NTER would have looked very different had ATSI people been involved in those high level decisions.

And I want to be part of the positive change for our people.

The Congress structure was a result of consultations around Australia led by a Steering Committee co-chaired by Dr Tom Calma and Dr Jackie Huggins and there are several deliberate points of difference between the Congress and ATSIC.

Firstly, it is a company limited by guarantee and therefore independent of government – an organisation that is member led and that gives every member the chance to stand for office and vote for the Co-Chairs.

Secondly the structure is built on a principle of gender equity and accountability from the Co-Chairs, the directors to the delegates, there will be equal representation.

Existing peak bodies and organisations are recognized in the structure and members take an active role in setting the direction of the Congress.

The Congress will not be involved in service delivery

In June we held the inaugural meeting of Congress delegates. 120 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from across the country met in a mood of optimism and excitement. 40 people representing 3 chambers, peak bodies, organisations and individuals.

It was an affirming and uplifting 3 days which I think bodes well for the future of the Congress.

Congress meeting in June reminded us of the importance of the Congress role but also the challenges it will have

The Congress will only succeed in our ambitious agenda with the support of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities.

Dr Lowitja O'Donohue spoke at our June meeting as proud Congress Member number #1865. Lowitja spoke of the unity required for the Congress to be successful and of the important role of members

She said "...it is not enough to say blithely I am a member of the national congress and do no more"

It is about contributing to change and the sort of future and leadership we want

The first elected board was elected at the National Congress by Delegates –

Directors:

- Tammy Solonec and Brian Butler (representing individuals),
- Daphne Yarram/Dennis Eggington (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations/state

peaks)

-Venessa Curnow and Rod Little (national organisations and national peaks).

We discussed many of the key policy issues confronting our people and the range of views expertise and experience in the room contributed to excellent debate.

The Board will now take forward an agenda built on the work done at the National Congress and informed by a survey of Members views.

One of the highest priorities for members is health. This is not surprising given both the health statistics confronting our people and the numbers of our people involved in providing health services. Of which you are an integral and critical part.

In a moment I'll explain what Congress is doing to improve the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

All our policy and advocacy is underpinned by the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples that was adopted in 2007 and formally supported by Australia in 2009.

The Declaration is the most significant achievement in the protection of Indigenous peoples' rights at the international level.

It is a guide and a reference point for us – and a basis of our involvement with government.

This Declaration was negotiated over many years through the United Nations with heavy involvement by Indigenous peoples.

It is a clear statement of our rights – and a tool to both educate government and hold them accountable.

There are many articles within the Declaration that have a direct bearing on our health and wellbeing as First Nation peoples.

The Declaration covers decision-making, culture and spirituality, along with education, employment and participation, health and traditional medicines.

To quote from Article 24:

Indigenous individuals have an equal right to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. States shall take the necessary steps with a view to achieving progressively the realization of this right.

So we have this Declaration – endorsed by the Australian Government – to back up our efforts.

But we still need to work together to achieve the change that is so badly needed to lift up all our people so they share the same life expectancy, the same health outcomes, the same quality of life, as all Australians.

Peak health bodies who are also Members of the Congress have agreed to establish the National Health Leadership Forum (NHLF) and to work through the Congress with myself

and the Chairperson of NACCHO, Justin Mohamed, who is here today, as the Co-Chairs of the NHLF.

The National Health Leadership Forum is established as the primary partnership interface on health for the Congress and the Australian Government and will also play a role in the Closing the Gap Steering Committee (CTGSC) Chaired by Mick Gooda and myself.

It recognizes the value the Congress adds in leadership and in drawing on our members' views, experience and expertise, and the way that Congress allows for us to work holistically across other social areas.

The NHLF is a practical expression of how the Congress can support our member organisations and I take the opportunity today to announce its establishment.

List of members of NHLF

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation.
- Australian Indigenous Doctors' Assoc.
- Australian Indigenous Psychologists Assoc.
- Congress of ATSI Nurses
- Indigenous Allied Health Australia Inc.
- Indigenous Dentists' Assoc. Australia
- National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
- The Lowitja institute
- National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Workers' Association.
- Torres Strait Regional Authority
- National Association Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Physiotherapists

Our first action will be in working with Minister Snowdon on the Health Equality Plan and will require strong connections to the social determinants through Congress and government.

Congress Members have identified mental health and access to service as the principle issues to be addressed and there are a whole range of other issues.

So clearly we will work in collaboration with and recognize the expertise of other bodies such as the Indigenous Mental Health Advisory Group and NATSIHEC (National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Equity Council) and draw on input from other members – individuals and organisations.

Other priorities for the Congress in this our first term include building an active membership base, establishing a secure financial future, negotiating agreements with governments to recognise the role of the Congress and formalising involvement and influence in a number

of policy areas – justice and education. The recently released survey of Congress members strongly supported constitutional recognition as a priority for us to be involved in. About 90% of members saw this as a top priority and constitutional protection of rights and against racial discrimination were highly supported.

It is timely then that the commitment of the government and multi party support for constitutional recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples has seen the appointment of an Expert Panel to consider this issue and report to government in December this year.

I have heard in all the consultations I have attended peoples' concerns reflecting those of Congress members, that is protection of rights and against racial discrimination feature largely in the conversations. There has also been strong support for constitutional protection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures.

People clearly see a connection between recognition in the constitution and policies and program delivery in areas such as the NT Emergency Response, housing and justice.

So while there is an argument that constitutional recognition is only symbolism it has the potential to be much more than that.

I'm not convinced that we will achieve the recognition that is aspired to by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who have attended the consultations. Principles guiding the expert panel of contributing to a unified nation, supported by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, able to be supported by a majority of Australians and legally and technically sound, will by their nature result in compromise.

However what I am convinced of is that constitutional recognition is something sought by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and that it has the potential to change the relationship of our peoples in this country to one that will benefit not only our children but those of all Australians.

And we have commented on and will continue to comment on the future of the NTER, we also commented on the Indigenous Expenditure Review and the Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage reports.

Our members are demanding solidarity and strength, strong leadership and accountability.

Our membership has been growing steadily, over 3000 and it's been less than a year since we have had an office with staff.

As you all know there is so much to do and we need every ounce of unity in order to achieve our goals.

Membership is free and I have forms here with me, so I invite you as professional dedicated people to join the Congress and add your individual voices to help make our representations even stronger. Together we will make a difference.

Thank you for having me here.