



Brotherhood  
of St Laurence

Working for an Australia free of poverty

## **SAMBELL ORATION 2018**

### **Strong and smart: investing in Indigenous children**

**Professor Chris Sarra**

**Melbourne, 11 April 2018**

Ladies and gentlemen thank you for your time and interest this evening. Let me start by acknowledging the traditional custodians and the descendants of the traditional custodians of the land upon which we gather here this evening.

I note the Sambell Oration has been delivered since 1981 in honour of former Brotherhood Executive Director Geoffrey Sambell and is designed to reflect his concern for social justice and provide a forum in which to discuss social issues. I am delighted to be invited here this evening and I thank the Brotherhood's Executive Director, Conny Lenneberg.

Tonight, on discussing the notion of investing in Indigenous children I want to gently and respectfully challenge and stretch your minds to think about how we invest in Indigenous children, and whether that 'investment' creates value or diminishes value for those children.

In 1988 I started my career as an educator determined to change expectations of Aboriginal children throughout Australia. This passion and drive was fuelled by a very personal revelation about the extent to which I had been 'sold short' by low expectations about who I was as a young Aboriginal student going to school in Bundaberg in the 1970s and 80s. I was brought to this insight by the greatest teacher and mentor I have ever known, Dr Gary MacLennan. In my recent memoir, *Good Morning Mr Sarra* (2012), I described the circumstance whereby my mother and father had nurtured within me a very strong work ethic and a very strong and proud and positive sense of being Aboriginal. I explained that they kindled a fire in my belly and Dr Gary MacLennan came to me and threw petrol on it.

It is fair to say that my passion and desire to change expectations was fuelled by a sense of anger and outrage at such injustice. If I had been sold short by education, then how many other Aboriginal children were being sold short simply because teachers didn't believe in their capacity to learn and be exceptional? This had to change. When I look back on that time I knew very well that changing expectations of Aboriginal children right across Australia was quite a lofty career ambition. It would take lots of hard work, lots of courage to say what needed to be said; and a thick skin. On reflection though, I was very angry; and this was personal!

From August 1998 until March 2005, I had the privilege of being principal of Cherbourg State School, an Aboriginal community school just three hours' drive north-west of Brisbane. At the time, it seemed a daunting task, as I had never been a school principal before but, as an Aboriginal academic getting frustrated by questions from undergraduates such as 'Are you a qualified lecturer?', I felt it was time to get on with the business of working with my own people and with my own ideas.

I went with a keen interest in Aboriginal identity as I was very much aware of how young Aboriginal students aspired downwards to confirm what they thought was their 'identity'; really all they were doing was conforming to mainstream Australia's negative stereotypes. I was determined to address this, remembering what it was like to be surrounded by stifled perceptions about who I was as an Aboriginal student and what I could achieve. If I was to lead a school with Aboriginal children, I was determined they would never be subjected to the stench of a school culture of low expectations.

Clearly the school faced many challenges, even talk about closing it down. It would have been easy to simply collude with a culture of low expectations. There was never a consequence for such collusion with low expectations of Aboriginal children; it was normal, a reality that was readily embraced and justified. After many lengthy discussions with children, parents, Elders and the Community Council, I challenged staff:

*What I believe, what the children, parents, Elders and the Council believe, is that our children can leave this school with academic outcomes comparable to any other school, and also leave here with a very strong and positive sense of what it means to be Aboriginal! If you don't believe that, then you should not be here!*

Half of the teaching staff applied for a transfer within three weeks!

Positive change beyond such endemic collusion would certainly require something stronger, something smarter. It would take many years of hard work to create a new, stronger, smarter reality. With a new teaching team that worked exceptionally hard and in partnership with Aboriginal teacher aides and the community, we did create a new and more positive school culture that underpinned some profound change. Unexplained absenteeism was reduced by 94 per cent within 18 months; attendance rose from 63 per cent to 93 per cent. Year 2 literacy improved by 58 per cent within two years, and 81 per cent of students were within the state average band for literacy in 2004, compared to none in 1998.

People often ask me about how the kids went after I left. There are some success stories and there are some sad stories.

Last year I was interviewed on a local Indigenous radio network by a young Aboriginal woman. The radio network was in Cherbourg. The young budding radio presenter was a former student of Cherbourg State School.

'This morning's guest is Dr Chris Sarra, a nationally recognised educator and my old principal from when I was there at Cherbourg State School', she commenced with an impressive degree of professionalism.

