

It's not black and white: indigenous Australians and Australia day
Australia Day: Invasion Day. Australia Day: Survival Day.

For many Indigenous people, Australia Day has a completely different meaning.

Mark Bin Bakar, NAIDOC's Person of the Year 2007 and Western Australian of the Year 2008, will help us understand the reasons behind Indigenous Australians' perspective and challenge us to acknowledge their feelings about 26 January in our events and programs.

ARE WE DANCING ON THE GRAVES OF HISTORY, TRAGEDY AND TRUTH?

I would like to thank you all who are here and like to also thank the Australia Day National Conference for inviting me here to talk to you about this day of celebration and what it means to our Aboriginal and Torres Strait people of Australia. But first and foremost I would like to acknowledge the Traditional owners whose lands we gather here today. As a Kimberley Aboriginal man I pay respects to the Traditional owners by honouring them in their country. The country that is intricate in what I have to say in the evolution of the western founding of our great country. I humbly pay respect and acknowledge the Gadigal people and their past, future and living ancestors.

I would first like to ask if the room lights can be turned off and for everyone to close their eyes and go into a totally relaxed state. Go into a deep meditated state and take into your heart, soul, spirit and bones, deep into your inner self and merge with the sound of this ancient instrument the didgeridoo. Shut off all thoughts and just focus on this very powerful, healing instrument for 3 mins. Share with me the thousand year old wisdom, which we as a nation inherit. The oldest living race in the world. What a gift. The only race in the world that invented and mastered this art.

I personally have been affected by the many trials and tribulations that have been imposed upon me and my family. Like my mother being a stolen generation, snatched at the age of 3 years from her mother, people, country, language and identity. She is now 65 years of age and just reconnecting. My father who came to Australia from Singapore in 1952 to work on the pearling fleets of Broome was a foreigner to the shores of Australia, escaping racial conflicts and abandonment by family, losing them forever. He is now 75 years old and a proud West Australian.

But, the unique gift that was given to me was the diversity of my upbringing. The convergence of religion, language and culture that exposed me and my family to a greater understanding of "true community oneness". The gift of embracing and becoming part of a new community made up of the many different cultures, foods, religions and beliefs to allow my mind to accept, absorb and appreciate, and become part of the universal make up of our community, sprinkled with the diverse essence from throughout the world, into my heart, mind, soul and lifestyle.

This has worked in Broome and this can work anywhere in the world, or in this case, Australia, if people can embrace others and most importantly not poison young children's minds, as they are the future. We must embrace the many different religions and cultures that make up our country.

We are all Indigenous from somewhere. We are all descendants of old and ancient races. It is not as simple as black and white. It is many colours. It is a rainbow of true human faith and respect for our fellow man.

When I was invited to speak I read the template that was to be my guide to what I had to say. It has been challenging for me as I do not wish to come across as radical but more as a teacher, educator

and to stimulate about what it really means for ATSI people when we as a nation come together to honour the founding of our country and the new title of Australia day. I hope I do not offend anyone here, but I have an obligation to share a sentiment about our national day. I have an obligation to inspire an understanding of my ATSI peoples plight.

*I quote the first ever Aboriginal and Islander Governor in Australia, Pastor Sir Douglas Nicholls, South Australia who said at the National Day of Mourning event in 1938, 71 years ago “ **Aboriginal and Islander people are the skeletons in the cupboard of Australia’s national life, outcasts in our own land**”.*

Yes, Australia Day should be a symbol of unity, a symbol of coming together and sharing a common place, a common space as a nation, respecting the many diverse cultures, languages, people and pioneers of the past in absolute solidarity. And it is, to a big degree. But as all of you know, there is this little stain on the side line, that Indigenous Australia choose to be excluded. This is deliberate as ATSI people psychologically feel, it is a very strong spiritual conflict that plays in their heads. This goes to the heart of the question of who are we as a nation? Who are we, when we are still dealing with a very, very traumatised race of people who happen to be the Indigenous people of this land, that many non Indigenous Australians descendants of early migrants, pioneers, convicts, child migrants , new migrants, refugees etc, who now call Australia home.

