

Russell Taylor Oration

Old Parliament House

Museum of Australian Democracy

30 May 2017

Distinguished guests, ladies, gentlemen, brothers and sisters. I thank you all for attending. I would like to express my deep appreciation at being afforded the wonderful opportunity to present this inaugural address named in my honour.

Thank you Jude Barlow for your, as always, most gracious ‘Welcome to Country’.

Thank you Minister Birmingham for your encouraging words and for your attendance and support of this event.

Thanks also to Dr Martin Parkinson AC PSM for your very positive introductory words as well as for your strong personal support for this event.

I would also like to thank others including all members of the AIATSIS Council, and in particular, the long term, outgoing Chair, Professor Mick Dodson AM, the newly appointed AIATSIS CEO, Mr Craig Ritchie, the Public Service Commissioner, Mr John Lloyd PSM, and of course Ms Daryl Karp, Director, Museum of Australian Democracy for all their respective involvement in establishing and supporting this event.

As a Kamilaroi man and in our language ***Garay bubati*** (the language of my father) I say to you: ***Yaama Ngindaay, yaamagera Ngindaayuu!*** (Hello everyone, hello to all) – ***Gulbiyaay Baawaa Gulbiyaay Dhagaan*** welcome sisters welcome brothers

I acknowledge that we come together on the traditional lands of the Ngunnawal and the Ngambri peoples. I pay respects to their elders past, present and future and pay tribute to their resilience as cultural peoples. I would also like to acknowledge and pay respects to other elders and leaders, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous here this evening.

I would like to dedicate this oration to honour the memory of the late Dr Charles Perkins AO who, 30 years ago, occupied the position of Secretary to

I sincerely hope that any shared learning can be truly beneficial and transformational in ways which can both support and encourage those Indigenous Australians who choose a public sector career now and in the future.

So now a little information which goes some way to explain “Who is Russell Taylor?”

I am a proud descendant of the Kamilaroi peoples from north western New South Wales with specific family association with the Taylor mob from the small Aboriginal community of Walhallow, formerly known as Caroona Aboriginal Reserve.

Born in Sydney in 1948, I was raised, and my childhood and teenage years were spent, at Millers Point. This place is a Sydney, inner-city, waterfront suburb, better known and associated with the historic “Rocks’ tourist precinct which is situated in the shadows of southern arches of the famous Sydney Harbour Bridge.

Although now in transition to extremely affluent gentrification, during my time Miller’s Point was almost exclusively low rent public housing² and at that time home to struggling working class families essentially dependent on uncertain employment in the stevedoring, shipping and related industries.

Miller’s Point was then looked upon as a separate, self-contained village within the City of Sydney with a long colourful history of entrenched poverty, crime and violence, dating back to the dawn of colonial times.

‘The Point’ and the broader Rocks precinct are not only important locations in the history of the British colonization of Australia but also make up part of the harbour side boundary of the traditional ancestral country of the Gadigal, one of the significant clans of the Eora peoples of the Sydney region.

However, by the time my family moved to the area, any physical signs or other markers indicative of this significant Indigenous cultural history and

² Most of the public housing at Millers Point was purpose built (around the early 1900’s as part of a world leading major waterfront reengineering project) to accommodate the waterfront workforce and provide low rent housing under the auspices of various public institutions including the Sydney Harbour Trust and The Maritime Services Board. Nowadays the public housing stock forms part of the asset base of Housing NSW.

relationship had been destroyed and/or made invisible by the progressive influence of colonization, the associated expanding infrastructure needed for the development of emerging maritime industries and of course the burgeoning modernity of a global city.

So, during my childhood it was a tough place to call home, considered a slum by most - and my family and I loved the place! Still do! I am very proud that 'the Point' is part of my personal historical story - although the place has changed considerably since those times and continues to do so.

After attending Fort Street Primary School and then Fort Street Boys High School, I was the first person in my family to complete High School and later in life, as a mature age student, the first person in my family to enrol and to graduate from University (and which resulted in my being the very first Indigenous Master of Business Administration graduate in the country).

