

High Expectations Realities through High Expectations Relationships: Delivering beyond the Indigenous Policy Rhetoric*

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As part of my duty as an NRL Commissioner I had to be at the 2015 Telstra Premiership Grand Final. It was an epic match and easily sits as one of the best grand finals ever. The Broncos defended their line fiercely and admirably for 79 minutes and 45 seconds. Then, just as even the most loyal of Cowboys fans, like me, had all virtually given up, Johnathan Thurston refuses to die with the ball as he searches for his magical halves partner Michael Morgan. Morgan takes the ball with seconds remaining; Cowboys fans are saying ‘No hang on! We might be a chance here!’

With just moments to go Michael Morgan does what Thurston expects of him and conjures some magic to put Kyle Feldt away in the corner to level the scores on the last second of the last minute, with the kick to come to win the game after the hooter.

As if the football gods had not messed with our heads enough, Thurston kicks; it looks like it’s going in and it hits the post and now we have to go into extra time. The rest is history now as the Cowboys capitalise on a Broncos error in front of the posts and Johnathan Thurston goes on to kick the winning field goal. Cowboys fans like me start to cry because we have waited for this moment for 20 years.

There are so many things that are special about this day and this game. In the previous game an Indigenous captain holds the NRL State Championship trophy aloft. In the main game, two Indigenous captains, Justin Hodges and Johnathan Thurston, lead their teams in an epic grand final. This is the great thing about rugby league. The playing field is level. Indigenous players bring their sense of strength and excellence which is acknowledged, embraced and celebrated. At the end of the game we see Thurston and Hodges embrace after a game which was as fair as it was superb. Hodges is consoled by his dad and his wife, Thurston sits on the ground with his daughter who holds her favourite black baby doll and gives her tired-looking dad a hug and a kiss: excellence and humanity at its best.

Earlier in the day I had approached Malcolm Turnbull to congratulate him on his ascendency to the prime ministership and, as I described, his clever appointment of Senator Arthur Sinodinos to the role of Cabinet Secretary. As I mentioned to him, at

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least now we can have something that resembles a functional cabinet as opposed to the crippling centralised way of governing that many of us had become so frustrated by.

‘This whole Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs thing’, I told him, ‘has done more harm than good, and seems to be more about gimmicks, personalities and polls, rather than proper policy process’. The Minister for Indigenous Affairs must be trusted and able to get on with his role, without distractions and confusion about who is responsible for what.

He then said ‘Chris, what are three things we can do in the Indigenous policy space to make a difference?’

It is too important and too complex a question to answer at an NRL grand final, and I did have to focus on the game, so I said to the PM, ‘I do have an answer for you but I’ll get back to you with those three things at some stage soon’, to which he responded, ‘Please do’.

So here I am offering just three things that we can do in the Indigenous policy space to make a difference.

It occurred to me that the answer to Prime Minister Turnbull’s question was being played out right before us on that epic NRL grand final night. On a level playing field we saw the humanity of Indigenous Australians authentically acknowledged, embraced with enthusiasm, and celebrated with passion. We saw young Indigenous Australians nurtured by hope, which cultivated their strengths and excellence and encouraged them to chase down their dreams, no matter how lofty they seemed. We saw Indigenous leadership working with non-Indigenous leadership together in an elite and honourable, high expectations relationship.

This is the perfect analogy for the Australian society we can develop. There are three things we can do:

1. Acknowledge, embrace and celebrate the humanity of Indigenous Australians
2. Bring us policy approaches that nurture hope and optimism rather than entrench despair
3. Do things with us, not to us!

Acknowledge, embrace and celebrate the humanity of Indigenous Australians

It is always a complex and, for many, hurtful challenge to reflect on the past in such a way that we learn from the awful tragedies of our shared history, without letting it

define us in an unproductive way that can stifle our quest for shared emancipation into an honourable future. The truth is there have been, and continue to be, many very clear and graphic examples of where the humanity of Aboriginal Australians is either not embraced and acknowledged, or simply undermined. It is also true that in some Aboriginal communities we observe what might be described as ‘subhuman’ behaviours. At the risk of rendering some gross misbehaving and poor choice-making individuals not culpable for some despicable behaviours, I would argue quite strongly that when we treat individuals as though they are subhuman, then subhuman behaviours are likely to emerge.

