

**SPEECH BY JACKIE HUGGINS  
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FOR THE INDIGENOUS FAMILY VIOLENCE PREVENTION SEMINAR  
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CQU MACKAY**

I would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet today and pay respect to those who have gone before us.

And I would like to thank Heather Nancarrow and the team from the Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research for inviting me to take part in this important forum, along with a range of other speakers who work in and around the profoundly important and difficult fields of domestic violence and child welfare.

This forum comes at a critical time in Indigenous affairs – a time when a whole range of organisations which focus attention on the needs of Indigenous people are feeling a degree of uncertainty about the future.

But it is also a time when Indigenous people are increasingly determined to identify and promote our own aspirations within the context of Indigenous affairs policy. And when there are ever more “points of light” in terms of policies and programs that are showing some promise in finally addressing Indigenous disadvantage.

Which is why I am so pleased to be here today at a forum which will celebrate achievements of all those people out there working to combat Indigenous family violence. It’s a seminar that’s geared towards making things happen out there and it should be a real stimulus for all of you to know that your deliberations will be taken forward to tomorrow’s post-forum policy development meeting.

This gathering is not just about talking the talk – it’s about sending important messages and advice through to people who need to know what’s happening on the ground so that they can develop appropriate, workable policy to support it.

This is reconciliation in action.

And we at Reconciliation Australia are striving to ensure that the whole community takes responsibility to back up the reconciliation rhetoric with this kind of real commitment and that takes money, action, courage, imagination and great trust.

Heather has asked me to reflect on my experience at the Prime Minister’s summit last year on Indigenous Family Violence and also to make some connection between family violence and child welfare, which has been an issue here in Queensland.

For a start, we all know that if the reconciliation rhetoric had been backed up properly in the fundamental area of family violence and child welfare we would have reached the stage where we would be coming together for an event like this to measure and celebrate the distance we have travelled.

We can do that to some extent, but not to the extent we would all wish.

So here we are, yet again, talking about a level of violence and dysfunction that could see another generation of Indigenous children grow up too damaged to create functional families and communities themselves.

But at least we are here. At least the issue of violence is well and truly out in the open, and not only are our women speaking out about it but so too now are our men, men like Mick Dodson, my fellow director from Reconciliation Australia.

That is why, despite my intense frustration with the situation overall, there are many things about a forum like this that inspire and encourage me.

For a start, many of the people here are tireless practitioners in family violence and child welfare. You are at the coalface and my admiration for what you do is immense and heartfelt.

So why over two decades, have we seen things go backwards rather than forwards?

For the general community, the answer to this question is quite elusive. It tempts people to fall back on dangerous stereotypes about Aboriginal people and the choices we make and don't make for ourselves.

The reality is that what has stayed the same over 20 years is the inability of government agencies and mainstream service providers to address our problems effectively.

And when problems like these are chucked in the "too hard basket" over long periods of time, they get worse and worse until they reach the kind of crisis we now face in family violence which is so closely related to child welfare and development.

As many of you know, a group of us spent time last year discussing this issue with the Prime Minister. And while Mr Howard, his Government and State/Territory governments are yet to commit to any meaningful, coordinated program to tackle it once and for all in our communities, we have made a start by sitting around a table in a spirit of trust and shared ownership of the problem.

This capacity to trust is one of the keys to reconciliation and it's something I would like to talk more about a little bit later on.

The bottom line about last year's summit was that there was a real coming together of minds and hearts on the importance of giving children the best start we can in life. And it's no coincidence that whenever people are looking for words and symbols for reconciliation, it's the children who help us find a shared language.

In the same way that the innocence of children shows us what is possible for reconciliation, they also provide a safe place for us to agree that we still have a problem and that we need to work together to fix it.

We cannot ignore the plight of children. We cannot accept their suffering without settling for a very second rate future for our nation.

And none of us is about to do that.

But I would have to say that it was clear last year, and remains clear in the light of recent events at the Federal level, that despite the genuine concern about children shown by all parties, there is still a reluctance to accept that we cannot help children without appreciating the broader environmental context in which they live.

We cannot stop a woman or child being beaten if we can't appreciate what makes communities like ours dysfunctional and what helps them learn to be functional, want to be functional.

And here I have to express my disappointment in some leaders, black and white, who in praising the Government's approach on practical reconciliation, have ridiculed those of us who say that symbolic measures and the rights agenda are essential ingredients also on the path to healing.

