

## **Commonwealth for the Common Good Address**

**Graeme Mundine**

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### **From Boiled Lollies to Shared Responsibility Agreements: What hope for the future?**

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I begin by paying my respect to the local Indigenous Peoples of this area, a group my people, the Bundjalung People, would have traded with and mixed with spiritually and socially over many thousands of years.

I stand before you as an economic refugee who had to move out of my own home country in search of better opportunities, in education and employment, despite this moving away, one thing I always recall is my fellow people, of my own country, who have not had the same opportunities as me. Those people who are still at home and who suffer great hardships because they are not allowed to participate fully in the life of this great nation. I also recall what I had to give up to move into this new world. It is important to always remind myself of who I am and where I come from. Yes, I am different from the newcomers and yes, I am proud of it.

In 2000, the world's leaders came together and made a commitment to alleviate world poverty by 2015, they called this the Millennium Declaration from which the eight Millennium Development Goals were developed.

In supporting these time bound and measurable goals our leaders were making a bold statement; they believed and, more importantly, they had the will to alleviate poverty in the world by 2015. Subsequently, the International community supported this call and made a commitment to holding our leaders accountable through the Make Poverty History campaign which millions of us have supported around the world.

The MDGs are focused on relieving poverty amongst the poorest of the poor. So, when I heard of them I thought, great, at last we may have some action on poverty for our Indigenous peoples here. But the more I learnt the more I realised that there was

no mention of Indigenous Peoples. Now, I know that Indigenous peoples were not part of the development process of the MDGs, there was little, if any consultation and there was, and still are, no specific strategies to address Indigenous poverty. This is despite the fact that world wide Indigenous Peoples are the poorest of the Poor. In addition, the MDGs do not address the issue of poverty within so called “developed” countries. In fact, a key criticism of the progress so far has been that Governments have tended to treat the MDGs as a foreign policy and overseas aid issue, rather than adapting them to deal with poverty at home.

So, we decided that it was no good criticising from the side lines, rather that we needed to do the adapting ourselves so that we could apply the MDGs at home and so the Make *Indigenous* Poverty History campaign was born.

In doing this we are not negating or diminishing the necessity of alleviating poverty for the poor overseas, there is no reason, other than an inequitable allocation of resources and wealth worldwide, why these people continue to live on the edge of existence.

Likewise, there is no reason why Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should continue to experience such extreme disadvantage here in a wealthy country such as Australia. We should not be complacent and say that because of our social security system nobody in Australia lives on less than \$1 a day, which is the measure of extreme poverty in many places. The fact is that, compared to other Australians, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are poor and they are disadvantaged.

This disadvantage started from the very first interaction with the colonisers, from the moment that these newcomers arrived and declared us non-existent and negated our ownership of this land; we have lived on the margins ever since.

But what has all this to do with boiled lollies as the title of this talk refers to? Let me tell you a story – it’s not my story but comes from Bishop Saibo Mabo, the Anglican Bishop of the Torres Strait Islands. I will read it to you as he tells it.

*When I was a school boy, the government used to go around, we used to call him a protector. Protector his name, good name alright. He goes around everywhere in a boat and we made a good welcome for him, Oh, even we carried the dingy when the reef is dry we carry the dingy and let him walk over there - right through. We dance, we entertain him. Nothing happened to us. When he go visit us in the school he carry boiled lolly. And he give us the lolly and we eat the lolly. We suck the lolly and he went and shoved the lolly into our father's mouth, our mother's and our brother's and sister's and grandma's and grandpa's. We all suck the lollies. And he come back again and he do it for every islands when he go around. When I was at Nungalyina College I interpret that lolly. That lolly was meant for me, what the government gave us. He give the lolly, you suck the lolly, the taste finished. That what the government is - doing and today that's what he been doing all the time. He make you glad and he make you sorry again. He hurt you. He make you happy only for a while like you sucking that boiled lolly. And that was my interpretation of that boiled lolly.*

Bishop Mabo's message in this story calls us to consider whether we, the Indigenous peoples of this country, are still being handed boiled lollies, or are we enjoying the full range of rights, advantages and responsibilities that are due to us as citizens of Australia.

