

Initiatives of Change Conference:

"AUSTRALIA AS A NEIGHBOUR"

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Richard Windeyer was the lawyer who unsuccessfully defended the murderers of many Aboriginal people at the trial relating to the Myall Creek massacre in NSW that took place in 1838. It was a rare event that it came to trial at all.

6 years after the trial he wrote a paper which mounted a powerful attack on Aboriginal rights.

Yet, Windeyer expressed in that paper that he was troubled by, as he put it, "how is it our minds are not satisfied? What means this whispering in the bottom of our hearts?"

Clearly then, such feelings about justice for Aboriginal people are neither a recent creation nor a creation of the political left.

Aboriginal people remain at the margins of our society and disadvantaged for the most part on all indicators of housing, health, education, employment and what we call the "justice" system.

My belief is that lasting change happens quickest through healing, apology and forgiveness between people. We then have the power of engagement as trusting equals who can put into practice the idea of partnership which we talk about so much in government circles.

How do I come to this view?

In the 1960s a neighbour introduced my family to an Aboriginal family who had moved into our street – a rare event in those days. Her actions changed my life's direction - though I was hardly a teenager. The parents of that family became founders of the Aboriginal movement in Brisbane. I heard and saw their struggles. I became politically and socially active as a result.

While working with Initiatives of Change in India in 1974 this sense of engagement with Aboriginal people became a calling. It began with my own healing.

One day I vividly recalled hurtful childhood experiences involving one of my brothers. The memory still brought tears to my eyes.

Then I felt an overwhelming "whisper in my heart" about where I had wronged him.

Though I needed to forgive him, I realised for the first time that the baggage of resentment that I carried towards him was equally wrong. I wrote to apologise and felt so much freer after that.

A few days later I saw a photo of a senior Aboriginal lady who had been one of those children forcibly removed and never returned to her family. Her face reflected a depth of suffering yet a rich, triumphant aspect.

Then it was as if someone was talking to me, saying, “What have you done to my people - the Aboriginal people?” Previously it was always someone else’s fault – the government or previous generations.

Then I heard, “If you are obedient to what I am telling you, you will be used to rebuild the relationship between Aboriginal and other Australians just as between you and your brother.”

Later I lived in Ramingining in Arnhem Land for over four years with my wife and children. I was co-ordinator of the Homelands Resource Centre which supports clan groups returning to live on and look after their country.

Among the many lessons of that time was that, if we attend to relationships and our own errors, the people you fight with can become your firmest and most productive allies or friends.

One day at a meeting of our organisation I had a public disagreement and lost my temper with one of the homelands leaders, who collectively were my employers.

I felt wrongly accused of not doing my job. I took a file and slammed it on the ground in the middle of the meeting.

My target was enraged and moved menacingly towards me and then, thankfully, moved away again. Some women were saying “misunderstanding”.

I thought “what I have started here? Now I have blown it.” The uncomfortable idea came to simply apologise. My pride resisted and I felt somewhat justified, but I did manage to say sorry.

He moved towards me again without a smile but stuck out his hand and we shook on it.

Soon after, this man told me the story of his homeland area.

50 years previously, intruding cattlemen had murdered the whole group responsible for that country. His own family were the nearest relatives and had to take on additional responsibilities for this area.

It was as if we moved onto another level. After that it was easier to develop appropriate oral contractual arrangements for the development of an airstrip that would give them necessary access in the event of an emergency. His sons cleared the end of the airstrip of trees and then we formed the strip with machinery.

A highlight of my last 14 years in South Western NSW has been the establishment of Tirkandi Inaburra (“learning to dream” in the Wiradjuri language). The Attorney General of NSW, Bob Debus, recently wrote, “one of the greatest privileges of my political life was being able to assist in the establishment of Tirkandi Inaburra”.

Set on bushland away from town, this cultural and development centre for 12 to 15 year old Aboriginal boys runs programs based on developing their resilience.

What proportion of the inmates of juvenile justice centres in NSW are Aboriginal? 51%.

How many of those “graduate” to adult prison? 85%.

Why not prevent them from getting into the juvenile justice system in the first place? It will save much pain and a lot of public money. That is the purpose behind the program.

It has been a long held desire of Riverina Aboriginal communities to have such a facility.

Many people played key roles in planning and lobbying for the \$5 million required to build it and over \$2 million per year to run it.

My own contribution over many years came from seeking that inspiration from the inner voice for the way ahead. Often these were simple thoughts about who to engage and include from all communities, the private sector and government agencies. This was indispensable to my bureaucratic role as a planner.

24 have completed the program in this first year. So it is early days. All except one have re-engaged happily with their school thanks to a greater sense of self respect, cultural learning and pride, and greatly improved literacy and numeracy.

The challenge is – how can their families and their home schools continue the change?

One boy wrote a poem about his new life. He refers to his teachers in his life before Tirkandi: “When you gave up on me I gave up on you”; but concluded with “I will respect even those who don't respect me”. That is the high ground.

I am constantly amazed at how God has used all sorts of people whom I would not have chosen to be critical players.

We can all do something if we heed the whispering in our hearts. Perhaps today we will find further steps that we can take.

Ron Lawler is a director in the NSW Public Service.