



NATIONAL CONGRESS OF AUSTRALIA'S FIRST PEOPLES

**Dr Kerry Arabena Co-Chair**

**Vetting, Vehicles and Vision:**

**The National Congress of Australia's First Peoples.**

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land where we are meeting tonight, the Gadigal peoples of the Eora nation. I pay my respects to your Elders and to those who have come before us. I wish to thank you to Chikka Madden for your generous welcome to country and acknowledge the Perkins family (Eileen, Hetti, Rachel and Adam) and my fellow Board members on the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples, my family and friends. I would also like to take this opportunity to acknowledge Dr. Michael Spence, the Vice Chancellor and Principal of the Sydney University, Dr. Jeff McMullen for his introduction and Ms. Janet Mooney from the Koori Centre for the great honour and privilege of being invited to address you this evening in memory of a truly great Australian leader and wati pulka, Charles Perkins.

Can I also pay my respects to tonight's three prize winners. I am honoured to share this stage with you as we recognise your achievements.

Before I get to the body of my speech I'd like to talk about the person who has made tonight possible.

In a life of exceptional achievement, Charles Perkins demonstrated that passionate engagement in the injustices affecting our lives is rarely neat and tidy. He was a brilliant man, but often in strife and largely misunderstood. But, nothing Great in the world has ever been achieved without passion. Charles Perkins, supported by his family, I believe, achieved dimensions of Greatness. A rebel, free thinker, restless spirit, son, husband, father and grandfather; a man capable of looking far into the future and even further into the past; who dared challenge the precepts that Australians hold most dear and in so doing, personalized for us all our quests for equality.

I remember vividly the first time I met Charlie. It was at Kintore, 600 kms west of Alice Springs. I was 21, the administrator at the Pintubi Homelands Health Service and Charlie dropped out of the sky in a single engine plane and was doing a consultation. I could not believe that in such a red, dusty, windy place, complete with leatherback dogs cruising everywhere, there out the front of the Council Office was this incredibly well-dressed man with the shiniest shoes I had ever seen. Now when my father was 21, he did a stint at TC Burns - a shop in Brisbane, selling shoes. He always told me that you could tell the caliber of a man by the shine in his shoes. Well my opinion of Charles then went off the Richter scale! I was fixated by those shoes!

The second time I met Charlie, I was working in Cape York, the Executive Director of the Cape York Health Council. I went up and

introduced myself to him at a conference. Charlie finished off our brief conversation by calling me a champion. A what?!! I couldn't believe it. Here was a champion of Aboriginal affairs, calling me a champion. "You are a champion, just keep going mate" a phrase he would use with many of us. And didn't that make us want to keep going too. There were plenty of opportunities in my life to just stop. Just settle for a satisfying but bland life. But people like Charlie were looking for champions who were going to take it forward: champions for the cause, champions on the sports field, champions in our families, champions in politics. Champions who felt destined to unite people who had become separated. Champions who dared to dream for equality and justice. Charlie was compelled and compelled others to have the next big dream or possibility, then make it happen. Charles Perkins asked us all to find the champion within and amazingly, he could already see us all as champions, it was up to us to realise it. No excuses.

If he were here today, I imagine that he would be interested in who our new champions are, what their vehicle of change will be and what vision they hold for all of us to aspire to. He would be interested to know if the modern day champions had forgotten or built on the experiences of those who had gone on before us, who used grassroots organisations, or who had been part of FACATSIA, DAA or NAC, then NACC then ATSIC or whether we had learned the lessons and incorporated them into the new. I can say with absolute certainty and pride that the architects of the road ahead are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who have heeded that call of Charlie's, "Who among us are champions? Who among us dare to find, then follow, the champion within?" And we have answered.

Tonight, I will be discussing the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples - the most recent addition to national self-determining infrastructure set up to deliver that promise that Charlie and others have fought so hard for: that we are all equal, all free, and all deserving of a chance to pursue our opportunity and experience happiness. The title of my talk is Vetting, Vehicles and Vision.

Vetting, because we have responded to the community's request for high, uncompromising standards<sup>1</sup>. Vehicle: Because the Congress I believe has the capacity to influence what all Australians can do, and Vision because it can be a beacon for years to come. I stand here tonight, as all the Board members and staff of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples do; we are humbled by the task before us, grateful for the trust bestowed upon us by our peers and colleagues, mindful of the intelligence given and sacrifices borne by our ancestors. We consider ourselves champions not because we are big noters, but because we are in service to more than 300 nations of First Peoples' across this vast continent and to our nation of Australia<sup>2</sup>. Our service makes us the champions men like Charlie wanted us to be.

When we signed up to be a part of the National Congress, we knew we were part of the next wave of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people seeking to redress injustice to achieve equality.

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<sup>1</sup> See page [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social\\_justice/repbody/index.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/social_justice/repbody/index.html) available 2 November 2010.

<sup>2</sup> A map developed by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies represents work carried out for the *Encyclopedia of Aboriginal Australia*. Using the published resources available between 1988 and 1994, the map attempts to represent language, tribal or nation groups of Australia's Indigenous peoples and has identified over 300 nations. See <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/asp/map.html> as at 2 November 2010.

