

OUTCOMES FROM THE INDIGENOUS PILBARA DIALOGUE

The Peninsula Palms, Dampier

15 – 16 September 2009

ORGANISATIONS REPRESENTED AND NAMES OF ATTENDEES

Bloodwood Tree Association (Inc)

Graham Kennedy, Bernadette Spurling.

Department of Indigenous Affairs

Ms Noela Taylor (Head Office with observer status).

ESS/Compass

Mara West.

Gumala Aboriginal Corporation

May Byrne, Darren Injie, Natalie Parker, Karen Tommy, Greg Tucker.

Indigenous Implementation Board (IIB)

John Sanderson, Sue Gordon, Brendan Hammond (all with observer status).

Juluwarlu Aboriginal Corporation

Jan Kapetas.

Mawarnkarra Health Service

Charmaine Adams, Danny Brown, Keith Churnside, Marilyn Lockyer, Joan Hicks.

Ngarda Ngarli Yarndu Foundation

Barry Taylor, Athol Prior (providing secretariat support).

Ngarliyarndu Bindirri Aboriginal Corporation

Susan Shirtliff (observer status).

Ngarluma Aboriginal Corporation

Paul Hales (observer status).

Ngarluma Yindjibarndi Foundation Ltd

Vince Adams, Michelle Broun, Arnold Lockyer.

Oasis Contracting

Susan Murphy.

Pilbara Indigenous Women's Aboriginal Corporation

Donna Lockyer.

Pundulmurra Indigenous Management and Training Council

Maureen Kelly

Wakathuni

Joyce Drummond.

Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation

Doris Eaton, Nyaparu Rose, Amy Cargill (observer status).

OUTCOMES

DAY ONE – 15 September 2009

Acknowledging the Traditional Owners (Mr Barry Taylor)

Welcome to Ngarluma Country (Mr Keith Churnside)

Introductory Comments (Mr Barry Taylor)

- Mr Taylor welcomed participants to the inaugural Indigenous Pilbara Dialogue and introduced the guests from the Indigenous Implementation Board (IIB).
- Mr Taylor made the point that Indigenous leaders in the West Pilbara could choose to engage with government and seek to change the current unsatisfactory state of affairs, or believe that government was not serious about change, and focus their energies elsewhere. He stated that by coming to this Dialogue, all present had recognised the need to do Indigenous business differently. He recommended that participation be constructively critical, and focussed on forward looking solutions.

Expectations of the next two days (Lt Gen. John Sanderson)

Lt Gen Sanderson:

- Acknowledged the traditional custodians of this place and expressed his respect to everyone present, particularly to the elders who lead in fulfilling the obligations to ancestors and the landscape which is the source of our nation's wellbeing.
- Stated that realisation of the true wealth of this mystical region called the Pilbara lies in accepting responsibility for and sustaining the deep and ancient heritage of that landscape into the future.
- Thanked the Ngarda Ngarli Foundation for taking a leadership role in organising this Dialogue. He noted that it was an important leap of faith on the Foundation's part and has to be based on an expectation that there is something different about what is going on to justify another attempt at engaging the people of this region in talking about their future.
- Expected participants to make their own decisions about how they would organise themselves and what they would demand from Government in the way of plans, structure and a fair share of resources to bring about change in the future.
- Observed that the critical thing from his perspective, is for the Aboriginal people to speak from a position of strength. Such a position can only be developed if they can overcome or put into proper perspective the things that might have divided them in the past, and unite on the things that are truly important.
- Stated that the IIB is in the business of giving Aboriginal people – particularly young people – hope. Somehow, they have to seize the moment and transfer sufficient power to the people so that they can sustain their own options, even in the face of political opportunism.
- Explained that there are new opportunities to become full partners in the future of Australia, but they are only there if Aboriginal people are prepared to seize them. Australia's position as a global nation demands this, but they will not be given willingly, because there is an underlying, historical, racist and self serving view in the non Indigenous community that Aboriginal people are not capable of accepting that responsibility.

