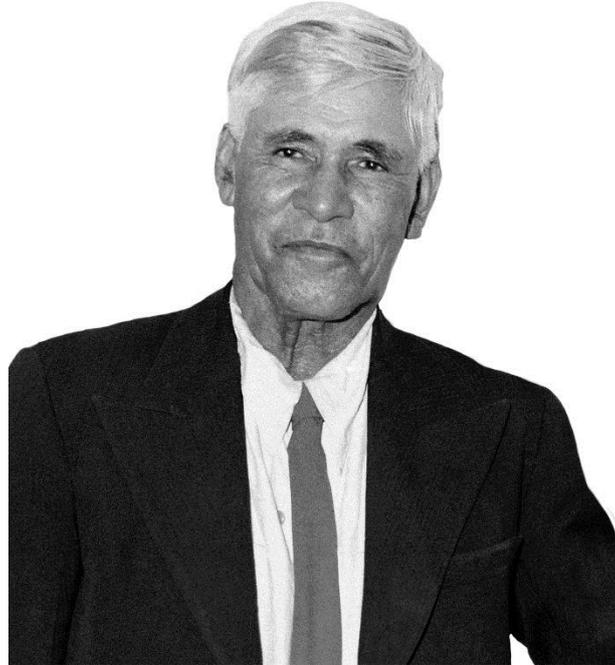


# The Frank Archibald Memorial Lecture Series



1990 Lecture Notes

## **Aboriginal Culture and Learning Styles - A Challenge for Academics in Higher Educational Institution**

Charles N. Perkins



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## **Welfare and Aboriginal People in Australia— Time for a New Direction**

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Whenever the Australian public—particularly politicians and bureaucrats—think of Aboriginal affairs and matters relating to Aboriginal people they automatically think of welfare.

That is a situation of dependency where Aboriginal people are essentially dependent on the majority of society for their needs and wants.

Sad to say, this is in my opinion, the context in which we Aboriginal people basically view ourselves.

We are, it seems, and always have been, encompassed in the welfare system since the arrival of Captain Cook.

This must change, and I will suggest some principles for a total re-organization and redirection of Aboriginal affairs that can project Aboriginal people out of this degrading and self-perpetuating dependency welfare syndrome.

However, at this point it is clear that the essential debate in Australia about "welfare", in general, has not changed since John Gorton made his infamous remarks about the "hand-out mentality" in relation to the funding of Aboriginal poverty and other disadvantages—the causes of which were then historically based.

In 1960, when the idea of "hand-out" was first raised at Federal level, very little was known either about the essential nature of Aboriginal society or about the wide range of disabilities Aboriginal society possessed.

Although the rhetoric is different, the idea of the creation of an "under class" of people is very much in the minds of many welfare planners—even today.

The idea of Aborigines and welfare is, therefore, a very complex question with a long history and one which strikes at the very heart of contemporary Aboriginal politics, the context of which must be seen in an historical framework.

In this paper to begin with, I will be looking at:

1. The way I define "welfare" and how this differs from contemporary Aboriginal predicaments;
2. the concept of "welfare" and its origins;
3. the way Australians, through the concept of "welfare", continue to view as separate Aboriginal social, political, economic and cultural life—in other words, the alienation process.
4. How the manifestations of these misconceptions materialize as Government—State and Federal—policies.

And finally, I want to argue that the history of welfare as applied to Aborigines has been the process of the continuing alienation and dependency on the part of Aboriginal society. Moreover, it seems the present Government, as with its predecessors, continues to provide the circumstances for the perpetuation of the unequal conditions of Aboriginal life.

### **The Concept of Welfare**

Normally "welfare" as applied to Aboriginal affairs is both understood and accepted as part of economics, but because of the disadvantages faced by Aborigines, it cannot be equated in purely economic terms, for the measures used by both economists and public servants do not fit easily into the general definitions.

The way in which I generally understand "welfare", in the orthodox provision of services context, may be stated as:

"the provision of financial support (from the national budgetary processes) to individuals who are demonstrably in need of society's financial support."

Obviously welfare specialists would object, but in general, "welfare" is understood to be the dichotomy between "the deserving" and "the undeserving". Australians would generally categorize Aborigines under the latter. It is precisely for this reason that "poor whites" and Aboriginal questions cannot be understood, or defined, in purely libertarian terms. Aboriginal questions relate to historical paradigms and, as such, have a political component that cannot be defined without reference to change.

