

Speech Saturday, 8 August 2009

Health, Homelands and Creativity

11th Garma Festival of Traditional Culture - Gulkula

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

INTRODUCTION

I would like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land, the Gumatj people and pay my respects to their elders, both past and present.

It's great to join you today at this 11th Garma Festival. I think I've been to them all, perhaps only missing one at most.

Garma has become a really important gathering for indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

It is a unique blend of activities.

On the one hand a vibrant festival of art, music, and dance, a celebration of traditional Indigenous culture and learning.

On the other hand a nationally significant forum for discussing progress on Indigenous health, education, and economic development; and a venue for education and training.

And this year I am pleased to say is no different.

One of my first experiences in Indigenous Australia was in 1979 when I worked in and out of Pipalyatjara, a small Pitjantjatjara homeland community.

I was fortunate there as I have been throughout my working life to be taught much by very wise Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

One of my first lessons there was about the social, economic and cultural determinants of health, lessons that have stood me in good stead.

INDIGENOUS HEALTH MINISTRY

As the new-and first-national Minister for Indigenous Health, Rural and Regional Health and Regional Services Delivery many of these wise persons' lessons will guide me in my efforts to help Indigenous people here in Arnhem Land, across the Territory and throughout Australia have a better future.

We won't see a big leap forward in health and wellbeing without associated progress on cultural, social and economic fronts.

If you have a sense of connection, through culture and through gainful employment, you are much more likely to be happy and to be mentally and physically healthy.

The Rudd Government acknowledges this in our commitment to improving Indigenous health.

That is why our Closing the Gap pledges—which have been agreed by all states and territories—include firm goals on education and employment as well as health.

My own responsibility is for health and I would like to tell you about the plans we have which will make a difference.

Our firm commitment is to close the life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians within a generation; and to halve the rate of death in Indigenous children below five years of age, within a decade.

Achieving these goals will take a huge effort and that effort is already under way.

It will involve improving health services in a number of ways—both Indigenous Health services and mainstream health services.

Indigenous health services will feel the positive benefits of the very broad reforms that are under way in the health sector as a whole, and some of the big ideas also now on the table for discussion.

A couple of weeks ago the Prime Minister released the report of the National Health and Hospital Reform Commission.

This report contains 123 recommendations, a number of them dealing with Indigenous health.

The report recommends, for example, the creation of a new National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Authority which would broker services specifically for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

The new authority would hold all health services to account for providing the right services.

The report includes recommendations for greater investment in Indigenous health services, and strategies to improve nutrition in remote communities and workforce.

It acknowledges that health is a fundamental human right—that improved health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is essential to basic human dignity.

There are also recommendations relating to other parts of the health system including rural health for PATS (Patient Assisted Transport Scheme) and other mainstream services that will have direct impacts for Indigenous Australians and their health providers.

The Government is committed to engaging with stakeholders on the content of the report and will spend the next six months travelling across Australia to talk with the community and listen to what they have to say.

We have completely open minds on the report's recommendations and I encourage you all to have a good look at the report, and I look forward to listening to what you think.

The changes flowing from these reports are particularly designed to assist with prevention and management of chronic diseases which are taking a disproportionate toll on Indigenous people.

We know that our health system is under pressure, from challenges such as demographic change, growing chronic disease in the community, and from increasing health care costs.

We know that the case for health reform is compelling.

HOMELANDS—HEALTHY, CREATIVE AND SAFE COMMUNITIES

As I said earlier my role as Minister will be assisted by many of those lessons I have learnt working and living in the Territory, in my many visits to the homelands of Arnhem Land, Central Australia and indeed right across my vast electorate of Lingiari.

Outstations or homelands as they are more generally known have been an integral part of the Northern Territory community for decades.

They were developed by Indigenous people as a deliberate strategy to improve their own health and well-being.

The history of the homelands movement is well documented in works like the late great Rev. Jim Downing's "Spirit of My Country".