- Referred to this contradictory and almost schizophrenic view as being fundamentally wrong and containing the seeds of destruction for this nation. In order to build a new future together in this landscape, he believed that Aboriginal people are probably going to have to lead the way.
- Made the point that despite the COAG processes and the Northern Territory Intervention, power has been taken away by the centralisation of decision making into the hands of people who know they are failing.
- Noted that Aboriginal people still don't have a participatory process with government, even though a proposal from the Australian Human Rights Commissioner (Tom Calma), for a national Aboriginal Advisory body is on the table.
- Explained that the Indigenous Implementation Board that he chairs, and that is also represented by Sue Gordon and Brendan Hammond at this dialogue, has been empowered by the Western Australian Government to: *"advise the State Government on how to identify and cut through the obstacles and really improve social and economic outcomes with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders."*
- Advised that the IIB is developing a proposal for a regionally driven reform agenda that has Aboriginal people at the centre.
- Recognised that the IIB is not an Aboriginal voice. That voice is the voice of experience and must come out of the landscape. For the Pilbara Aboriginal voice to have legitimacy, it must be inclusive and embrace both genders, all cultural groups and young people as well as the Elders.
- Challenged participants to create a sense of hope and aspiration where everyone wants to climb on board and be a part of a new future.
- Advised that this Pilbara Dialogue is even more important than the highly successful Kimberley Conversation, because of the opportunity to build on and progress beyond the point reached by the Kimberley mob, and because it adds serious momentum to the whole process of taking control.
- Emphasised that his Board gets its power from Aboriginal people – not from Government.
- Pointed out that no single thing will give Aboriginal kids a decent go at a future worth having. It has to be the total package that makes life worth living, and that includes knowing who you are, where you fit into the landscape and the larger world and taking confidence and pride from your culture.
- Confirmed that they were looking forward to taking away from here the wisdom of all the participants, and building it into their advice to Government.
- Stated that they are confident in the Pilbara Dialogue and the capacity of Aboriginal people to come up with strategies for the future.

Workshop Outcomes:

Setting a Vision for the Pilbara

- We need to share a common vision about improving cultural, social and economic outcomes for Indigenous peoples in the Pilbara.
- Our focus should be the Pilbara first (i.e. our own back yard), and then be prepared to look nationally.
- We need a Makarata or a Truth and Reconciliation process, to overcome racism and the theft of our land.
- We need a Memorandum of Understanding between Indigenous Peoples and the Government, which includes a commitment by government to policy continuity.
- We need to go back to our own communities and consult about all these things; we need to build from the bottom, like a tree.
- We need to speak with one voice and act as one people.
- The answer to our problems lies with Aboriginal voices.
- We need to respect ourselves first, and then we will get recognition by others.
- Now is the time for action and leadership, with:
 - older people modelling the right way to young people;
 - parents building strong families;
 - elders building strong culture; and
 - us all building cohesiveness, integration and unity.

Economic Development

- The Pilbara generates most of the country's wealth through mining companies. However, Pilbara Aboriginal communities are still experiencing poverty and third world living conditions.
- The Yamatji Marlpa Aboriginal Corporation (native title representative body) is forming a Charitable Trust, which will be responsible for running a food bank with the assistance of non government bodies.
- Given the limited funding available from government, we need to develop more community partnerships of this kind, in order to better meet the needs of Pilbara Aboriginal communities.
- We need sustainable economic development programs and we require government to be more accountable. There is a history of government programs which work well, suddenly being defunded without explanation.
- How can we keep government accountable? By taking back our power and control, by togetherness, unity and driving change ourselves.
- We need to set up a Pilbara Aboriginal Economic Group to deal with Aboriginal affairs, mining companies, native title agreements and partnerships.
- There is power in working together in order to create:
 - partnerships;
 - agreements; and
 - shared responsibilities.

Lore and Culture

- The Pilbara Region is rich in lore and culture.
- Everyone here rides on Aboriginal lore and culture but doesn't respect it.
- Proper consultation rarely happens - Indigenous Intellectual Property needs to be recognised in statute law.
- Young people don't hold the knowledge about lore and culture, old people do.
- Should we be setting up a governance hub, to handle lore and culture consultations?
- We need to strengthen the people who have lore and culture authority. Lore and culture doesn't change.
- Learning culture from our elders will build strong men and strong women.
- We need to bring back bush meetings.
- We need to bring back the commission of elders.
- What is an elder? Who is an elder? They are nominated by their community. This is not government business.
- We still have strong lore and culture and we need to make it stronger.
- Schools need a budget to teach lore and culture, and bilingual programs need to be included in the curriculum.
- It is time for change! We need to ensure that there is respect for culture. In order to do this, we need to take back the power by all language groups working together.
- Can we do this through Native Title Agreements?

Media, Radio and Communications

- We need to use and build on existing media, like the Koorie News, to not only reach our people with good news stories, but reach non Aboriginal people too. The Aboriginal community of the Pilbara needs to open a dialogue with the wider community of the Pilbara.
- We need to be able to attract donations from the wider community (i.e. not just depend on government), by using the tax deductibility of charitable foundations.
- Note that the loss of funding initiated by the Howard Government has not been overturned by the Rudd Government. All media organisations are struggling.
- We need the ability to establish a positive identity for Aboriginal people in the Pilbara, and one way we can do this is through successful local Indigenous drama and music.

Gaining Control

- In any contest or competition, winning is about out-thinking your opponent. In this case, successfully taking back control will involve a contest with the mainstream Australian system. Fortunately, this system doesn't do much thinking and is pretty dumb.