We knew we were aiming to achieve full citizenship rights and to act on the responsibilities those rights entail, within our own Indigenous societies and within Australian society. And we seek these things; not simply because of the expectations that those in government have for us, but because we the people have remained faithful to the citizenship ideals of our forbearers and true to their aspirations while realizing our own. So it has always been in our communities, and so it must remain.

As company Directors we needed to be prepared to stand up, and, as one great leader said, choose: hope over fear, unity of purpose over conflict and discord<sup>3</sup>. As we consider the road that unfolds before us now, we the Board also remember with humble gratitude those courageous advocates from within our past, and within our communities who at this very hour are also working to realise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' rights in urban areas, in our organisations, community halls, in rural communities, on country, around kitchen tables, across cultures.

These advocates have something to tell us. Those in our past whisper through the ages, those in communities through conversations – they provide us with an instruction on what to safeguard, how to be a custodian of this part of the journey to achieve our rights, and how to embody the spirit of service. I find for myself the more I am open to these instructions, the more I am willing to find meaning in something greater than my individual effort alone. Not for profit, not for personal gain but because I value who we are as First Peoples; where we have come from,

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<sup>3</sup> Barack Obama, *Inauguration Speech*. See example accessed 2 November 2010 at: <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address/>

and all we can be, given the opportunity.

At the commencement of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, members of the Board are mindful of the fact that we are looking to secure our First Peoples' economic, environmental, social and cultural futures in an unprecedented period of change in the world. Achievements in science, technology, industry, commerce and finance have brought humans into a new age at the expense of much of the diversity of life and life enhancing processes across the world<sup>4</sup>. Demographically, we have the largest number of adolescents in the history of our species, many of whom are living in poverty<sup>5</sup>. India and China are becoming the most powerful, technologically advanced countries in the world. Globalised, multinational companies have budgets bigger than some countries. Our country is at war. That we are in the midst of crisis is now well understood. Not only do we have to consider international and Asia Pacific regional issues in our deliberations, but domestic issues as well. In Australia, it appears that natural and cultural diversity is not viewed as a source of wealth nor a resource for modernity, nor for current political models<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, even within the 600 000 people who are First Peoples in Australia, we find it difficult to view our own diversity with the respect it deserves, let alone get respect from others.

Australia is governed by a federal parliament that has only one Aboriginal member. We see a system of service delivery to

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<sup>4</sup> Arabena, K. 'The Universal Citizen: an Indigenous Citizenship Framework for the twenty-first century.' *Australian Aboriginal Studies*, 2006/2, 2006: 36-46.

<sup>5</sup> International Planned Parenthood Federation is one global NGO who provides a commentary about the rate of growth in adolescents around the world and their vulnerability in a variety of circumstances, for example: <http://www.ippfwhr.org/en/node/592> accessed 2 Nov 2010.

<sup>6</sup> Arabena, K 'A Vision for the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples'. Posted in *On-Line Opinion*. <http://www.onlineopinion.com.au/view.asp?article=11164> 1 November 2010.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – by governments at both the federal and state levels – that still struggles to deliver the most basic of services that benefit Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We see a system that does not want us to be decision makers, one with too many bureaucrats who do not see themselves as accountable to our people or as having responsibilities to ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people benefit from their efforts, and we have seen limited engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the setting of policy and programs<sup>7</sup>.

We are still not all fully engaged with a system of a ‘real economy’, nor do some of us live in places where a buoyant market economy exists<sup>8</sup>. Our life expectancy, whilst improving, is happening at a glacial pace. We are not all benefitting from the delivery of education, our own knowledge systems are still marginalised and we sadly remain over represented in judicial and child protection systems<sup>9</sup>. These systemic issues are themselves indicators of crisis, evidenced by data and statistics. Less measurable but no less profound is the impact of a sapping of confidence in and by our communities - a nagging fear that failure is inevitable, and that the next generation must lower its sights. A subtle message is inherent: “Give up before it hurts too much”. These and other circumstances are unacceptable and form part of the reasoning why a national representative body like the Congress is needed.

In this century, our challenges will be new. Instruments with which

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<sup>7</sup> Calma, Tom (2008) Still Riding for Freedom: A Human Rights Approach for the Twenty-First Century. Available from [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/about/media/speeches/social\\_justice/2008/20081023\\_still\\_riding.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/about/media/speeches/social_justice/2008/20081023_still_riding.html) 2 November 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Pearson, N. 2000 *Our Right to Take Responsibility*. Cape York Partnerships. See for example his position on ‘real economy’ in <http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/383869>

<sup>9</sup> For example ‘Indigenous Legal Relationships in Australia’ by Larissa Behrendt, Chris Cunneen, Terri Libesman on [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/about/media/speeches/social\\_justice/2009/20090227\\_launch.html](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/about/media/speeches/social_justice/2009/20090227_launch.html)

we meet these challenges may be new. But those values upon which our traditional societies were built and upon which our success as countrymen and women depend – discipline and community, honesty and hard work, courage and fair play, tolerance and curiosity, loyalty and love of country - these things are old. These things are true. They have been the quiet force of progress and given hope to those even when there was no hope apparent<sup>10</sup>. These values have been evident throughout our history and the mainstay of our culture. These values have underpinned our resilience when all other indicators suggested we should falter. What is demanded then is a return to the truth and the certainty of these values<sup>11</sup>.