This places me in a position to present to you a perspective of where we are at and hopefully, where we need to go.

A mother stands on the banks of a river and she cannot swim, she sees her child drowning in the deepest parts of the river, what can she do? No one else is around to help and she cannot do anything. So all she can do is watch her child slip away via drowning. The pain that burdens her heart, soul and spirit is a pain that is greater than any physical pain. She will carry this pain for the rest of her life. This pain is the pain of a broken heart. This pain is the pain of broken love. How could this woman stand there and not have any remorse, or anger towards herself and faith in God and herself.

This applies to the stolen children that were snatched away from their Aboriginal mothers. This is the pain that lingers in the hearts, mind and soul of ATSI people of Australia. It is unfinished business. This is the suffering and pain that burdens deep into the psyche of Indigenous Australia. People want to climb out of the gutter, they want to be a part of the economic development and contribute to their own well being but they have been told over time that they are not worthy of anything.

***"The history of colonization, and its aftermath, including the forced removal of children, has been the most significant reason for today's picture of Aboriginal health and other problems. The evidence is overwhelming of the effects of loss of culture, land, voice, population, parents and children"* Professor Fiona Stanley Director of Telethon Institute and 2003 Australian of the year.**

One of my Uncle’s once asked me to help drive his car whilst he picked up another car he was buying. He stated, “Look, the bloke I am buying this car from is a racist man”. I said “well, why are you giving him your money”. He said “Because it is a good car” He then went on with this line that really

drove home to me as a Aboriginal man the very essence of the historical unprofessed racist attitude to Aboriginal Australians.

He said "This bloke I am buying the car from, he is one of those typical Aussie blokes, who talks like this "How you going mate" but he goes on in jest, "He is one of those blokes that have this attitude about our people, "Don't worry about the old Abo, keep him in the back pocket, because we can always make a quid out of him".

I realized then, that even though it was in jest it was the very thing that describes the psyche of this country. He described the truth of the inherited general silent attitude to ATSI Australia. Since colonisation the Aboriginal people have been treated as irrelevant or even by legislation as "Flora and Fauna" This was the title that I was even born into, I was born under the Flora and Fauna act of WA. An animal, or perhaps a flower!

Even more so this attitude was also tough on the many non-Indigenous men who actually fell in love with Aboriginal or TSI woman who were also shunned and called derogatory names like gin jockeys etc. The laws of the time did not allow inter-racial relationships between white men and Aboriginal women or Asian men and Aboriginal women.

I heard and grew up with these terms. I was also privileged to be invited to the 2020 summit and in the main auditorium with over 1000 of the various diverse intellects from across the country a forum of discussion was being carried out about who we are as a country. No Aboriginal was up there at the time. But a question was asked of the ½ dozen people on stage, is Australia a racist country. The response was, no! unanimously. I felt compelled to jump up as the ATSI 100 reps where devastated to hear them say this. It demonstrated again that ATSI was irrelevant. History tells us quiet clearly that the atrocities that was burden on ATSI people sits in the many records of the building of the nation.

I quote here one of Australia's Prime Ministers Mr Paul Keating who said in his Redfern speech "We non-Aboriginal Australians should perhaps remind ourselves that Australia once reached out for us. Didn't Australia provide opportunity and care for the dispossessed Irish? The poor of Britain? The refugees from war and famine and persecution in the countries of Europe and Asia?"

Isn't it reasonable to say that if we can build a prosperous and remarkably harmonious multicultural society in Australia, surely we can find just solutions to the problems which beset the first Australians - the people to whom the most injustice has been done? And, as I say, the starting point might be to recognise that the problem starts with us non-Aboriginal Australians.

It begins, I think, with the act of recognition. Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the disasters. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion.