- In order to gain control of their own affairs, Aboriginal people in the Pilbara will need a plan of attack. This can be developed by answering the following simple questions:
 - **Why** do we need to take back control of our own affairs? (Answering this question will allow us to be clear about our purpose or mission.)
 - **What** will it be like when we take back control of our own affairs? (Answering this question will allow us to be clear about our vision.)
 - **How** do we need to act in order to take back control of our own affairs? (Answering this question will allow us to set strategies aimed at achieving our vision.)
 - **Do** what to implement our strategies? (Answering this question will allow us to operationalise our implementation.)

Participants' Summary Thoughts at the end of Day One

- We need to tell the story of our successes and our good times.
 - We need to create pride in the past and hope for the future.
 - We need to form partnerships with white people, while remaining united and staying in control of our own affairs.
 - There is a passionate belief in the importance of employment for Aboriginal people (especially young people), and of creating a strong Aboriginal community.
 - We need to work smart to achieve change, develop partnerships with others and do things the Aboriginal way.
 - We need to focus on the positives and look to the future.
 - We need to build self esteem through a focus on lore and culture.
 - We need to voice our opinions clearly, government needs to listen carefully.
 - We need to stand united, speak with one voice and protect that voice.
 - We should not get angry, we should not get even, we should get what we want.
 - Magistrates should be directing offenders into training programs, which will prepare them for productive lives. Local elders should meet with magistrates and offer alternatives to locking people up.
 - There is a brain drain from service delivery jobs into mining jobs.
 - We have learned a culture of drinking as a means of celebrating success – this is counter productive. American Indians shun drinkers from their communities.
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DAY TWO – 16 September 2009

Recapitulation of the previous day and review of directions

After much discussion of the previous day's outcomes, the following vision was agreed:

Our vision for the Pilbara is strong, secure and sustainable Aboriginal families and communities, built on lore and culture.

Workshop Outcomes:

Building Strong Families and Child Protection

- Strong families and strong communities need good facilities and better infrastructure. However, we shouldn't use this as an excuse to do nothing while we wait for the facilities. We need to take control back and make things happen.
- Some parts of current Aboriginal lifestyles come from our traditional culture and some parts are learned behaviours which do not serve us well.
- In 1967, Aboriginal people obtained drinking rights and a new culture of drinking to excess arose. Among other things, this resulted in weakening the legacy of our elders, including the application of tribal justice. Now our children are learning wrong behaviours from their parents.
- The greatest danger Aboriginal children face today is from other Aboriginal people. This problem must be addressed by Aboriginal people themselves, through acting on many of the things already identified in our earlier discussions.
- Aboriginal child protection workers become scarred through their experiences and Aboriginal families become wary to avoid being blamed for child abuse.
- This is not just an Aboriginal problem, but Aboriginal people are an easy target. Aboriginal people are more visible than white people, due to their practice of largely living outdoors.
- It should be realised that not all jobs are family friendly. Some jobs can harm families and sometimes parents can be exploited by employers. Fly in fly out jobs can fall into this category.
- Some families do the right thing, but their children get dragged down by other kids running wild. Spending time on outstations can help in this area, by reducing the bad influences of towns. We need to take our children out bush again.
- Existing organisations (like PIWAC) need to be properly resourced and become truly regional in their focus and service delivery.
- Community organisations need direct funding – government keeps control by funding through intermediary organisations.
- Existing service providers need to be held accountable for results. It would help if a report evaluating the effectiveness of Pilbara service delivery agencies was prepared. Long term statistical evaluations of the success of all government programs should be undertaken.
- For example, what was the impact of the long term hostel program (residential education) run by government?

- More resources need to be directed back to making families whole again, using Aboriginal knowledge and practices.
- In order to achieve this, we can draw on our past history of successful grass roots lobbying and exerting political influence.

Women and Youth

- The changes to CDEP are causing problems. Government is now expecting people to find mainstream employment. However, our people need a lot of help to find, win and keep mainstream jobs.
- In some cases, our women are unable to take mainstream jobs due to the attitudes of Aboriginal men.
- Support groups have proved effective in assisting both Aboriginal men and women in dealing with issues associated with entering the mainstream labour market.
- We need to support the home maker if we want to build strong families again.
- Appropriate community development strategies need to be developed and implemented.
- Our young people need to know their skin groups and be strong in their culture.
- There are real benefits for employers in accessing a skilled and stable local workforce, drawn from nearby Aboriginal communities.
- It has been demonstrated that Aboriginal women are very stable employees, who are able to quickly learn the skills needed to become proficient machinery operators. A business case can be easily made for employing Aboriginal women.
- The priority is to build strong families, strong culture and strong communities.