I have never backed down from calling out such injustices from both sides of this relationship, but on this occasion let me reflect positively on the example I gave at the outset of this lecture with our two Indigenous NRL grand final captains after the game on that level playing field, embracing each other, and then embracing their families.

My simple point, as strange as this may sound, is this.

Our humanity exists!

Our humanity exists and it must be acknowledged. It is worth embracing and celebrating. Our humanity has existed for tens of thousands of decades on this land we now share, and it continues to exist proudly, despite the efforts of post-colonial governments to smash us and smash us and smash us. This is not an invitation to smash us even more, but rather an opportunity for you to understand that such efforts are futile and our humanity cannot ever be assimilated, nor destroyed. Nor should you want it to be because as we share ancient land, we share humanity.

When you embrace and celebrate the humanity of Indigenous Australians you embrace and celebrate your own humanity, because it is our humanity that we share at our core. To help us understand this more deeply, let me reflect on some of my earlier work inspired by the late and very great modern day philosopher, my dear friend Roy Bhaskar.

Bhaskar discusses the concept of the ‘concrete universal’ which has four dimensions. At its base is the notion of a ‘core universal human nature’. We are all of the human race and this should ensure unquestionable grounds for human rights.

At a higher level this basic core is acted upon or mediated through a variety of ‘differentiae’ such as gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity or culture et cetera. The core and the mediations result in a ‘concretely singularised individual’. The fourth dimension to this concept is that of ‘processuality’ or the rhythms of time in action.

The key to understanding the importance of the concept of the concrete universal is that it is part of a stratified ontology, or stratified insight into our sense of being. Put simply, each of us has layers or stratifications of being. As well, the notion of processuality allows one to recognise that at differing times in the life of the individual, the mediations or the individuality upon the core humanity can be of greater or less salience. If we can accept the terms of Bhaskar's insights here, then we have hope of being liberated from those toxic dynamics that are quintessential to the binary of 'mainstream' and 'other', whereby mainstream is somehow 'superior'.

Put simply, all of us are set free from the pressures of being one or the other as it becomes the case that we can be content with who we actually are, knowing that at some times we actually can have strong resonance with a sense of being mainstream, and at other times in other contexts, we can have equally as strong resonance with a sense of being 'other'.

Let me explain.

When I stand on the land of my father's people, my people, at the village of Miglianico, in the province of Abruzzo, Italia, my sense of being Italian resonates strongly for me. When I stand before the graves of my father's parents, speaking Italian with my half-brother, Gulio, my sense of being Italian continues to resonate strongly and he embraces me as such. At my core I am human and the resonance of my Italian ethnic differentiae is dramatically enhanced by processuality, which sees me on my father's country, Italia, in that moment in time. Significantly, my sense of being Aboriginal or Australian is not relinquished here; it simply does not resonate so strongly.

When I am at home fishing in the Burnett River in Bundaberg knowing my people have done this for many thousands of years, my sense of being Aboriginal is very strong. In this place in this point in time, I often look across the river to Paddy's Island, a place where many of my ancestors were massacred, and wonder what life must have been like for them before, during and after the slaughter of so many. At my core here I am human and my sense of being Aboriginal resonates very strongly; enhanced by the sense of time and place that locates me here. I have not relinquished my sense of being Italian, nor my sense of being Australian.

As I reflect on times when my sense of being Australian resonates more strongly I think of rugby league, of barbeques and the beach. In a deeper sense I think of when my mum's house in Bundaberg was completely flooded by the devastating January 2013 floods and a 'mud army' of volunteers who I didn't even know, turned up to help my family clean up and rebuild. At my core here I remain human and this

humanity is shared with those around me. My sense of being Australian resonates strongly here, given the time, place and context. In such times when tragedy strikes we stick together as Australians and we just get in and help. It's what we do. In this circumstance I have not surrendered my sense of being Aboriginal or my sense of being Italian.

Understanding and embracing the notion of a stratified ontology not only liberates Aboriginal people from the toxic dynamics of being forced to be mainstream, it is indeed an intellectual concept that is emancipatory for white Australians. Many white Australians have experienced this also, perhaps unknowingly. Many have experienced a strong and very powerful sense of 'spirituality' when visiting the graves of their ancestors in England, Scotland or Ireland for instance. At their core they remain human, while the differentiae of their ancestral ethnicity, enhanced by the processuality of their time and place, are the very dynamics that 'fills a hole inside them' as they sometimes describe. Importantly they have not surrendered their sense of being Australian, but their sense of humanity is enhanced.

