

# Foreword

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In 2009, I gave a speech at the 'Beyond Sport Summit' in London on July 9. It was a speech that came directly from the heart expressing my passion for justice for the first Australians.

When I had written the speech, I had many things to consider, for example, it was a speech that was a collaboration of my understanding of issues being faced by Indigenous Australians from the leaders in this area who I respect and admire. I had read and heard too often about the injustice that Indigenous people face everyday and as importantly I had witnessed first hand the hardships experienced by my 'Brothers and Sisters', a term I do not take lightly and only with respect.

I was also representing people whose names I know who had lived through these atrocities, this was my biggest responsibility speaking out for those who have a voice but are all too often not heard. Therefore, I am delighted to have my speech published in this book so that it may reach a wider audience of historians who also share my commitment for justice for Australia's Indigenous people.

I strongly believe that one of the ways we can overcome social injustice in Australia is through education, and that a significant part of that education needs to be through understanding Australia's history. Without a firm understanding of the past we are at a loss to know why and explain how such injustices and inequalities exist.

I would like to congratulate all the contributors of *Passionate Histories: Myth, Memory and Indigenous Australia* for keeping your passion for indigenous history alive, and to wish the editors, Frances Peters-Little, Ann Curthoys and John Docker, every success with this wonderful collection of essays.

## My speech: Australia's dirty little secret

'Ladies and Gentlemen, first may I thank you all for participating in this wonderful event. I am incredibly excited to be able to address you in regards to Beyond Sport. For me this is an ambiguous topic.

As you may or may not be aware I am indeed an Olympian. I am no longer competing as a swimmer. I do take pride in my achievements in the pool and the valuable insight and education it has allowed me to take on, as I travelled the globe throughout my career.

When we speak of athletes there is a great deal that we know, like what is required of them, for me that meant 30 hours of training a week. We do this training just so we have a sporting chance to fulfil our life long dreams.

My travels with my sport since I was a very young and shy 14 year old opened the world to me, I didn't realise at the time that this adventure would turn into a career beyond my wildest dreams.

I was the youngest male to ever represent Australia in swimming. By 15 I was the youngest-ever male world champion. At 16 I broke four world records in four days and at 17 I was Olympic Champion, I had fulfilled my life long ambition as a child. I quickly realised I was a child in an adult world.

It was the child in me that throughout my career questioned why? Why is it so? Why is it done that way and why is the world the way it is?

In my travels, competition took me to places where sometimes I was met with abject poverty, whilst I simply swum. Why was my life so blessed when others just by fate had less opportunity than I? I guess I witnessed at a very young age how sport is an international language, a language that transcended borders, boundaries, cultural ideology, politics and even socio economic disadvantage.

I have only discussed my career up to when I was 17. It is because when I was 18 I established my charity, 'Fountain for youth'. I didn't realise at the time that this may be my biggest accomplishment. An achievement not in the sense of doing something right, rather a stepping stone where my values that I had gained from sport could be transferred to something that is bigger than sport and in my opinion far more important.

That said, sport was what has made me who I am today and has afforded me the privilege to work beyond sport. My charity work didn't begin at 18, I was just 15 when I began working with those less fortunate than myself. It was those years that shaped my understanding of what charity was. It gave me an insight into the power of celebrity and sport, especially in sport mad Australia.

I realised my value to organisations trying to bring positive change lent enormous weight to these causes. I must say though this should be an outrage, because as an athlete I am not as qualified to comment on health or education as the health professionals and educators who daily tackle the big issues. In fact it is a bit disappointing that a teenager's opinion garnered more attention than those who had been working on their chosen causes before I was even born. This realisation of the opportunity that my voice and name could lend to an excellent cause was the simple foundation laid for my very own charity.

I continued to win medals, breaking world records and continued travelling around the world recognising the needs of people, particularly children, in many places I visited. By this time my charity had enough money raised to commit to larger projects, I sat at a board meeting and stated that I wanted to help the world's neediest children. I started to think of what impact my effort could have in places like Africa or South East Asia. I then visited some of the world's neediest communities, places without access to planes and cars that seemed to be a world away ... but now they were truly at my back door.

The communities that I visited had illiteracy levels at 93 per cent ... that was staggering only seven percent of a populous being able to read and write. Up to 80 per cent of the children in these communities have serious hearing impairments because of 'glue ear'; middle ear infections neglected from infancy. These kids will never hear the teacher in front of them in a classroom ... that is, if there is a teacher and indeed a classroom.

Malnourished mothers are giving birth to babies that are seriously underweight and this only gets worse throughout a life born into poverty. Here diabetes affects one in every two adults. Kidney disease is in epidemic proportions in communities where living conditions; primary healthcare and infrastructure are truly appalling. In this part of the world even the community leaders are afflicted by clusters of chronic illness. Syndrome X, the doctors call it, diabetes, renal disease, strokes, hypertension, cancer and heart disease. Some people die with four or five of these chronic illnesses.

Rheumatic heart disease among the children in these places is higher than in most of the developing world. But I was not visiting communities in the developing world, I was in the middle of Australia, remote, yes, but this is Australia, a country that can boast some of the highest standards of living of any nation in the world. How shocked I was that Syndrome X was afflicting so many of the 460,000 Indigenous people of my country. As a result of these chronic illnesses and conditions Aboriginal life expectancy has fallen 20 years behind the rest of Australia. For some of my fellow countrymen life expectancy had plunged to just 46 years.

Australia's grim record on health care for Indigenous people is by far the worst of any developed nation. Developed? How can a country be 'developed' when it leaves so many of its children behind? Australia has not provided its citizens with an equal opportunity for primary health care, education, housing, employment, let alone recognition and a life of dignity.