*'Mr Sarra before we start this morning I just want to say to you that I remember that message you always taught us. About being strong and smart and all the value that comes with that! I have carried that with me all my life and I just wanted you to know that!'*

I've always been confident in any radio, print or television interview because I have always just spoken from the heart, but with that opening she floored me like no other journalist had ever done. How does one speak from the heart when your heart has just been stolen like that?

On another occasion when I was back in Cherbourg to help deliver a stronger smarter leadership program another student was in tears when he saw me. I was in tears too as he spoke to me. I remembered him very well as a young boy. I had described him as one of the brightest children in the school.

'Sir it's good to see you man,' he spoke softly with slightly slurred speech. He wasn't a completely broken young man but I could see that he almost was at times in his life.

‘Sir ... I’ve taken a lot of drugs you know. But I just kept remembering strong and smart, strong and smart. That kept me alive man.’

I remember very well the day I announced to the kids that I was leaving the school as their principal. I remember the look in their eyes almost asking, ‘Who is going to give us Strong and Smart now?’ I remember explaining to them that Strong and Smart was never ever something that I ‘gave’ to them! It was something that was inside them all along. All we did was draw it out of them to the extent that they could see and believe in it for themselves. Indeed it is in every Aboriginal child throughout Australia.

Since leaving, I have been able to articulate what is now called this ‘Stronger Smarter’ philosophy – a strengths-based approach that signals a ‘belief in the capacity’ of Indigenous children to perform as well as any other child, regardless of the complexity of their social and cultural context. Also at its core is the belief that indigenous children are ‘worthy of a quality education’:

*The Stronger Smarter philosophy honours a positive sense of cultural identity, acknowledges and embraces positive community leadership, enabling innovative and dynamic approaches and processes that are anchored by high expectations relationships. High expectations relationships honour the humanity of others and, in so doing, acknowledge one’s strengths, capacity and human right to emancipatory opportunity.*

From here on tonight, I would like to focus on just the first pillar of the Stronger Smarter philosophy – a positive sense of cultural identity – and discuss with you some things to think about in schools and our society beyond Cherbourg.

Outside of Cherbourg, this microcosm of self-empowerment, hard work and relationships based on high expectations between children, families, community leaders and teachers, there was a society that continued to balk at the shadows of the negative Aboriginal stereotype that persisted and appeared to many as something of a truth. This manifested in the experience I had in my search to find the right school for my own children upon leaving the exciting and vibrant school we created together.

I asked the principal at a school I was considering, ‘How do you think my kids will settle into your school, given their Aboriginal background?’

'No worries!' he replied confidently. 'That wouldn't be a problem.'

But there was a problem, obviously, given the swiftness and easiness with which he linked 'being Aboriginal' with 'being a problem'.

The principal was a decent man and he was trying. I should have at least heard him out. His next comments confirmed for me there was indeed a problem.

'Our kids are all Australian when they come in that school gate. We are all the same!'

I reiterate, he was a decent man and he was trying. He was not malicious, and I didn't know him well enough to conclude he was in any way some kind of racist. There were simply some things he simply did not know.

I doubt he understood that Aboriginal cultural identity is not something you can take off like a backpack and leave at the school gate on the way in and pick up on our way home.

Aboriginal cultural identity, like any sense of cultural identity, is inherently connected to the very essence of who we are. He did not understand the fundamental notion that when one implies we should leave our cultural identity at the gate, our cultural identity is being judged negatively. When any person's sense of cultural identity is deemed inferior or detachable, then of course their confidence is dramatically undermined.

Any quality educator knows that a student will struggle or become dramatically disengaged when they lack confidence or lose any sense of their personal value. To me it was very obvious that this principal did not make this connection, nor the depth of this complexity.

It was clear to me that this principal was not conscious of the notion that white Australian cultural identity is so omnipresent that we simply don't realise the extent to which it dominates our existence. Just like the fish knows nothing about the water it swims in, we simply don't realise or acknowledge the existence of the dominant white Australian cultural identity. It forms part of our common sense. As a consequence, we do not understand its effects on those who are different.

Australia can and must realise a new dimension, where the negative stereotype of being Aboriginal which has defined us to white Australia since 1788 is filed away as

a painful chapter in our history, and Aboriginal people are unequivocally liberated from the toxic precept of being forced into the mainstream. Then we would no longer suffer from the gaping, dysfunctional policies that have propagated racism and inflicted unbearable hardship on Aboriginal communities.