Acknowledging, embracing and celebrating our humanity means you would never let our communities continue to be neglected at the end of the vine or characterise our sustained existence in remote parts of Australia as some form of flippant 'lifestyle choice'.

Acknowledging, embracing and celebrating our humanity means you would never amend the Racial Discrimination Act especially to inflict policy approaches on us in a way that would never be inflicted upon other Australians.

It means you would acknowledge us as the original custodians in our nation's Constitution.

Acknowledging, embracing and celebrating our humanity means you would find the courage to contemplate some form of a treaty, a document upon which we both agree, no matter how long or complex this task is.

Bring us policy approaches that nurture hope and optimism rather than entrench despair

Again as we watched the NRL grand final, won by the Cowboys, we witnessed Indigenous excellence manifested, and borne out of the seeds of hope, sown many years earlier. It is one of the things I love about being an NRL Commissioner. I get to see very solid young men and women, playing rugby league for their country at the elite level, knowing that at some stage many years earlier, they dreamed of being a

Kangaroo, or a Jillaroo. These dreams can only manifest when they are nurtured by hope.

If politicians and other policy makers operate from a philosophical basis that acknowledges and embraces the humanity of Indigenous Australians, there is scope for policy approaches and programs to nurture hope and optimism rather than entrench despair.

When it comes to constructively aligning people, philosophy, policy and programs, we must understand that ultimately we are dealing with a relationship. The relationship is of course the one between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Both parties have a responsibility to tend that relationship and to ensure that it is healthy and a source of mutual benefit.

My own research, triangulated by our shared instincts, shows that the relationship is not as healthy as it should be. It empirically unveils a world of ambient racism and unhelpful yet persistent negative stereotyping of Aboriginal people. Persistent to the extent that non-Aboriginal and, regrettably, Aboriginal Australians subscribed to it as if it were some kind of 'truth', when in fact it was not. Too many of us are blasted by this singled-barrelled so-called reality, calling this inaccurate, yet prolific 'reality' into some form of 'being'. Too many of us don't realise we actually have a choice, but then unwittingly choose to collude with this toxic 'reality', nurturing it, to make it appear more real than it actually is.

Sometimes non-Aboriginal people do this because it readily fits with the narrative of Aboriginal people as, what I have described in other papers, a despised 'other'. Sometimes non-Aboriginal people do it because they might inadvertently think they are being 'culturally sensitive' when in fact they are simply colluding with a negative stereotype.

Sometimes Aboriginal people collude with this stereotype, thinking they are reinforcing their 'cultural' identity, when in fact they are simply reinforcing a negative stereotype and/or clinging to victim status that no longer serves us in a modern society.

Sometimes Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people collude with and nurture this toxic negative stereotype because, bluntly, there is lots of money and power in keeping this 'industry' alive, as we entrench the despair of Aboriginal people while pretending to do otherwise.

These dynamics of stereotyping and collusion are what Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman calls 'fast thinking'. This fast thinking consists of slurs, insults, names, sayings, jokes, opinions, metaphors, metonyms, and slogans. There is no need for me to rehearse with you the world of fast thinking about Indigenous Australia. The problem is that fast thinking is almost immune to logic and the rationality of what Kahneman calls 'slow thinking'. People still believe that Aboriginal Australians have lots of privileges despite all rational and statistical evidence to the contrary. The language of fast thinking is a house of being and it determines how we think and act. This is why fast thinking is influenced, not by rational slow thinking, but by alternative fast thinking.

It seems clear our current Prime Minister knows this. During the Rudd/Abbott years we were spooked and then paralysed by incessant bleating, or fast thinking about a budget crisis. Today, after being offered alternative fast thinking, and told this is a time for hope and optimism and there has never been a more exciting time to be Australian, we find ourselves as a nation tentatively embracing a more authentic dialogue about tax reform.

In fast thinking on Indigenous affairs we often hear things like 'We've tried everything and nothing has worked' when actually we haven't tried everything, and we certainly haven't seriously tried a high expectations relationships policy approach. We say things like 'We've spent billions in Aboriginal communities', when most of the dollars are more likely spent on bureaucracies and consultants before it even gets to communities. We have a catchy mantra of 'Closing the Gap', which in many ways suggests that as blackfullas we are here and other Australians are there, with a big gap in the middle that leaves us blackfullas with some catching up to do if we are to be as good as the average Australian. When in fact the truth is reflected in the less catchy notion of 'shifting the bell curve to the right', a notion that reminds us all that many Aboriginal people are as exceptional as our fellow Australians.