I would hope that everybody in this room tonight knows what the true situation for my brothers and sisters is. We know, for example, that the life expectancy of Indigenous Peoples is about 17 years less than those of other Australians. We know that the state of Indigenous health is an appalling rent in the fabric of our collective wellbeing. Our disadvantage starts in the womb, our mothers are more likely to deliver low birth weight babies; this can be attributed to factors such as lack of ante-natal care, bad diet, ill health of the mother as well as mother's engaging in risky behaviour such as smoking or alcohol intake. Once born, our infants are twice as likely to die before their first birthday.

As our children go through school they are more likely to struggle, and we have to remember that English is not a first language in many communities. The fact that our kids are struggling in primary school has an effect on the rest of their lives; we know that we have a lower retention rate to year twelve and then only 3% of us go to University and statistics released last month show that University participation rates are falling.

Socially, we know we are faced with many challenges, there is a high incidence of family violence in the communities and most disconcertingly many of us are losing hope. The rate of suicide is twice as high amongst Aboriginal people as other Australians.

These statistics paint a troubling and difficult picture, one that I think is the most pressing need in Australia today. Poverty has many causes, but one aspect of poverty is that of exclusion and that is the area I want to focus on tonight. In particular, I want to talk to you about how we are excluded from taking our rightful place in society and especially in church. I think that a powerful message that we can take from Bishop Saibo's story is that in so many aspects of life we are still being handed out boiled lollies, little sweeteners that might make us feel, temporarily, that we have been allowed to share in the advantages of this country, but leave us with nothing but a sour taste.

I recently had an experience that reminded me about how far we have to go to do away with disadvantage in all its forms. Earlier this month I attended the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Catholic Council's (NATSICC) gathering in Alice Springs. This gathering celebrated the Pope's visit to Australia twenty years ago, when he made that outstanding speech to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders.

In that speech, Pope John Paul II made many statements which resonated in the hearts of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders around the country. In 1986 I was a young Marist Brother, and was also there at Alice Springs and met Pope John Paul II. His words and visit gave me great hope, and I still consider it to be an inspirational speech

for us all. There is one part which I think, in particular, should have challenged us all. The Pope said:

*“You are part of Australia and Australia is part of you. And the Church herself in Australia will not be fully the Church that Jesus wants her to be until you have made your contribution to her life and until that contribution has been joyfully received by others.”*

So we move on twenty years and gather once more in Alice Springs. We had a good time there, we caught up with friends new and old, and there were many, many good things about the gathering. But I was also very disappointed; I came away thinking that it was a wasted opportunity. Twenty years after the leader of the Catholic Church made this inspiring speech, I ask what has really changed? Have we, the original peoples of this country, truly been welcomed into the heart of the Church, not just the Catholic Church, but all Churches? Is anybody listening to us and acting on the voices that are out there and which, I want to remind you, have been out there for some considerable time. These are the questions that I had hoped we would have given attention to in Alice Springs.

Instead we got platitudes. For example, I heard people say we must “start” listening to these Aboriginal voices as if they have just appeared on the Church stage. I want to remind you that Aborigines have been members of the Catholic Church for many many years. We are not newcomers, or Johnny come latelys. I could tell you the stories about my grandparents in Nambucca, in NSW, who made pews for their local church. I could tell you about the role that my parents and older brothers and sisters played in setting up Aboriginal Catholic Ministries; I could tell you about my sister Kaye, leading the Pope around in Alice Springs or meeting Paul VI; I could tell you the history of the beginnings of NATSICC, I know because I was there. In fact I have been there all my life, I have been working there for over thirty years. But people, usually White people, rewrite our history all the time, but we know what happened, we were there. Whilst the Pope’s speech 20 years ago was significant it wasn’t the beginning of Aboriginal People in the Church, it was simply a landmark; we were already there and we are still here. Isn’t it about time you heard us?