It was our ignorance and our prejudice. And our failure to imagine these things being done to us. With some noble exceptions, we failed to make the most basic human response and enter into their hearts and minds. We failed to ask - how would I feel if this were done to me?

As a consequence, we failed to see that what we were doing degraded all of us.

Friends and comrades we want collectively, a common unity in our nation. I express this, as for us to move forward in a oneness, we need to learn from our past and make the change that is needed to heal our nation. I add here that it is happening, it is slow but it is happening. The apology by Prime Minister Kevin Rudd was a major step forward which had tapped into the psyche of our country. People are now able to again move slowly, with an interestingly increasing pace; understand, the way forward is to own our history good and bad, right and/or wrong. History cannot be changed but we can own it as a nation.

I, with very deep sincerity and respect, think of the modern ignorance that is still out there. The recent death of Mr Ward from the Goldfields of WA, should not have happened. In the back of a very hot cage, no air-conditioning, travelling fast on a gravel road in the heat of day, with a small bottle of water and a pie, the man perished in this caged. If he was a dog he would have been checked on all the time. But for 4 hours non-stop, that tribal elder, leader, international advocate and statesmen perished in the back of that van.

This should never ever have happened in this time. This should never ever happen to any human being. But particularly, not in 2009. Not in Australia. Not after the apology. The outrage for this across the country has been deafening by the silence. Does anyone care? His crime was a traffic offence yet he lost his life because of that attitude it seems, he is only an Abo?

His family now have to put him to rest, they are at a loss for a great leader that he was, they mourn, they cry, as Aboriginal people had always done, since colonisation. But the amazing thing here, demonstrates the great spirit of Aboriginal people, that is, the family accepts the apology made to them. The grace and heart of Aboriginal people to forgive. I pine for them. The irony of this sad case is Mr Ward was celebrating **Australia Day** when he got charged for a minor traffic offence leading eventually to his death. Maybe this can be a theme dedicated to him next year.

Early almanacs and calendars and the *Sydney Gazette* began referring to the 26th of January as First Landing Day or Foundation Day. This has been the tension between the two themes. ATSI Australia feels that the day celebrates the suffering of our people. However Australia Day is a very important day as we acknowledge the birth of our country and despite the negative history regarding Indigenous people, we must be inclusive and maybe allow Aboriginal people to celebrate or mourn Australia Day in the way they feel appropriate. This can be inclusive and we can share this history together. But we must share it together. Not their show and our show attitude.

(humour) An elder once said to me hey Mark where you going. I said I am going to Perth for the Australia Day celebrations. He said what on the 26th Jan. I said yeah. His response was, "well who are they for the rest of the year. What do they celebrate, throughout the rest of the year?" Our country is still dealing with issues that need to be dealt with.

We are challenged everyday. We also have the same element of persons who like to discredit ATSI people through the media. People who make their living creating the divide, between Main stream Australia and Indigenous Australia. It verges on legal racism, yet we allow it as freedom of speech, their legitimate right as a journalist. They cause so much suffering by the strike of the words they chose to write. They want the division, I ask why? Is this in good spirit of nation building or mockery of a people who have been dispossessed and conquered. We must pull them to account. This is not Australian.

Andrew Bolt comes to mind who quotes that its hip to be Black. He claims that fashion, politics, and plum jobs rather than actual heritage had driven the 'choice' of some academics, artists, and activities to identify as Aboriginal. I quote Ms Abigail Burchill who said that Andrew Bolt was in no position to determine who was and who wasn't Aboriginal. She goes on to say "Once we were too black and now we are too white. We reject that. "Protecting our cultural identity is the new battle that Aboriginal people must now enter"

Today because of his attack he and his papers are under threat for being sued for racism, we shall see. People like Australian of the Year Prof Mick Dodson, Lawyer Larissa Behrendt, authors, Dr Annita Heiss and Tarra Winch, Photographer Bindi Cole and broadcaster Danial Browning. Credible Aboriginal people who have struggled to achieve their goals and come from a poverty stricken history! I salute them.