My simple point here is that the fast thinking, or the policy rhetoric if you like, often does more to entrench a sense of hopelessness and despair rather than nurture a sense of hope and optimism. Even big spending and 'well intentioned' silk purse policy approaches fail dismally on this measure and are exposed as the filthy pig's ear that they are.

In my memoir, *Good Morning Mr Sarra*, published in 2012 by University of Queensland Press, I recalled an encounter with a proud, yet almost deflated Aboriginal man in Alice Springs at the time of the juggernaut that was the Northern Territory Intervention. In our encounter the young man said to me with a deep sense of hurt in his voice, 'Chris, you don't know just how hard it is to be an Aboriginal

man in this town! You walk down the street here and these people just look at you like you're some kind of paedophile or like you're just comin' from bashing your woman at home'.

It is impossible to argue that such an approach, which saw signs erected to brand Aboriginal communities as they did, while sending the army in from the outside to 'fix' them, could instil a sense of hope and optimism. I am not denying for a moment that toxic and subhuman behaviours exist in some Aboriginal communities and must be flushed out. You will argue that such toxic and subhuman behaviours exist and I will agree with you.

I will then challenge you to wonder about why such behaviours exist and remind you that when you treat people as though they are subhuman, then subhuman behaviours emerge.

What I find grossly offensive is this dynamic in which we home in on extremely toxic and subhuman behaviours and conflate their existence as if all Aboriginal people are behaving in such ways. Roy Bhaskar would call this the epistemic fallacy. Briefly, this is the reduction of being or reality to our knowledge of it; or, if you like, the refusal to make a distinction between ontology and epistemology.

Another way of explaining this is that makers of Indigenous policy, including government-anointed so-called leaders, do not understand the fundamental importance of a strength-based approach to community and individual transformation. Even those who enjoy choreographed visits to Aboriginal communities cannot fully understand the depth of complexity required to be useful, especially if they listen and observe simply to confirm their own way of thinking, rather than listening and observing to really understand.

Policy makers may be great at spending taxpayers' money conjuring expensive yet ineffective government programs and quasi-bureaucracies. Yet their unsophisticated, deficit-based elucidations expose them as impotent amidst the profound need for stratified, strength-based approaches to individual and community transformation, and almost completely ignorant amid the profound need for deep and compassionate understanding of the stratified ontology of Aboriginal people and their communities.

When I worked as school principal in Cherbourg for six and a half years, we fixed attendance with a sophisticated and stratified strength-based approach. Thirty-eight per cent of children were not attending school. We didn't immediately resort to cutting welfare payments of all parents as if 100 per cent of children were disengaged. We recognised that 62 per cent actually were engaged and if we celebrated and

reinforced this great strength both extrinsically and intrinsically, then we were likely to positively influence most, but probably not all, of the remaining 38 per cent. By acknowledging and celebrating the strengths on display, attendance went to 94 per cent. The remaining six per cent had more hardcore needs and so we pursued this as best as we could, in a more low-key way. It was an approach simple to understand, yet hard work to execute, but one that was effective and cost less than one per cent of the taxpayers' money we see spent in some schools today in deficit approaches that assume all students are chronically disengaged.

I was in Warburton in remote Western Australia as recently as last week. The week before I was in Wiluna and the week before that in Ampilatwatja in the Northern Territory. The conversations there remind me that such frustrations and such despair persist with policy and program approaches that simply conflate single-barrelled understandings about Aboriginal people and communities, and offer ineffective, unsophisticated blanket approaches that simply don't make sense. Not only do they not make sense, they are causing an even greater sense of despair and disengagement from Australian society.

This is an aspect of the stratified ontology of Aboriginal people that your makers of Indigenous policy simply do not understand. As blackfullas you can bring on your policies and programs and bash us and bash us and bash us! We will not change. We will not become the people you want us to be. We will submit in some way but in a way that will see us become passive, simply disengage or readjust because we are so accustomed to you smashing us and our communities. I am sure some of you may have seen this passivity and disengagement, without even knowing you have seen it.