These values contain in them the responsibilities and a recognition, on the part of every Australian, that we have duties to ourselves, as First Peoples, and as a nation, duties that Barack Obama said in his inauguration speech ‘we do not grudgingly accept but rather seize gladly, firm in the knowledge that there is nothing so satisfying to the spirit, so defining of our character, than giving our all to a difficult task’<sup>12</sup>. We who assume leadership roles in our communities and organizations know probably more than most that this is the price and the promise of citizenship. I know that our members are clear about the challenges we face as a First People and that they are real. They are serious and they are many. We have told community people that these challenges will not be met easily or in a short span of time. This is why the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples has been

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<sup>10</sup> See [http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/6356.Barack\\_Obama](http://www.goodreads.com/author/quotes/6356.Barack_Obama) for example.

<sup>11</sup> Kane, Robert, ‘Personal Life inspired by the Spirit: Redefining Virtue’ <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=1646> accessed 2 November 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Obama, Barack (2007) *Inauguration Speech* as at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address/>



established as an independent organization intent on creating a legacy – the Congress is a long term proposition, evolving and changing with the input of its membership.

I am proud that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have been the architects, the designers, the campaigners, the consulters, the doers, the makers, the choosers, the facilitators, the explainers, and the implementers of this new national representative voice. We have built the organization on elements that worked well in ATSiC<sup>13</sup> and other national representative bodies, and have used company law<sup>14</sup> to allow for more entrepreneurial thinking and action. We are innovators concerned with establishing a foundation of greatness, not as a given, but greatness which is earned.

Greatness through the Congress will not occur because we have taken short cuts or settled for less. We have decided this will not be an organisation which supports those who prefer leisure over work, or be a platform for those whose criminal behaviour or lack of regard for others will bring the organisation into disrepute. Nor is the National Congress for those who seek only the seduction of personal fame. Rather, this organisation will be represented by the culturally strong, the educated, the risk-takers, the doers, the makers of things – men and women who have labored unknown but appreciated in our communities, who have delivered a legacy of those who are working for equality and freedom. This decision about who will represent us, is conceived in the ideal of not who is the strongest, or the loudest, but assessing who among us is

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<sup>13</sup> The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSiC) was abolished on 16 March 2005.

<sup>14</sup> The National Congress of Australia's First People is registered as a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee with the Australian Securities and Investment Commission (ASIC), Canberra.

worthy of commanding the right use of strength and resource to see change happen where and when it is most needed. In these times, the leadership question can only be answered by those who command it.

Not everyone in this audience, or in other audiences I have addressed, will have the pleasure of being an artist or poet, a doctor or teacher. Not everyone will know the simple beauty of love, either given or received. It is a truth, however, that everyone will come upon some form of hardship, of pain and struggle, of adversity<sup>15</sup>. In fact for some of us, it is the only constant in this life. We will all make decisions that affect ourselves, those close to us, and possibly even following generations. It is during these times of adversity that we turn to people who command leadership, who can articulate the ideals and principles that allow us to rally behind them. They must also be able to marshal resources with great effect. All of our leaders at this time in history will need to have integrity, determination, charisma, vision, technical and interpersonal expertise, adaptability, and even the often-overlooked quality of being an experienced follower. All these characteristics are crucial to helping us deal with and successfully come through particular times of adversity.

We need leaders who can command power and resources to great effect to stand up now and come forward. It is your time. Leadership needs to contribute to something bigger than the sum of our individual ambition, and be greater than all the differences of birth, community or faction. Leaders cannot be seen to protect narrow interests, nor put off unpleasant decisions. Surely, that time has passed.

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<sup>15</sup> See <http://www.armchairgeneral.com/art-of-command-book-review.htm> accessed 2 November 2010.

There are many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who find themselves in poverty and who might find my assertions of leadership outside of their realm of influence. For some people, poverty is what they live and breathe and I am not just talking about financial poverty. I am also talking about being impoverished culturally, linguistically, time poor, isolated, without love, women growing up children with out partners, educationally impoverished, children growing up in institutions rather than in the care of a family.... There are many ways to be impoverished. Poverty is a human rights issue after all<sup>16</sup>. Some of us can move out of that circumstance, some of us will die in it.

And whilst our effort should be to engage with and direct resources to people in poverty, we do have cause for celebration. Among our number are professors, lawyers, barristers, judges, teachers, health workers, doctors, nurses, academics, politicians, dancers, athletes, public servants, people who are trained in governance, business, entrepreneurial thinkers and actors. We have people in decision-making and powerful positions. We have Chief Executives, Chairmen and women, we have Marine Biologists, Social Scientists, Rangers, researchers, we have people working in corrections, youth agencies as lecturers, representing us locally, nationally and internationally. We have done our teething in health, education, academia, natural resource management, in regional autonomy, leadership development, organizational management, youth empowerment, media marketing and public policy, land purchasing, business development, economic development, human rights and political strategy. We must also celebrate those that kept their children and families alive and despite great challenges in their lives helped them thrive.