Now I don't expect you to just take my word for it. I am not a Doctor, I am simply an athlete. But ask Australian health professionals like Doctor Jim Hyde who says that while our nation has plenty of medical problems, only Indigenous Australians are facing a genuine health crisis.

The Governor of New South Wales, my home State, Professor Marie Bashir, an eminent Child Psychiatrist, has repeatedly pointed out the national disgrace of allowing the 40 per cent of Indigenous children under the age of 15 to put up with health problems found in no other developed nation. Patrick Dodson, winner of the Sydney Peace Prize and one of our greatest statesmen, identifies health as a human right for Indigenous Australians.

'Only the most urgent government action', said Australia's 'Father of Reconciliation', 'could change the inequality that has created this health tragedy in our own backyard'.

How could citizens with the greatest need be so under funded? If we were to indeed recognise the severity of this gross neglect, funding to these communities should be extradited.

A commitment to the first Australians is well within the means of my country, and this is what I find inexcusable. I am talking about an issue with a solution. For Australia to heal its wounds that have been weeping for 200 years we must not ignore the issue, we must start the healing.

Like many people in Australia I was completely unaware of the huge gap in health and education outcomes let alone the differences of life expectancy. I, as many had, made an assumption; Australia is a rich country, don't we throw a lot of money at that problem? It disgusts me to speak those words now but that was what I thought. This was not just my lack of knowledge of this area but it is echoed throughout my nation.

An Aboriginal health expert, Shane Houston says:

Aboriginal people are viewed by too many in the Australian community as an unwelcome burden on the nation. Governments say they have spent a lot of money on Aborigines but where do you see the results in this squalor? So the mainstream concludes that Aboriginal health is a waste of money. It is all the fault of the poor blacks. My people are

somehow expected to just extricate themselves from this maze of life-threatening conditions. And if we can't manage to do that, then many white people will shrug and say our end is inevitable.

Visiting Aboriginal people, in their homes, their communities, on their land, has allowed me to listen and given me some idea of the problems that Aboriginal people face. I listened to the concerns of mothers and fathers for the betterment of their children. This unwavering strength, in the face of social injustice. Within these communities I witness poverty, despair and pain ... but I also see hope ... hope from those men and woman who want more for their children.

With the words of these people in my head, I became part of a campaign in Australia called; 'Close the Gap', it is quite simply a program that recognises the difference between Indigenous and non Indigenous life expectancy in Australia and the huge gaps in all of the factors like education, jobs and housing that leave Aboriginal people so deeply disadvantaged.

Close the Gap is a commitment that this difference is unacceptable. It was supported by the government and also the opposition. This is the kind of action that is required in Australia. The issue of Indigenous health and education goes beyond government, it is a fundamental right. I hope all sides of government continue to commit to this policy as a starting point and it is not another hollow promise that falls short.

Australia's Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd has said that it was 'devastating' that a new report by our productivity commission showed that Aboriginal people had made little progress to close those gaps since 2000. He said this was 'unacceptable' and 'decisive action' had to be taken. The truth is that none of the problems I have mentioned can truly be rectified until our government and my fellow Australians recognise the injustice faced by Aboriginal Australians and how they are denied so many human rights. This has been highlighted once again by what is called in Australia 'The Intervention', the Federal Government's takeover of 73 remote Aboriginal communities.

The Intervention was constructed by the previous government and has since been reported to have been assembled in the space of just one day. The irony is that Aboriginal people had been campaigning for decades about the living conditions and the neglect of their children within their communities. The programs to protect and nurture the children, had been grossly neglected and under funded by government over the last decade. What appears to be a political stunt and a grab for government control over Aboriginal people continues to this day under the new government.

Once more an Australian government has claimed it is doing its best for Aboriginal Australians by taking over their communities, appointing white

managers, more government bureaucrats, promising all kinds of things, if Aboriginal people will just sign over their communities under 40-year leases to the Federal Government. And politicians wonder why Aboriginal people do not trust them. The truth is for over 200 years Australian governments have neglected and patronised Aboriginal people.

The Intervention is unlikely to provide any lasting benefit to Aboriginal people because it tries to push and punish them, to take over their lives, rather than work with them. One of Australia's oldest and wisest Aboriginal leaders, Galarrwuy Yunupingu says the only way forward is for Aboriginal communities in these remote areas to be led and organised by their own organisations. Assimilation will not work.

So in the work I do, the way I try to contribute through my organisation, Fountain for Youth, we work with Aboriginal teachers, health workers, parents and children, with the health services and the schools, to encourage people to believe that we can move forward together. We support pre-schooling, health education, literacy backpacks that let kids carry home reading for the whole family. And we use sport where we can to make a difference.

As a swimmer, who would have thought I would have ended up supporting Flipper Ball, junior water polo for little Aboriginal kids in the mining communities of Western Australia. As a swimmer, who would have thought I would be back at university studying psychology and at the same time working with young Aboriginal university graduates on a mentoring program to help get more kids to complete High School and go on with their studies. As a swimmer, maybe I was expected to just be satisfied with the gleam of those gold medals. But all sportsmen and women know the truth – there is something beyond sport.

There is the challenge of playing a part in the human family ... to contribute and make a difference. We can use sport and use our sporting status to improve the lives of children and whole communities in so many places. We can make it a fairer, safer playing field for everyone.

In 20 remote Australian communities and with thousands of Aboriginal children I know life will have some extra opportunities if I commit to work hard on this. I do intend to work hard at this for the rest of my life.

That is my promise to you – beyond sport!'