Some of you have been tricked into believing that such passivity is the result of welfare, when in fact it is the result of chronic disengagement from a local and vibrant economy. Welfare and a basic social security structure did not cause chronic disengagement from the economy. A lack of desire to pay equal wages to Aboriginal people in the late 1960s caused chronic disengagement from the economy. A lack of desire to invest substantially into innovative, vibrant and sophisticated localised economies entrenches ongoing chronic disengagement.

But you have never been seriously challenged to understand the deep complexities here! You have never been challenged because in order to seduce you, it is better to pretend you are not culpable in any way for the challenges we face. If I can make it seem like Aboriginal people are entirely to blame here, you will describe me as a hero and you will throw millions at me and never seriously question the efficacy of my approaches, even if they take us back to the policy approaches of the last century. You have never been challenged because frankly there is great power and money to be had

from the entrenched despair of Aboriginal people. Personally I think this reluctance to challenge underestimates your intelligence and your humanity, leaving us all floundering with limited hope of transcending the challenges we face together.

Today I challenge the Prime Minister!

Not to pick a fight with him, but because I respect his interest in a positive future for all of us. I respect his intellectual and emotional capacity to embrace and be honest about the extent to which he is culpable in a high expectations relationship with Aboriginal Australia and I am committed to the same.

And you, Prime Minister, and your policy makers have a choice. You can choose the more expensive and ineffective option of continuing to devise policy approaches that continue to demonise us and entrench despair. You can bring policy approaches to bash us and bash us and bash us. Or you can bring policy approaches that offer hope, and a sense of pride, and a feeling that we can trust and walk with you into what I would call a stronger, smarter, more honourable future, where your emancipation is bound up in mine.

Do things with us, not to us!

When Cowboys coach Paul Green set about conjuring a way to win the NRL grand final, he collaborated seriously with his Indigenous captain, Johnathan Thurston. He did this because Thurston has wisdom and sophisticated insights to offer. He did this because he had an authentic belief in the strengths and knowledge that were obvious, and sometimes not so obvious, in his team's captain.

A key pillar of the stronger smarter approach is high expectations relationships as opposed to high expectations rhetoric. Sometimes high expectations rhetoric espouses lofty ideals that are often imposed with good intentions from the outside rather than negotiated with the individuals to be affected.

I mentioned earlier the fundamental importance of understanding that as we contemplate the challenges we face together, we are in a relationship in which we must ensure that it is healthy and a source of mutual benefit. My greatest intellectual insight of the last two years, I think, is understanding the profound difference between high expectations *of* Aboriginal people versus the notion of high expectations *with* Aboriginal people; high expectations rhetoric versus a high expectations relationship. I can assure you that we as Aboriginal people want to be on a journey with you. This journey, however, must be one that enables us to be the best that *we* want to be, not a journey in which we are forced to be who *you* want us to be. Let me assure you that as Aboriginal people we have an interest in being the exceptional people that we can be

and often are. None of us aspire to be downtrodden, uneducated, disempowered and dysfunctional.

It is often the case that sometimes well-intentioned non-Indigenous Australians make fatal mistakes at the very genesis of their relationship with Aboriginal Australians. Imagine you and me preparing for an important journey together, standing alongside each other, and calibrating our compasses for a stronger smarter destination. Even just to stand together, we must have purged from our relationship the toxic stench of low expectations, mistrust, and stifled perceptions of each other. From this point we have a chance of getting our compasses aligned.

If you stand beside me well intentioned, but in this relationship feeling sorry for me, as if I have to be rescued, the relationship is contaminated from the start, leaving us a few degrees out from each other and destined to become parted in the long run.

You might come to the relationship assuming that I must change my ways and become 'like' you in every way, emulating your way of existing—assimilated if you like. In this circumstance you assume you are superior to me and I am inferior to you. With this as our starting point the relationship is again contaminated and we calibrate our compass in a way that gives us no chance of taking an honourable journey together.

In some ways this analogy explains why we spend billions on Aboriginal affairs and achieve no appreciable gains.

If, however, we start the relationship in which our strengths and humanity are acknowledged and embraced, and we are convinced of an authentic sense of hope for all, then our hearts can truly beat closely together, and our compasses can be calibrated for an exciting, sometimes bumpy, yet honourable journey into the future.

In a practical sense this means identifying and embracing local community leadership that is proven, rather than anointing Aboriginal leadership that will only tell you what you want to hear.

On the Aboriginal education landscape, if we have the courage, it means acknowledging that Aboriginal parents *do* want the best for their children. It means being bold enough to offer those parents who work in partnership with schools to get their children to school for more than 85 per cent of the school year, the guarantee that their child will achieve the national minimum standard on all years 3, 5, 7 and 9 benchmarks.