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<sup>16</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/libertycentral/2009/jun/19/amnesty-poverty-human-rights> accessed 2 November 2010.

Some of us have been working in our affairs now for at least 20 years and are in positions to mentor others. We are the emergent leadership. And we will be taken notice of.

This type of leadership is now critical for all of our affairs. Because the issues affecting our health and well being are globalised and localized, be assured. It is my view that if you have got a criminal record for a category A crime including rape or murder, you should never represent Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through the National Congress<sup>17</sup>. If you have committed fraud and been found guilty, don't even put your hand up to represent us<sup>18</sup>. If during your term, you behave in a way that brings the organization into disrepute, and there is evidence to support it, we will get rid of you<sup>19</sup>. If you are disrespectful to another representative, you will be disciplined and if it continues you will be gone. If you are a wrecker and can't help build a legacy for the National Congress, you are not needed. You will not be welcomed. You will not be supported through this organisation.

(Membership and Vetting)

Of course not everyone who joins the national congress wants to be a leader or be a representative. Some just want their voices heard. Some want to belong to something bigger than themselves and their personal circumstance. There is a place for them in the Congress. If you are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, over the age of 18, then there is a Congress membership card with your

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<sup>17</sup> Policy of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples. Policy and Fact Sheet available from website [www.nationalcongress.com.au](http://www.nationalcongress.com.au)

<sup>18</sup> ASIC legislation prohibits those who have been convicted of fraud from being Company Directors or Office Holders of companies in Australia.

<sup>19</sup> Fit and Proper Policy, National Congress of Australia's First Peoples. Available from website [www.nationalcongress.com.au](http://www.nationalcongress.com.au)

name on it waiting for you<sup>20</sup>. You can be a prisoner in Long Bay prison, a single parent living in a Caravan Park in Tingalpa outside of Brisbane, you can own two properties in Darwin and have a stock portfolio, you can be a business owner and employ 8 people; you can be going to University or work as a ranger. You can be on a welfare benefit, you can be on the pension, you can be a Traditional Owner or a member of the Stolen Generation. There are only four criteria to satisfy in order to become a Congress member- You must be over 18, have the heritage, you must identify and be accepted by an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander community<sup>21</sup>. This is a self-declaring process; the National Board of the Congress are not the identity police. We have told people during our consultations that the membership form is a legally binding document. If they cannot satisfy the criteria, then there are legal ramifications for falsifying information.

In terms of organisations seeking to be members, agencies need to have at least 51% of the members and Board, be Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander; AND the principle purpose and activity of the organisation needs to be in service to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people<sup>22</sup>.

After a particularly difficult day, earlier this year, I had the opportunity to open the mail. There were envelopes of all different shapes and sizes; carefully scripted envelopes with large and clear writing with many return addresses on the back. These envelopes contained membership forms, some sent in from the Koori Mail, some photocopied, others were the originals that we had just taken

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<sup>20</sup> Membership information downloads available from the website [www.nationalcongress.com.au](http://www.nationalcongress.com.au)

<sup>21</sup> Declaration accessed from the Individual Membership Form, accessible from the website [www.nationalcongress.com.au](http://www.nationalcongress.com.au)

<sup>22</sup> Information for organisations available from website: [www.nationalcongress.com.au](http://www.nationalcongress.com.au)

out with us across the country, some.... Well I just don't know how people had come across them except to say that we blackfellas have very well developed networks! What heartened me on that particular afternoon was as I opened these envelopes; there were application forms for members from entire families, all stapled together. Other application forms were from older members of our communities with little hand written notes of congratulations; others were sent in with messages that they were also encouraging others to join and that we would be getting 50 or so from their community. This meant so much to me. Helped me believe that we were building something of which we could all be proud.

Others reported their ambassador status, Congress ambassadors who have taken the forms, distributed them, helped people fill them out, made the cups of tea, told the stories of hope, stood up as an advocate to re-mobilise our peoples. Those ambassadors never questioned the scale of our ambition, they never forgot what we as First Peoples have already done. What they believe in, unquestioningly, and without need for detailed information, is that in this country we are free men and women who can achieve anything we want, and by choosing the Congress, those ambassadors know what can happen when imagination is joined to common purpose, and necessity to courage. And they are ready for whatever that means. But by extending the opportunity to belong to the Congress, to be a member is a small act of greatness in itself.

Perhaps this is why just 5 months after hiring our first staff member we have almost 1200 individual members and almost 100 organisations. Through our membership, we are structuring both

belonging and opportunity; not because it is charitable or ‘we need the numbers to be legitimate’, but because we believe that the Congress provides a different way for people to be drawn together in coherent and stably organized political communities. It one of the surest routes to our common good. And our common good is too precious to be undone by the illegal behaviours of a few.

