SPEECH TO THE ORDER OF AUSTRALIA ASSOCIATION

SHAKING OFF THE DEFICIT

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Good Afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, it is a great pleasure to be here and share some perspectives today. In the ancient language of this area Dhawura nguna dhawura Ngoonawal, Yanggu ngalamanyin dhunimanyin, Ngonnawalwari, dhawurawari, dindi wanggiralidjinyin, This is Ngoonawal country, today we are all meeting on Ngoonawal country, we acknowledge and pay our respects to the Elders and I would like to extend that respect to any Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people here today. I felt privileged to be taught how do to a Ngoonawal acknowledgement in language, it is something that is becoming more common and I think it is a respectful way to acknowledge the fact that we in this land live, love and die on Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander country.

I last spoke to this gathering a little over four years ago when I delivered the 2017 Defence Force Oration, I had just returned from a visit to Iraq and observed some the very difficult but important work that the Australian Defence Force had been doing there in the fight against Daesh or ISIS as it is more commonly known. I also spoke of the importance of the ADF being of and for our society and the importance of being the best warfighting organisation we could be because that was why we existed and was something we couldn't ever afford to lose sight of. The bulk of the speech though was about how we also needed, while maintaining that fundamental focus on warfighting, to continue to evolve culturally and behaviourally and how very different and, I still believe, holistically better, the ADF was in 2017 than the one I joined as a Reservist while still at school in 1978.

With four decades of not having to worry about what to wear to work, I hung up my uniform in the middle of 2018 and started my transition to civilian life. Thankfully for me it was relatively smooth.

The story for many others leaving the ADF is not as positive and you will all no doubt have seen the stories of Veterans' mental health, homelessness, and most tragically, suicides. For a number of years now I have been very worried that in trying to raise awareness of these issues, we have allowed a deficit discourse around veterans to develop. This is a corrosive one both in the image it projects to the broader public, I think most people who have left the ADF in the last few years have been asked how their PTSD is for example, and the impact it has on the individuals themselves who have served. It is a tricky line to walk when you are trying to bring issues into focus to support the excellent work being done by a range of organisations in these areas but to maintain a balanced narrative at the same time.

That journey of transition out of the ADF is part institutional and part personal. They are of course connected, particularly if the mechanics of the Institutional transition don't go well. This was something that I was working on through my time as Vice Chief of the Defence Force, how do we improve the Institutional dimension of transition? How do we make the

process of separating smoother, how do we ensure that support where it is required transitions to the Department of Veterans' Affairs in a way that maintains support for the individual? How do we ensure that processes that are followed are done once don't have to be repeated when responsibility for support is passed to DVA? I do think that process has improved over the last 5 or 6 years, DVA's approach has fundamentally shifted. This sort of change though has a long tail, decisions taken and approaches followed in years gone by won't magically change an individual's circumstances who is impacted by that past practice.

Governments are well aware of the implied social contract that exists between the nation and its society and those that pull on the nation's uniform and serve in the national interest. Expectations vary on how that social contract should be met, it varies widely among Veterans themselves and certainly more broadly across society. It is not just about how much money goes into the Veterans' Affairs budget. That approach reinforces a deficit discourse, reinforces the 'broken Veteran' narrative which by and large does not represent the majority of those who have served. That is one of the reasons that the Government has been so active in relation to veteran's employment in recent years. These programs were developed in parallel as we worked on improving the transition process. They are designed to help those who are having difficulty in transitioning and improving their employment options, but, as importantly they are designed to change the discourse around Veteran employment from a deficit to a strength based one.

That is not to ignore the challenges and problems that need to be fixed but they become harder to deal with if the pervading narrative is one of despair and not one of strength. I think we collectively need to focus on the strengths and positives that a veteran brings to a new workplace and society more broadly rather than what the negative aspects of their lived experience might have been.

