

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES CONFERENCE
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VISION AND PARTNERSHIP – A REGIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR PARTICIPATION
BY
LIEUTENANT GENERAL JOHN SANDERSON, AC
CHAIRMAN INDIGENOUS IMPLEMENTAION BOARD
WESTERN AUSTRALIA

I am very grateful for this opportunity to speak to you as part of this important conference on Functional Communities and Closing the Gap.

As you know, I spoke at the first Local Government Manager's Conference on this subject back in December 2007. At that time I was the Special Adviser on Indigenous Affairs to the Carpenter Government and I spoke on the subject of *Imagining a New Strategy for Building Sustainable Community*. In that context, as those of you who were there might remember, I advocated that the best pathway towards empowering Indigenous people to take control of their own destinies was by building partnerships in the regions based on regional governance structures which brought Indigenous and non Indigenous people together in a shared vision of where they wanted their part of the landscape and the future of their children to go.

For very good reason, I began that presentation to you with a take on the story of the Dakota Indians who are purported to have observed that if you find yourself riding a dead horse the best policy is to dismount. What do I mean when I talk about dead horses? Of course, in the context of our conference theme, riding dead horses is about doing the same things over and over again when they are clearly not working – what Einstein referred to as a definition of insanity. Such a conclusion might be appropriate with respect to areas of Indigenous policy and action in Australia where we are continually confronted by the question of, “how come we keep spending so much money on the issues and the situation only gets worse?”

You might also recall that when I last spoke I alluded to a number of ingenious ways that some people contrive to continue riding the dead horses that they are comfortable with, and how they manage to destroy people's creativity and keep pouring money down the drain while they do this. Because there are people in positions of authority who continue to do this in Australia I was almost tempted to give the same presentation today. I decided against that option because many things have changed since the end of 2007 and I believe there is cause for some optimism about this issue of empowering Indigenous Australians within a new national framework. That's what I want to talk to you about this morning.

My subject is *Vision and Partnership – A Regional Framework for Participation*. In coming up with this title I have anticipated that we would have advanced the discussion of engagement with Indigenous people to the point where we all understand that only Indigenous people can solve Indigenous problems.

We have enough experience from the past – including the recent past - to know that solutions cannot be inflicted on people who have a different cultural take on what is important to them. To attempt to inflict solutions is to continue to ride the dead horses of paternalism and assimilation. Only they can close whatever gaps there are that they want to close, and in priority orders that they want to close them. Why would they be happy with only half closing any of these gaps? We need to ask ourselves who decides these closure figures anyway and on what basis was the rate of closure decided? Was it the amount of money available or was it simply that they sounded as though we could get away with those targets in a short term, media driven context?

I am also assuming that there are many things that they – the Aboriginal people - consider valuable that they don't want to sacrifice in this process of closing the gap and they might want to be consulted on these things. These cultural and sacred issues can't be considered as simply inconvenient in a forward estimates or market forces context. We have to realize that they are about the sustainability of a culture that is embedded in the landscape we all want to share.

It might come as a surprise to some, but I am also assuming that there are some things where Indigenous people would believe that it is non Indigenous people who suffer from deficit and need to be helped in closing their gaps. I speak here specifically about environmental issues where our alienation from the Australian landscape is made clearer every day by the condition of our river systems, our soils and biodiversity. We know that this is not simply about climate change. First and foremost it is about the way we have abused and continue to abuse the continent in our pursuit of wealth.

It is also not simply in the agricultural and remote regions where these impacts are now being experienced. Recently, the Victorian fires produced some hard lessons about trying to live a European lifestyle in the Australian bush and conjured up visions of a struggle for survival of our cities in the extreme weather conditions of a warming planet.

The words Vision and Partnership appear throughout the program for this conference and can be inferred as central to the intent of the Local Government Managers from the wording of the communiqué that was sent to the Prime Minister of Australia and the State Premiers after the 2007 conference. How do we generate shared vision and how do we build partnerships that gain real commitment and are sustainable?

So what has happened in the 18 months since we last met? I would suggest that there have been some extremely positive and some very negative things in determining the future of this partnership with Indigenous Australians.

