

Beyond discomfort and dismay: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, power and prosperity

Mokak Oration, 20 November 2024

Romlie Mokak

Acknowledgment

I acknowledge the Ancestors and Elders of this special place; Ngunnawal and Ngambri Country.

And thank you Paul for your beautiful warm welcome.

I give thanks especially to your mother Aunty Dr Matilda House, for her care and generosity over so many years.

My people are from Djiring giny ngan (known also as Rubibi or Broome). My ancestors, to the beginning of time, are of that place. Their spirits, their dreams, their memories and their blood are in that place.

I come from a long line of strong Djugun women.

My great grandmother Philomena Carter is one of 33 apical ancestors under the Yawuru Native Title Determination. Strong, resolute, determined.

My grandmother Crescentia Carter moved her whole family to the Northern Territory in the late 1950s in pursuit of opportunity. Defiant, proud, protective.

My mother Esme Nasir. Power in her love and care for others. My greatest teacher. Gentle, humble, full of grace.

Like many Kimberley families who migrated to the NT in the mid-1900s, ours travelled back and forth. Keeping connected to kin and Country.

With my parents' separation in my early teens, travel back to Broome faded. Longing for connection to my Ancestral lands remained strong.

The colonial project's aim to dispossess First Peoples' of our lands, our languages and our cultures reverberates throughout families across this continent to this day.

And compels us, as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, to hold strong and to achieve justice and prosperity for our future generations.

It is a question of our very survival. Of our very existence.

I acknowledge and thank the countless Elders and Indigenous family in Australia and beyond who have shared with me their wisdom and their love and nourished my soul.

I am forever grateful.

And to all the people who have given so generously - their wisdom, guidance and time; to you my deepest gratitude.

Young and old, Indigenous and non-Indigenous.

And while somewhat daunted, my heart is filled to see you here today.

The Commission

I'd also like to thank Chair Dani Wood for your kind introduction.

Though we worked together for only a short time, from day one I witnessed your passion and drive for the Commission to elevate its impact; to provide strong and sound policy advice to Australian governments.

This commitment is shared right across the Commission. Colleagues around the Commission table and staff alike.

Dani recently highlighted the imperative to incorporate a range of perspectives and expertise in policy making. To tackle so-called 'wicked problems' that cut across policy realms.

This has always been my view, in working in the Commission and all previous roles.

And this obviously does not just apply to the Commission.

It is imperative and urgently needed to deliver Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander outcomes right across public policy making. And I would argue more than any policy challenge exercising the minds of policy makers today.

And as the Commission throughout its existence led many public policy debates, so too must it be an exemplar for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy research and advice into the future.

A Story

Earlier last month, my partner Deb and I camped at Gundabooka National Park, just south of Bourke in north-western NSW – a sacred place for the Ngemba and Barkandji people.

We climbed to the top of Mount Gundabooka. As much breathless from the stunning views as the ascent. Views that go to the Barka (Darling River) and beyond.

Back at the campsite that evening we were hit by a massive dust storm, closely followed by a downpour of red-tinged raindrops.

So fierce was the storm, we had to hold down the awning from ripping off our camper trailer and taking flight into the bush.

After the front passed, we were gifted the most stunningly beautiful pink rainbow.

As I have never seen before.

That night, under the mighty Milky Way, my mind went to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy.

And to the mountains we climb, the energy and effort, the breathlessness – sometimes in awe, sometimes from having the wind knocked out of us.

The healing power of Country, the weathering of storms, the clean up afterwards, the power of working together, the emergence of new insights, the wider or sharper lens, the brilliance of the night sky, the love of people and family, the determination and resolve for better.

And the comfort in the power of our Ancestral Lands. And the power and presence of our Ancestors. And the power of knowing we will always be here, as we have always been.

As Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the policy making game, our challenge and our responsibility is to hold clearly and intentionally in minds and hearts our old people who came before and our generations to come.

We must navigate the mundane and the procedural.

We must challenge systems of privilege that box us in as ‘other’.

And we must invest in revolving door relationships.

All whilst honouring the imaginings of our Ancestors and the dreams of our children’s grandchildren.

The Mokak Oration is about doing just that.

To elevate the perspectives and priorities of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

And to provide space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander public policy contributors to *share their impact on the future for our people.*

I am humbled by the Commission establishing an oration in my name, and I look forward to sharing this space with you today.