We want to be judged for what we build not what we destroy. We cannot support those who are only powerful through acts of corruption and deceit or who have perpetrated suffering for which they have been charged. We have listened to a number of key concerns from community people and have turned them into a vetting system. The first concern was that the Congress had representation that was fit and proper. The second concern was that people wanted to be safe – women did not want to be in the same room with perpetrators of violence for example. The third concern was that there needed to be a mechanism to use in the event that a Director of the company or a member of the Congress behaved improperly for which there was a legal conviction, the members could participate in a process to effect a representative’s removal from office. Finally it was said during the community consultations that the organization has to be completely independent from government and that all measures had to be taken that would protect the organisation. We have covered off against all of these concerns in our vetting process.

Adjudication in matters brought by the members, vetting the delegates to the Congress and ensuring appropriate development and maintenance of standards for the National Congress is to be achieved in partnership with the Ethics Council, an independent advisory body comprised of eminent people. No other company in

Australian ASIC Law has developed such a mechanism – nor have they mandated gender parity for representatives to forums or on their boards. The Ethics Council applied a merit based selection process to shortlist candidates for the current national board and will be instrumental in applying a standard to elect candidates for the representative roles of Congress delegates, Directors and Co-Chairs. All members who nominate to be representatives will have to pass a federal police check and meet fit and proper criteria developed by the Ethics Council. The Ethics Council will then be responsible for ensuring the ethical conduct of representatives of the organization, based on the Nolan Principles of public office<sup>23</sup>.

The Ethics Council has six of our own peoples of high standing, with co-chairs, and a gender balance among their members<sup>24</sup>. The Council will initially serve a two-year term in order to bed down the processes for the new organisation. Additionally, the Ethics Council will advise on standards and guidelines, review policy decisions, assist with legal and reporting requirements, investigate breaches or complaints and review any queries that arise about eligibility for membership<sup>25</sup>.

The inclusion of the Ethics Council into the Constitution of the Congress<sup>26</sup> and giving them a Charter that defines their roles and responsibilities has been the source of comfort for many community people. But, it has also been a source of contestation. “Who are these people?” “How come they have the power to veto me?” “I thought this organisation was going to be representative of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people?” “How come I can

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<sup>23</sup> [http://www.hreoc.gov.au/pdf/social\\_justice/nirb/community\\_guide.pdf](http://www.hreoc.gov.au/pdf/social_justice/nirb/community_guide.pdf)

<sup>24</sup> See for example [http://www.indigenous.gov.au/Pages/13\\_Indigenousrepbody.aspx](http://www.indigenous.gov.au/Pages/13_Indigenousrepbody.aspx)

<sup>25</sup> Under development – Ethics Council Charter. Soon to be posted to website [www.nationalcongress.com.au](http://www.nationalcongress.com.au)

<sup>26</sup> National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples Constitution download available from [www.nationalcongress.com.au](http://www.nationalcongress.com.au)



get kicked out through this process?" The truth is anyone and everyone who meets the criteria to be a member can be a member. Members can and will be asked for their advice on policy and approaches to issues that affect their lives.

Members can attend forums and be invited to participate in Congress-sponsored events. We will be truly representative of the membership; the members have to be involved. No member will be subject to a vetting process until they want to be a representative. Similar processes are in place if people want to work with youth, be a politician, work in schools or be members of a company board. For the first time however, we are bringing vetting process into an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representative organisation. This is a change, but what is needed in my view, to not only protect values in a world hostile to such values but to ensure that we can fully get behind and protect those that want to represent us, such is the sacredness with which I have come to view the Congress.

My view was further deepened earlier this year when Noel Pearson referred to the National Congress as a 'wailing wall' for blackfella's victimisation<sup>27</sup>. I think I know what he was getting at; it seemed he wanted to sideline the National Congress. His throwaway line was included in no less 10 newspaper articles and many blogs in Australia and internationally as a reason to not get behind the Congress, deeming it unworthy of support. Now I also know Noel would not want to offend people from the Jewish or Muslim faiths, but the Wailing Wall is a central tenet of a practice

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<sup>27</sup> See for example Jopson, Debra (3 May 2010). "New indigenous 'company' structured to keep politicians at arm's length". *The Age* (The Age). Retrieved 29 May 2010.

of faith for millions of people across the world<sup>28</sup>. It is a place of communion, thought sacred because it is where God resides on Earth, and, in my view not to be trivialised. Praying at the Wall signifies being in the presence of the Divine. People have made pilgrimage to the Wailing Wall for centuries, leaving notes of hope in the cracks of the wall. It has been a place of grief and struggle, a place of reconciliation and of truth and purpose and faith. The Wailing Wall is no less significant to those millions of people, because one person, in a throw away line, in seeking a little win, chose to make it so. I am a person of great faith. I have been on a pilgrimage. As a Torres Strait Islander, I know what it is to stand on the sacred soil of my ancestral home, my Ged<sup>29</sup>. It is a heartfelt hope of mine that the National Congress, could inspire the same faith, hope and sense of sacredness in the lives of our people as the Wailing Wall.

### **And so, what can the National Congress be a vehicle for?**

The primary objective of the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples is to reconnect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with the decision making structures in Australia, providing its members with the opportunity to be informed and have input to decisions about their lives and future. Prior to the establishment of the National Congress and since the abolition of ATSIC, we have not had a national "voice", which could harness the collective energies and efforts of individuals in communities, service provider organizations and peak bodies. This is the first time that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people ourselves have had the opportunity to shape a national representative voice, in ways that

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<sup>28</sup> See for example [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western\\_Wall](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Western_Wall) accessed 2 November 2010.