The mechanics of steering Australia toward a new dimension of multicultural strength, harmony and identity might seem radical and daunting. In the face of this challenge let me offer some insights to reframe our thinking in a way that is fundamental.

More recently on the Indigenous policy landscape we've seen prime ministers wanting to be heroes. Some are determined to Close the Gap, while others have wanted to be known as 'the Prime Minister for Indigenous affairs'. There are some fundamental flaws with this situation.

The Close the Gap mantra emerged from the courageous efforts of many Aboriginal leaders in the health sector. In that very focused context it makes perfect sense and offers an honourable platform upon which to make change. Unfortunately, it was hijacked and dragged onto the broader Council of Australian Governments Indigenous policy front. Regrettably, in this context, it seems to signal that the best we can do for Aboriginal people is get them to be as good as the average white Australian. It fails to acknowledge, or simply cannot see, that we Indigenous Australians are so much more than this. The 'PM for Indigenous affairs' cloak might have seemed cute at the time, but it diminished the critically important space of Indigenous policy, making it more about personalities when, in fact, it should always be about policy design and execution.

There is however a deeper, more profound flaw in such approaches: policy intent. As we sift through the wreckage and the rubble of Indigenous policy over the years, we can understand why we've spent tens of billions of dollars to limited or no avail once we realise the 'policy intent' has been contaminated from the start. This contamination infects many decent Australian policymakers and service-delivery people, including the school principal I encountered some years ago. It also infects the thinking of many Indigenous Australians.

Such people think policy success lies in making Aboriginal Australians just like everybody else, without truly understanding that we actually can be the same and at the same time we can be magnificently different. The policy intent here has always been about taking Aboriginal Australians from *surviving to complying*. We must instead plot a course that takes us from *surviving to thriving*.

Enabling this move requires all of us, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, to understand that our sense of identity is not entirely defined by our sense of Aboriginality, nor our sense of being Australian. As individuals we are so complex that in fact we are both, and we should not have to be locked, coerced or assimilated into being one or the other. We are Aboriginal; we are Australian; we are human.

My dear late friend and founder of the critical-realist philosophical movement, Professor Roy Bhaskar, leaves as a precious intellectual gift to the world his notion of the 'concrete universal'. Bhaskar's concept, if understood and embraced, enables us to transcend the stifled thinking that contaminates our thinking and locks us into identity binaries which at their best can only ever allow us to be mediocre. The intellectual concept of the concrete universal emancipates us all from mediocrity, and can usher us to a new space of, as Bhaskar describes, re-enchanting our nation and re-enchanting the world.

The first step in understanding Bhaskar's approach is knowing that any individual at their core is human, and upon this core humanity are a range of magnificent, complex and layered 'mediations' in the form of cultural, spiritual, professional and other relational identities. The second step is knowing that our core humanity and the infinite range of magnificent, complex and layered mediations upon it are avidly dynamic, influenced by time, place and context.

When I stand in my father's village of Miglianico in Abruzzo, Italy, and speak Italian with my half-brother Giulio while standing at the graves of my *Nonna* and *Nonno*, my cultural sense or mediation of being Italian resonates very strongly upon my core humanity. And in that moment, because of the time, place and context, I lean into my sense of being Italian and feel extremely proud. I do not surrender or relinquish my sense of being Aboriginal; it just is not resonating as strongly as my sense of being Italian in that moment and in that place.

When I am at home on the land that holds the footprints of my traditional Taribelang and Gurang Gurang ancestors, I lean into my sense of being Aboriginal, and it resonates strongly because of the time, place and context. By leaning into my sense of being Aboriginal, I do not surrender or relinquish my sense of being Italian, it is just not resonating as strongly as my sense of being Aboriginal. On many fronts, more circumstances in my life cause me to lean into my sense of being Aboriginal.

On a positive and cultural front, going fishing, hunting and making time to just be on my country; making time to take my children on our country and explain the significance of various places; making time to be with extended family and explaining to my oldest son how we are all connected to each other and what responsibilities come with knowing this; all of these things cause me to lean into my sense of being Aboriginal.

On a negative and demand-for-social-justice front, getting called a 'black bastard' as a child by the old guy living next door to us; being sold short in classrooms by teachers with low expectations of me; being held back professionally by others with stifled beliefs about who I was and what I could do; feeling a sense of rage knowing that a police officer can cause the death of an Aboriginal man with no serious consequence; all of these things cause me to lean with a sense of defiance into my sense of being Aboriginal.