Today's Speech

In 2018, Parliament passed legislation to establish the position of Indigenous Commissioner at the Productivity Commission. And in April 2019, more than 20 years since the Act established the Commission in 1998, I was appointed Indigenous Policy Evaluation Commissioner.

On accepting the role, I wondered what value the work of the Commission holds for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, and how the Commission would know if it had been successful in these efforts.

I also wondered why it took legislative amendment for an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person to be appointed as a Commissioner to the Productivity Commission.

You could ponder the same questions across many key mainstream institutions.

My appointment to the Commission was the first time an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person sat at the table of this pre-eminent advisory body to Australian governments – and somewhat delayed, when considering that improving outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been long agreed as a national policy priority.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have long been impacted, often to the detriment, by national policy priorities.

But we are so much more than policy priorities.

We are so much more than program recipients.

We are so far beyond needy vessels to build capacity.

Too long have our people not had access to corridors of power or had our hands firmly on levers of change.

Agreements, strategies and frameworks, accompanied with implementation plans and monitoring and reporting processes, are simply not enough if structural reform and mindset shift are not addressed in real, tangible and measurable ways.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, our perspectives, our representation and our voice matter. And change must happen without delay.

This is what I will talk about today:

How we must centre Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Tackle the imbalance and abuse of power.

And ensure future prosperity for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

People, power and prosperity. Essential elements for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people's wellbeing.

30 years in Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Policy

I have worked in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander policy for more than 30 years, and it has been an enormous privilege to have served our people.

To have directly contributed to changing people's lives is profoundly rewarding.

My first policy role in NSW focused on home and community care, ageing and disability, before I moved to the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, covering policy areas from eye health to health financing and substance use.

I then spent fifteen years heading up two key national black organisations - the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association and the Lowitja Institute.

And lastly, the Productivity Commission for five years, completing my term in March this year.

A focus on people, power and prosperity has underscored much of this work, taking shape through:

- Establishing a collective Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander voice across jurisdictions within the home and community care sector
- Supporting children and their families in remote Australia through community led youth-centred supports and the introduction of a world-first, low-aromatic unleaded fuel, which dramatically reduced sniffing prevalence
- Increasing the number and prominence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander doctors and medical students, and strengthening impact across the Pacific with Indigenous medical association kin
- Contributing to the rise and influence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peak bodies through the Australian Indigenous Doctors Association, and providing support and mentorship to emerging bodies which led to the National Health Leadership Forum
- Securing the future of the Lowitja Institute to drive Indigenous community-determined research, research translation and evaluation.

Since 1788, gains made by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, have all been hard fought. Nothing has been gifted to us.

Where we have seen movement in the right direction, the gains have required smarts and strategy, intellect and innovation, persistence and patience. And the pursuit of collective and community impact.

And we have many non-Indigenous colleagues and friends who have been with us, side by side. Offering their skills and talents to an Indigenous empowerment agenda.

However, benevolence and beneficence have not always been our friend.

There are still areas where we have seen little if any movement. And indeed, movement in the wrong direction. This includes the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in custody whether adult or younger people. The data continues to tell this damning story.

It also includes broader efforts to Close the Gap.

The language and label of Closing the Gap sits uncomfortably with many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. It speaks to non-Indigenous benchmarks against which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are measured, and the labels that work to define us. The labels that work to frame us in ways that reinforce deficit.

Problematized as people. Forced into proprietorship of our own disadvantage.

And while there are attempts to bring nuance to this narrative by using strengths-based language, to the general public, politicians and policy makers, the baked in negative narrative about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is ubiquitous.

In the face of continuing poor outcomes, recycled proclamations of needing to do better, re-doubling effort and re-committing to Closing the Gap simply do not cut it.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people see through these veiled words. With 20/20 vision.

There is no silver bullet – but there are solutions. Solutions Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have provided. Just look at the *Yirrkala Bark Petitions* (1963), the *Barunga Statement* (1988) and the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* (2017).

But numerous calls on parliaments, governments and citizens to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and our priorities have been ignored or rejected.

Much like racial literacy, or financial literacy, Indigenous literacy – that is, non-Indigenous people's understanding of self and relationship to Indigenous cultures, knowledges and histories – is lacking.