First let's consider the positive developments:

The Apology of February for one thing, must be considered as a positive development of immense power. For the first time an Australian leader confessed to the great injustice done to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, acknowledging their prior occupancy of the continent and thereby beginning the process of national redemption that makes possible the sort of partnership that resides in the minds of Australia's first people.

In the process of apologizing Prime Minister Kevin Rudd acknowledged that the ancient cultures were a profoundly important part of our national heritage, opening up the possibility of a partnership founded on the preservation of those cultures rather than their demise.

Secondly, all Australian governments have committed themselves to reinstating some form of Indigenous voice in the form of Advisory Councils. They do not exist at present, primarily because of the difficulty of establishing their legitimacy as grassroots representatives. Without such legitimacy, I think it is fair to say that the entire process would lack substance.

There has been extensive consultation with Indigenous people in the process of establishing acceptable solutions that represent diverse cultures as well as geographic regions. It is going to be very interesting to see what emerges from this process, but I think it is fairly safe to say that it will be dependent for its success on generating a voice in the places where people live, rather than simply a disembodied gathering of the usual suspects. The logistics of doing this could prove very challenging and it will call for innovative solutions at the regional and national level in which you will all be involved.

Another positive development in this period has been the emergence of a regionally empowered Government in the state of Western Australia. What do I mean by that? The National Party sitting on the cross benches by virtue of an election platform of shifting power and resources back to the regions is quite a remarkable outcome – one that could clearly be short lived if it is not seen to be delivered in a constructive and sustainable way.

In view of the fact that, prior to the 2008 Election, the regions were deliberately being disempowered in the interests of consolidating political power along the railway line from Joondalup to Mandurah, such an outcome must clearly be seen as a last roll of the dice. It is against the odds and fragile. Despite that, it has to be seen as positive for both Aboriginal and Regional Western Australia and an opportunity to develop regional governance mechanisms that will consolidate the long term interests of the regions and the people who live in them. This is where the development of shared visions and regional partnerships that can be sustained becomes so important. Otherwise the risk continues of regional development, or lack of development, being imposed from outside by people, including foreigners, who have no commitment to those regions other than the exploitation of their natural resources to generate personal wealth and royalties.

Another significant positive development in Western Australia is the advent of the Indigenous Implementation Board with its charter to change the way Government engages with and delivers services to Aboriginal people in this state. As Chairman of that Board you would expect me to recognize it as a positive change – otherwise, why would I and other members of that Board have anything to do with it. We are all people who have called for fundamental changes in the way Aboriginal people are embraced by the State and all of us have made it clear that our commitment will only endure if those changes are made.

There remains much confusion about the role of the Board and its relationship to all the other instruments of Indigenous policy development and delivery, so I thought I should take the opportunity to tell you about its terms of reference, membership and emerging strategy. Let me begin by emphasising what the IIB is not.

Firstly, the IIB is not the Indigenous voice in Western Australia. As I have already made clear, the Indigenous voice will emerge through the Aboriginal Advisory Council and regional bodies connected to grassroots Aboriginal organizations.

Secondly, the IIB is not established in statute having no statutory authority and therefore no financial delegations. These continue to reside in the Ministers of State and their departments.

So let me tell you what the IIB is. It is a Board consisting of four non Indigenous people and five Indigenous people all of whom have vast experience with both the plight of Aboriginal people, the commercial world and the institutions and processes of government. The IIB is what I describe as a conduit for the Aboriginal voices, facilitating their recognition and resonance within both the political and bureaucratic arms of government, and with business. The Board has considerable moral authority – the authority to express a view and to be heard.

Its Terms of Reference are broad and expansive – open to interpretation on the basis of the nature of the information that emerges from its engagement with government agencies and Aboriginal people in the places where they live. The essence of the Terms of Reference is contained in these two paragraphs four and five:

