

Speech by Prof. Mick Dodson
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Thank you Ken - and thank you to the National Press Club for inviting me to speak today.

My thanks also to Matilda for her very warm welcome. They hold a few important events round here, on the traditional country of your ancestors, and your presence adds significance to them.

When we talk about traditional 'country' in this way, we mean something beyond the dictionary definition of the word. For Aboriginal Australians, country has an altogether different meaning.

When we say country we might mean homeland, or tribal or clan area and we might mean more than just a place on the map. We are not necessarily referring to a geographical place. We're talking about the whole of the landscape, not just the places in it.

For us, country is a word for all the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that area and its features. It describes the entirety of our ancestral domains. All of it is important – we have no wilderness, nor the opposite of wilderness, nor anything in between. Country is country – the whole cosmos.

Country underpins and gives meaning to our creation beliefs – the stories of creation form the basis of our laws and explain the origins of the natural world to us – all things natural can be explained.

So when we acknowledge traditional country, as increasingly people do in Australia, it is no empty ritual: it is to acknowledge who we, the Aboriginal people, are and our place in this nation. It is to take special note of a place and the people who belong to it.

In doing that, it seems to me, all Australians might have a clearer notion of who they are and where they stand in relation to their history and the land they live in. And were they to understand what Aboriginal Australians mean by country, they would have gone some way to understanding the oldest living culture on earth – which is no small thing.

By such small steps on the path of knowledge, you see, we will more easily find each other.

Some might think this ritual of respect is purely symbolic – and therefore unrelated to all that needs to be done to improve our health and well being, and bring reconciliation nearer to reality. But it is not unrelated. It is one of the essential tools we need to get these jobs done. A symbol, after all, is only a symbol when it stands for something concrete.

Governor Phillip didn't think planting the British flag in Sydney Cove on January 26 was a gesture without meaning, even when there was so much work to be done. He knew how practical that symbolism was.

Last month, when I was given the honour of being named Australian of the Year for 2009, I said I wanted to talk about the protection of the rights and human dignity of all Australians. I said that sometimes we don't speak up or act because we think a problem is too hard or that it will somehow go away. I said I believe that we're better than that.

And watching the reaction to the tragedy in Victoria, who can doubt that we are?

Today I want to talk about three things:

I want to explain what I meant by those words on 25 January.

I want to talk about my plans for the year.

And I want to do my best to put an end to the misguided notion that reconciliation comes in two discrete and opposing forms – practical, meaning worthwhile and effective; and symbolic, meaning near enough to worthless.

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I've thought a lot in the last couple of weeks about what changes I would most like to see by 26 January 2010, and where I would most wish to make a contribution as Australian of the Year.

I'd like to see every Australian child next Australia Day geared up for the start of the 2010 school year.

And I want to be confident that those children are going to get the best education this country can give them. I want it for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and I want it for other children who aren't getting it now because of where they live, because of poverty and because we've failed them.

This isn't a 'no child will live in poverty' statement.

This is the father of two ambitious young women, saying that my children and your children- all children - have the right to the best education this country can deliver.

And the fact that many of our children are not getting the best education is something none of us should tolerate, or dismiss as inevitable, or as too hard to fix.

I truly believe we are better than that. And my call this year to each and every Australian will be to play a part in fixing it.

That every child deserves a good education, and that a country as prosperous as this one should be able to provide it, are things all of us agree on. We've been agreed on it for a very long time - and yet we still can't do it.

The failure should be an offence to our pride, our benign self-image and our profession of faith in the 'fair go' – and maybe it is. Maybe that's why we fob off the failure by blaming the kids or the parents or the teachers, or looking for one size fits all solutions, silver bullets that just don't exist. Maybe these habits are symbols of our denial.

I want to spend my year doing what I can to see that children who are not getting a good education in Australia today, get one in the future. Many of these children, of course, are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

And in doing this, I'm going to take up the phrase the Prime Minister has been using lately in talking about the global financial crisis: that on education 'we're all in this together'.

If we are all in it together to deal with a crisis that has been decades in the making and upon us for less than 6 months, surely we are all in it together to assure the future of the nation by giving all our kids the chance to find and realize their potential.

Education is something we've let slide miserably in recent decades. We've failed a lot of children in that time. And many of those children – a disproportionate number – are Indigenous children. We've been failing them for a lot longer.