Beyond year 9, if we are bold enough, it means offering a guaranteed service outcome in the form of a job, a place in training, or a place in a university to all Indigenous students who complete year 12 with better than 85 per cent school attendance.

It means doing whatever it takes to inject exceptional school leadership into remote Aboriginal community schools.

This is honouring and embracing humanity. This is offering hope. This is doing things with people not to them.

Conclusion

In some ways the three things I have articulated here can in essence be seen as the triple bottom line for Indigenous policy analyses. My critics may well want to accuse me of being overly philosophical but after 17 years as a very successful educator on the Indigenous education landscape, I have nothing to prove.

As an educator I said I wanted to change expectations of Aboriginal children and today expectations have changed. Today there is no place to hide for any teacher with low expectations in any classroom in any school in Australia. Of course they are still out there, but it is only a matter of time before they are exposed and challenged.

Whilst these three points might seem philosophical to some, the truth is this is the very approach that enabled me to work with staff, students and community at Cherbourg State School some years ago to deliver transformational change.

The formula for success here was very simple, but as is always the case, the work was always very hard. There are no silver bullets or quick fixes here. Notwithstanding, the formula was so simple that we have proven it is able to be extrapolated by those who are prepared to work extremely hard and apply the stronger smarter, high expectations relationships approach which acknowledges, honours and embraces a positive sense of Aboriginal identity and works *with* positive Aboriginal leadership that is beyond victim status. Beyond Cherbourg the Stronger Smarter Institute has for the last 10 years worked with more than 500 schools and communities and more than 2,000 educators and community leaders with an exponential reach of more than 38,000 Indigenous Australian students.

In North Queensland at Yarrabah State School:

- 83 per cent of year 3 students at national minimum standards for reading
- 56 Indigenous youth (10 per cent of the student population), re-engaged with school

- the percentage of parents who think the school is providing a good education for their children increased from 60 per cent in 2009 to 96 per cent in 2014.

Aitkenvale State School in Townsville reduced student suspensions by 70 per cent within one term.

At Pormpuraaw State School in Cape York:

- year 5 students have the highest reading results within their group of similar schools in 2013 and 2014, and this continues to improve and outperform nearby Cape York schools that are seeing millions of dollars invested in them
- 44 per cent increase in students 'at or above national minimum standards' on NAPLAN spelling results for the same cohort from 2009 to 2013.

In the Kimberley Region Wyndham District High School:

- a 16 per cent improvement in school attendance over a three-year period
- 25 per cent improvement in year 3 reading to be above the national benchmark within a year.

At Broome Senior High School 100 per cent retention of Aboriginal students through year 8 to year 12.

At Fitzroy Valley District High School suspensions for poor behaviour were reduced by 74 per cent in two years.

At Dawul Remote Community School they see up to 100 per cent parent attendance at parent engagement activities.

At Kalumburu there was a 700 per cent increase in the number of Aboriginal people actively employed at the school within three years.

Mount Margaret Remote Community School saw 94 per cent attendance and a 37.5 per cent improvement in reading levels over a two-year period.

In northern Victoria, Swan Hill Primary School has introduced a local Indigenous language program for year 1. They have also seen a 10 per cent increase in Koori student attendance since 2010.

Mildura Primary School has closed the gap on NAPLAN results and 84 per cent of year 5 students are achieving national minimum standards, the highest within the region.

In New South Wales at Glenroi Heights Public School they saw attendance jump to 90 per cent, up from 77 per cent just four years earlier. They also saw a dramatic reduction in Aboriginal student suspensions from 274 learning days lost in 2007 down to just 13 days lost in 2011.

Above and beyond these significant returns for Aboriginal children—this I am more than delighted to say—the stronger smarter approach delivers much needed positive change for poor white children, who in many ways are just as infected by the toxic stench of low expectations.

