

Jobs, Wealth and Hope

It takes a community

by Dr. Phil Burgess

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A. Introduction

Thank you for that introduction Justin and thank you for inviting me to speak this evening at Telstra's special NAIDOC celebrations for 2007.

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land – the Gadigal (*Gad – e – gull*) people of the Eora (*Yo – ra*) Nation.

I would also like to acknowledge the Chairman of the Telstra Foundation – former Olympian and businessman, Herb Elliott -- who unfortunately could not be with us tonight. Though I am a member of the Telstra Foundation Board, there is no way I can step into his (very fast) shoes.

I want to tell you a story about **Herb Elliott** that I learned – not from Herb, who is a very modest man but from another Australian hero, **John Bertrand**, the skipper of *Australia II* in the 1983 Americas Cup.

This story about Herb is very relevant to what I want to talk about tonight. [Tell Herb Story – about stakes in the ground]

As many of you know, I have been in Australia for two years now – actually 24 months and 6 days.

During that time, I have been fortunate to travel throughout this wonderful country. Since the Christmas holidays I have visited 47 cities, towns and communities.

Through this process I have developed a deep affection for the land -- and especially for

- the wide diversity of the people that inhabit this great nation and
- the many cultures they represent; and
- the on-going challenge – one faced by the US and many nations in Europe -- to find ways to make multiculturalism work.

It is to celebrate an important milestone in that struggle to make multiculturalism work that brings us together this evening – the struggle to win the right to vote and to assure that Aboriginal peoples are recognised as full citizens of Australia. It took a long time, but the right decision was made, and it is right to celebrate that decision – as we are doing this evening.

I have been fortunate during my time here to see the benefits of that decision. I have travelled to Indigenous communities to see first hand both the achievements and the many challenges that remain. For example, I've been to:

- Cherbourg,
- the Tiwi Islands, and
- Yuendumu,

I've also been to Birdsville and Blackall and other remote communities throughout Australia. Some problems, to be sure, are unique to Aboriginal communities. But many others are common problems shared by many communities in rural and remote Australia.

Even before coming to Australia, I knew about Australian Aborigines famous in the US – people like:

- **Cathy Freeman**, the winner of the 400 metres at the Sydney Olympics on 2000;
- **Ernie Dingo**, the Aboriginal actor who has appeared on *The Great Outdoors*, in *Crocodile Dundee*, and in other films and TV shows;
- And since coming here I have come to know about many Aboriginal athletes, such as Australian Rules Footballer, **Michael Long**¹;

There have also been Aboriginal heroes who have stood up for their fellow man. As a newcomer to this culture, the one that stands out more for me than any one else is Eddie Mabo.

Eddie Mabo took on the big guys and had a determined, “keep-at-‘em’” like personality. He stands out to me because he engaged in the action and passion of his time and tirelessly campaigned for what he believed in.²

¹ Michael Long, is a former AFL Essendon football player. When he was playing, he championed the Indigenous cause within the AFL. In 1995, Michael made a stand against racial abuse, following an on-field incident with another player. Ultimately, this led to Michael being one of the pioneering forces behind the racial abuse code that was adopted by the AFL in the 1990s. On 21 November 2004, Michael Long embarked on an historic trek, walking from his home in the suburbs of Melbourne to Parliament House in Canberra (650+ kms). This is now known as *The Long Walk* and was the start of a not-for-profit organisation that addresses Indigenous issues

² Eddie Mabo's desire and pursuit saw the High Court of Australia overturn the term 'terra nullius' – meaning 'no-man's land' – and the issue of Indigenous rights to land were never seen the same again. It is unfortunate, as with many famous people from history that Eddie Mabo didn't get to see the result of his tireless work. He passed away five months before the decision was made, but he will be remembered for generations to come as the fighter behind the Mabo decision.

It is the need to commit to the action and passions of our time that I want to address this evening.

B. Creating jobs, hope, and development

I should tell you that I come from the Western region of the US. It is a region very much like Australia – 25 million people, 70 per cent of whom live in a few large cities such as Denver, Phoenix, and Salt Lake City.