We've all been looking at the dollars being spent to shore the country up against the global financial crisis: looking and applauding, many of us, especially the dollars being spent on schools.

What I'm saying is that we need to invest in the children and their teachers – the human capital, as people like to say these days – as well as the physical infrastructure.

Buildings and roads and computer technology and gymnasiums and science labs are essential to any kind of education revolution. I'm all for them. But they're worth nothing without people to build and occupy them, operate them, teach and learn in them. The education revolution begins and ends with people: teaching them, giving them skills; and, with those skills, the confidence and wherewithal to do their very best for themselves and their communities.

We need more investment in teachers and in their professional development so that we can reasonably expect them to be good teachers; so more good students will grow up wanting to be teachers; and more teachers will believe in the worth of their vocation and in the potential of every child they teach.

We need investment in curriculum development. For a start we need curricula that teachers, pupils and parents can understand, school reports they can understand. That's surely a bare minimum.

We need good minds and common sense brought to bear on it – not education theory or bureaucratic fashion.

We need curricula that will fit students for fulfilling, useful lives and give them all at least a roughly equal chance at happiness.

It never was an easy task – but the shame is not in failing, it's in not trying as hard or as intelligently as we can.

Might I also say we should be giving every Australian child a chance to learn about this country's Indigenous history and culture – it IS the oldest surviving culture in the world and, as the Prime Minister says, it's a culture all Australians can take great pride in.

When I was named Australian of the Year, I said I wanted to encourage Australians to uphold and protect the human rights and human dignity of their fellow citizens.

I said I wanted to help end this false distinction between those who see themselves as pursuing this goal – and the goal of reconciliation – by practical means, and those who are cast as feckless symbolists.

I say, let's begin with education: I think we can all agree that a good education is a right and that all Australian children have that right. I think we can all agree that in bestowing knowledge, skills, opportunity and a chance at happiness and self-sufficiency, education also bestows dignity. And all agree, I think, that this right and this dignity are a good deal more than symbolic – they have profound practical effects.

This is not to say that we do not have our share of hollow symbolism. It's not hard to think of notorious examples: billions of dollars set aside for education that never reach the children or the teachers. That is mere symbolism.

Mere symbolism in education – as in health and much else – is when those who are paid to take responsibility do not take it. It is providing the money for infrastructure and not seeing that it's built and serviced properly. Putting up the schools and not seeing that kids learn inside them.

Mere symbolism is the poisonous habit of political spin: of grandstanding before the media – and then walking away, as if the mission is accomplished just by saying it has been.

Of course not every bureaucracy or every politician in the country can be accused of this – not by a long chalk – but it is true of enough to cost a lot of kids an education.

Think of it this way: if we were to learn that most of the donations of money and clothing and food to the survivors of the bushfires had not actually reached them, we would be outraged. Justly outraged.

If we really believe in the value of education and that every child has a right to it, we should be just as outraged when our taxpayer dollars do not reach the children who need them.

Consider a school on an outstation in the Northern Territory: a good new building, a school house, 30 odd children living in the houses all around, parents who want them to get an education – but the teacher, paid a full time salary, is only there for half the week at most.

Primarily concerned with reaching national benchmarks and university entrance standards, the responsible officers have decreed that teachers will spend only five or six days a fortnight in the classroom. Now try to imagine if your children in a suburban or rural school were missing out like this – if it was your children whose life opportunities were being squandered, their chance at happiness ebbing away day by day, week by week, year by year.

I think it's safe to say you would be beside yourselves with rage and pain. Remember, their parents missed out on education too, so they can't catch up at home. By the time the children are ten, they are too far behind to ever catch up. By 15 the game is over. How do you count the cost – to the children, to their communities, to this country?

Of course they're not our kids. So why should we worry? And anyway, if they want their kids to be educated why don't they move to a town? Well, tell that to generations of white kids educated in remote Australia – no one told them they had to move. These people live where they do because the homeland communities are safer and measurably healthier. And it is their land. It's the place where they live. And their kids have a right to the same education as all other Australians.

This example is one of many that lead me to saying that we need to bring to education in this country a much greater sense of urgency, of necessity. We have to make up our minds to turn the right to an education into a reality. Before the mission can be accomplished we have to make it our mission.

First up we have to agree on the education mission - you, me, every level of government, teachers and principals, students and parents, businesses and future employers of our children, universities and churches - Indigenous leaders and other Australians of influence and power.