Nevertheless in terms of expenditure of funds in this area Australian society must be able to have a certain confidence that the money it spends will have an impact both on Aboriginal questions (needs, requirements, etc.) and on the country's other political and economic priorities. With this in mind, it is important to remember, therefore, that enormous gains have been made in the period from the early 1970s.

If we look at the question of independence of Aboriginal political organizations, and their capacity to both be seen to be self-determining as well as in fact being self-determining, it can be understood that these are as much a criteria for measuring success, or failure, of Government policies as they relate to, not only Governments', but also Aboriginal welfare consumers' accountability to Australian taxpayers.

To understand the differences, therefore, between the libertarian view of welfare and the idea of oppression and welfare, a new historical perspective needs to be constructed.

We should understand, therefore, the way colonial society in the late nineteenth century and, much later, Australian society thought of and developed the concept of "welfare". This is welfare in its broadest sense. The idea was that "welfare" was something that was thought of as being carried out by religious societies, or directly by the churches themselves.

This was the perception most Australians held after the Second World War. For example, the way colonial, and later Australian society, dealt with Aborigines was a direct manifestation of the way moral perspectives were used to view the results of development in general.

The government, as perceived by colonials, was seen as a tool for economic uses, and had little or nothing to do with the way society coped with social and political problems, which resulted from the development of the nation.

By the formation of the first national government of 1901 the concept of welfare was hidden behind the interests of the wealthy, or the powerful groups who did their bidding.

By the first decade of the twentieth century Aboriginal society, in its classical form, had almost disappeared completely. Two decades to the 1930s saw the emergence of totally new problems in which, first, the Church was the agency of Governments and whose responsibility was to make Aborigines ready, in one way or another, for their place in Australian society. However, by the late 1930s the Federal Government had become both a potential benefactor and an actual policy co-ordinator for the states.

Some of the reasons behind the growing Commonwealth dominance of the church mission institutions and the State Government programmes were: the reluctance of the states to provide additional resources for Aboriginal affairs in general; the growing poverty of the Church; the new "half caste" Aboriginal question and associated population explosion; economic interests within the state political structure; and, finally, the growing wealth of the Federal Government.

The dialogue conducted between the State and the Federal Government in the late 1930s, as reflected in the official documents of 1937, indicated the reluctance by the State authorities to fund the increasing financial demands of a growing Aboriginal population.

It was true that population data was collected but the Australian constitution made it illegal for Aboriginal population figures to be published with the national census. This meant that although population figures were available to the State authorities (which they used for their own purposes), the Federal government was in no position to know the magnitude of the Aboriginal population question.

In addition to making policy co-ordination difficult the growing stress on the church missions showed up in a variety of ways. For nearly a century the church mission system performed their duties as if their only task was to safeguard the spiritual needs of the many disparate Aboriginal groups.

The main thrust of their policy was protection and conversion, and while ever the Aboriginal and European societies were segregated the Aboriginal population continued to decline.

However, as more and more Aboriginal labour became available for development more interaction of a social and demographic nature took place. In turn, the Aboriginal population expanded and the same policies were maintained even though the population had almost doubled from the 1920s to the 1930s.

At the same time, the costs of both segregation from the outside world, and internal spiritual and social-care costs, were becoming so great that the church authorities were forced to seek an increasing financial input from the state authorities by way of state grants from the Federal Government.

The State governments' powers, as conferred by the constitution in 1901, were to care for all people within their borders. It seems while ever the Aboriginal population was declining there was little danger of more money and attention being required to deal with that question. However, as indicated, the reality was that the question was changing in a number of ways.

The Aboriginal population was changing both in size and nature. The population increases came mainly from the pastoral areas where Aboriginal labour was an essential feature of pastoral production. At the same time the labour force in the pastoral areas was seasonal and therefore the surplus male and female labour force returned to the mission settlements during the break.

It was true that some groups were practising outstation living, but this had little to do with "Aboriginal traditions" but had more to do with mission administrative costs. The practice was adopted from the pastoralists' cost-cutting strategies because they had been utilizing outstations, both as a way of keeping Aboriginal workers away from the main homesteads and as a reason for not building proper living facilities.