I quote Steven Biko (1946-1977) South African activist, leader of the Black Consciousness Movement. ***"White people must be made to realise that they are only human, not superior. Same with Black people, we must be made to realise that we are also human, not inferior"***.

Friends, the racism that is out there is still alive and well. Aboriginal people know this and have always known this. Hence why the plight for the Australia Day celebrations will always be tarnished with the label Survival Day. Because every day in our lives we are being challenged, whether it's through Govt policies, laws, society or even down to proving one's own country via a multimillion dollar industry called Native Title. ATSI people have always known that it is going to take a huge shift before Australia is fully capable of owning its true past, warts and all.

This ATSI history, negative and positive, right or wrong, good intentions or evil intentions belongs to all Australians not just ATSI people. By embracing, encouraging and supporting the Australia Day Celebrations in partnership with Survival in reconciliation. It is the first stepping stone to bring the truths together. This truth being Foundation Day 1788 and Survival of the ATSI people since colonisation. As a country we are not perfect. The only perfect component in our country is the full blood Aboriginal. The rest of us are worldly, we are all family, we share same or similar bloodlines, coming from diverse DNA back to Europe, Asia and Middle East. We must bring ourselves together as one family. But we must also attend to the neglected factual history that we generally do not wish to own due to shame, disgust and embarrassment of our fore-fathers and fore-mothers. We must also respect those who are and identify and is accepted as ATSI people first. This is who we are.

ATSI people have an oral tradition. Everything was handed down through song, dance and storytelling. Once it is passed, down it becomes gospel. People do not shift from it, and our people do not ever forget. The suffering, pain and hurt imposed on our earlier generations are passed down and

never forgotten. We grow up passing these stories on. That is why it is hard for ATSI people to fully engage in the concept of Australia Day as we know it. It will always be frowned on and considered a DANCE ON THE GRAVES OF HISTORY, TRAGEDY AND TRUTH.

Australia cannot blame our people for this. But if we are willing to learn from each other we can work towards a common day that will truly bring our nation together in proper protocol with the true owners of Australia. We have nothing to be ashamed about our history as it is, if we are only willing to accept it and teach it.

"Let the people know the facts, and the country will be saved" Abraham Lincoln 16th President of the United States of America from 1861 - 1865

Paul Keating, Redfern Speech :-There is one thing today we cannot imagine. We cannot imagine that the descendants of people whose genius and resilience maintained a culture here through 50 000 years or more, through cataclysmic changes to the climate and environment, and who then survived two centuries of dispossession and abuse, will be denied their place in the modern Australian nation. We cannot imagine that. We cannot imagine that we will fail. And with the spirit that is here today I am confident that we won't. I am confident that we will succeed in this decade.

I also finish with this quote that I found in some history books Written by a white West Australian pioneer to fellow colonists in 1833. Quote:- ***"Think not, that the Aboriginal inhabitants of Australia – offspring's of the same parent with yourselves, and partakers of all the kindred feelings of a common humanity, can resign the mountains and the seas, the rivers and the lakes, the plains and the inhabitations of their fathers for generations immemorial, to a foreign foe without the bitterness of grief"***

I end by saying this simple little poem I wrote to emphasise my passion for Australia to truly reconcile itself and celebrate the diversity that makes us who we are as a nation.

I can say this because I am Aboriginal,
I can say this because I am Irish,
I can say this because I have European Ancestry,
I can say this because I have a Muslim Father,
I can say this because I have a Catholic Mother,
I can say this because my mother is a genuine Stolen Generation person,
I can say this because I had a grounded disciplinary Asian upbringing,
I can say this because I grew up in a multi cultural community,
I can say this because my family connections, language, culture, identity was stolen from me,
I can say this because I love my country,
I can say this because I am Australian,
You are, we are, we are all Australians.

I now leave you with this song, translated and sang in Wongatha language of the Goldfields WA by the Yabu Band. Album available at www.yabuband.com.au