What is apparent from Jim's research is that the homelands movement started despite governments not because of them—they were a calculated and deliberate strategy to provide opportunities for Indigenous people to exercise their cultural responsibilities, and improve health and safeguard families.

It is one of the very few initiatives in Indigenous affairs which has actually worked and continues to work to this day.

In recent times there has grown a view that homelands are not viable—that they are beyond the reach of law enforcement, represent some sort of failed Utopian experiment, and should not be encouraged and should not be supported.

However contrary to such a view there is very strong evidence that homelands provide positive, creative and constructive lifestyle choices for Indigenous people.

The outstanding study is the 2008 Utopia study, largely because it has been carried out over a long period (ten years), the data measurement techniques are high quality, and the results are so dramatic.

It establishes that Utopia homeland residents have:

- A mortality rate from all causes which is 40-50% lower than the NT average for Indigenous adults
- A mortality rate from cardiovascular disease which is 40-50% lower than the NT average for Indigenous adults – Indigenous death from this disease is higher than any other factor. There are obvious implications for Closing the Gap in life expectancies.
- Much lower rates of the risk factors for cardiovascular disease, including diabetes, blood pressure, cholesterol and smoking.

- Much lower rates of hospitalisation for cardiovascular disease- this means large savings for governments in terms of hospitalisation.

An earlier study in the same communities compared health outcomes and risk factors in Utopia homelands with those in surrounding centralised communities.

The study found homelands residents had:

- Significantly lower prevalence levels of type 2 diabetes, hypertension and obesity
- Significantly lower mortality rates than those living in the centralised communities
- Were significantly less likely to be hospitalised for any infection or injury (particularly any injury involving alcohol)
- Lived on average 10 years longer than residents of the centralised communities, evidence for the Closing the Gap implication of reduced death rate from cardio-vascular disease.

There has been quite a lot of work done in the Top End on this topic from the 1980's onwards.

In 1984, Kerin O'Dea demonstrated that where Aboriginal people have returned to their traditional land and adopted a semi-traditional hunter/gatherer lifestyle, there is a marked reduction in the major risk factors for coronary heart disease, and that these changes can occur in a very short time.

This indicates that even for people who do not live at homelands all the time, short-term visits will improve health outcomes.

The health of Doyndji homeland centre not far from here has been studied in detail throughout the 1980's and beyond using a variety of precise biomedical markers.

Some of the conclusions were:

- The general health of Doyndji residents was very good with low BMI's, little anemia, no biochemical evidence of dietary deficiency, red cell folate levels were normal to high, and fasting cholesterols generally low.

A recent study by the Menzies School of Health Research in collaboration with traditional owners of Western and Central Arnhem Land, the Northern Land Council and Charles Darwin University, reported in 2007, draws quantitative links with the health of those Aboriginal people engaged in natural and cultural resource management particularly those living in homelands.

- Those who engaged in natural and cultural resource management are significantly healthier overall.
- This include significantly lower rates of type 2 diabetes and cardiovascular disease
- Participants in natural and cultural resource management report a more nutritious diet and a greater degree of physical activity.

There are approximately 10 000 people living on homelands in the most remote parts of the Northern Territory.

Homeland communities therefore matter in terms of indigenous policy but also in regard to broader policies concerning remote areas of the nation.

As Gregory Marks wrote last year in the Australian Indigenous Law Review, “Policies in respect of (remote) Indigenous communities in respect of land management, environmental protection, national security and integrity of borders overlap and provide a two-way loop of interaction and effect.”

Recent years have seen significant growth in homelands communities’ involvement with these broader national policy issues.

For example, various Homeland Resource Agencies run very effective land and sea management programs, most notably but not exclusively Bawinanga (Maningrida Homelands), Laynhapuy (N-E Arnhem Land), and Mabunji (Gulf Of Carpentaria Homelands).