Today I am now a proud member, of ten years standing, of the governing Council of that same University.

My time in the public service has not been a total life long career pursuit having had, before entering the public sector, nearly 20 years' experience in banking where I was reasonably successful in reaching middle management.

I should mention that during this time I met my wonderful wife Judi, we married and now count in our immediate family two daughters and a son and their respective partners as well as 6 fine grandchildren (and I am very pleased to see that three of my grandchildren are here this evening).

However to complete the vocational part of my story, by the mid 1980's I had become somewhat disillusioned with banking and about the same time became aware of career opportunities existing in the Indigenous affairs sector in Sydney and particularly so within, the now defunct, Aboriginal Development Commission (ADC).

So in mid-1987, with the support of a very good Aboriginal friend and sporting mate, the late Allen Hedger, who also happened to be the ADC Regional

Manager, I commenced work, initially as a very temporary Class 6 Project Officer in the Sydney Regional Office of the ADC³.

Subsequently my entire career in the Australian Public Service (APS) has been exclusively spent in the Indigenous Affairs sector (although at times formally in other portfolios settings). I have worked since the 1980's in various senior roles in the Aboriginal Development Commission (ADC), The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), the NSW Aboriginal Housing Office (AHO) and finally the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), the role from which I stepped down in December last year.

Of course despite my departure from AIATSIS, I am nevertheless still rather busy.

I continue to be active in the context of my ongoing governance roles which currently include membership of the governing Council of the University of Technology, Sydney, as well as board memberships of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Healing Foundation, the NSW based Nature Conservation Trust and more recently the busy Aboriginal majority owned consulting firm, Moreton Consulting.

I am also involved in other community related activities and I consider that I have an obligation to continue to contribute, in some way, to pursuits that either directly or indirectly benefit Indigenous communities and our mob.

To record that I enjoyed a very rewarding and fulfilling career in the APS would be an understatement.

Since 1995 I have been a member of the Senior Executive ranks of the APS and during the entire three decades of my career I have been extremely privileged and very fortunate to have either worked with and/or as the saying goes 'rubbed shoulders with', some extraordinarily talented people both Indigenous

³ I should mention that factually I did not formally become a commonwealth public servant until March 1990 as a result of the establishment of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) which was structurally made up of staff from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the Aboriginal Development Commission (ADC). As ADC employees we all became commonwealth public servants overnight as part of the ATSIC enabling legislation and formal transitional arrangements. Prior to this time, as with all ADC staff I was simply an employee under the ADC legislation without public sector status.

and non-Indigenous alike. I have always tried my utmost to benefit and learn from all these people through our shared experiences.

To conclude my brief personal story and vocational history, there is no doubt that the most rewarding role during my career was the last one.

As the last Principal and inaugural CEO of AIATSIS for over 15 of the last 20 years, commencing in 1997, I have been very fortunate. I am very proud of the many achievements and the institutional growth achieved during my time although there have, of course, been some rather tough times as well.

AIATSIS, through its national role in collecting, research, publishing and associated activities makes an invaluable contribution to the cultural wealth, the national memory and well-being not just for Indigenous Australians but for the Australian nation as whole.

Any achievements during my time with AIATSIS have been the result of a team effort involving the guiding strategic influence of the governing Council and our committees together with effective work of the senior management team and of course the efforts of the wonderfully dedicated, professional, hardworking AIATSIS staff. It is important to me that I acknowledge this collective contribution tonight and I thank them all.

It would be remiss of me not to also mention the very strong support shown to AIATSIS over recent times by our Minister. Minister Birmingham your support is very much appreciated and I thank you for such support and leadership.

So, in drawing from my 3 decade long career and for the purpose of my address this evening, I will focus on the issue of current and future Indigenous employment within the Australian Public Service.

To further explore the context set by Dr Shergold, I wish to make some comment about the changing nature of the public service operating environment – an environment in which both change and challenge are not only ever-present and certain but appear to be multiplying in terms of scope and pace.

Undoubtedly technology remains a very real challenge and the systems and skills elements of this ongoing challenge will need to be confronted and

resolved in terms of the current and future role and capacity of the Australian Public Service.