That brings me to my transition journey and what I do now. I left the ADF very proud of the organisation that had shaped my life from its beginning, my father having served for more than 20 years in the Navy as well. I remain proud of my own contribution and the change I was able to be a part of particularly in the last decade of my service. I had no real clue of what I wanted to do but knew I wasn't going to just drift off. I enjoyed walking my step kids to school and trying to overcome a life time of sleep deprivation in the few short months I had off! I thought a lot about why being on a shipbuilding panel or working for Defence industry simply didn't float my boat (pardon the pun).

A few weeks into what I had planned to be a six month break, the then Secretary of Prime Minister and Cabinet, Martin Parkinson asked me to come on board as the Associate Secretary of Indigenous Affairs in his department and lead the 1100 or so men and women in the Indigenous Affairs Group. The appeal was instantaneous and then I sat down and tried to unpack why that was the case as I had been warned time and again not to take the first thing that comes up.

At its core was the fact that I had worked out that I wanted to continue to serve in some way and here was a higher purpose very similar to the purpose that got me out of bed for forty years in the ADF. Now I don't mean that in any sort of quasi missionary sense but the notion of working on challenging matters of national importance and the opportunity to

play your small part in making a positive difference is a powerful motivator. To do this in an organisational setting made sense to me, I knew that I would bring my leadership and management experience, I knew I would bring an action orientated approach and some hard won lessons in life in working across many different cultures. I was warned by some that it was a poison chalice, that no matter what you do, you won't be able to make a difference. But, at the end of the day I couldn't think of a more purposeful way to bring my skills to bear.

In framing this next section of this talk it is worth asking what does Indigenous Australia look like? Well today in Australia around 800,000 Australians identify as Indigenous, 80% live in the south east corner of the country with the two biggest populations in Western Sydney and in Brisbane. 50% of that 800,000 are under 25 and there are around 1100 discrete Indigenous communities across the country, many classified as remote or very remote. It is a world where culture, identity and the past really matter.

I am a somewhat reluctant public speaker in this space. As a non-Indigenous person you cannot hope to fully comprehend the story of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people over the last 233 years, a pittance of time in the great arc the Indigenous story of this land in one sense, but for 10 generations, that pittance of time has seemed like an eternity. I am conscious that no matter how much I feel I have learnt, I am only scratching the surface. As I venture into some comments I make it clear that they are informed by my own experience and of course that means by my own biases and overall lack of an intrinsic understanding of the nuances in Australia's Indigenous story and its cultures. Thankfully I have had some amazing people to guide me on my journey over the last 3 years.

It doesn't mean however that non-Indigenous folk shouldn't venture into the discussion but they need to do so with humility, care and respect. So, what I thought I would do today is stay in my lane and focus on some of the things that the Agency has been doing over the last couple of years, so you have a sense of what is happening.

The Agency I lead, the National Indigenous Australians Agency, was formed when we were spun off out of PM&C in July 2019. The Agency's lineage goes back to 1967 following the referendum which gave the Commonwealth particular powers in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the first iteration being the Office of Aboriginal Affairs. It is currently made up of around 1200 people, spread right across the country in about 70 locations which gives us tremendous insights into what is happening on the ground. Around 23% of the workforce identify as Indigenous as do almost half of the most senior leadership (Band 3 and 2). We provide a range of policy advice to Government, we collaborate with and influence mainstream Government departments on a range of issues and administer around $1.3b in grants each year through the Indigenous Advancement Strategy which forms around 8% of the Commonwealth's Indigenous specific outlay. Importantly though we try to work in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and take a place based approach to the work we do, which is an approach that acknowledges and tries to accommodate local circumstances and needs wherever we can.

There is a profound change underway in the way that Government works with Indigenous Australia. Some will no doubt dispute there is any change but from where I sit I am seeing

clear evidence of it. This is in part due to the work we have been doing with the Indigenous community through initiatives such as the Empowered Communities program and more recently as a result of the changes brought about through the new National Agreement on Closing the Gap. It is fair to say that this change is underway at the State and Territory level too. The key difference in approach is the commitment to working with Indigenous Australia through formal and informal partnerships. Working in partnership is hard, it is slow but it is rewarding for all when it works.