These leaders should look to the experience of Indigenous peoples across the globe who have found solutions only through frameworks of action which incorporate symbolic recognition and the building of pride, as well as practical measures.

So the lack of appreciation of context is one significant source of failure in addressing the needs of Indigenous families. Why else have we gone backwards?

Far simpler to appreciate, but still apparently ignored, are facts and figures which show the Aboriginal population is increasingly a young one. The massive majority is under 35 and a big chunk of those are children or teenagers but service delivery just isn't geared for that demographic reality.

The ground-breaking report prepared in 2002 by Sue Gordon in Western Australia into responses to child abuse found that child protection agencies just didn't have the resources to respond to the volume of need, let alone to respond quickly or appropriately.

While the Western Australian Government's response to the Gordon report, I believe, still relies too heavily on repairing existing programs, its commitment of \$75 million represents a good start and when we see it matched and extended by governments across the country, we might be in a better position to say that Australia is truly committed to tackling this problem.

Lack of coordination between jurisdictions is another big issue in child welfare given the transient nature of some Aboriginal communities and the fact that kids are moved around within the system.

If there's no consistency across the country, and there isn't, kids are going from one bad situation to another bad situation that's bad in a different and unfamiliar way.

There is a real need to establish some kind of high level, interjurisdictional body to chart a way forward.

While Ministerial Councils have not yet achieved big improvements in Indigenous health or education, they do elevate issues on the national agenda and they are required to develop and report on action plans.

It may be a little more complicated to establish another such Council that sits across standard portfolio areas to focus on Indigenous children but it must be possible ... if the rhetoric used by the Prime Minister and others is founded on genuine commitment.

Because having said that children provide the safe place for us to talk of reconciliation and a better future, I'd have to say that so far rhetorical priorities and the realities on the ground just don't match up.

The kids are still not getting what they need.

Now, I am aware that much of what I've said so far covers pretty bleak territory with which many of you are familiar. You live and work with these problems every day, doing the very best that you can.

And many of you are all too aware that one of the stumbling blocks in working to improve the sector is lack of trust between clients and the people working in government agencies delivering family support and child welfare services.

It's a hard one to fix but it's not hard to see that it is based on having a whole lot of people operating on the basis of stereotypes.

If you're in a mindset that says Aboriginal people are all drunk and lazy and beat their kids, while you're dealing with a woman or a child in need, you're never going to treat those people as though they really count as individuals.

It's certainly true that communities are also slow to trust authorities and this is understandable given the legacy of the stolen generations and the depth of problems in the sector that we've already talked about.

And at the end of the day, a bit of healthy skepticism about the system is probably in order.

But that being said, there's no doubt that a whole lot more trust is needed before outcomes are going to improve.

On the Aboriginal side, part of that trust will be earned as we continue to step up and own the violence, as we have started to.

On the agency side, part of the trust will be earned when politicians and bureaucrats are prepared to cop some flack about having got it wrong for so long.

However we do it, organisations like the Queensland Centre for Domestic and Family Violence Research will continue to play a pivotal role in brokering better relationships and moving the sector forward.

I've spent a lot of time this morning talking about persistent problems but none of this undermines the fine work performed by the Centre and by practitioners in this most difficult area.

You are some of the busiest service providers around and have the hardest jobs in the world. You don't have time to write reports and submit to inquiries or hassle agencies about what needs to be done.

The Centre makes sure that your voices are heard and it keeps the hammer on government agencies and others to think harder about the place of women and children who have no voice at all.

To those of you who are working at the grassroots, I can only offer encouragement to keep the faith. If you are to continue doing what you're doing, you have no choice but to hold on to hope.

I would also suggest to the organisers and delegates of forums like this that the opportunity will be wasted if all you walk away with this afternoon is a sense of your common experiences and grievances.

I urge you to make this gathering action-driven, so that you might leave here with a strong message to deliver to politicians, to media, to government officials and to Indigenous people themselves in all the communities you represent. And that message must be absolutely clear and uncompromising in communicating to these people that Aboriginal people deserve more.

We must deliver the message in an empowering way for our community as a whole.

Ultimately, I remain confident that these barriers will be broken and that solid progress will be made, as it has been in other Indigenous communities around the world. If we continue to bolster our response on all the different fronts, through government, through Indigenous action and through brave public debate, the only way to travel will be in a forward direction.

I wish you well for the forum and hope that your time here together will strengthen you in the important work that you do.