The APS has already felt the significant impact of the digital 'revolution', and we are still experiencing the new order of disruption that has and will continue to accompany this revolution.

My position on this is clear. If we are already very concerned about the nature and pace of technological change then we need to recognise and accept that it is not subsiding but rather is both expanding and accelerating – and - it is not waiting for any of us to catch up!

Of course technology is not the only challenge facing the APS. Other challenges, in addition to the changing nature of our political processes, include the disruptive influences of the changing demographics as well as the changing needs and expectations of the Australian citizenry.

Coupled with this, of course, is the ever-present fiscal challenge involving resourcing and the mantra that we must all 'do more with less'.

In response to such challenges recently, Dr Martin Parkinson in his role as the Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet has proposed and encouraged the APS to adopt innovation and disruption in its ethos and practice and to think about how we might work differently. Martin has my strong support in such thinking.

Martin has emphasised that the APS and its leadership must be prepared to be adaptive and has called for blue sky thinking in the APS that will require disruptive leadership which needs to be visionary, influential, collaborative, enabling and entrepreneurial. Again one can only support such strategic thinking.

Martin has personally and most solidly championed the need to embrace Diversity and Inclusivity to ensure that the APS is best placed to enhance its capacity to lead and better position itself now and into the future.

Again, Martin and I are in solid agreement on these matters – and this brings me to my specific thoughts on the issue of current and future Indigenous employment within the APS.

In this context I need to preface my comments by recognising that the APS leadership has certainly not been asleep at the wheel.

I acknowledge the valuable oversight role and supportive initiatives of the Secretaries Board through the work of its Equity and Diversity Council. In addition I need to recognise the innovative efforts and projects sponsored by the Indigenous Champions Network of which I have been a past active participant and supporter.

These initiatives are directed to increasing and enhancing Indigenous employment within the APS and many involve innovative approaches which Martin has encouraged. None of my comments are intended in any way to denigrate or dilute the importance of such initiatives and all have my strong support.

On a less positive note though, my thoughts are also expressed in the light of the 2016 Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) report (Biddle & Lahn 2016) which analysed motivations for Indigenous resignations from the APS.

The CAEPR report, based on the perceptions of existing and former APS Indigenous staff, disclosed a number of worrying factors causing Indigenous staff to leave. These factors included the negative collective impact of 'overselling' of an APS career to recruits, the political limitations and internal restraints of working in the APS, the lack of opportunity and recognition of skills sets and difficulties in relationships, the all too common experiences of racism and finally serious concerns about being undervalued as employees. The report also captured perceptions regarding a general lack of cultural awareness within the APS.

I should say that this report reinforced my own concerns and experiences in the context of components of my own APS career journey – although I do feel that circumstances are improving and I am confident that this trend of positive change will continue.

As evidence of this, I acknowledge the recently developed Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Employment Strategy which seeks to address the key issues identified by the CAEPR report.

This strategy articulates its support for expanding the range of employment opportunities, investing in developing capability, increasing seniority and improving cultural awareness within the APS.

It is interesting that, for the first time, whole of APS as well as individual agency targets are being set and performances measured against Indigenous employment aspirations and outcomes. In my view such performance evaluation is long overdue.

Ultimately, if we are to be successful in achieving our goals, then increased Indigenous employment in the APS needs to be core business and everyone's business across the APS rather than leaving any outcomes to a few 'heavy lifting' agencies.

So whilst good intent abounds there remains much to be done!

I understand that at last count the APS employed just over 8000 Indigenous Australians in a workforce of 345,000 or around 2.4% of the total workforce and that population parity (of 3%) remains as the aspirational goal for the APS.

To exacerbate this challenge there is a serious lack of Indigenous numbers in the senior and the senior executive ranks of the APS.

These gaps need to be addressed as a matter of priority for a number of reasons including the importance of having visible and accessible senior APS role models.

And so to Martin's ideas around disruption, innovation and the qualities of leadership I would add my own concept - which is one of imagination.