One of the best examples of this in action was the work that was done in partnership during the initial stages of the COVID-19 outbreak. To date, touch wood, there has still not been a case of COVID-19 in remote Indigenous communities and across the country only around 0.5% of cases nationally were in the Indigenous community. This is a truly remarkable outcome, sadly, we are unaware of any Indigenous population across the globe that has fared as well. So, how did this happen? By taking a team approach and listening to those who needed to be listened to.

We in the Agency identified very early on that different measures would need to be put in place in remote communities to what was envisaged in the city. We, as were the Department of Health and the Indigenous Health sector, were well aware of the devastating impact COVID-19 would have in community given the high levels of co-morbidities that existed and the difficulty of effectively isolating when housing overcrowding was a major issue. We all knew a different approach was needed.

We listened to the voices of local community leaders and their concerns for their communities and in a coordinated approach with State and Territory Governments, implemented a series of remote travel restrictions under the Bio-Security Act. Essentially remote communities were proactively locked down and isolated to protect the population. This included arranging the movement of people who were in regional and metropolitan centres who wanted to go back to their country where they would face much lower risks. This was backed up by mobilising the Indigenous broadcast sector to keep communities informed through appropriately targeted public health messaging and also by focussing closely on food security in remote communities to ensure people could safely stay in their community.

Of course like in the rest of the country, we are not clear of the threat of this pandemic. Vaccine rollout to remote communities is underway across the country. Take up, just like the broader community, is variable, from highly hesitant to highly enthusiastic. Again we continue to work as a team to emphasise the need for vaccination and on how to best protect a particularly vulnerable group of Australians.

I suspect the Closing the Gap process is familiar to many here. It was a process started in 2008 to try and close the social and economic divide that existed between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia. There was great ambition in this process and there were significant financial resources thrown at it, but it was not really designed with Indigenous people, particularly around how it might be delivered. There was no clear accountability in it. As a result the gaps still exist and in some cases have widened. The phrase Close the Gap itself has now sadly become associated with a deficit discourse.

In late 2018 the Prime Minister agreed to a proposal from a group of Aboriginal community controlled peak organisations to from a partnership between all levels of Government and these peaks to approach Closing the Gap in a different way. We now have a landmark agreement between all levels of Government and the Aboriginal community controlled service delivery sector to do things differently, from how we frame the reforms and the targets that need to be worked on, to how we implement them and how we jointly monitor progress and adjust our cadence as we move through the 10 year agreement.

What is fundamentally different in this agreement to the last is the inclusion of four priority reforms in addition to the 17 socio-economic targets. These reforms focus on working in partnership, strengthening the community controlled sector, transforming mainstream institutions so they are more accessible and safe for Indigenous Australians to use and, a reform built around the collection and use of Indigenous data. These represent the transformative changes that we must see if the gap is to be closed and they are intrinsically framed in a strength based way. To me in many ways they are more important than the targets because if we achieve the changes inherent in these reforms, they will drive the progress needed.

We are seeing shifts as well in issues like land rights and native title. I won't try and explain the ins and outs of the various forms of land tenure that impact Indigenous Australians around the country. They very much depend on where you are and what land tenure regime you are operating under. For the last few decades we have been going through a determination phase where claims have been considered and assessed and native title granted to various groups of traditional owners. That phase is largely coming to an end and we have entered the post determination phase where the emphasis is much more on how traditional owners can use these rights and unlock the economic potential in their land.

Just as in the Veteran's space, a deficit discourse in Indigenous Affairs works against the positive change you are trying to effect. It is more pervasive in this space and has persisted for decades. Every time there is reporting around community unrest or reports of an Indigenous organisation failing it reinforces this deficit. The truth is there are some amazing stories, positive strength based stories that struggle to get any air time, stories that would slowly but inexorably move the public's perception of the issues.