The nature, extent and pace of change to close the gap is still largely being determined by governments.

The pain associated with the outcome of the Referendum for a Voice to Parliament still sits with many of us today.

To quote the Uluru Statement: *this is the torment of our powerlessness*.

For many of you, these are not new insights.

Ignorance can no longer be justified as a handbrake on progress.

Close/Closing the Gap

I am not immune from being a participant in the gap narrative in the early days.

In the 2005 Social Justice Report, Commissioner Tom Calma published a chapter that set a goal of achieving Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health equality within a generation. Tom argued for a 'right to health' approach. That is to say, health as a human right.

Like many, I stood with Tom and other black peak organisations in shaping the Close the Gap agenda.

And with a collective of organisations, including the Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association where I was CEO at the time, a campaign was born. The Close the Gap campaign for Indigenous health equality.

The Council of Australian Government's response followed in 2008 in the form of a national agreement and carried the banner of *Closing the Gap*.

This change in language is important to note. The focus of our campaign from the outset was the destination – to *close* the gap. Governments were more cautious, or perhaps less ambitious – relabelling it *closing* the gap. The destination vs the journey.

Irrespective of these differences, in 2020 there was an unprecedented commitment made by governments to partner with the Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations. For the first time, a signatory external to Australian governments was in a national agreement.

This counts for a lot. All governments signed up, as well as the peak body representing local governments. In signing, governments committed to radical changes. A transformation of their structures, systems and staff.

Not ad hoc or piecemeal; planned, systemic, transformative.

And in February this year, the Productivity Commission released its first report on the Review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap.

It was the culmination of two years of work, with colleagues Natalie-Siegel Brown and Michael Brennan. And a deadly team led by Ana Markulev and Catherine Andersson.

This work was only possible because of strong and respectful engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, government and non-government bodies alike.

In the report's foreword, Nat and I wrote:

Most critically, the Agreement requires government decision-makers to accept that they do not know what is best for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Change can be confronting and difficult. But without fundamental change, the Agreement will fail and the gap will remain.

This report was about more than recycled proclamations. It was more than simple words that encouraged government decision-makers to listen and take action. To *do better*.

This was a magnifier on the lack of progress, and the failure of governments to capture the immense opportunities presented within the National Agreement.

Once again, this report demonstrated how decision makers fell short in recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and their priorities.

And once again, in response to this inaction, the Commission provided a pathway forward.

The Commission made four key recommendations in its report:

First, that power needs to be shared.

For meaningful progress towards Closing the Gap, governments must share power, and recognise that self-determination is grounded in the right of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to have control over decisions that affect their lives.

Second, that Indigenous Data Sovereignty needs to be recognised and supported.

The Agreement needs to be amended to include Indigenous Data Sovereignty and Indigenous Data Governance. One recommended action was to establish a Bureau of Indigenous Data to: support governments to embed Indigenous Data Governance into their data systems and practices; invest in enhancing data capability of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities; and invest in Indigenous data infrastructure.

Third, that mainstream systems and culture need to be fundamentally rethought.

Governments have not fully grasped the scale of change required to their systems, culture, operations and ways of working to deliver the unprecedented shift they have committed to in the Agreement, and this requires immediate action.

Finally, that stronger accountability is needed to drive behaviour change.

The report outlined actions to strengthen and drive accountability. One was to urgently prioritise setting up an independent mechanism with robust, legislated powers to examine progress on all aspects of the Agreement.

In July the Joint Council on Closing the Gap agreed to all four recommendations, as well as 15 of the 16 actions sitting under the recommendations. The one action Joint Council did not agree on was the Bureau of Indigenous Data. They agreed to do further work before deciding how to progress this action.

It was unusual for governments, especially within Commonwealth-State arrangements to agree to so many recommendations so quickly. This is a testament to the work that has been done by the Commission to this point.

But as history has shown us, a commitment can only get us so far.

We need action. We need real change.

People

At the heart of it all must be the people. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. And we must be at the centre of policy decision making, program design and implementation.

It's as simple as that.

We are not just another stakeholder in our own futures. Not just another cohort to consult with. We are not just another population group to cover or another segment of a market to survey.

We are the First Peoples of this place. With our sciences, our knowledges and our solutions.

You may have been misled by reductive notions of who we are and what we are capable of. These are not simply the provenance of past racist policies. They play out in our daily interactions.

