

Closing the Space Between Us

10 Years of Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth

Jeff McMullen

On her night of political victory, Australia's first woman Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, declared that our nation now expects the federal parliament "*to find more common ground in the national interest.*" What does this mean for Indigenous Australians?

There is a chance, a genuine opportunity, in front of us. Clearly there is an emerging political interest in recognizing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the Constitution. How the First Australians were ever left out can only be explained by the invasion, bloodshed, theft of land and denial that flowed from the opening Big Lie of *terra nullius*.

The question now is can the proposed Constitutional change address the damage done, clearly establish important Indigenous rights and establish a better relationship?

The nature of the relationship, closing the space between us, is the key to genuine equality. Bi-partisan support and the goodwill of a majority of Australians in a majority of States will be essential, not only for Constitutional reform and any other legal enforcement of rights, but to make progress on all of the gaps our Government has committed to close : health, housing, education, employment, opportunity and general well being. The relationship will decide almost everything.

The truth is that most Australians today, as in the past, have very little close contact with Indigenous people. While there have been many meaningful relationships from the start and what we might call some entanglement at the edges throughout the last two centuries, by some estimates today just one in seven Australians knows an Aboriginal family. This is not purely a consequence of the 2.7% minority status of Australia's Indigenous people. There is a structured 'space between us', an avoidance structure, sometimes visible and sometimes not. Without real contact on a respectful and informed basis, there can be only the shallowest relationship or none at all. To explain why so few Australians have much knowledge about the contemporary circumstances of Aboriginal people we can point to the mass media's failure to convey an adequate and accurate Big Picture. Without the truth, in all its complexity, the Great Australian Silence continues.

Television and newspapers report the status of Aboriginal remote communities with a sense of outrage, shock and even horror. But there has been so little vigorous reporting to analyze the Government's agenda in seeking to move Aboriginal people off their lands into twenty growth towns in the Northern Territory and to compulsorily acquire their lands for mining and resource development in Western Australia as well. The assault on Aboriginal legal rights has not been thoughtfully examined. Condemnation by the International human rights agencies such as CERD in Geneva and by James Anaya, the UN Special Rapporteur, has been given little weight in our media. Even some of our finest jurists, including the former Chief Justice of the

Family Court, Alastair Nicholson, have been largely ignored as they dissect the unlawfulness of the Intervention and its on-going discrimination.

Why has there been little outcry against the new policies of assimilation aimed at Indigenous people? I have discussed this with Australians in every capital city since June 2007 when the Northern Territory Intervention began. This year I have travelled the country on a rolling thunder tour with Aboriginal elders, film-makers and musicians, screening the documentary, *OUR GENERATION* <www.ourgeneration.org.au> and leading forums about the breakdown of this relationship affects Aboriginal communities. The Aboriginal elders with me, Dr Djiniyini Gondarra from Elcho Island and Rosalie Kunoth-Monks from Utopia, two of the communities taken over by the Intervention, have been struck by the widespread lack of awareness of what is happening in remote Australia.

This brings me to my deep conviction that in the search *for common ground*, as the Prime Minister put it, we need to build far greater real knowledge to create an improved relationship with Indigenous Australians.

Our relationship with Australia's 150,000 young Indigenous people of school age is one of the most crucial areas for improvement and on this front Aboriginal people are showing us the way.

Dr Chris Sarra and his *Stronger Smarter Institute* has focussed on the importance of the fundamental relationships in Australia's education system.

By re-educating school principals and showing them how to work with Aboriginal communities, the *Stronger Smarter* team is shaping a leadership group to change the underachievement. The principals empty their heads of their negative stereotypes. They also realise that cross-cultural education is not something you pick up in a few hours. It is a life-long process of learning to understand others in a diverse human family.

Many of these principals have told me that this re-education has been the single most important phase of their entire professional development. They say that this kind of education relationship enriches everyone.

"No collusion with low expectations," Dr Sarra tells the principals. Every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander student can be stronger and smarter, and not at the expense of their language and culture. Recognizing, respecting and understanding who these young people really are is the starting point of that improved relationship.

Dr Chris Sarra and his wife, Dr Grace Sarra, are both brilliant Aboriginal educators, each with a well-earned PHD, proud parents too, with three children. Their achievement inspires so many others. It shatters the dismal stereotypes, all that talk of malaise and hopelessness, and it shows us the way. This educated man and woman know who they are and want us to recognize the talent and brilliance in every child in this country that awaits our effort and our appreciation. This is re-setting the relationship.

In urban Australia where most Indigenous people live, the most hopeful new movement I have seen for a change in this relationship is AIME, Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience.

The young Indigenous educator, Jack Manning Bancroft and his team are leading 1000 university undergraduates on seven campuses in the mentoring program that now reaches 1000 urban Indigenous high school students in Victoria, NSW and Queensland. This is a bold move to close the space between us.

The non-Indigenous University students who are the AIME mentors have a life-changing and hugely empowering experience. As a Director of AIME'S board I have been watching this happen. The Indigenous high school kids are defying the barrier that nationally sees just 47% complete Year 12 of high school. Over 80% of AIME students graduate from high school and a growing number are going on to study at university like their mentors.

Jack Bancroft sees AIME spreading around dozens of Australian universities until Indigenous students in every region have a network of strong local support. Dr Chris Sarra, has been helping guide the younger Aboriginal team. Importantly, the management structure and working operations of AIME put into daily practice the importance of the right, respectful relationships. Aboriginal educators are in the majority on the board and in the management team. Yet I know of not one non-Indigenous worker at AIME who feels that his or her hard work, honest discussion and shared passion, has not been valued. We are in this together.