The Blealvey report of 1928 showed clearly the confused and detrimental social effects of the early emergency relief strategies. By the mid 1940s the incumbent Labour government saw that the Aboriginal question, and the associated powers required for its administration, should reside with the federal authorities. This was a time when Labour thought that all things should be centralized but with Aborigines there was a different urgency. For example, in the referendum of 1944 one of the questions asked was one that would grant greater power to the Federal Government, both to count Aborigines in the national census and but also for more appropriate legislation. That referendum was defeated, together with the Labour government, but the Labour party never lost their zeal for centralizing the administration of Aboriginal policy and practice. This became a reality in 1972 and this orthodox form vanished in 1989 with the abolition of the Federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

The successive Menzies Governments, from the 1950s through to the mid-1960s when he retired, gradually increased social welfare benefits for Australian society in general. Although many Aboriginal people were covered by social service benefits, those regarded as "beyond civilization" were excluded.

The referendum of 1967 enabled special efforts to be implemented to provide comprehensive cover for all Aboriginal people. Correspondingly there were to be increasing benefits conferred upon Aborigines after the election of 1972 when Whitlam implemented wide-ranging reform programmes.

Malcolm Fraser, through Viner, Chaney and Baume, modified the social welfare allocations on a more collective basis to benefit communities rather than the individual—a rather strange move considering the Liberal philosophical position towards the promotion of individualism.

The circumstances have not changed since the 1970s and, while federal funding has increased, the role of the Federal Government has been reduced in some significant administrative and policy areas.

It should be noted concepts like "mainstreaming" and "ATSIC" on the one hand have the potential to reduce Aboriginal peoples' capacities to collectively set their own political agendas, while on the other hand, give the impression that funds are in the hands of communities and that they have more of a decision-making role.

It can be argued that, in reality, the concept of "welfare", as it is applied to Aborigines, is used to mystify the diminishing equality of social welfare gains provided during the 1970s and early 1980s.

Recently governments may be seen as eroding Aboriginal political, economic and cultural rights in two ways: first, through the diminution of Aboriginal organizations' capacities to act collectively as a means of protecting their political, economic and cultural self interest; and secondly, there is a danger that Aboriginal organizations, under the new arrangements with ATSIC, could further drive Aborigines to be increasingly more isolated from becoming part of a global Australian political, economic and social milieu. It could become the setting for the final alienation of Aboriginal people from Australian society—the classic contemporary apartheid system—one of our own creation.

### **The Alienation and Dependency of Aboriginal Organizations**

It is clear that since the early 1980s Aboriginal organizations have become preoccupied with following agendas established by others. For example, the economic agenda has been established by the Federal and State Governments while the political agenda has been set by the media and other sectional interests. In the case of the bureaucracy, Aboriginal organizations are pacified by a process of almost total objectification by Government. What this means is that where once Aboriginal groups were able to display a self-interest separate from the mainstream Australian society, today their social consciousness has been totally absorbed by the Government and, as such, by government processes. In that sense, it seems that we Aboriginal people have lost both our identity and our purpose and have contributed to our own alienation and dependency.

Another more insidious manifestation of this process is that, generally, Aboriginal organizations in the states can be seen to lack the kind of creativeness present in the late 1960s and 1970s. It is clear, Aboriginal "social welfare" organizations throughout Australia have adopted more of a class-based posture in that they form a solid part of the "institutionalized status quo". This is due, in part, to the pursuit of survival economic goals. In addition, the blame is partly contained within the role monopolized by Government (consciously or otherwise) which determines the political processes which purge the political and democratic aggression from those organizations and individuals through which it most achieves its goals.

Likewise, the silence from many Aboriginal organizations and individuals, most able to protest on a broad range of general and social welfare issues, shows clearly their dependency on government monies for their survival. The latter effect of such a coercive process is that, through coercion, Aboriginal welfare policies, that is Aboriginal affairs policies, are not properly debated and, as such, impossible to articulate. We are a captive people as never before in our history.

### **Summary**

In summary then, there is no doubt that in a broad sense we, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia, have, as this nation of ours enters this critical decade of the 90s, lost our way. We are floating on an ocean of dreams largely created for us by others. Some of our leaders have neither the credibility nor the quality to lead our people towards a greater vision and a better life. Many of our Aboriginal organizations have lost their fire, creativity and have died on the vine. From this apparent wasteland it is becoming increasingly difficult for Aboriginal people to effectively mount and pursue our own cultural renaissance.