We continue to be framed by others who are dismayed by their perception of a persistent negative state of being. And we continue to be impacted by the discomfort of others – those who find it easier to stay silent, rather than challenge the status quo, the racist remark or the structural barriers that stand in the way of change.

Palawa Professor Maggie Walter has characterised data about us as the 5Ds: Difference, Disparity, Disadvantage, Dysfunction and Deprivation.

These are the ways that mainstream narratives and data define, produce and report on *statistical Indigene*. This data is largely numeric, and seemingly objective; divorced from the aspirations and ambitions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and communities.

Deficit discourse and negative narrative abound. Look no further than contemporary media. And you don't have to look far to find policy and research papers doing more of the same.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people painted as the problem, deserving to be in the situation we find ourselves in.

Or worse, not even considered at all. Invisible and unheard. Still echoing the great Australian silence that Stanner spoke about in his Boyer lectures over 50 years ago. Data that is devoid of the things that have relevance and meaning for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

And so it continues. Individuals and peoples are problematised. Systems and structures let off the hook.

The Indigenous Data Sovereignty movement is the antidote to these continuing representations of First Peoples. The rise of Indigenous Data Sovereignty, here and abroad, directly challenges the preconceived and continuing reproductions of us as peoples, as communities, as families, as individuals.

And in the absence of meaningful data, Indigenous people the world over are creating their own metrics. Built on the foundations of Indigenous cultures, languages and science.

New initiatives with new architecture, delivering new insights, are well underway.

Mayi Kuwayu is the largest national study of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, health and wellbeing, with over 13,000 respondents sharing their stories of identity, spirituality and connection to Country, community, and language.

Maranguka, the first Aboriginal-led, place-based model of justice reinvestment in Australia, is a leading example of Indigenous self-governance in Bourke, NSW. Young peoples' lives have been changed forever because of Aboriginal people holding power in their spaces, with governments and others invited in by community and Elders, instead of the other way around.

Local communities are more than holding conversations about what matters most. They are activating, and in doing so, building metrics for their own learning, adaption and empowerment.

This centrality of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is encapsulated in the Productivity Commission's Indigenous Evaluation Strategy's overarching principle for evaluations - *centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, perspectives, priorities and knowledges*.

If evaluations, research or policy are aiming to address a problem or answer a question in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, the starting point is to think about who is asking the question. Why does it matter, and for whom?

In practice, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people need to be the decision-makers of what to evaluate, and the development of evaluation questions, approaches, methods and practice, and the interpretation of findings.

In government, this also means ensuring Indigenous public sector leaders are at the highest levels. Across the board, not just in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander specific agencies.

In much the same way as Indigenous approaches offer insights for the sustainability of the planet, and wellbeing of all people, so too do Indigenous ways offer insights for the public service, as well as corporate and non-government bodies. To be places underpinned by culture and practice of relationality and reciprocity.

Within the Australian Public Service context, the 100 First Nations Senior Executive Service target is a significant step forward. I understand that meeting the target is well on the way.

However, a recruitment target is one thing. In a highly competitive labour market with limited supply, retention and advancement will be a big issue to keep an eye on into the future.

Ensuring workplaces are culturally safe is a necessary condition for success. Addressing institutional racism is a priority for every institution. For their own good and the good of people, not just because it's in the National Agreement.

We also need to be careful not to siphon black leadership from the community controlled sector. Movement across and between sectors, as I have, can only be good for public policy outcomes.

In centring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in policy, empowerment and action must also reside closer to the ground. People, locally, in their places and spaces, know best. So for solutions to be successful, they must be place based with strong local ownership.

And for that to happen, we must wrestle a most valued commodity from Canberra and state and territory capitals: power.

Power

Often heard, not often seen. The subsidiarity principle needs elevation and activation, not more lip service. Indigenous leaders know this and have been calling for it for generations.

Public sector leaders have committed to it – whether under the banner of place-based approaches, or local decision making.

It boils down to ensuring that people closest to the matter concerning them have the most say – that they have the power to set priorities, lead design and delivery, and assess outcomes.

This requires systemic change, and for governments, funders and policy makers to relinquish power – to establish mechanisms that ensure people who are most impacted have the most say.

The legitimacy of government rests on this. Trust is a currency and it matters deeply.