The American West, like Australia, is a sparsely populated area where lots of people live in rural areas – and where many of America's Aboriginal people live.

One of the things I learned living and working in the American West is this: American Indian tribes living on reservations and immigrant Anglos or Hispanics who came later to live in rural areas share many of the same issues.

And everyone comes to the conclusion that they need to develop strong communities –

- Even if they are small.
- Even if they are not going to grow.
- Even if they have limited natural resources.
- They still have people – and human talent is the most valuable natural resource there is.

But human talent must be developed – and that is the job of the community as much as it is of the individual. It takes a community – a father and mother and a school and supportive friends and neighbors – to develop a young man or woman.

That's why we need to focus on developing high-performance communities.

That's why we need to understand that economic development is more than growth. Economic development is really about:

- Creating jobs for people;
- Expanding wealth for communities; and
- Increasing hope for people and communities.

Currently, there is a lot of debate around the Australian Government's emergency plan for Indigenous Australians. From my experience, you assess these kinds of initiatives by applying three standards:

- Do they **create jobs**?
- Do they **expand wealth**, and/or
- Do they **increase the hope** that drives people and communities?.

3. Yuendumu Arts Centre

To explain what I mean, let me tell you about one of the communities I visited last year that left a deep impression on me.

It is a small community, called Yuendumu, which is about 350 kilometres North West of Alice Springs. It is one of the largest towns in Central Australia, after Alice Springs and Yulara.

Yuendumu has about 1000 people -- made up largely of the Warlpiri (*Wal-Pri*) Aboriginal people.

I've been told that most people know about Yuendumu – in part because **Peter Garrett** and the *Midnight Oil* helped make it famous with song, *Beds are Burning*.

While I'm not going to sing it for you – hum these words to yourself:

- Four wheels scare the cockatoos
- From Kintore East to Yuendumu

Do you remember?

In the Yuendumu community, with chronic unemployment and little hope, an Arts Centre was recently established.

This Arts Centre is run by an energetic woman, **Cecilia Alfonso**. She has been there for over five years. The people of Yuendumu own the Arts Centre, so Cecilia answers to a governing executive elected by the residents.

The Yuendumu Arts Centre has become the central point, the heart of the community, as it is a way of

- providing jobs,
- expanding wealth and
- increasing hope.

The Arts Centre is a welcoming place for all Yuendumu locals to

- paint, store their materials, get new supplies,
- sell their art works,
- share stories,
- talk with friends or family, and above all
- learn.

Once a local artist completes a painting, they take it to Cecilia, for on-selling. Cecilia pays the artist 50 per cent of the sale price in advance, and the other 50 per cent is used to run the business and to invest in the community.

What helps Cecilia is technology and a passion for the people that she works with every day.

On the technology side, **Telstra wired Yuendumu with broadband** (called ADSL) and with the new high-speed broadband wireless network called Next G™ in November of last year.

These new telecommunications platforms are now central planks in the way the Art Centre

- advertises,
- sells, and
- delivers Yuendumu art to the outside world.

Once the artist completes a painting, it is photographed with a digital camera with the image downloaded to the web site. That image is then sent via email or placed on the Internet for buyers worldwide to view within minutes.

In the past, the artists would wait weeks or possibly months to know if their paintings were sold.

Through this Arts Centre and the technology that is being used,

- jobs have been created,
- wealth has been expanded, and
- hope has increased.

Additionally, the Arts Centre is feeding funds directly back into the community to improve the health and well-being of its residents.

- funds are being used to build a swimming pool. As an incentive, children can only swim in the pool if they attend school.
- the pool also assists in the overall health of the child, providing exercise, recreation, and a good shower.

The Yuendumu community has also been addressing health issues that are common in many Aboriginal communities.

- cataracts are a serious health issue – especially for artists who cannot continue to paint if they cannot see.