They run successful programs in fisheries protection, feral animal and pest control and eradication, natural resource protection and bushfire controls.

On more than one occasion their Sea Ranger patrols have acted in the interests of national border security and intercepted illegal fishing boat incursions to Australian waters where conventional coast watch methods have failed.

There are under- or un-utilised benefits from co-ordination of these programs and activities with Norforce and with Northern Territory Government programs in such diverse sectors as corrections, rehabilitation among others.

The development of government policy in the area of climate change will inevitably lead to a greater engagement between those industries interested in carbon trading and traditional owners and homeland communities especially across Northern Australia.

The West Arnhem Land Fire Abatement Scheme is an early example of how homelands communities can benefit by virtue of their land holdings and innovative, though traditional land management practices.

The scheme largely headquartered at Kabulwarneyo and under the leadership and guidance of the redoubtable Lofty Nadjamerrek AO is a partnership between homeland communities of West Arnhem Land and Conoco Phillips.

Fire abatement workers from homelands do ‘cool burns’ in a traditional patchwork manner thereby limiting the impact of the much more green house gas intensive ‘hot burns’ of the late ‘dry’ season.

These are all matters of the highest national priority and cannot be performed as effectively or economically by anyone other than resident remote Territorians.

As the Garma theme this year indicates creative industries are especially important growth areas for homeland communities. They always have been.

When the homeland movement begun in this region of North-east Arnhem Land in the early 1970’s nascent commercial art enterprises provided the economic where-with-all to sustain community people out bush.

Similarly the famous Papunya Tula art movement of Central Australia had its roots in homelands and to this day many of the most prominent Indigenous artists of that region are resident in small de-centralised communities.

The lack of basic homelands resources and services sometimes results in these very same artists being effectively coerced into towns, where they work under sweatshop conditions.

Bawinanga runs a very successful arts and craft business, turning over millions of dollars every year.

They have a retail outlet in Darwin's largest hotel and export to galleries all over Australia and overseas.

Its artists are almost exclusively resident in homelands.

For homelands leaders like Djambawa Marawili from Yilpara homeland not far from here, art and homeland life are virtually indistinguishable from each other.

Djambawa markets his art through the very successful Buku-Larrnygay Arts Centre at Yirrkala. I'm sure many of you will visit their wonderful facility whilst you are here in the region. There is no doubt that artists resident in the homelands of N-E Arnhem Land are the core of their rapidly expanding business.

As he said late last year, "This is our backbone and our footstool. This is our art. This is our land. This is our story, from the country. The land can't talk but the people who are living there can (through our art)."

The legendary Warumpi Band honed their skills at homelands around Papunya.

Similarly Yothu Yindi and the Narbalek Band have always been closely associated with homelands.

Indeed one of Yothu Yindi's first hit songs was 'Homeland Movement' and a great song it is too!

The Barkly's premier Indigenous bands Kulumindini and the Tableland Drifters both begun as homelands bands at Marlinja on Newcastle Waters Station and the late Kumanjai Cotton's homeland on Brunette Downs Station respectively.

Similarly the Gulf Country's premier contemporary musicians the Sand Ridge Band come from, you guessed it, Sand Ridge Homeland.

Various other creative enterprises have been developed that are entirely in keeping with the opportunities presented on homelands through residents exercising their cultural responsibilities.

These include wildlife conservation, crocodile, camel and buffalo management, bush tucker and seed collection and wholesaling, ecological services and cultural tourism.

In addition a number of Homeland Resource Centres run very effective general building programs, housing construction and road maintenance enterprises.

Much more can be done by government and business to support these fledgling industries.

Despite the best efforts of many homelands communities and their resource agencies to safeguard the future of homelands, the recent facts are that policies intended to discourage remote settlements by limiting the provision of housing and other services, has meant homelands have become increasingly unable to cope because of overcrowding and lack of adequate funding for maintenance and infrastructure.