<sup>29</sup> Ged: home-place, homeland, habitable island with water resources, womb. In Sharp, N. (1993) *Stars of Tagai: The Torres Strait Islanders*. Canberra: Australian Aboriginal Press.

ensure the views and aspirations of our Peoples are taken into account. International evidence has shown it is clear an essential ingredient in overturning disadvantage is the close, respected involvement of the community itself. In this vein, I want to identify five opportunities that the Congress can be a vehicle for.

### **(1) Setting the standards for engagement in Communities**

Now I don't do this very often but I was speechless the other day. In having a discussion with government I realised that as soon as we 'opened our doors for business' there would be policy documents to review and new directions to endorse. Whilst the Congress is there to monitor and evaluate the performance of government and government agencies, we are not there to tick a box or to become an extension of government, nor are we a substitution for real and local consultation. There are a great number of peak bodies and agencies that do develop policy work and have effective partnerships with government and businesses already, at a state, national and in international forums. We will not be usurping their role, rather we will be supporting their role as key organizations for policy input and advice. Perhaps the Congress may in the future set the equivalent of a Heart Foundation 'tick', a standard that will articulate uncompromising standards about how to do business. For example the standard might set out that you have:

- a) Followed an ethical process of development and delivery
- b) Adhered to community sensitivities
- c) Delivered sustainable employment opportunities
- d) Used extended peer communities where governments join with business, academics and others to exchange ideas and operate in ways that are transdisciplinary and imaginative.

- e) Evaluated the impacts of the policy and communicated the findings widely.

The second opportunity for which Congress can be a vehicle is about having us

## **(2) Participate in Parliamentary Processes**

The National Congress is not an instrument of government. It is a representative voice for people who may not feel they have access to parliamentary process at local, state and national levels. In order to redress in a generation the issues we face, we will form relationships with parliamentarians across all parties across Australia. We want to do something that has not been possible so far by forming parliamentary and select committees with interested senators and ministers in federal and state parliaments. We want to address issues of concern as expert advisors, using United Nations models to inform how this is conceived. Our members have asked us to push for seats in parliament 'like the Maori people do'<sup>30</sup>. As such, we want to assist in the Parliamentary commitment to referendums and constitutional reform. We want to play our part in decision making in our country. As one of our members have informed us, "We need to have as much influence as the mining companies do in parliamentary decision making in Australia".

The third opportunity for which Congress can be a vehicle is to work to ensure that

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<sup>30</sup> Lloyd, Brian (2009) Dedicated Indigenous representation in the Australian Parliament, *Research Paper no. 23 2008-09* Politics and Public Administration Section, Parliamentary Library. Available from <http://www.aph.gov.au/library/pubs/rp/2008-09/09rp23.htm> accessed 2 November 2010.

### **(3) the UN Declaration of Rights for Indigenous Peoples is implemented.**

The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples<sup>31</sup> will provide us with an important tool in how we could move forward together.. The Declaration is self-determination in practice. The Declaration affirms that we the First Peoples have a role and a responsibility AND a unique contribution to the diversity and richness of civilizations and cultures. As such, we need to embody and promote cultural diversity and understanding.

The Congress can facilitate public discussions about the Declaration and how it should be implemented by Governments.

The fourth opportunity for which Congress can be a vehicle is about

### **(4) Harnessing Collective Voice and Action**

At a local level, we have long said we cannot look at diabetes without first having more houses. We have said in health for example, as healing one body part can't heal the whole body, nor will one organisation be able to make all the change and lasting change. Rather change will be the result of agencies working together, bringing a diversity of thought, experience and collective action together. We have said we need to focus on wholes, rather than parts, to build relationships rather than separate entities, and to understand networks and feedback loops rather than assume that linear, deterministic cause and effect influences prevail.

In this context, then, leadership and influence take on quite different connotations. In this context the incongruence and

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<sup>31</sup> <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfii/en/drip.html> Accessed 2 November 2010.

inadequacy of equating “leader” to position, to level, or to title become obvious. These are all static designations. They cannot reflect the on- going flow of reality for Australia’s First Peoples. There are four ways in which we will focus on harnessing the collective voice and action of the members of the Congress.

The first way recognizes the unique gifts of all its members and the responsibility to contribute those unique gifts, and to invite the contribution of others. That way the Congress is not just ‘for those with University Degrees’. Every member has the ability to influence the environment of the Congress so that all voices feel welcomed, to demonstrate personal integrity that creates trust, to contribute to the continual well being of the membership and the Congress. Evoking excellence from within our membership group requires a deep appreciation of the necessity for diverse thinking, and competence in co-creating an environment that is safe and accepting on the one hand and honest and challenging on the other.

The second way is to support the work being done by the peak agencies in Australia, of which there are many in health, land rights, housing, child protection, professional associations and on other emergent issues. These agencies have supported their membership with the development of key policies and issues papers. The National Congress will support rather than replicate the work of these peak agencies.