These are strong words that have deliberate intent but we can no longer live in the shadow of our own misery, and cry "poor bugger me" when often the cause in some areas has long since died and the real needs of the people are not being met.

The 1990s should be the decade when we, the Aboriginal people of this country absorb the experience of the past to the extent that the decade will be one of considerable achievement and further consolidation. It is a time for new direction.

We should be in a position to at last throw off the old social welfare stigma, and emerge, even in a preliminary way, as a people within this nation, more self reliant, politically independent and mature, with an essential collective understanding of the economic system.

We are however, more than ever before, as a nation within a nation, more dependent than ever. We are with some exceptions, in every demeaning sense, largely regarded as dependent on our annual welfare handout. We live from one budgetary year to the next, living off the conscience and the

goodwill of the general Australian public, and the fantasies of often poor-quality, opportunistic politicians.

We exert no long-term decisive influence of any consequence on any political party, economic sectional interest, or even the general public. We are their playthings of convenience. The media has lost patience with our often collective, and individual, lack of purpose, sense of direction and sometimes erratic efforts. We are, it seems, only good for the occasional sensational story.

The time has come for our people to break out of this unworthy, enforced western dreamtime and charter a new course, not only for our people, and particularly our children, but for our nation. We must throw off the yoke of welfare and the soul-destroying concept of welfare and the subsequent dependency syndrome. It is destroying us and will eventually do so. The American Indian experience is clear evidence of this.

We are running out of time, and there is no future for us as a distinctive group of people in this country, if we do not initiate action to dramatically change our philosophy, politics and strategies. It is clear to all concerned that governmental and Aboriginal policies as applied in the field are just not working. Aboriginal education is generally a farce and Aboriginal employment programmes largely ineffective. Aboriginal health is still well below the Australian average level and housing for Aboriginal families is virtually a lost cause for the bulk of our people.

We are still the stereotyped welfare class of people as viewed by the Australian public. Deep down we sadly view ourselves similarly. We still react to situations created by others. We have to create our own positive educational, employment, economic and socio-cultural environment. We must become constructive and pro-active and not reactive.

Considering all I have said let me now construct a positive framework within which we Aboriginal people can assist to create our own template for the future.

Let me suggest some principles and strategies for consideration and hopefully, implementation.

### **1. Aboriginal Economy**

The first is the Aboriginal economy and what we can do to remove the concept and perception of "welfare" from Aboriginal affairs. Clearly in the general welfare services area this is not entirely possible—nor should it be.

In almost all areas of Aboriginal activity we are funded by the Government or quasi-Governmental bodies. We have scarcely moved away from the annual dependent and humiliating welfare budgetary process. Our economy is in reality a false economy. This arrangement can be terminated or drastically reduced at any time by any government. We must therefore consider several options.

(a) Importantly, Aboriginal people should be aware of this false economy which forms the basis of Aboriginal affairs in this country. The economic lifeline is maintained only at the discretion of politicians and a fickle general public. We must therefore develop and consolidate a viable economy for our various communities and organizations that will sustain us into the future. We must create short- and long-term economic strategies now and thus create a more independent and secure base for ourselves and our children. The reality is that Aboriginal people under-utilize, to put it kindly, current economic and personnel resources. The potential for economic viability for our people is available now if only we could awake to the opportunity and not be blinded largely by employment survival economics.

Naturally, one would not expect government to remove funds until this reorganized economic base is in place. My main point on this principle is that Aboriginal people must now begin to create the economic base that will provide the springboard for our very survival. The reality is that we do not utilize current economic and personnel resources as well as we might.

(b) This brings me to the next point of government budgetary appropriation. Government should reconsider the budgetary process and establish Aboriginal affairs appropriation under a line item in the context of a separate capital fund on the basis of, perhaps, compensation payments for land lost. An essential element in all of this financial rearrangement is the psychology and public perception, not forgetting the practice, of removing Aboriginal affairs funding out of the context of "welfare". The annual appropriation of one billion dollars through the Federal Government should be placed under the direct control of Aboriginal people but obviously this body would have no connection whatsoever with government. An arrangement can be concluded between Aboriginal people and the Australian government, perhaps in the context of a treaty that will provide for a "sunset clause", and of course democratic elections and appropriate accountability for funds expenditure.