Employment and Training

- Employers sometimes work on the assumption that Aboriginal job seekers have their own accommodation and transport. This is often wrong. Either accommodation on site is needed, or transport to and from work sites.
- Working FIFO involves long hours, often at the cost of families and culture.
- Employers need to open discussions with Pilbara Aboriginal communities about the needs of Aboriginal job seekers and employees. Employers need to create flexibility within the employment they offer.
- A priority in building strong families and strong communities is ensuring that all options are utilised to help Aboriginal young people make a successful transition from education and training to employment.
- Traditional land owners need to take an interest in what is being done to country by mining companies.
- Native title agreements should include time frames for all promised training, employment and enterprise support commitments, as well as accountability clauses.
- Note that not all Aboriginal people want mining jobs (either directly in mining or even related to mining), when they see what is happening to country.
- There are other service delivery employment options which can be pursued. Eg, mothers should be brought back into schools as teacher assistants.

- We need to return to the community based service delivery approaches of the past.
- Aboriginal people should be encouraged and supported to develop their own enterprises and small businesses. Eg, we have a heritage of successfully growing vegetables (back when living on stations).
- It is recognised that there are sustainability and long term viability issues associated with the establishment of any small business. Eg there are high failure and burn out rates, even in mainstream. However, we should not use this as an excuse, targeted support arrangements can overcome these problems.
- Another option is the creation of not for profit businesses, run by Aboriginal people, for Aboriginal people and employing Aboriginal people.
- It has been observed that whole towns and associated infrastructure can be built quickly by mining companies, when their bottom line is at stake. We require the same commitment to addressing critical Aboriginal community needs.

Governance

- We know how to do it (good governance) in our culture. We are still learning how to do Wadjela governance.
- There are many Aboriginal organisations and many of the same people sit on their boards of management.
- This is also true for advisory bodies to government, most of which operate within information silos.
- There are no benchmarks to establish what constitutes good governance.
- Aboriginal organisations need to be open and transparent, and share information.
- A major problem identified was that although Commonwealth funding is available for three years, it is only provided on an annual basis.
- The common experience of Aboriginal organisations in receipt of annual funding is one of FAILURE.
- We need to learn from other regions to find out what is working well and how it is being done, eg the Gove Housing Program.
- We need leadership from our elders, who need to strengthen our men.
- We need to act now before we lose our elders.
- One change we can make immediately is to bring back bush meetings.
- We need to be aware that wadjela governance rules are changing and that there is training available from ORIC to learn about this.
- A simple way of understanding Wadjela governance is “*doing the right thing, and doing the thing right*”.
- We need a governance hub for the Pilbara, based on our four Aboriginal cultural blocs, a regional governance body. We need this so we can have a process whereby we can resolve internal conflicts.
- Our governance hub needs to start with Aboriginal people, and then as strong and united Aboriginal peoples of the Pilbara, we can invite others (like local government) to join us. (Note: local government is strong because it has a strong lobby group to government. It also has its own local Pilbara Council.)

Health Workshop

- Education: We need to see a return to parents teaching children, and grandmas looking after kids. Parents need to be educated in this role, and be given the skills and training to do it properly. We all need to learn from our elders.
- Long term programs: Pilot programs get closed down after 6 – 12 months, and other successful programs have been discontinued. Government needs to bring back the homemaker program.
- We need to look at what has worked and is working and do more of that.
- We need funding for health workers in communities, not just clinics.
- Environmental factors: poor living conditions cause the biggest impact on health. Eg, overcrowding needs to be addressed and culturally appropriate housing needs to be built. We need to address eating and lifestyle factors, as well as stress, mental health and self esteem factors.
- We need to respect and look after our elders, so they can look after the health of our communities.

Motion, put from the Floor

That a Pilbara Indigenous one stop shop (the governance hub referred to earlier in the workshop) be created to speak to all levels of government:

- *Federal;*
- *State; and*
- *Local government.*

This organisation would do business with:

- *Miners;*
- *Explorers;*
- *Tourist operators; and*
- *Other relevant agencies.*

This organisation would include Indigenous:

- *Elders;*
- *Community leaders (who may or may not be elders); and*
- *CEOs of Indigenous organisations.*

Only Indigenous people would have voting rights.

This motion was passed unanimously.

Agreed follow up action

The Ngarda Ngarli Yarndu Foundation:

- Will prepare a draft report and a DVD of the Dialogue, and distribute them to everyone;
- Will organise further meetings to discuss these issues, with the next meeting to be held as soon as possible in 2010; and
- Will ensure that the planning for further meetings includes bush meetings.

The Indigenous Implementation Board

- Will impress on the State Government the needs of Pilbara Aboriginal people (as advised at this Dialogue);
- Will advise State Government what Pilbara Aboriginal People want to do next;
- Will seek resourcing for these next steps, including for bush meetings.

Meeting Closed