The Commission's review found that the commitment to shared decision-making, a centrepiece of the Agreement, is rarely achieved in practice.

And while there are some examples of governments sharing some decision-making in some circumstances, it is not evident more widely. The Commission also found that contrary to a principle of shared decision-making, there appears to be an assumption that government knows best.

Barriers to power sharing often reside in the mindsets of individuals or the habits and rituals of institutions, not necessarily in breaches of regulatory or administrative parameters.

Individual resistance to sharing data, even when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations are partners in a data project, is a case in point.

There is nothing quite as damaging as one partner holding onto information to dissolve hard-earned trust.

As a latecomer to the study of economics, I became familiar with the idea of information asymmetries or some having information when others don't. Robbing parties of the ability to consider the range of available options and solutions, thus leading to unfair outcomes.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and organisations are all too familiar with this practice. And we suffer the consequences of bad decision making by others.

Of course, there are notable exceptions.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander governance and decision-making structures, built on foundations of cultural legitimacy, are becoming established in many regions.

In Victoria, the First Peoples Assembly, Treaty Authority and Yoorook Truth and Justice Commission are well advanced. South Australia has a Voice to Parliament, and the ACT a legislated Indigenous Elected Consultative Body.

These arrangements have come about after years of hard work, negotiation and commitment to staying the course.

Disappointingly, government commitment to Treaty and Truth-telling in Queensland looks to have come to an end. Having recently been with our mob in Meanjin/Brisbane, I witnessed the deep hurt and pain.

Let's not forget that that much power remains tightly held within non-Indigenous institutions. Within the corridors and closed doors of bureaucracies, and within the cultures of bureaucracies and the staff who work in these places.

Last year, we had an opportunity to change this trajectory of power and decision making through a Voice to Parliament.

Remote Aboriginal communities overwhelmingly supported a constitutionally enshrined voice – a stark contrast to other parts of the country.

Despite its defeat, the *Uluru Statement from the Heart* is as relevant and important now as before the referendum. As much as the hurt and pain remains for so many, we will not be defined by the referendum outcome. We will continue to assert our rights as First Peoples.

And where we go as a nation from here is dependent on all Australian citizens.

Governments must transform – deep and wide. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander decision-making must be valued and enabled.

Structural changes must be made to the ways that governments transfer power to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities, and lay the groundwork for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander wellbeing and prosperity.

Prosperity

Some in our communities may react to prosperity as a word. Thinking that it is only about economics, or material wealth.

But the prosperity agenda is a family centred, community focused agenda. Relevant to local and regional spaces. And firmly rooted in the daily lives of people.

Some important work in this space has been done on Yorta Yorta Country, led by Paul Briggs.

The Goulburn Murray Regional Prosperity Plan, developed for local Aboriginal think tank, the Kaiela Institute, defines prosperity as *a state of success. This can be in terms of wealth, health, peace, self-determination, cultural strength, and happiness.*

This is a ground up definition.

It encompasses Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, families and communities prospering as First Peoples – culturally, spiritually, economically. It speaks to our worldview. It is relational and holistic, not individualistic and reductive.

Their vision is to increase gross regional product through Yorta Yorta and First Nations' economic inclusion, prosperity and shared value.

And each of the 6 strategic themes has a prosperity goal.

For example, the prosperity goal under the theme of Thriving Community with Strong Foundations is to:

...recognise families as the backbone of communities and provide support to build safe and stable homes, harmonious family units and create intergenerational wealth.

And under the theme of building enduring relationships, the prosperity goal is to:

...build strong and authentic relationships to enable transfer of knowledge, reduce ignorance, erode racism, promote advocacy and commitment to the Plan and create new opportunities in a variety of workplaces and domains.

Each theme articulates expected outcomes, regional benefits and alignment to Closing the Gap targets.

I mention this work to highlight the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are designing futures in all sorts of sophisticated and systematic ways.

And that governmental effort across all three levels must shift to a greater focus on supporting and enabling communities' priorities and plans to be realised.

It has been long called for by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, whether through Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community councils, services and peak organisations, the Empowered Communities leadership and regions, land councils and prescribed body corporates, black businesses and entrepreneurs, and policy makers and researchers.

I have seen growth in black businesses across the country, accelerated by Indigenous procurement policies, and the growing commercial nous of our people and organisations.