Last week, in Alice, I was told to have patience, that the “non-Indigenous” church still needed time to hear us. How long do you want? I know for a fact that we have been engaging in a formal way with the Church since at least 1973, that’s over thirty years. Do you still need time?

I don’t think you need more time, I think you need to listen in a different way. I think that in trying to grapple with how “we” can fit in with “you”, you are missing the point. It’s not about us fitting in with your White Church; it’s about creating a church that is inclusive and expressive of us all, of our diversity and of what it means to be Church in an Australian context.

We talk about an Australian Church, but what is that, do you know? To my mind the Church here is not Australian, it’s still Western European, much of what we consider to be the essence of Church is in fact inherited “western values”. We need to remember what the basic beliefs of the Church are. What is the essence of the Church here in Australia? It is only through stripping back our church to its basic beliefs that we can hope to walk forward.

I am sure that there are people who will call me radical, and perhaps revolutionary, but I strongly believe that you do not have to give up your culture to be truly Christian. Where is my evidence to say this? Simple, it’s Jesus. He was a man of his culture and he is my inspiration for making these statements. We, here in Australia, need to pare back the trappings of Western Civilisation that have crept into the practice of our religion and get back to the core beliefs and then we can truly create a church that is Australian.

What are the things that we want the Church to listen to? One key issue is about leadership. Can we truly be part of the Australian church if we do not have people in leadership roles? I don’t mean as advisers to the Bishops, I mean Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as Priests and Bishops. The biggest barrier to my people taking up these roles is the issue of celibacy.

Celibacy is not cultural for us. If it was so important it would be a part of our culture, but it’s not. I am not attacking celibacy per se, I see a very valid role for it, but it’s not

cultural for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. I was a celibate, Marist Brother, for twenty years of my life, so I can speak from experience. Taking on a life of celibacy also means detaching from important cultural experiences. As you know family is of the utmost importance to us and therefore having to choose between that and celibacy means that we can not choose to take a larger role in the life of the church. And it's not that we don't want to be there, the number of Aboriginal deacons is testimony to that. Another consequence of celibacy is that it has caused a crisis in Aboriginal men taking a role in the church; simply put, there is no role for us and so consequently many Aboriginal men see Church leadership as 'women's business'. As Aboriginal men, we come from a long history of leading ceremony, but within the church we are denied that and so it is hard for us to be part of the leadership within our church and our community and also to speak on our own behalf.

It is interesting that last week's copy of the Catholic Leader, a highly regarded paper in Catholic circles, has a photo on the front cover of a man standing with Bishop Ted Collins. Unlike Bishop Collins, this black man did not have the courtesy of being named; rather he was labelled as an anonymous "Aboriginal Church leader". I know this man; he is a good man and a priest in the Tiwi community. However, he is not Aboriginal but comes from Papua New Guinea. The church these days imports black priests into our communities as if they are good for our community; as if because they are black they will somehow 'fit' better. Yes, they are fine men but just because they are black does not make them Aboriginal Australians - a lesson that the Catholic Leader might care to consider - these men do not fully understand the culture of Indigenous Australia just like the many other newcomers and they too have to learn to listen to us and not speak, or be asked to speak, on our behalf.

There are other issues about our place in church, but tonight we are talking about poverty and I have raised this issue of leadership and our role within the church because I don't think it's an issue that the Church has to exclusively grapple with. Exclusion and lack of representation are apparent throughout our society and yet, being allowed into the structures of government and those aspects of life which are so fundamental to our society is absolutely critical when it comes to alleviating disadvantage. How can we achieve anything standing on the sidelines of society? I remind you that the world's leaders came together and recognised that poverty can be

alleviated through a common will, that poverty is not caused, by and large, by a lack of resources, but by a lack of will amongst our leaders and ourselves as citizens.