The third way will be to encourage a cross-agency/portfolio approach to particular issues. I for example would be interested to see how the issue of teenage pregnancy could be better dealt with.

The perverse and negative incentives are very powerful: the receipt of baby money, the lack of buoyant market economies, the transitions between year 10 and 11 and year 12 and university or employment, access to public housing and a higher amount of money in the welfare payments, entrapment, the way young people are socialized, the use of alcohol and drugs, young women's empowerment (or not), sexual education and reproductive health all contribute to how teenage pregnancy comes to be. What could happen if members invested in health, housing, education, land rights, economic development, and traditional owners, parents and young people could dialogue around this and other issues? What would then happen if the Congress wrote a paper that was inclusive of the diversity of people's lived experiences and was able to express what should happen in these instances with clarity, opportunity and purpose? Who would listen to our collective voice and enable that collective action? Would you?

The fourth way we are harnessing this collective voice and action is through the membership fully participating in a democratic model and exercising the right to vote. We are implementing a model that will allow each and every one of them to have a say in who gets to lead them. This is critical to ensure that the National Congress facilitates the right to democracy and the full participation in democratic processes by its members. This is not a one man band, or a closed shop. This is a people's movement, a voice, and we will be heard.

The fifth and final opportunity for which Congress can be a vehicle is about

## **(5) Facilitating the respectful generation of and contribution to knowledges across the world.**

On June 11, 1776 while the question of independence was being debated by the founding fathers of America, the visiting Iroquois chiefs were formally invited into the meeting hall of the Continental Congress<sup>32</sup>. There a speech was delivered, in which they were addressed as "Brothers" and told of the delegates' wish that the "friendship" between them would "continue as long as the sun shall shine" and the "waters run." The speech also expressed the hope that the new Americans and the Iroquois act "as one people, and have but one heart."<sup>33</sup> With the Iroquois chiefs inside the halls of Congress on the eve of American Independence, the impact of Iroquois ideas on the founders is unmistakable. So too will the National Congress seek to influence the respectful generation of and contribution of Australia's First Peoples knowledges between each other, to this country and the world. This will be done in several ways, through meetings, in forums, at conferences, seminars and in sessions with our members. There will be the facilitation of task-orientated groups, interest groups, organized protest and participation in discussions. We will also use social networking, digital and web based methods of generating and contributing to information for the public and for members. We will have scholarships for people to attend such meetings, when possible, we will have scholarships for people to participate in the first congress as part of their post graduate degrees. Already, the National Congress has received invitations to international forums,

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<sup>32</sup> Daly, Janet L. (1997) *The Effect of the Iroquois Constitution on the United States Constitution* originally titled *The United States Constitution: Is it a Native American Myth?* Accessed 2 November 2010 from [http://www.ipoa.com/iroquois\\_constitution\\_united\\_states.htm](http://www.ipoa.com/iroquois_constitution_united_states.htm)

<sup>33</sup> <http://democraciaparticipativa.net/documentos/OldestLiving.htm> Accessed 2 November 2010.



people from Alaska and Bolivia are interested what the National Congress is and what it is we might do in the future. This company has an enormous potential for influence and contribution to local, national and international processes. We will see this potential realized.

**Finally, let me come now to my final “V”: the Vision for the Congress.**

Some visions, not all, have to start with an apology or rather an asking of forgiveness and a remembrance. In stating what the vision of the Congress shall be I will both apologise and ask for forgiveness first, then remember.

The National Congress will not be able to save more marriages, we will not be there to visit the homebound, we will not be able to ease the pain of parents who have lost a child. We will not have money to help widows, single parents or families in economic ruin. We will not be able to spend specific time teaching young people, nor will we be able to come into everyone’s workplace and assist them, or visit their country, or heal those who have been part of the Stolen Generations, lived in institutions or make peace for those whose heart is full of hate. The National Congress, with its staff of 22, Board of eight and delegates numbering 120 will not be able to do these things in the way we should. We will not be there, personally to stop the violence, stop the hurt, to ease the pain, to celebrate, to witness; to ensure in a personal way, the dignity and kindness that should be afforded to each and every person in Australia. It is not possible that any of us as individuals or as the Board of the Congress can do that for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. For these shortcomings, we ask for

forgiveness.

But what we can do is draw on our own experiences on our own aspirations and make a vision for the Congress vision from that point. This is for me the remembrance. I remember so clearly, the young woman I was 23 years ago. A mother for a month, a teenager and first year university student living in a caravan isolated from everything and everyone. I recall one day where I had yet again been flogged quite badly, and I noticed afterward that the fan I had for my newborn baby son had been ripped out of the wall and the prongs were still in the socket. I reached over to pull them out, absentmindedly, and ended up getting a nasty electric shock which threw me against the wall opposite. Now this was one incident of many that I endured for years, but eventually I had the strength to walk away and 23 years later, here I am. Everything I do in this Congress I do for the me I was 23 years ago. It is her I have in mind when I present, when I visit community people, when I devise some strategies that might establish a vision for this organization. If this Congress is capable of reaching her, engaging her, representing her, then in my view we will have succeeded.