And I mean educated in the sense of able to read, write, add up, do maths, with skills and knowledge, competent, creative, able to make their way in the world, able to discover their potential and make something of it. Things that can be measured in concrete ways. This is what 'accountable' means – accountable to the children.

I'm not an expert on education or its delivery but I've worked alongside people who are – people like Chris Sarra who is here today - and I've lived in many different parts of the country where I've seen examples of schools delivering good education and bad education and education that is not worthy of the name.

I've listened to lots of people recounting their own experiences and I can reflect on my own. I am the product of a good education, though it was not the type of education that would suit every child, Indigenous or non-Indigenous.

I was born in the Northern Territory when it was run by the Commonwealth Government. I went to the government run primary school at Katherine. It was a good school as I remember.

By the time I was 10, both my parents had passed away and I went to live with relatives in Darwin who had their trust in the Catholic education system. So I went to the convent school, then the all boys college, and eventually to boarding school in Western Victoria.

My last nine years of schooling I spent with the ‘Micks’ and it was an excellent education. It not only prepared me for university but made me ready, if a bit raw, idealistic and naïve, for life!

A good education won’t look the same for every child. But as Chris Sarra knows it will have a whole lot of common ingredients ...

Many of you would have heard about Chris and his remarkable achievements as principal of Cherbourg School in Queensland.

Chris himself was the product of an education system that considered him unlikely to succeed because he was Aboriginal. His successes as a child were considered surprising, and now his message as an educator is to challenge what he calls “watered down” perceptions of Indigenous students.

For kids to see what he didn’t see in himself as a schoolboy – that they are stronger and smarter than this society has so far given them credit for.

Chris is working to make schools across Australia places that respond to, and cultivate, an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander student identity that is Strong and Smart, the identity he cultivated at Cherbourg.

All of the examples Chris describes offer the same set of ingredients for success.

Examples of success in education are very similar to what we see across Australia and around the world as essential elements in closing the gaps for Indigenous peoples. They centre on a community development approach that's all about working respectfully with communities.

They involve lifting expectations of what's possible, supporting the aspirations of communities rather than imposing solutions that fit a certain ideology, having the courage to be creative and flexible in developing models that work in particular contexts, and being prepared to make and fix mistakes along the way.

And they universally involve ingredients that some of you might be tempted to think of as merely “symbolic”, like recognising and developing students' sense of themselves as Aboriginal people.

It is an interesting concept – that a sense of who you are and where you come from is of no practical value. Dinky Di Aussies can kiss themselves goodbye.

I said earlier that I want to say goodbye to this practical versus symbolic reconciliation.

It's nonsense! What does **impractical** reconciliation look like?

It's a false dichotomy with roots in the late and unlamented culture wars. It never made any sense but has nonetheless provided an easy way of dividing people who are essentially working towards the same end result. And it's been constructed on the assumption that Australians will only tolerate action and spending on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people if they can see it in bricks and mortar.

I say we're better than that.

We all know that children need more than a roof over their heads to succeed. As though love and understanding and encouragement aren't just as important.

We know that how people feel about themselves, whether they feel valued and respected, has a whole lot to do with how they face up to problems.

We need to pick up all the tools in the box to get the job done. And getting distracted by these false divides is just not on.

Reconciling is an active pursuit – it's about getting on with what's needed and what we know to get the results we all want, and that's a mixture of measures that target the body, the mind and the spirit.

Reconciling is about **always** taking the next step, whatever that step may be. Brick by brick the Prime Minister said – we'll rebuild those devastated towns in Victoria brick by brick, school by school, community centre by community.

We need to do the same with reconciliation. Each little success creates a platform for more success – a little more self-esteem, a little more sense of what’s possible. It’s not grand policy half so much as attention to detail. And persistence – making sure it works.

Just last week we commemorated the first anniversary of the apology. We were reminded of how we felt that day, the effect it had on the nation. How we looked in the mirror that day and liked what we saw.

So-called symbolic steps like the apology, like acknowledging country, like constitutional reform, like giving an Aboriginal child pride in their culture. These are all very practical steps that change the way we think and feel and act.

To quote the Prime Minister, the apology was ‘practical in terms of how I as a human being relate to others, but also how Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians go forward’.

Noel, Warren, Marcia, Patrick, Lowitja, Colleen Hayward, Tom Calma and younger Indigenous leaders like Leah Armstrong, Larissa Behrendt, Chris Sarra, Jason Glanville – we all agree the apology was a good thing.