## **2. Cultural Renaissance**

My second major suggestion towards our survival as Aborigines is cultural renaissance. We must re-establish our Aboriginal cultural base throughout Australia. Aboriginal culture is the *raison d'être* for our existence. It was our anchor in the past. It should be our anchor in the future. It provides the purpose and the passion. It should be our uniting force. We need our culture, to bring us together once again as a people. Today we are divided and disorganized. To this end, of establishing our cultural base nationally, I would suggest traditional and urban Aboriginal people should engage in organized cultural social exchange programmes. This means Aboriginal people from the cities and towns should spend time living out bush with traditional groups to learn their Aboriginal law, dance, customs and songs. The reverse should of course apply. We can thus build up our cultural base nationally to give us confidence and greater credibility. For example, we should begin to learn our own, or another Aboriginal language, and further ensure such languages are taught as an accredited course in schools and tertiary institutions. We should also reverse the romantic and unproductive "English as a Second Language" practice now in operation in Aboriginal schools in many parts of Australia. In addition Aboriginal dance and music should be part of the general educational curriculum throughout the nation in primary and secondary schools.

The simple fact underpinning this principle is that, without our cultural base, we are nothing. We stand for nothing. Our culture is our beginning, our present and our end. Our culture gives us pride, dignity and a reason for living—it is the basis of everything we do.

## **3. Aboriginal Organizations**

Thirdly, we must "free up", for want of a better word, our numerous Aboriginal organizations. There are over 1,200 operating in Australia today in a variety of areas. We should realize, as indicated previously, that many Aboriginal organizations have become so institutionalized they are just part of the oppressing system, and as such, resistant to change. They have become, in fact, an end in themselves, and that is not as originally intended, a means to another end, the well-being and independence of Aboriginal people. To put it bluntly, some of the organizations live for themselves alone. They have not evolved with time. They no longer serve the basic needs of the Aboriginal people to the degree that warrants their existence.

Clearly Aboriginal organizations in the 1960s/1970s and early 1980s were established to help Aboriginal people overcome disadvantages in identified areas of concern. It should be said many

have basically performed well over the years and served the Aboriginal people and Australia well. However the last ten years has seen a withering away of effort and commitment. Many have lost their commitment, purpose and the fire in their organizational belly. They have become areas of employment per se, and ultimately conservative and somewhat reactive.

What I am suggesting is that many Aboriginal organizations should change their direction, and their mode of operation completely, and become, for example, more preventative than curative. Others should move towards more economic goals. Others should become more target group oriented or specifically functionally based.

As previously indicated, most Aboriginal organizations as with many non-Aboriginal governmental bodies, drift from one budget allocation to the next with no long-term strategy in mind. We have created a monster by allowing this situation to develop. It now not only suppresses Aboriginal creativity and spirit, but dictates the pace of any progress. The organizations now appear to be in collusion with other agencies; governmental, unions, media and economic interests—deliberately or otherwise—and are actually impeding Aboriginal well-being and development. The end result is that many Aboriginal people, and certainly Aboriginal affairs in general, are locked permanently into the welfare cycle and lifestyle. If this situation continues, in fifty years time progress will be minimal. What we desperately need is for the passion and commitment for the cause of our people of the 60s, 70s and early 80s to be re-ignited. Clearly not all Aboriginal organizations or individuals are at fault, or sections of the media, unions and governments. However there is no doubt the scenario condemns us all.

We must go back to the basics and the grass roots. We must build up at the local level and then move to the state and then national. Perhaps ATSIC may be our salvation. It is difficult to judge—I wish it well. It may be ten years too late, however.

#### **4. Treaty**

Fourthly, the Federal Government must pursue the concept of a treaty. This government must keep to its promise to enter into a treaty with the indigenous people of this country. This would demonstrate to the world that Australians, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, can exist in cultural harmony and celebrate our common humanity.

History must not be a cross we should carry as a nation, into the future. Our children must inherit a society better than the one we inherited. A treaty is not so much a matter of dollars and cents, it is more spiritual and symbolic. It can be a catalyst which binds us together as a nation, respecting our past but building for the future. Australians must never forget that Australia was Aboriginal land and still is Aboriginal land. A treaty is the appropriate mechanism for such negotiations. Naturally a key element in any treaty process and conclusion should be the establishment of appropriate monies separate from the budget process, specifically to be used by Aborigines as they direct—subject of course, as I indicated previously, to proper democratic processes and audit arrangements. Nor would these be "government funds".

