

**Catholic Schools NSW Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander
Education Conference**

Leura, 12, October 2022

**** CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY ****

Thank you Dallas for that very warm welcome.

- Aunty Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Baumann
- Ms Aunty Miriam-Rose Ungunmerr Baumann AM
- Ms Brooke Boney
- Mr Isiah Dawe
- Dr Anita Heiss AM
- Mr Dallas McInerney (CEO Catholic Schools NSW)
- Mr Greg Whitby AM (Director – Catholic Education Parramatta Diocese)
- Bishop Vincent Long – Roman Catholic Diocese of Parramatta

Ballumb Ambul Kabi Kabi Gundungurra Dharug yindamarru. Ngadu – yirra bang marang.

I have just said in Wiradjuri, the language of my people –

I pay my respects to the Gundungurra and Darug people where we are meeting today – and honour their custodianship and care for Country.

I also honour their elders – especially those here today.

And I extend respect to all First Nations people in the room.

Finally, I acknowledge the many people here from across the NSW education sector – I have many fond memories of working in this sector and I thank you all for inviting me to speak with you today.

The theme of this conference is 'Transforming with the Spirit'.

I understand that this reflects the commitment of this group to make a difference to the lives of young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

It also recognises the contribution we can all make to reconciliation and healing.

As a young Wiradjuri woman living in Whitton in NSW I had access to a primary school, and a high school.

Not all Aboriginal kids have had the same opportunity.

Let me tell you a little of the story of the Wiradjuri – my people.

In Wiradjuri lore Biarni is the creation spirit. He is the source of both our physical and moral landscape.

The story of invasion and conquest for the Wiradjuri is a brutal one.

The horrific poisoning of waterholes and flour began in Wiradjuri country.

Massacre sites are dotted all over my lands. The scars are evident for all of us to see.

In 1823 martial law was declared in Bathurst after Windradyne and his warriors waged a fierce war of resistance. Four months later far too many Wiradjuri were dead by sanctioned murder.

In 1842, during the second Wiradjuri wars, one horror saw all but one young boy slaughtered when settlers opened fire on a group taking shelter on an island amongst the reeds in the creek of the Murrumbidgee River.

That creek is now known as Poisoned Waterhole Creek, and their sheltering place is called Murdering Island.

I have been to these places in my Country.

I remember driving over that bridge and that creek. I stopped the car, I got out and my blood ran cold. You see, I am of the Murrumbidya Wiradjuri.

In Australia this history is in our landscape and our hearts.

And long after the massacres ended its legacy has lived on in the marginalisation and oppression of our First People.

The last sanctioned massacre was in 1928 in Coniston in central Australia.

We have come a long way in the journey towards reconciliation.

But there is still a long way to go.

We are at an important moment – about to take the next step – and ask the broader population to support a First Nations Voice to Parliament. I'll speak more about that today.

THE EDUCATION GAP

It would be wrong of me to speak with you today without mentioning the education gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

In 2016, only 63 per cent of First Nations people aged 20 to 24 had finished Year 12.

Compared to 88 per cent of non-Indigenous Australians.

This statistic is alarming, and the Australian Government is committed to making real progress in these areas.

This is why it is a central element of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap – our national framework for improving outcomes for First Nations people.

It is designed to transform the way we work with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and achieve a whole range of socio-economic outcomes.

The National Agreement prioritises partnerships and shared decision-making so Indigenous communities have a seat at the table.

This is critically important, as together we ensure our students are supported to thrive in the classroom.

For our part, the Australian Government has committed to re-establishing the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Council.

This work will be led up by the Minister for Education Jason Clare and Professor Peter Buckskin.

And the Minister for Early Childhood Education and Minister for Youth, Anne Aly is working on implementing a new Early Childhood Care and Development Policy Partnership between all Australian governments and First Nations people.

Just a few weeks ago I pleased to announce today extra support to help more Indigenous children into early education.

As part of the Government's plan for more affordable childcare, all Indigenous children will be able to access 36 hours of subsidised childcare a fortnight from July 2023.

We know that access to high quality early education and care can improve a child's readiness for school.

And school readiness is an area where we went backwards last year – in terms of our Closing the Gap targets.

These initiatives will help ensure our children build strong foundations in their early years.

