

**ANNIVERSARY
OF THE 'BRINGING THEM HOME' REPORT
ST JAMES COLLEGE**

12 May, 2017

ADDRESS OF WELCOME

Good morning and Welcome:

St James College is privileged to be standing on land of the Turrbal and Jagera Clans of this area, whose Elders past, present and emerging, we respectfully acknowledge.

Indeed we are privileged to be standing in solidarity on this side of Boundary St and all that that means in the story of Aboriginal people in Brisbane, and we are honoured to be welcoming Elders, dignitaries, friends and young people to this very special commemorative event today.

Many of you will have heard of the late Uncle Bob Randall, Elder, Singer and Community Leader and, in many respects, a philosopher. In an award-winning documentary, produced in 2006, Uncle Bob speaks passionately about the deep value of 'kanyini' meaning 'connectedness', what each person and, particularly, what each Aboriginal person holds as being intrinsic to life. He speaks of this connectedness in four ways: through a Belief System, through a deep sense of Spirituality, through the Land and within Family. When that connectedness is severed, so is lost the connection to all that is meaningful in life.

Today, we are recalling and reflecting on milestones along that long and sad journey of disconnectedness that characterised the lives of Aboriginal People in this land.

It has been a tragic indictment on this Nation that its First Peoples endured such persistently denigrating, demeaning and de-socialising treatment at the hands of successive Governments since the first days of European occupation – a story of oppression, neglect and inhumanity that lasted over 200 years before an apology on behalf of the entire Nation was offered unequivocally and without reserve in 2008 by the then Australian Prime Minister.

History recounts story after story of the struggle of Aboriginal People to be recognised. Tragically, in those early days, recognition was more in the form of decisions to dominate and perhaps even eradicate.

For example, in the early days of Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania), the killing of Aboriginal people by settlers actually met with the approval of officials. In another instance – one of many – the first Governor of Western Australia, Captain James Stirling, in 1834 led a party of police 85 km south of the new settlement of Perth, encountering the Pinjarra people killing a large number of them and ostensibly wiping out the entire community. We know of the tragic massacre at Myall Creek in northern NSW in 1838, for which, thankfully and rightfully, the white perpetrators were brought to justice. I wonder how many of us knew (I certainly didn't) that when the all-Aboriginal Cricket Team left on a tour to England in 1868 (coincidentally the same year as the founding of St James College) and something for which all Australians could be justifiable proud – at the same time nearly 150 Aboriginal men were killed for resisting arrest in the Kimberley region of WA.

By 1890, terms and phrases such as Chief Protector, segregation, assimilation, de-socialisation, and indeed 're-socialisation for their own good' were creeping into the official language of Government.

In 1901, the newly accepted Australian Constitution mentioned Aboriginal people only twice: once to exclude them from the official Census, and also excluding Aboriginal people from the law-making powers of the new Federal Parliament.

From then on, the tragic stories of separation grow throughout every State and Territory in the country, regardless of many attempts to repeal laws. For example, in 1938, the Australian Aborigines Conference was held on January 26 in Sydney marking as a 'Day of Mourning' the 150th anniversary of establishment of the Colony of New South Wales. The founders, Jack Patten, Jack Ferguson and William Cooper demanded a 'justice, decency and fair play' for all Aboriginal People. The resolution of the Conference read:

"We, representing the Aborigines of Australia, assembled in conference at the Australian Hall, Sydney, on the 26th day of January, 1938, this being the 150th Anniversary of the whiteman's seizure of our country, hereby make protest against the callous treatment of our people by whiteman during the past 150 years, and we appeal to the Australian nation of today to make new laws for the education and care of Aborigines, and we ask for a new policy which will raise our people to full citizen status and equality within the community."

As we are all too much aware, misguided policies of assimilation and integration resulting in forced separation and cultural disconnection lasted right up until the 1960s in some States, leading to countless numbers of Aboriginal children being forcibly removed from their homes and homelands.

While the Commonwealth Electoral Act of 1918 was finally amended in 1962 to enable all Indigenous Australians to enrol to vote in Australian Federal Elections, it was not until 1967 – 50 years ago this year – that finally the *Constitution Alteration (Aboriginals) Act (Commonwealth)* referendum was passed entitling Aboriginal people to be included on the Census and the empowering of the Government to make special laws for the welfare of Aboriginal people.

Sadly, though, things did not really begin to change as expected for Aboriginal People in spite of laws being passed in respect to housing, health and suchlike.

The commissioned report '*Bringing Them Home*' released in 1987 – 20 years ago this year – became a turning point in acknowledging the tragedy of what we know as the Stolen Generations. From then on, State Governments finally and seriously began to acknowledge their inhumane treatment of Aboriginal people and offered apologies – some beautifully and effectively worded, others clumsy and disrespectful.

In all walks of life, home always holds a special meaning. 'Going home', 'returning home', 'being brought home', as Submission 186 in the *Bringing Them Home* Report states, 'is fundamental to the healing process of those who were taken away as well as those who were left behind.

Another section of Submission 186 of the Report states: "Just as there are many homes, there are many journeys home. Each one of us will have a different journey from anyone else. The journey home is mostly ongoing and in some ways never completed. It is a process of discovery and recovery, it is a process of (re)building relationships which have been disrupted, or broken or never allowed to begin because of separation." A journey home is a journey of discovering identity. Going home is essential to 'healing the wounds of separation,' and essential to re-connecting with Family, Land, Spirituality and Belief System – the 'kanyini' – in the words of Uncle Bob Randall.

Today, together here in this place, we reflect on our journeys and on our sense of belonging – always in hope, looking to the future and what it means for all of us in this country, in this land.

We re-iterate the message of the National Apology delivered by Kevin Rudd, Prime Minister of Australia, in February, 2008, to the Federal Parliament:

For the future we take heart; resolving that this new page in the history of our great continent can now be written.

We today take this first step by acknowledging the past and laying claim to a future that embraces all Australians.

A future where we harness the determination of all Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to close the gap that lies between us in life expectancy, educational achievement and economic opportunity.

A future where we embrace the possibility of new solutions to enduring problems where old approaches have failed.

A future based on mutual respect, mutual resolve and mutual responsibility.

A future where all Australians, whatever their origins, are truly equal partners, with equal opportunities and with an equal stake in shaping the next chapter in the history of this great country, Australia.

Thank you for being present today – both in person, here side by side, and also in your hearts, imbued by the Great Spirit that breathes deeply within us all.

Gerry Crooks
Principal