#### **5. Education**

Fifthly, a major element which would allow us to move away from the dependency situation, is free education for all Aboriginal people at all levels. This would give us the basis for true self-determination. This free education would be from pre-school through to the tertiary level. As I have previously indicated, it is clear the current education and training policies of the Federal Government are not effective. The costs are too high and the results very poor. We must have

flowing through the universities and the schools, educated and competent Aboriginal people— young and old, men and women—who can lead us. We need articulate, intelligent community-based leaders. This is not entirely the case at the moment. At least 3,000 Aboriginal graduates per year will dramatically change the face of Aboriginal affairs within five years. It will cost more in the short term but less in the long term. The cost benefit to the Australian economy over ten years will be enormous. At present we spend one billion dollars on Aboriginal affairs per year. This figure can only escalate but there is at present an inverse correlation in terms of monies spent and positive results in the context of the general living conditions of Aborigines. Education of an appropriate level and nature can provide our people with the confidence, the competence and the ability to compete with white Australians on an equal basis. We can then eyeball other Australians with dignity and respect—both ways.

## **6. National Independent Aboriginal Body**

My sixth point is that there is an urgent need to establish an effective, independent, non-Government sponsored national Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organization. This organization should be funded by the Aboriginal people and others through voluntary subscription with a charter to express strongly the political, social and cultural opinions of Aboriginal people, free of any government or other sectional influence. At present there is no such national organization since the demise of FCAATSI in the 1970s. It should, obviously, be democratically elected and accountable to the Aboriginal people. It has been clear for some time that Aboriginal people in Australia have no focal point of reference for independent opinion on our issues. Our opinions are largely reflected to the nation by our need for economic survival in the workplace as funded by government or by churches, sectional interests, unions, media or a nervous general public. There is no doubt we need a national body as never before in our history.

However, critical to the establishment of this independent political voice for Aboriginal people must come the realization that we now in Australia operate within the framework of a dynamic multicultural society. We Aboriginal people must now cultivate vigorously the understanding and support of the many ethnic groups in this country. We cannot stand alone. Their support is vital and a natural development. They would welcome our support and thus a powerful influence for good relationships can be developed which ultimately would be to the benefit of the country as a whole.

## **7. Employment**

My seventh point revolves around the need for a programme that allows for the employment of all Aborigines of working age, providing they are physically capable. Aboriginal people should be given the opportunity to undergo relevant and proper training where required to allow them to obtain such reasonable employment that may exist. Most Australians would be surprised to realize that Aboriginal people numbering some fourteen thousand in over 136 communities actually work for their dole. Aboriginal people are not lazy, have never resisted work opportunities and have always been fully cognizant of the benefits proper employment brings to the health, happiness and general well-being of their own family and their community. It is clear such an initiative would reduce alcoholism and its detrimental effects drastically.

To conclude then, the critical point in all of my address to you today revolves basically around one principle theme, which is that we, the Aboriginal people, hold the key to our own destiny in our own hands. To put the principle across in its most simplistic form, let me say that the answer to the problems Aboriginal people face in Australia today, begins and ends with ourselves. We must grasp the nettle. We must, as individuals and members of Aboriginal communities, realize our potential to

re-organize ourselves and our people. We have to realize clearly our destiny is within our own hands. We can no longer entirely blame governments of whatever political colour, churches, unions, history or the white Australian population. We must take the initiative on a community or individual level. We must take the first step.

As we all realize, during these volatile times of change and economic difficulty, we run risks of increased unemployment, further disenchantment and alienation among the young, excessive poverty, and generally are witnessing a situation where equality and social justice are submerged in the struggle for economic and technological development.

The struggle then of Aboriginals for social justice and equality, especially at this time with the economy in such an unstable state, is one which requires universal support. Governments, of course, have a significant role to play in addressing issues of social justice and inequality, but they alone cannot effect the changes that are required. Similarly Aboriginal people cannot achieve the objectives of social justice and equality in isolation.

Australian society as a whole must accept the challenge and help to create a more compassionate and tolerant social and economic environment.

However, as I have indicated clearly and strongly before, nothing will change for the better for Aboriginal people until, and unless, the Aboriginal people of this country ourselves, make the collective and individual effort to want this change; to work for this change; to organize for this change and finally, to unite for this change. It is an inward spiritual and psychological commitment, without which we are doomed forever to be locked into the social welfare syndrome, the dependency relationship and hence continuing alienation from the general Australian society.