One of those stories is about the vibrant but still emerging Indigenous business sector in this country and, no, it is not built simply on Aboriginal Art and bush tucker. There are electricians, plumbers, mechanics, consultants, bakers, miners, retailers, tourism operators, architects and construction workers all playing an active part in the economy. Add to that the thousands of Indigenous public servants, health professionals and academics and you have a very different picture to the one that is normally painted.

Just through the Commonwealth's Indigenous Procurement Policy alone, we have seen the amount of Federal Government spending directed to Indigenous business grow from $350m in 2015 to $4.1 b today. This helps drive more and more Indigenous employment. Few people know there are around 20,000 Indigenous students studying at University, this combined with increasing year 12 completion represents an ongoing shift which will have

significant implications for Indigenous representation in both the private and public sector going forward.

None of this is to say there is not more that needs to be done to overcome entrenched disadvantage, there are some truly wicked and awful issues we are working with key stakeholders on. What I am trying to do is present things in a slightly different way which might make people think differently.

The biggest thing we can do systemically is to stop thinking that any one group has the answers and to start doing things with rather than to Indigenous Australians, to work in partnership together on how we overcome the challenges. For those used to making the decisions, It means giving up a little control and power and allow for Indigenous perspectives to get a serious look in.

For the last 18 months we have been on the journey of co-designing an Indigenous Voice. 52 Australians, the majority of whom are Indigenous have come together to give form to what an Indigenous Voice, at both the local and regional and at the national level might look like. They have spent the last 4 months or so taking the initial proposals around the country in one of the biggest consultations on a matter such as this. The 52 were drawn from all sectors and from all parts of the political spectrum. Key Indigenous leaders such as Professors Tom Calma and Marcia Langton, Noel Pearson and Marcia Ella-Duncan joined by non-Indigenous Australians such as Jeff Kennett, Fred Chaney, broadcaster Chris Kenny and former Law Society President Fiona McLeod; certainly not a group with a single world view. What has been fascinating to watch is how well this very diverse group has worked together with great unity of purpose on this project. This is not the product of Government, this is the work of 52 thoughtful individuals bringing their significant expertise and experience to bear on this complex problem.

The group is now writing its final report to Government which will hopefully be passed to Minister Ken Wyatt, our first Indigenous cabinet Minister, sometime in July.

One thing that dogs perceptions in this space and holds back progress is the view that there should be some sort of pan-Aboriginal position on issues. It always bemuses me somewhat when I hear ‘what is the Indigenous view’ or the oft peddled ‘they can’t agree on anything’ argument which gets trotted out when others are trying to shoot down proposals. Indigenous Australia, like Anglo-Saxon Australia or Greek Australia is not homogenous in lived experience nor in outlook on every issue. It is nonsensical to expect it to be so. Yet that view persists, largely due to negative stereotyping and it is an issue that I think we all need to call out when we hear it.

As you can see by this sliver of the things that we do in the Agency that I have talked about today, and it is only a sliver, we are engaged in some significant pieces of work that are crucial to setting the relationship between Governments and Indigenous Australians as we go forward. I said to my team when I started in this role that I did not, as too many do, see the challenges in this space as intractable. Hard, yes, confronting, yes, long term, also sadly yes, but not intractable. What gives me a positive outlook is the inherent talent that exists across the nation and the deep passion to make a difference.

We are not starting from scratch of course and are building on decades of philanthropic and Government effort, some of which it has to be said, has been of varied success, and the achievements of Indigenous activism and community service provision over that time but we are held back by an understandable lack of trust on both sides. That trust must be built over time. But, it will only be built if it becomes evident that co-designing programs and policies and working in partnership is being approached in a genuine way by all concerned.

There are other things that will accelerate that trust building such as becoming a nation that is truly reconciled with its past, a nation whose Indigenous peoples feel the great arc of their story is recognised and respected, and who themselves feel respected and listened to for what they bring to the fabric of our society, to our workplaces and to our institutions.

So for both our veterans and our first peoples there is I think a positive way forward if we can shake off deficit narratives and really focus on the strengths that exist and bring these to the fore and allow them to sit more prominently in our national consciousness. I think that is a task we can all play a role in.