In closing I would love to talk with you more about rugby league, the greatest game of all, but instead let me conclude on a more sombre and profound note. While Johnathan Thurston and Justin Hodges, two of the great sons of Australian Rugby League, rose to the challenge and delivered excellence on a level playing field—a field where others worked with them to nurture a sense of hope, where their excellence was acknowledged, embraced and celebrated—it is the great Oodgeroo Noonuccal (Kath Walker), in a message to her son, who offers us all as a nation, an even greater challenge:

Son of Mine (To Denis)

My son, your troubled eyes search mine,
Puzzled and hurt by colour line.
Your black skin as soft as velvet shine;
What can I tell you, son of mine?
I could tell you of heartbreak, hatred blind,
I could tell you of crimes that shame mankind,
Of brutal wrong and deeds malign,
Of rape and murder, son of mine;
But I'll tell instead of brave and fine
When lives of black and white entwine,
And men in brotherhood combine—
This would I tell you, son of mine.

I suspect Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull is right when he says there has never been a more exciting time to be an Australian and that this is a time for hope. Let us share in that sense of hope in three profoundly simple ways:

1. Acknowledge, embrace and celebrate the humanity of Indigenous Australians
2. Bring us policy approaches that nurture hope and optimism rather than entrench despair

3. Do things with us, not to us!



Question — You have reminded us how important sport can be as a factor in society. I am from Victoria so I do not know much about rugby league, but I would be really interested to hear a bit more about what you are doing to empower women to compete professionally and to play, and also any initiatives to support the prevention of violence against women and their children.

Chris Sarra — Let me answer your question in two parts because it is a very important question. As a Rugby League Commissioner, we take very seriously the need to stamp out domestic violence so that it is not a part of our game. We understand very well the potential for our high-profile players to be able to say to people who follow them in communities in every corner of Australia, ‘This is not acceptable’. So we do what we can in that space to make use of the profile and the sense of connectedness to our elite players.

You will also see quite a dramatic shift in the profile of women in the game of rugby league. That has been increased dramatically under the NRL brand through greater participation and through a partnership with Touch Football Australia, but it has also been improved—and I am really pleased to watch this—through the elevation of the profile of the Jillaroos and the Queensland and New South Wales women’s rugby league teams. So that is that part.

From an educator’s perspective, we used to contemplate this question when I was at Cherbourg school. We talked to kids about being strong and being smart. I did talk with them about what that actually meant. It meant being strong enough to understand that, when we encounter conflict, there are other ways to deal with those issues. It means we have to be strong internally, rather than use our fists or think that we have to inflict physical pain on people.

Look, it is a really complex question and, in part, I hope that answers it.

Rosemary Laing — Chris, those were astonishing results that you were reading out to us at the end. You, as principal of Cherbourg, were there implementing these approaches to education. When you work with the schools you mentioned, how do you actually get into the schools and work with them? Do you train teachers or do you have staff or associates who can go and work in the school? How does it work?

Chris Sarra — It is important to understand that, although all of the results are fantastic and I really love the fact that we have been a part of that journey, I have been in schools myself and I know how hard it is to achieve those sorts of outcomes. So I acknowledge all of those school and community leaders who are the true heroes in delivering those outcomes. From our perspective, we work with school and community leaders to get them to understand what we call the stronger smarter approach and the things that underpinned the success at Cherbourg. So it is not really about saying to them, ‘We did this at Cherbourg so you need to do this in your community’. It is about getting them to understand the overarching philosophical concept and understand the importance of simple things like, when you break it down in a micro sense, engaging children and having conversations with teachers, analysing the intellectual integrity of our classrooms and asking questions like: is this classroom environment, is this teacher, performing, or is the essence of that teacher–student relationship of the kind that I would accept for my own child? If the answer is no, then we should not be asking anybody else to accept it. To understand that is very simple, but to execute a response to that is very hard work.

Question — About 12 years ago some premiers commissioned Dr Vince FitzGerald to examine and report on the GST and horizontal fiscal equalisation. What happens is that state governments come in and put in bids to the Grants Commission saying they need to provide services, particularly to Aboriginal communities, and they will get extra money in the carve-up because it is a lot more expensive to provide those services. But then they do not provide them. It has been going on for 20 or 30 years. It was one of the key findings that FitzGerald made in his report and then the premiers put the report in the draw and did not really want to talk about it. How do you feel? Do you feel that, when you see state governments competing for extra funding to provide services and then not providing them, we are dropping the ball completely as a nation?