SCHOOLING

I also want to recognise that a quality education is about so much more than just English literacy and numeracy outcomes.

It's about looking at the whole picture to make sure that First Nations children have the best possible chance of success in school and beyond.

We're supporting the establishment of formal partnerships between independent schools in the city and remote schools with a high proportion of First Nations students.

The Government is helping to build brand new boarding schools on country in partnership with Studio Schools Australia.

So that kids can learn on country, close to family and community.

And we're scaling up proven reading programs to accelerate First Nations students' literacy outcomes.

I am particularly excited about our commitment about teaching First Nations languages in primary schools across Australia.

This plan helps keep our languages alive and will promote engagement and attendance and an increased sense of pride for First Nations students.

This plan will also ensure that all students in selected schools gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of their local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander languages.

Our country is made stronger and richer when we understand and celebrate our 65,000-plus years of history, cultures, wisdom, knowledge, language and art.

It builds on the inherent connection between language and identity.

CATHOLIC EDUCATION IN NSW AND ACT

I would like to acknowledge and commend the Australian Catholic education sector –

for the incredible contribution it provides to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander education across NSW, the ACT and Australia.

The Catholic NSW Aboriginal Education Strategy aims to see increases in a number of important indicators –

Enrolments, retention and post-school transitions.

It is also committed to improvements in numeracy and literacy and NAPLAN results.

But importantly, it also aims to see improvements in wellbeing outcomes...

and better understanding of the histories, cultures and experiences of Aboriginal people.

Which are important factors in making schools welcoming, supportive environments for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.

And better, more inclusive places for everyone.

VOICE TO PARLIAMENT

I also want to talk with you today about the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament.

At Garma this year, the Prime Minister laid out a roadmap to implement the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

He announced a possible question and amendments to the Constitution to establish a Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament.

And just two weeks ago we held the first meeting of the Referendum Working Group and Engagement Group on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament -

With the Referendum Engagement Group, we've got more than 60 First Nations leaders and representatives – and their role is going to be engaging with communities all across Australia to build understanding, awareness of the referendum.

I've said before that we'll be able to measure the success of the referendum not just by the number of people who vote for the Voice in the Constitution – but by the lives that Voice will help improve.

As the Uluru Statement from the Heart states:

“We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country.

When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish.

They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.”

As a country, together, that's where we want to go.

We want to see First Nations children flourish - to be the keepers of a culture 60,000 years strong – and for that strength of culture to be a gift to everyone on this country.

We want Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have a Voice on the matters that affect them.

INFORMED CITIZENRY

Central to a functioning and healthy democracy is a well-informed informed citizenry.

There is a role for government to play before the referendum by informing Australians about our Constitution, about how we can change it through Referendums.

And of course, what an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Voice to Parliament means.

But it can't just be up to government.

There's a key role for the community –

For schools and universities, for sporting clubs and religious organisations.

Information also needs to go to a variety of different groups – including our multicultural communities.

MODERNISING REFERENDUMS

It's been 23 years since Australia last held a referendum.

45 years since the last successful one.

Indeed, the youngest Australians to have voted in a successful referendum will be 64 years of age next year.

The Voice referendum will be the first held in the digital age.

In 1999 during the Republic referendum - YouTube, Facebook and Twitter did not exist.

And just 1.5 million Australian households were connected to the internet.

Today, around 23.5 million Australians use the internet each day.

Which brings me to this important point -

The system for holding referendums in Australia is set out in the Referendum Machinery Act 1984 -

An act which is now out-of-step with the Electoral Act, which governs general elections.

Essentially, it's outdated and needs to be refreshed.

The Act does not contemplate the broad digital communications, so common in contemporary Australia - currently it relies on voters being sent information in print form -

A pamphlet in the post to each elector describing the proposed change, and 2,000 words each on a 'yes' and 'no' case - as provided by parliament.

These are issues government is looking at carefully.

CONCLUSION

Friends, history is calling us. Australia is on the cusp of re-defining its constitutional relationship with us – it's first people.

The Voice referendum is our opportunity to build a different future for First Nations peoples – and the entire country.

I hope you will join me in encouraging others to get behind this once in a generation reform.

And I'll leave you with some wise words from the late Aunty Evelyn Crawford who said:

You can't change the past, but sure makes good looking at.