And I think we can all agree we want our kids to grow up strong in their culture and smart in their abilities.

We might differ about how to go about it and that debate should be encouraged rather than interpreted as a personal battlefield.

But I'm confident we can come together around this simple ambition for our children's education. Simple, but an ambition that encapsulates all the complex and interrelated elements of closing the gap.

Some of us might think the solution lies in sending kids from remote communities to boarding schools: some that we should be teaching them, as white kids are taught in rural areas, in their own country, on their own turf. Others might think the solution lies in building boarding schools in regional centres.

Some might think we need to develop specially trained teachers to work with Indigenous children and children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Some might think there's a lot to be gained by recruiting more willing volunteers – by calling on the good will in the Australian community that we see on spectacular display every time there's a disaster of some kind. Good will – and expertise.

I want us to carefully examine all approaches, rather than falling into the trap of imagining there's just one answer that suits every situation, or one mantra under which every problem and every community can find shelter.

For my part, this is what I'll be doing in the next twelve months:

I'll be responding to all those dozens of invitations I've received from schools around the country – I'm sure they'll be many more. I want to accept as many of these invitations as I can. I want to get out and talk to people in school communities.

At my workplace at the ANU, I'll continue working with colleagues to get our Reconciliation Action Plan in place so that we attract more Indigenous students and enhance our across university equity strategy and to create an educational environment that offers them the best chance of success.

And I'll be talking to people across Australia to gather as many examples of success as I can – success involving Indigenous and non-Indigenous kids, in private, public and community schools. Examples of parent-focused initiatives, teacher training, bilingual education – everything I can find that seems to be working.

And there are plenty of examples of success. We are not starting from scratch here. We just have to recognise success, analyse it and replicate it.

As my friend Fred Chaney says, we have to get rid of the “start again” syndrome that has a lot to do with politics and nothing to do with evidence. We have to see the points of light all round us and join them up.

I will encourage actions that make good intentions mean something.

Actions speak louder.

I challenge all of us to think anew, because through new thoughts old habits will be broken, new ground will be broken.

If like me you believe education is the principle pathway to reconciliation, you need to act on that belief.

Indigenous or not, if you are a parent you need to value your kids' education – get them to school, take an interest in what they're learning.

If you are non-Indigenous parent, find out how many Indigenous kids are at your children's school and whether your kids learn about their history and culture.

Do you know enough about local Indigenous history and culture to help your kids learn?

If you're a teacher, demand only the best, of yourself and your pupils.

If you're a government official working in an education department, ask yourself what are you doing to support schools that achieve great results? What are you doing about those that are failing?

What do you do about schools with poor attendance records or poor literacy outcomes? What did you do this week? Last week? What problem will you fix before you go home?

If you're a university lecturer what do you teach the next generation?

Do you know why there are so few Indigenous students at your university?
What are you doing about getting them there?

If you are an employer, do you offer opportunities for Aboriginal trainees, hope for students that their education will lead to work that values and respects them for who they are? Do you hesitate because of stereotypes?

Are you the kind of employer who, given a lucrative government contract for a job in an Aboriginal community, puts a fence around the site and employs not a single Indigenous person, and trains no one?

If you're someone with skills looking for something fulfilling, have you considered taking them where they are needed?

These are questions we need to be asking if we want better outcomes for Indigenous kids. But we need to ask the same or very similar questions for all disadvantaged kids who are not getting a decent education.

Throughout the year, I want to examine and ask questions and work towards improving education outcomes for ALL Australian children.

As an Aboriginal man I have particular responsibilities for my own community, for Aboriginal brothers and sisters and their children.

As Australian of the Year I have responsibilities to ALL Australian children and I intend to fulfill both sets of responsibilities as best I can.

To the media people here today, let me ask that you not see yourselves as removed from this effort. You are citizens. You have lives outside of your jobs, you care. And even inside of your professional roles, if you can put in a bit of yourselves, you will find ways of contributing to this thing that I ask.

26 January 2010.

EVERY child geared up for the start of the school year.

A school to go to with chairs and tables, blackboards and computers.

Teachers ready, confident and determined. Equipped to impart knowledge and confidence.

Shoes on the kids' feet.

Breakfast in their tummies.

Well rested. Ready to learn. Willing to learn. Able to learn.

That's my hope. And I'm going to do my best to make it real.