Chris Sarra — I think it is pretty easy to imagine how I would feel about that circumstance. In many ways I go back to the conversation with the Prime Minister about the need to just execute excellent policy and program approaches. That is all we are asking for. These dynamics and circumstances that you describe exist, but they only exist because, if you go to my original point, the humanity of Aboriginal people is not acknowledged. What enables that kind of behaviour from bureaucrats and politicians is this sense that, ‘Oh well, it is only black kids in remote communities, so what the hey’. If a policeman causes the death of an Aboriginal man, it is only an Aboriginal man. If it is only a remedial product, which might be costing tens of millions of dollars off the shelf from the US, and it can only ever deliver remedial outcomes even when it is executed superbly, ‘It is only black kids so what the hell. As long as we look like we are making big policy announcements, that is all we care

about.’ Those ways of behaving signal to me that there is a lack of acknowledgement of the humanity that we bring to the country. When we are perceived in this way, those sorts of behaviours are manifested. If we can do the three things that we talked about, one would hope that those behaviours will be flushed out.

Question — Would you care to comment on the role of homeland centres, particularly with this latest development in Western Australia?

Chris Sarra — I think it is worth understanding the richness of what Aboriginal Australia brings to the nation. My very strong belief is that there is good reason for all of us to celebrate the fact that we have Aboriginal people living in homeland centres and it is worth paying for that because when we do that we play our part as a society in retaining a human connection to the land that has existed for tens of thousands of years. In some circles it is thought about as the oldest form of human existence on the planet. So why the hell would we undermine that circumstance? Why would we want to be seen as a nation that housed the longest human connection to country and then set about, through policy approaches that try to force them into provincial centres, cutting that connection off after it has existed for tens of thousands of years? To me it does not make sense. It represents a lack of appreciation of the humanity of Aboriginal people in those places and it represents a lack of insight into the value that we bring to the country. When Desmond Tutu was asked about what black South Africans bring to Africa, he said they bring the *ubuntu*, which in some ways is kind of like the spunk or the thing that enchants our nation. That is what having Aboriginal people connected to country in the way that has been done brings to the country and that should never be underestimated.

Question — You have issued some really important challenges to the Prime Minister and you have mentioned bureaucrats as the deliverers of the politicians’ commitments. There is obviously a large bureaucracy out there in state, federal and local government. Can you perhaps expand a little bit more on the skills, knowledge and attitudes you think we need to be seeing from bureaucrats in order to inject that humanity in the sense that you have been enunciating so well today?

Chris Sarra — I think it comes down to that very micro kind of insight—that is, would we accept this way of behaving for non-Aboriginal Australians? We see some crazy things happen in the Indigenous policy space. I am sure they happen in other policy spaces as well. But all I am asking for is to deliver policy rhetoric and policy programs that are considered excellent and logical policy processes. You see, it does not make sense that Pormpuraaw school, which I mentioned earlier, is achieving excellent outcomes and outperforming a school up the road where they have been forced into having to endure a product that is bought off the shelf. Pormpuraaw school

is outperforming that school after the other school has had \$8 million poured into it to execute this remedial direct instruction approach. If you read the papers, you would assume that approach is fantastic, but the actual data is saying that it is not working. So they have poured \$8 million into that. Policy logic would say: ‘This school is outperforming that school. \$8 million has gone into that school. Maybe we should have a closer look at what is happening here.’ What actually did happen, three weeks before the NAPLAN results were due to come out—I need to check my facts on this—the federal minister for education announced a \$22 million rollout of this program here. In a policy logic sense, that just does not make sense. Policy logic would say, ‘Why don’t we have a look at what the data is saying?’ That is all I am saying—just good policy execution.

Question — Bringing together a number of different things that you have talked about today, I wondered if you could speak to the ideas of humanity and celebrating Aboriginality while not perpetuating a victim mentality. In the educational realm, what does that look like when we implement programs and resources specifically for Aboriginal students? I wondered if you could speak to that?

Chris Sarra — Thank you for your question. I think it is best encapsulated in the sort of approach that we took. I don’t like to talk ourselves up too much, but I reflect on the children at Cherbourg school and the elders and the parents in the Cherbourg community. I just look at the way that, when I challenged those kids to stand up and to be strong and proud to be Aboriginal and to work hard so that we could be smart enough to mix it, they rose to the challenge because they saw value in being both strong and smart. It was not about getting black kids in and trying to turn them into being like white kids; it was about getting the strength that existed in them and drawing that out. It is a wonderful thing to reflect on that because effectively that is the place where the ripple started which ultimately created a tide that would change expectations of Aboriginal children right across Australia. I think of those kids and I am really proud of their efforts to stand up and embrace the challenge. That is what it is about: it is about being strong and being smart.