As a result there has been a drift of population to the major Indigenous communities and to the fringe of the regional service towns of Alice Springs, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Darwin.

The end result for these newcomers in the towns, fringe camps and suburbs of the urban centres is marginalisation, overcrowding, conflict, continued social and cultural breakdown, and deep personal distress.

There is increasing pressure placed on resources and infrastructure and also increasing social tensions in the towns and regional centres that people move to.

Homelands certainly have the potential to play creative and positive roles as 'communities of recovery' in situations like this.

The recently applied alcohol management plans of NE Arnhem Land and that of Groote Eylandt has seen long term alcohol and kava abusers return to homelands in droves to 'dry out' at little or no expense to government agencies charged with their rehabilitation.

Similarly Indigenous organisations like the Balunu Foundation take troubled Indigenous youth at risk out bush to remove them from the temptations of the towns and cities with great success.

Barry Abbott at Ilperle south-west of Alice Springs and the Mt Theo anti-petrol sniffing program near Yuendumu use homelands in such caring ways also.

Yolngu women from this region have been trying for years to set up a traditional healing centre at this very place Gulkula.

They plan to use their ancient medical arts to heal the sick and troubled of the larger Indigenous communities.

In recent times homeland schools have come under close scrutiny with suggestions that they have been abject failures and that students need to be re-located to larger centralised communities so as to take advantage of the educational services offered there.

Teachers and others involved in Indigenous education tell me that in fact homelands schools particularly in this region of East Arnhem Land have superior attendance rates and despite being poorly resourced can out perform major community schools.

I have seen documents that suggest homeland schools in this region have had a minimum attendance of more than 80% whilst larger centralised community schools often have attendance rates as low as 25-30%.

As for academic performance, in 2008 Laynha homeland schools in this region have approximately 250 students, averaged over T-12 this is about twenty students per year level.

From that group last year, seven students completed and attained their NT Year 12 Certificate, a 35% pass rate.

No large centralised Indigenous school anywhere in the region could rival those outcomes.

Creative technological breakthroughs in distance education allow us to consider an even brighter future for homelands schools.

In 2001 the Australian Government provided satellite technology and computers to provide a distance education service to 65 cattle stations and 66 remote schools.

Unfortunately at several large centralised schools this service was provided only to the children of the non-Indigenous staff of the community.

Homelands schools appear to have been excluded...

In 2008 I am informed that the provision of up-to-date technology and distance education software has been extended to over 250 remote sites, of these five only are homeland schools.

What is missing from the educational service equation for homeland schools?

- Access to equivalent distance education technology for homeland schools.
- Access to quality English literacy and numeracy internet sites developed specifically for Indigenous students.
- Make the technology and software available in the first instance to schools that have operated successfully for five years or more, with proven enrolments of twenty students or more, and at sites where the technology is safe and secure.

Charles Darwin University has developed an English literacy program for remote and very remote communities.

This software does not require a teacher to be present and does teach basic English literacy.

It is called REOW (Read English on the WEB) and is currently being trialled at numerous sites around Australia by Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education.

If successful this internet link could be extended creatively to adult education including for health workers, administration staff, small business and land management amongst many other possibilities.

CONCLUSION

Homelands have too often been the victims of arbitrary bureaucratic abuse of power, but despite this, homelands have continued to respond in a variety of creative and innovative ways to their situation.

As a result we see a spectrum of types of small de-centralised communities with a variety of needs and challenges before them, but all with a continuing commitment to the health, well being and cultural responsibilities of their people.

These core commitments have allowed Indigenous people on homelands to engage with wider society and the ways of the modern world for the benefit of all.

Government policy settings that reflect the strong attachment of Indigenous people to their traditional lands and their rights to live on those lands are likely to have benefits not only for those Indigenous Australians but the wider Australian community as well.

All homeland communities have needs and all deserve the respect of being considered for support.

Homelands; places of health, creativity, well being and cultural responsibility.

Thank you.

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