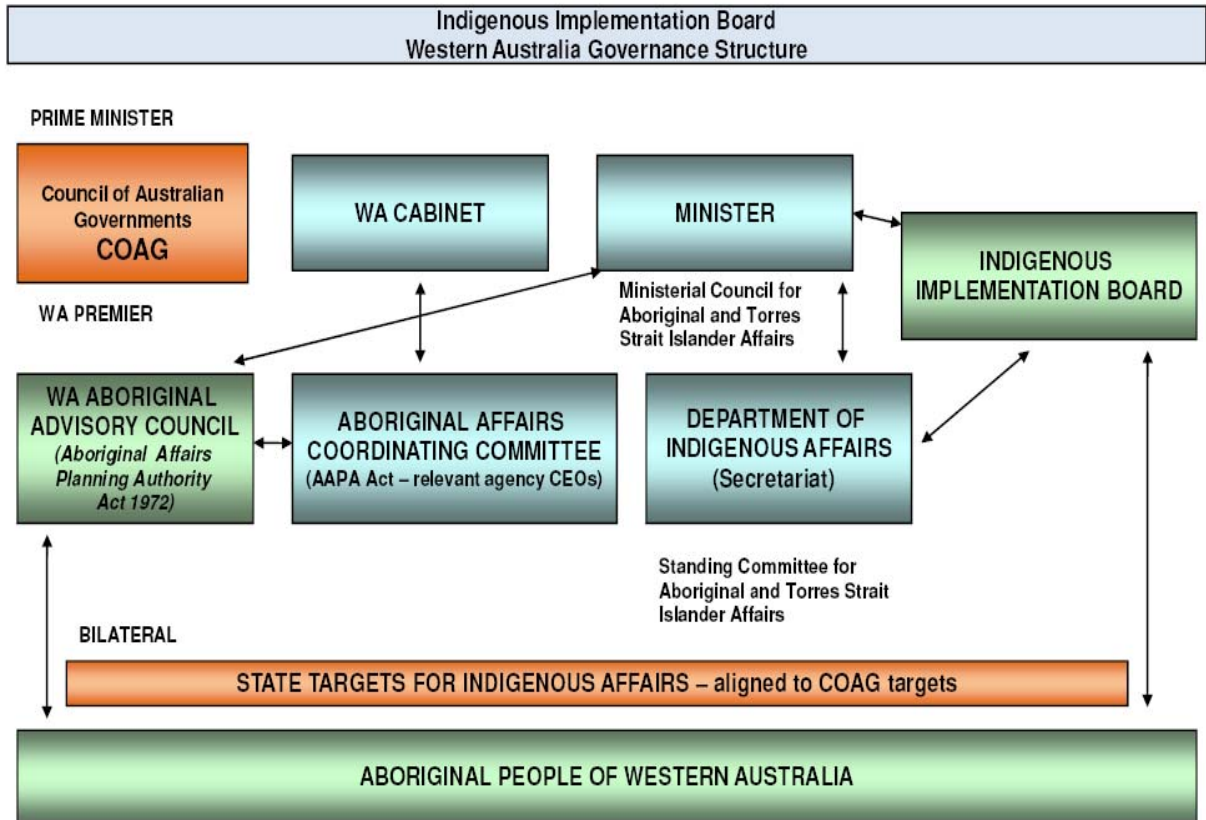
4. Driving fundamental policy shifts through stronger and more accountable Government governance, building trust through consistency and commitment.
5. Building effective participation of Indigenous people, and the broader WA leadership, supporting effective community.

Importantly, from the perspective of this conference, the IIB has included in its specific tasks:

- Developing, with State agencies, clear overarching regional action plans to guide current and future activities linked to bilateral arrangements and State investment priorities.

You will see that this Terms of Reference demands that the Board develops a close relationship with those Departments that have the carriage of changing the lives and circumstances of Aboriginal Western Australians. In our view, that is every department in the Government of Western Australia.

This is our interpretation of where it sits in the structures of governance in Western Australia:



The relationship with the two statutory bodies, the Aboriginal Advisory Council and the Aboriginal Affairs Coordinating Committee – the Directors General Group is vital to the objectives of the Board. The object is to build alliances to this end and to ensure that the relationship is not adversarial in nature, but one that is based on shared vision and objectives. In a sense, the Board is about brokering a new relationship between Aboriginal people and those who have statutory responsibility for their wellbeing.

The Board has been very deliberate in getting its own purpose and strategy clear before proceeding to build these alliances. It had to have a strategic conversation with itself in order agree the framework for engagement. Out of the conversation came a strategic framework that is based on the agreed understanding that Aboriginal people and their culture are critical to the future of our State. Their unique knowledge is the defining element in building a sustainable future for Western Australia.