I believe that we allow our fellow Australians to live in poverty through our lack of will. The answers are there in the hopes and dreams of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples. We have been speaking out on these many issues for many years and no-one seems to want to listen. If we but work closely with each local group we can bring about great change.

Therefore, this campaign to Make *Indigenous* Poverty History is about creating the will to listen and to act. In fact we call on us all to do three things.

The first is to remember. Remember the past and know the true history of this country; it is this history which has caused Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples to be living with disadvantage today. We have allowed this to happen because we really have not addressed the past and we continually deny our history. A good example of this is the recent native title decision in Western Australia and the reaction to it. We instantly saw Government's both State and Federal scaremongering, bringing out the "your backyard is under threat" lie and immediately stating they will fight it. You want reconciliation? When this country stops fighting the lie of terra nullius and accepts that we were here first and this is our land, then we can talk about reconciliation.

The second aspect of the campaign is to Recognise. You must be aware; you must educate yourselves about the plight of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders today and in particular be aware of those areas in which we are not treated the same as mainstream Australia. A recent example of how we are treated differently is when we consider the coroner's findings in the 2004 death of Mulrunji on Palm Island. The coroner found that Mulrunji died after being punched and kicked by a policeman. This came after a previous enquiry found no wrongdoing by the police. The day following the coroner's findings were handed down I happened to be in Brisbane and was shocked and angry to see that the headline on morning TV did not reflect the key finding of the coroner, that an Aboriginal man was beaten and kicked to death, by a policeman. Rather the headline banner said "coroner's report points to problems in



Indigenous Communities”. That this Aboriginal man died is not because of us, it’s not because of our “problems” it was because he was beaten up by an outsider, who was in a position of authority and trust and who has still not been brought to face these charges in the judicial system. And yet, we can all recount stories of our people going to jail with far less to answer for, and who are allowed no due process. Why is this policeman being protected, but more importantly why are my people continually denied the same rights and opportunities and justice as our fellow Australians?

The third aspect of this campaign is to Rectify. For each and every one of us to do something, no matter how small or insignificant it may seem, to highlight the wrongs, which are continually being acted out on my people. Do something to help your fellow Australians overcome their disadvantage. Talk to us, listen to us and act with us. Continue to hold our elected representatives accountable for their actions. Stop the continual ‘mainstreaming’ that is taking place; recognise that Governments and other agencies must deal with groups as their needs warrant. And, if necessary, exercise your democratic right to stem the current movement, amongst our political leaders, to lead the country away from helping those who really need our help and support.

We hear all the time about shared responsibility and we have had years of so called ‘reconciliation’. But what’s the difference between the boiled lollies doled out by patronising protectors and being told that we have to clean our kids’ faces to receive services which are our basic rights? It’s all a one way street. It’s all about us, the Indigenous peoples, taking more responsibility, coming to be reconciled with you, well I think it’s about time that you walked down the street towards us. More needs to be done from Church, Governments and each and every one of you to correct the wrongs that continue to manifest themselves in our community. We can not say we did not know what our Indigenous Peoples have to endure, we do know and we, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, continue to tell you. Perhaps we can achieve reconciliation when the non-Indigenous people of this country try to listen harder.

And so I will end how I began, by talking about the Millennium Development Goals. Those eight goals are ultimately are a statement of faith and hope. Faith in our common humanity; hope that we have the will to come together and to fight to end

injustice for the poorest of the poor. These goals are a grand statement because they are measurable and time bound and so allow us to reach beyond rhetoric to do something to end the suffering of millions of people world wide.

Do I have hope that we can achieve the same here? Do I think that if we come together and commit to ending Indigenous Poverty that we can? Yes I do, and more than that I don't think we have a choice, I think that my Indigenous brothers and sisters deserve nothing less. And so I end by asking you - what will you do to make Indigenous poverty history?