On other fronts, when I am celebrated as the first Aboriginal principal of Cherbourg State School; when I challenge and influence other educators to understand and commit to a relationship based on high expectations with Aboriginal children; when I sit across from the prime minister to negotiate an honourable way forward on Indigenous policy; all of these things cause me to lean into my sense of being Aboriginal.

At this point let me pause and ask you to reflect on what I think are some interesting questions:

Would celebrating Australia Day on January 26 cause me to lean more into my sense of being Australian, or more into my sense of being Aboriginal? Would it make Aboriginal people feel more included, or more marginalised?

Would Australia's national anthem, if it had new lyrics that acknowledge and embrace ancient Aboriginal Australia, cause us to lean in and strengthen our sense of being Aboriginal, our sense of being Australian, or both?

Does Australia's flag, with the Union Jack in the corner, cause Aboriginal Australians to lean into their sense of being Australian, or away from it?

These are questions worth contemplating in a mature, modern and sophisticated nation.



Because of who I am, where I live, what I do, how I connect with others, and how others connect with me, my life and my existence are dominated by my sense of being Aboriginal. Yet like others, I am so much more than this.

The third and ultimate step in understanding Bhaskar's sophisticated notion of the concrete universal is recognising that our entire sense of identity and being is encapsulated by our core humanity, our dynamic mediations upon that core humanity, and the manner in which these mediations resonate upon our core humanity according to time and place. It is not just our humanity, nor just our cultural identity.

Understanding and embracing Bhaskar's concrete universal enables us to transcend the pressures or stifled thinking that the key to 'fixing' Aboriginal Australia is to just make us all 'like white Australians'. It enables us to understand that, because we are connected by our core humanity, there are indeed many ways in which we are already the same: loving our children; wanting them to have a bright future in the same way as any other human being. It should also enable us to understand that we deserve to have our mediation of being Aboriginal acknowledged, honoured and nurtured. When we send our children to school they rightfully deserve to learn in a place where their sense of being Aboriginal is acknowledged, honoured and nurtured, rather than having it implied that this important part of their being should somehow be left at the school gate.

One of the challenges here is when a contaminated and toxic perception of the mediation of being Aboriginal persists. A contaminated view of being Aboriginal explains how a police officer can cause the death of an Aboriginal man, woman or child; acknowledging core humanity should demand that justice is afforded. A contaminated view of being Aboriginal explains how in education we cherry-pick a small number of children from remote Aboriginal communities and send them off to private schools while leaving the majority of Aboriginal children to be subjected to a remedial curriculum that does not comply with national curriculum standards; acknowledging their core humanity demands that we provide quality education for all children.

A contaminated view of the mediation of being Aboriginal is clearly problematic. Focusing only on one's core humanity while ignoring a positive perception of the mediation of being Aboriginal is also problematic.

The American 'Black Lives Matter' activists were countered by an equally strong 'All Lives Matter' sentiment. This is an example of how individual and community-wide mediations are denounced in favour of a homogeneous and assimilated society. The school principal I mentioned earlier would have identified with such a statement, and had his view reinforced if he tuned in to conservative commentators who regularly state 'We are all Australians'. Such comments seem so seductively logical when made from a place of hegemonic luxury, without realising that some are actually excluded from the opportunity to be as 'Australian' as others.

Bhaskar's intellectual concept holds the key to resolving many apparently unsolvable dilemmas, especially those regarding recognition and identity. If we embrace it, without amendment, we can realise a culture and nation that can relinquish long-held beliefs and attitudes about Aborigines and minorities, and engage in a new, honourable way of being in high expectations relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.

Reflecting on the many wonderful conversations I had with Roy Bhaskar, and without getting too exotic, I recall how he would often refer to our need to 're-enchant the world'. Embracing his intellectual concept of the concrete universal, whereby we see and relate to each other in cognisance of the core humanity we share, and the individual mediations that make us so magnificently different, enables us to play our part in this by re-enchanting our nation.

Embracing the humanity of Aboriginal Australians, and the positive mediation of our sense of being Aboriginal, will enable white Australia to understand and share all that is superb and exceptional about us. With this sharing, their connection to country significantly deepens, from two hundred and thirty years to sixty-five thousand years. With a deeper, more respectful and authentic relationship we truly can transcend any challenge we face together.