On the basis of this belief and this understanding, the Indigenous Implementation Board will drive the empowerment of Aboriginal people to create their own future. This provides the foundations on which strong partnerships can be built to bring about positive outcomes for all of us. To achieve these outcomes the Board will catalyse a fundamental rethink of Government policy.

It will move swiftly to:

- enable the Aboriginal design and delivery of services
- ensure the continuation of a vibrant living culture
- refocus regional governance to build sustainable communities, economies and environments
- engage all sectors

This is the Board's strategic vision. To begin the process, the Board has developed an action agenda for the first 100 days which includes:

- starting regional dialogues, commencing in the Kimberley in March 2009 and moving across the State
- facilitating meetings of senior Aboriginal law men and women to advise the Board
- ensuring the development and empowerment of indigenous leaders
- commencing the redesign of Government process and decision making in partnership with the Aboriginal Affairs Coordinating Committee (AACC) and Aboriginal Affairs Advisory Committee (AAAC).

The success of the Board depends on having a vibrant and capable Secretariat, one that is designed with a deep interdependence with the Board, being both a way of amplifying and executing the will of the Board as well as being an important conduit for Aboriginal voices across the state to reach the Board. This is where the Department of Indigenous Affairs comes into this equation. It becomes the Secretariat and changes its shape and nature to do so. The statutory role of the Director General of DIA as the Chairman of the Aboriginal Affairs Coordinating Committee - the Directors General Group with the responsibility for the delivery of services to Aboriginal people - is the most powerful sustained link in this process.

All these things are happening and last week the Board began its dialogue with the Directors General to begin to get us all on the same sheet of music with the same strategic vision. In the near future we will workshop our approach to this so that we breakdown the silos and develop shared holistic objectives that can be translated into the regions for action.

At the same time we have begun to shape the conversations in the regions with our key dialogue partners – the Aboriginal people. Ultimately, those conversations have to embrace non Indigenous people, business and government in those regions. We would want to move to a shared dialogue as early as possible. This is what shared vision and partnership is all about.

Now let me touch on the negative things that have happened since December 2007. The first of these has to be the global economic downturn, the full effects of which are yet to hit Australia. When President Obama talks about the worst recession in a lifetime we know that he is referring to the precedent of the Great Depression of the 1930s. That is serious. In a sense, we are talking about the collapse of the entire Western economic system that has focused for last the 40 years on a consumption driven, market led paradigm that has moved the people of this country and others off the land and into cities.

These might prove to be unsustainable in the long run particularly if they are separated from the landscape, but what it means in the short term is that there is not going to be the sort of money available for new programs that we have come to anticipate over recent years. As Treasurer Wayne Swan said last week, we are going to have to do more with less. The Government's limited response to the outcomes of the 2020 Forum tells us that the enthusiasm for a new order has receded rapidly.

Indeed, there is going to have to be a review of old programs and commitments to see which of them we can do without. In my view, the alternatives to this are either to accept more long term debt on behalf of future generations, to print more money, or to sell off the farm to those who do have reserves or are able to generate capital at the expense of their people. At this time it seems that the only option we haven't begun to exercise is the highly inflationary one of printing more money. I suspect high levels of debt and moral outrage about selling off the farm will draw us to this option in the fullness of time.

The reason I have raised this spectre of reduced economic circumstances, an area in which I confess to having little expertise, is to suggest to you that now is the time to come together and generate new approaches from the bottom up. I am also suggesting that there is some immediacy about this – immediacy that is not reflected in the COAG processes that we will be discussing at this conference. In fact, I am suggesting that the programs and processes at work now are a 'business as usual' approach which equates to riding dead horses in a raging torrent in a storm of unknown dimensions and duration. They might work, but there is certainly little chance of that if the objectives are not pursued by people who have ownership of them and apply themselves with great passion in the belief that they are taking control of their own destiny.

Quite recently in the company of some politicians and officials I visited one of those scenes of Aboriginal dysfunction and despair that we are familiar with and that some people speak of as Third World in nature. It was the sort of environment that visitors to Australia find unbelievable in the context of the free, wealthy and egalitarian image we otherwise project. It is much worse than Third World because of this and what it says about us as a nation. "What can you do?" would be the logical question from people who are not engaged with these issues.