- The Arts Centre has worked with the Government and doctors from Canberra's Medical Society to remove cataracts from 15 of their senior artists. This program will continue to build momentum in the area with the Fred Hollows Foundation³ in Alice Springs.
- Petrol sniffing and other drug abuse problems are diminishing as young people now think about painting and working on digital photography to earn extra money.
- When people have hope – people of any age – it changes their behaviour.

The Yuendumu Arts Centre is a case in point: When you create jobs and increase wealth for the people and the community, hope is increased.

They understand that by taking such action, they are building a high performance community – small as it may be; remote as it may be. That means they are proving:

- Real jobs at fair wages;
- Business enterprises that have a future;
- More per capita wealth for the community;
- New voluntary associations that begin to give meaning to civil society; and
- More hope for families, communities and the future.

I think we all have reason to believe that this community has a good chance to prosper in the future, as will others that work within these principles.

³ The Fred Hollows Foundation is a not-for-profit, community-based, non-government development aid organisation. Their vision is of a world where no one is needlessly blind and of a land where Indigenous people enjoy the same health outcomes as all Australians. Fred Hollows (dec.) called himself an 'eye doctor' and worked closely with Indigenous communities to improve their health

4. Telstra Foundation Indigenous projects

Telstra, through the Telstra Foundation, has a strong commitment to the Indigenous communities of Australia.

The Telstra Foundation identifies and provides funding to projects that can make positive and lasting differences to the lives of many Australians.

Since its inception five years ago, the Telstra Foundation has invested more than \$6.3 million in more than 80 Indigenous, community-based projects in Australia. I am proud of that achievement.

While all of these projects address the specific needs of particular Indigenous communities, there are two projects that stick out in my mind that I would like to highlight – as they are again examples on how creating hope can help build a high performance community.

The first is a project that the Telstra Foundation supported in Aurukun (*Air-a-COON*), on the Western Region of Cape York – a 12 hour drive from Cairns. It is one of the larger communities on the Cape with around 1200 people.

The Telstra Foundation invested \$325,000 in a program to increase school attendance by 166 per cent during the second school term at the Aurukun Primary School.

The program has been an enormous success:

- It helped re-establish a regular school routine for children and
- introduced new programs, including developing new digital media skills, to make learning more fun and engaging for students.

My colleague, Geoff Booth, visited Cairns last week where he met with the program leader from the Croc Festival, Peter Sjoquist (*Show-quest*) and the school's principal, Richard Barry.

He learned that the Croc Festival Aurukun project took a school struggling with student absenteeism and learning apathy and turned it into a stimulating environment where students wanted to come to school.

Previously, **school absenteeism** at Aurukun Primary School was the highest of all schools in the surrounding community. After the project's implementation, **school attendance increased** from 75 students attending school regularly in term one to over 200 students attending school regularly in term two.

A successful element of the Aurukun project was a digital media skills program, where visiting Melbourne-based film makers stayed for seven weeks to teach students how to develop and record their own videos.

Creating videos provided a job for the students. They also increase their wealth by learning new skills and their increased hope was reflected by their decisions to stay at school.

As a reward for their efforts, 30 students who displayed significant improvement at school are being rewarded with a trip to the Croc Festival next week to be held on Thursday Island.

I wanted to highlight this project because it is an idea based on the principles that I continue to refer to, and one that can be replicated in many different ways throughout varying communities.

There is a second project. However, I don't think I could do justice to it by trying to explain it.

The only person who can do that is here tonight and about to come up and address you all. His name is **Dr Chris Sarra** and he is the Director of the Indigenous Education Leadership Institute and founder of the *Stronger, Smarter Realities* project.

This project has received \$1.2 million from the Telstra Foundation over a three year period to provide intensive training to help 240 school principals deliver a better education to Indigenous students, focusing on reducing student absenteeism, improving literacy and numeracy, and instilling a sense of cultural pride.

To give justice to the program and to work in the Indigenous communities, I'd now like to introduce you all to Dr Chris Sarra.

Thank you.

14 minutes (1843@130 words per minute)