By inverting the usual power relationship, AIME and the STRONGER, SMARTER INSTITUTE have established values that create a respectful balance. It makes working together inspiring. The movement for change becomes personal.

In remote communities it is absolutely essential to first establish this personal relationship for one quite fundamental reason. Only Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people can truly lead efforts in the right direction in these communities that have been subjected to bewildering government policies for many lifetimes. We all need to practice the Art of Listening.

Instead of phasing out Indigenous languages in remote school classrooms education programs should respect Indigenous people, their languages and Cultures. This means ensuring that not only education but indeed all vital information is provided to people in a way that they can understand and utilize on their terms. This is their legal right and it is plainly commonsense. But so many problems are still caused by the staggering communication breakdown which sours the relationship.

All of the global evidence, including that from the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development, underscores the importance of empowering and informing Indigenous people, not making them more marginalized, traumatized and dependent on government. Good communication is the starting point.

In our education work at Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth, a decade long effort I have been involved in as Honorary CEO, we have learned much from people in the twenty Indigenous communities we a relationship with.

First, it is essential to understand the traditional Aboriginal social structures and as much history as possible. Second, we recognize that elders, parents and young people already out of school have to be involved in discussions, even if we are primarily working with teachers and students. This is because the most effective Aboriginal communities have strong traditional protocols and a very real belief in the importance of extended family structures. I realize that this is quite a different image to the one conveyed by mass media but it is true in many places I know so well. This kind of family relationship leads us deeper into the core Indigenous knowledge concept of Custodianship. Every man, woman and child must contribute to the balance, sharing in the responsibility. This is how it is meant to be.

Establishing the right relationships has been the key to the success of the Literacy Backpack program introduced by Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth in these twenty communities across the Top End over the past decade. Since 2005 the Australian Government has recognized the impact achieved by this literacy empowerment program and has contributed funding to the early learning, literacy and Cultural education programs for more than 2,500 Aboriginal families.

Aboriginal parents and teachers first pointed out the urgent need to tackle the bookless homes and whole communities that had no accessible libraries. We talked about the Navajo Backpacks I had seen in Native American communities thirty years ago and so the Aboriginal parents decided they would have a backpack in the colours of the Aboriginal flag.

There's no pictures of Ian Thorpe's mug or any branding on the kid's backpack. It belongs to the child, to the community. The parents decided that it would simply carry the child's name and the words, READ ME.

Instead of sending in an army of new workers, adding to the housing pressure in these under-resourced communities, we support Aboriginal people and white teachers in working closely together. We back the people on the front line, the Aboriginal families and teachers.

Ten years ago the communities in the Jawoyn region, south east of Katherine, had an illiteracy rate around 93%. A survey of homes confirmed most were bookless.

When the backpacks started moving between the schools and homes, we began to close that awkward space between us.

The children carry books for themselves and their siblings, logged onto a simple library system set up by an Aboriginal assistant teacher on a lap-top computer.

The mothers and fathers, assistant teachers, and elders then came up with the idea of adding Indigenous newspapers, women's magazines, sport and Cultural news. Within a few years we found not only that the reading ability of the younger children had improved but the older siblings and parents were reading more. Many of these parents now spend the little money they get ordering books for their children.

By listening to what the communities want to do we have been able to build cultural centres, libraries, pre-school programs and begun to connect communities through inter-active smart technology. We have employed some of the best children's authors including Alison Lester and Liz Thompson to develop original stories in the remote

communities working with the kids and their elders. This is an entirely different education relationship. The communities, the families and the kids, know they are in the education story.

One of our latest projects to further develop this closer relationship is a captivating series of children's history books that will benefit all Australian children. The series, built around iconic Australian songs, began when song-writers, Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody contributed *FROM LITTLE THINGS BIG THINGS GROW* about Vincent Lingiari's Wave Hill walkoff and the Struggle for Land Rights. Now we have Shane Howard's Uluru song, *SOLID ROCK- SACRED GROUND*, Archie Roach's *THEY TOOK THE CHILDREN* and Neil Murray's *MY ISLAND HOME*.

Aboriginal children in the communities where these songs are set have been guided by artist, Peter Hudson, to illustrate the lyrics with a vivid sense of each sacred place. The Aboriginal dialects relating to each story are included in every book, adding another measure of Cultural respect. With the support of the publisher, Bernadette Waters of *One Day Hill*, Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth ensures that profits from these little history books are directed back to the education of the Aboriginal children. All Australian children should know about these people and places.

Right around the country we have had some marvellous days and nights, sharing these stories about great Australians like Vincent Lingiari and the Struggle for Aboriginal justice that remains unfinished. Hearing Archie Roach, Shane Howard and Neil Murray supporting one another in these performances large audiences in Melbourne and Sydney have experienced the kind of harmony that comes when everyone is on the same wavelength.

Shane Howard would sing, "The air is a hummin', the rain is a coming, the earth is singing beneath my feet..."

It is when you understand the beauty, power and resilience of the Aboriginal relationship with this land that you begin to shape the right relationship with the people. They will tell you that the land owns us and this is the way we find ourselves in a deeper place, a sense of what it means to be Australian. This is how we will find that elusive common ground.

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Director Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience.
Director Indigenous Australian Engineering Aid Summer School
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Address to Patrick Dodson's National Indigenous Policy and Dialogue Conference,
University of NSW, 2.30pm, 18th November 2010.



Children at Bulla NT with their Literacy Backpacks



Jawoyn children celebrate their Culture at the annual Festival at Beswick Falls, Northern Territory. Walking with Spirits