Imagine an APS where at least 15,000 Indigenous Australians form part of the workforce. Imagine an APS where, of the 124 heads of state and federal agencies, at least a dozen were Indigenous Australians forming part of an even broader diverse leadership group.

Just imagine an APS where the Secretary of the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet and/or the Public Service Commissioner were Indigenous Australians. In an almost 'back to the future scenario' imagine an APS where the Secretary of the Department of Indigenous Affairs, a la Charlie Perkins in the 1980's, was an Indigenous Australian!

Further, imagine an APS where cultural competence was a mandatory measurable entry qualification for the senior and senior executive leadership ranks of the APS - leading to a point in time where the existence of such collective cultural competence in APS leadership was a given rather than an exception.

These are certainly ambitious scenarios however we should not be restrained either in our imagination or in our pragmatic thinking about what can be achieved.

Based on my experience here are some suggestions about how population parity and beyond with regard to APS Indigenous employment might be achieved:

- The APS must be prepared to properly engage with the Indigenous community and here I am referring to all agencies not just those involved in the Indigenous affairs portfolio.
By proper engagement, I mean establishing relationships with Indigenous individuals, communities and our institutions, at local, regional and national levels, based on trust and mutual respect underpinned by unqualified support to the principles embodied in the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Such engagement, through establishing relationships built on trust and shared values, and recognition of the strengths Indigenous people bring to the partnership, can facilitate negotiations and the achievement of positive outcomes around more specific objectives concerning policies, programs and projects – including employment!.

This is how our developmental agencies operate overseas by firstly establishing relationships and trust as a precondition to any negotiations involving the provision of specific aid or related capacity building projects. In the international context I understand that such approaches have proven to actually work;

- An effective way to develop relationships with Indigenous Australia is through the development of an agency Reconciliation Action Plan (RAP). The processes in developing a RAP can be liberating, multifaceted in its

benefits and can lead to the establishment of the meaningful community relationships about which I speak.

There exists ample evidence of the workplace benefits in developing a RAP which include increased cultural awareness and respect and increased employment opportunities for Indigenous Australians.

I therefore urge the APS leadership to encourage all agencies to develop a RAP.

At AIATSIS we developed a public sector leading, gold standard Elevate RAP. The AIATSIS RAP included successful innovative employment strategies including a special initiative targeting some long term unemployed Indigenous community members. This resulted in very positive employment outcomes for those involved.

I mention this successful AIATSIS RAP initiative and achievement as an example of the type of beneficial innovative thinking of which Martin has promoted;

- In encouraging effective engagement and relationships between the APS and the Indigenous community, I would again highlight and promote the positive influence of professional cultural competence within the APS.

With approximately 92% of funding on Indigenous issues administered by mainstream agencies, cultural competence is recognised as a contributing positive influence in improving performance and sustaining positive outcomes across the APS. In my view this is a systemic issue for the whole of the public sector

Accordingly I take this opportunity tonight to champion the pursuit of cultural competence and to encourage the APS to strengthen efforts to raise the level of cultural competence throughout its ranks.

Many in the audience this evening will be aware that AIATSIS has made a very strong contribution to the APS in this area.

Recently the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), in collaboration with the *Department of Social Services* (DSS) contracted AIATSIS to develop an *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Capability eLearning Programme*, known as *CORE*, for use across the APS.

Whilst additional elements of *CORE* are still under development, *CORE* has now been successfully designed and created.

Following its launch last year, *CORE* has already been extremely well received by Commonwealth employees, as a unique and much needed capacity building programme. The demand for the program has grown rapidly, not only within the Commonwealth, but also beyond to the state and territory governments and a range of other institutions. At last count, over 40 individual agencies had accessed the course and over 2000 employees have enrolled and commenced their training and the take-up is growing.

In my view, the access and acceptance of the *CORE* program augurs well for the APS and I have no doubt over time will facilitate increased capability as well as increased Indigenous employment in the future;

- Hand in hand with proper engagement with the Indigenous community, the APS must adopt more innovative practice and culturally appropriate processes for recruiting Indigenous Australians.