So, the first element of the vision is that we will be capable of engaging those with whom no one else can. The second element of the vision is about our members, that we will grow and change as a result of input and advice from them, so that we are representing them in ways of which they both need and can take pride. The result of this member-driven evolution does have implications for the Board. For example, our members informed us that they needed more time to consider becoming a delegate to

the Congress than we had given. We listened. This means that the first national congress will be delivered in the first part of next year, not later this year as originally planned. The third element of the vision is necessarily focused on re-engaging Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people with the decision-making processes in this country. It might mean that we end up with an administration arm and a political party arm. It might mean that we establish a precedent in Parliament by participating in a joint committee or standing committee, or having a seat at COAG. The fourth element of the vision has to do with who represents us, both now and into the future. We all as Australians have a duty to properly mentor Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people into these roles and support them uptake their roles and responsibilities with maturity compassion for what is at hand; a vision and sense of purpose and an unwavering conviction in the possibilities of collaboration, partnerships and unity. The fifth element of the vision focuses on the larger threats to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and our country, and indeed the world.

I had one of the most enduring instructions in my life from Ate James Rice<sup>34</sup>, one of the four defendants in the Mabo Case. 16 years after the court case was won, we went back and interviewed him about what was achieved. He said with tears in his eyes, “I did what I did not just for the Rice family, nor for Murray Islander or people living in the Torres Strait or Australia. I did this for people all around the world”<sup>35</sup>. And so my instruction is this, we must always see the global in the local.

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<sup>34</sup> Ate (Ar-tay) is a Torres Strait Islander word meaning ‘Grandfather’.

<sup>35</sup> AIATSIS filmed an interview with Mr. James Rice prior to the *Zenadth Kes: Free Thinking Symposium for Torres Strait Islanders* on Thursday Island, in December 2008.

Being true to this instruction then, I will always be compelled by my personal view that the deepest cause of devastation to our First People and our globe is found in a mode of consciousness that has established a radical discontinuity between human being, other species we share the planet with and the eco systems which supports our lives. This attitude permeates four of the fundamental establishments that control the human realm: governments, corporations, universities and religion – the political, economic, intellectual and religious establishments of our time<sup>36</sup>. The National Congress has a role and a responsibility to shake these establishments to their very roots; with all the passion and hope that we can muster. Not only for ourselves, but for all people, everywhere, in every circumstance. The full vision for the Congress is the same as it should be for all of our institutions everywhere: our vision is that the full fluorescence of the world in all its magnificence is here for future generations. We will carry out the improvement in the circumstance of our lives AND be part of the global infrastructure that facilitates a transition from a period of human devastation of First Peoples and the Earth, to a period of time when all humans are present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner. Such a transition has no human historical parallel. Humans prior were not dealing with anything comparable to the toxins in the air, the water, the soil, or with the immense volume of chemicals dispersed throughout the planet. Nor were they dealing with the extinction of species or the altering of climate on a scale such as our present concern. In order to ensure the planet is available for future generations we have to draw on our older knowledge traditions that provide advice on how to live with

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<sup>36</sup> Berry, T *Evening Thoughts: Reflecting on the Earth as a Sacred Community*. Tucker, Mary Evelyn (ed) San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 2006.

in the very structure and functioning of the planet itself.

History is governed by those overarching moments that give shape and meaning to life by relating human venture to the larger destinies of the planet. Creating such a work might be called the great work of a people<sup>37</sup>. The National Congress is not only our great work, it is our vehicle for great work, something that we can find inspirational and inspire people around the world. Each of us have our own individual life pattern and responsibilities. Yet beyond these concerns each person in and through their personal work contributes to the great work. We cannot doubt that we have been given the intellectual vision, the spiritual insight and even the physical resources we need for carrying out the transition that is demanded in these times. Mutual enhancement is the vision for the national congress. It is a long-term proposition and there is much great work to be done.

**So to bring this to a close.....** I have offered my ideas tonight to both provoke and to stimulate. I have talked about how we have come to be a National Congress by listening to our past and imagining a future. I have talked about the champions past and present, and the way in which our members are coming to us because the imagined future is shared. I have discussed the five ways in which Congress will be a vehicle for what we, the people, want to achieve. I have talked about what it is to have a vision to be; yet knowing we cannot be all things to all people. We are indeed fortunate to have the National Congress, not only to rebuild our relationships based on mutual respect, but for what it provides

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<sup>37</sup> Berry, Thomas 1999. *The Great Work: Our Way into the Future*. New York: Bell Tower Press.

as a vehicle to assist the planet and all with whom we share this common lived experience. All that I have offered here tonight has been offered constructively and in a spirit of reconciliation – and to honour the legacy of the great Charlie Perkins.

From self-respect comes dignity, and from dignity comes hope. My friends and colleagues and fellow board members have hope in spades, and I have plenty in my heart tonight. And this hope is for us all; because when the world quiets to the sound of our own breathing, we all want the same things: comfort, love, and a peaceful heart.

So I hope that each and everyone here tonight – heeds Charlie's call and looks for the inner champion we all have inside us.

Take Care, much, much love and travel well. Thank you so much for listening.