"You should have come to talk to us when were sober" one lady said. The adults were all in an advanced stage of inebriation, and clearly caught in a cycle of drinking themselves into that state everyday. There were little children in this scene, but what distressed me more than anything were the young adolescents who were caught up in this state. Their eyes told a story of shame and despair and my sense was that this is what youth suicide in Aboriginal communities is all about. Without strong culture to fall back on and boredom mixed with that shame and despair, where else is there to go – except to jail.

This thought took me back to a discussion I had previously with one of our regional magistrates who, when I asked him how many of those Aboriginal people who came before actually wanted to go to jail, replied, "About eighty percent. For many it's a case of life and death."

In part, this might explain why Western Australia has the worst rate of Indigenous incarceration in the world – nearly 45 percent of the prison population comes from less than three percent of the total population. This is not improving, and, given the overwhelming youth of the Aboriginal population with fifty percent of the population under the age of twenty years, and the levels of foetal alcohol syndrome in very young children, without fundamental changes to the way we engage with this issue it can only get worse.

Frankly, this should be an affront to the humanity of all of us. If it isn't we truly need to ask ourselves what is wrong with our society. These are our fellow human beings I am talking about. More to the point, they are our fellow Western Australians, and they are our challenge if we are to live decent and sustained lives in this State. Dare I say it, they are our problem rather than the problem of some disengaged bureaucracy from far away. Western Australia needs a strategy of its own to deal with this – one that is about inverting our dealings with our Aboriginal people from a needs based, mendicant status to one where they and their culture are contributors to the common wealth of this state.

My view is that this challenge has to be grasped at the regional level where shared regional strategies have to be developed to carry forward the prospects of those who want to make their lives in those places. Quite clearly, we are now confronted with the need to coordinate development with social policy agendas that provide levels of human wellbeing and environmental sustainability that match the vision that people aspire to. I don't think this can be done by local government, which has its place, but is too diffused and will never have the firepower to develop, coordinate and sustain the shared regional vision I speak of.

On the other hand, things like education, health, housing, communications and culture that are key to wellbeing, cannot simply be wished on regions by well meaning people who live in other places and control the purse strings in financial management silos that never quite come together to generate outcomes at the point where they are supposed to be focused. They have to be set up, managed and shared by people who are connected to the grassroots and are empowered by the shared vision. In my view, this has not been the driving characteristic of past COAG processes, nor is it the character of the present COAG process which bares close resemblance to those of the past.

I am aware that there is a marked reluctance in some quarters to move to what has been marketed as an extra tier of government in the regions. This explains in part why this State has adopted the Claytons approach to regional coordination with the Regional Development Commissions. Perhaps there is also a fear that there might be a dilution of the power of the states, an outcome that could be conceived as enhancing the power of the central Government and its bureaucracy – the opposite effect to that intended. My contention is that it is a lack of virile and coherent regional and state strategies that powers the central agencies - by default. When you have to go cap in hand without a strategy of your own it's the one who holds the purse strings who dictates what can and what cannot happen.

The outcomes of this trend and the weakness of governance in the countryside speak for themselves. As I have suggested to you in this presentation, those outcomes for Aboriginal people and the environment are unacceptable and unsustainable. In the long run they are probably poor for most regional people and regional communities.

In the Sydney Morning Herald News Review section of last Saturday 25 April is an article by Peter Shergold, Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet under the Howard Government titled *Public Service, Political Heart*. It is a 'Road to Damascus' type article revealing an epiphany in thinking on the need to engage a wider fraternity of people and organizations in a more participatory form of government. Mr Shergold, who is now the Macquarie Group Foundation Professor at the Centre for Social Impact has this to say:

“There is an unparalleled opportunity for much greater levels of Political participation. It also involves dangers. It requires shifts of power. Decision making needs to be less bureaucratic and more citizen-centric. That requires far more flexible organizations and more collaborative leadership cultures. It demands that governments embrace social innovation and that public services are willing to manage the risks that inevitably accompany it.”

He goes on to say, “Too much “accountability”, too much public service process and too much “professional” expertise kill creativity”.

It is also my view that we now have a window of opportunity to do things differently and better. It requires vision, partnership and, most of all, courage. My experience tells me that Aboriginal people are up for this and way ahead of the rest of us in thinking about it.

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