Effective engagement and connection with community will assist in identifying and recruiting potential APS employees.

In addition, the APS must be prepared to better engage with those Indigenous Australians already in the workforce and must be prepared to develop incentives, both financial and non-financial, to support such approaches.

The APS has to develop broader and deeper pathways to employment through innovative interventions into and partnerships with communities, high schools and universities to facilitate and promote Indigenous employment opportunities and to identify and encourage likely applicants.

Similarly the APS needs to expand its Graduate program and to be prepared to partner with Universities in offering placements to studying students as well as to their graduates.

- The APS must evaluate and create any and all initiatives aimed at the retention of existing Indigenous employees and to develop ways and means by which their careers are encouraged and enhanced. This includes the implementation of appropriate accelerated leadership training and related initiatives in an effort to fill the void in senior ranks currently existing within the APS;
- As an additional offering, I wish to make a suggestion to the APS or more specifically to its affiliated Australian and New Zealand School of Government, better known as ANZSOG.

I feel that there would be considerable value in developing an ANZSOG course similar to the existing Executive Master of Public Administration course which could be entitled Master of **Indigenous** Public Administration.

I would propose that the structure of such a leadership course could incorporate the cultural competence elements of CORE. However such course content could be enhanced by a comprehensive treatment of the history of black/white relationship in Australia as well as a specific analysis of the historical role and control of the state in the lives of Indigenous Australians. This material should be supported by readings and discussion regarding the existence and impact of intergenerational trauma affecting Indigenous Australians today.

I have also noted Martin's view of the APS regarding '*our relatively weak capacity to evaluate potential success or impending failure*' as being '*a capacity gap of itself*' and so I would incorporate in the proposed course design an analysis and critique of the critical factors of past failed as well as any successful policies and programs employed within the history of in the Indigenous affairs public sector.

I feel that such a course, if established and delivered by ANZSOG would be extremely beneficial to the overall competence and capacity of the

APS and its leadership – and no doubt make a contribution over time to achieving increased numbers of Indigenous APS employees.

I offer these advisory suggestions regarding ways to increase Indigenous employment with all due respect and in the interest of seeking to ensure that the APS is a better, safer and stronger source of employment for all, but in particular, for those Indigenous Australians who choose a career in the Australian Public Service.

I trust that my modest suggestions have elements of innovation and disruption which I feel are absolutely appropriate given the nature of the Indigenous employment challenges we face. I would also hope that we can apply some imagination as to what can be achieved in finding the solutions to this challenge.

To this end tonight I have a message to impart to the Indigenous community as well as a message to the APS leadership.

Firstly, to the Indigenous community my message is simple.

It is that a career in the APS is a most honourable one, one which provides a wide diversity of choice in roles and responsibilities and one which can be extremely rewarding and fulfilling.

For those Indigenous Australians who may have concerns or misgivings around certain governmental positions, policies and approaches, I simply respond that the APS provides opportunities for those who wish to be change agents from within. I urge Indigenous Australians to take up this challenge as one critically significant way to both bring about positive change whilst pursuing a satisfying career.

Indeed, I encourage all Indigenous women and men to consider an APS career and to do so on the basis that such a career choice requires a degree of both commitment and resilience and which I believe will be suitably rewarded.

Secondly, to the APS itself my message is also simple.

Securing greater numbers of Indigenous employees across all ranks will be extremely beneficial to the APS in meeting the growing and accelerating challenges I have already mentioned.

Various studies have clearly shown the tangible productive benefits of supporting and maintaining diversity in the workforce. This fact is now an acceptable truth.

In the Australian context, where we are faced with the wicked problems associated with 'closing the gap', surely the benefits in having more Indigenous men and women in the APS, as a component of such diversity, are obvious and in my view represent a collective 'no brainer'.

To conclude, I again express my sincere thanks for the opportunity to present the inaugural Russell Taylor Oration.

I am truly humbled by the honour and thank you all for attending and supporting the event

Yaluu Maliya Maaru yanaylaya!

(Goodbye Friends Go well and be well!)

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