As a judge of the recent Indigenous Governance Awards, I saw the strength of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations and communities who, under the stewardship of Elders who hold cultural authority, are showing the way on what excellence in governance looks like.

Look no further than the Wintjiri Wiru Working Group, an Anangu committee who hold cultural authority and oversight of cultural experiences at Yulara. The drone show depicting the Mala story is shared with

visitors from across the globe. It is a world first cultural experience. A portion of revenue goes to the two communities that are custodians of that chapter of the story.

Another, Djarindjin community, 200 kilometres north of Broome became the first Aboriginal owned airport in Western Australia in 2018. The Djarindjin Aboriginal Corporation is largely self funded through revenue from its airport operations which supports other community priorities.

These are two of many examples of how our people are exemplifying excellence in governance, and entering into significant commercial deals with joint venture partners and as suppliers of services to a range of consumers.

I have come across more than a fair share of sceptics, who say that notions of wellbeing measurement are simply soft. Or measurement for wellbeing outcomes deliver nothing more than the more conventional socio-economic metrics.

To this I say such metrics can only ever tell part of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander story.

And the tyranny of the aggregate, the decontextualised data, only serves to do more harm. The overreliance on these metrics alone sells Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people short.

They reinforce the *statistical Indigene* as the problem person.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are more than recipients of jobs and training programs. Much more than partners at tables that do not truly value their knowledges, priorities and solutions, let alone leadership and authority.

We must recognise the limitations and inadequacy of some frameworks - including economic frameworks - to fully understand meaning, perspectives and outcomes for Indigenous peoples.

The Mayi Kuwayu longitudinal study is a significant data asset that is offering valuable insights, as do local surveys such as the Yawuru wellbeing study. There is also a significant and growing corpus of Indigenous-led research and evaluation employing a range of methods, including Indigenous research methodologies.

Our communities, organisations and businesses operate within complex cultural, social, regulatory and administrative contexts, single-minded in securing strong futures for their grandchildren's grandchildren, with prosperity of families and community at the core.

Utilising sophisticated toolkits, drawing from the best that western and Indigenous knowledge systems can offer, to achieve their goals.

Our people's empowerment and prosperity go hand in hand, with strong spirit, strong culture and strong identity. Strong mob!

In closing

Our Elders, leaders and activists have fought long and hard for our recognition and demanded respect to maintain our culture and identity.

They called out the brutality of our peoples' treatment. The degradation and inhumanity put upon our people in full consciousness and in full view, with intention to wipe our old people from the face of our ancestral lands.

Massacres and theft of our children. Lives of enslavement and servitude.

This is the truth of our past, the reality of our history, and it plays out in our everyday lives; our contemporary realities. And like it or not, this is a history shared between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and non-Indigenous people.

The black nurse is not separate from this history. The black public servant is not separate from this history. The black kid in school is not separate from this history.

And the non-Indigenous policy maker is not separate from this history.

It is one year and five weeks since the referendum for an Indigenous Voice to Parliament.

In 2017, I was a delegate at Uluru, a signatory to the *Uluru Statement from the Heart*. In 2023, I voted yes.

As did 6.2 million other citizens.

The defeat; the rejection, means we have no constitutionally enshrined Voice.

However, we are strong people. And we will continue the fight.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will have the most say in our futures.

Not just some say, or even the first say, or the last say; the most say in our futures.

Where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are the designers, builders, practitioners, evaluators of our futures.

Where we prosper in the fullness of our talents, ingenuity and Indigeneity, in a nation where we are no longer positioned as problematic people.

And where racism is for others to understand, call out and eradicate, not for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to endure, educate and explain.

Just as we cannot separate our histories, so too are our futures intertwined. We have a chance to ignite change from the ground up.

But for this to happen, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people must be at the centre of policy decision making, program design and implementation.

We must tackle the imbalance and abuse of power at all levels of decision making. And we must redefine our understanding of prosperity as a family centred, community focused agenda that is firmly rooted in the daily lives of our people.

The wellbeing of future generations depends on it.

...

My final words are for Deb. I am so grateful to be your partner in life. I could not have done half as much as I have without you. You have been there through my deepest worries and greatest joys.

And to Georgia, Louis and Maya. You three inspire me in immeasurable ways. Most of all to believe that there must and will be a better future.

Thank you