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FOURTEENTH ERIC JOHNSTON LECTURE 1999

Learning Lessons – Indigenous Education in the Northern Territory

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I had the privilege and pleasure of knowing Eric Johnston from the time he arrived in the Territory as officer commanding RAN naval forces in Northern Australia, through his notable period as Administrator of the Northern Territory, subsequently Chairman of the then Batchelor College Council and up until his untimely death.

Like all of us who had the privilege of knowing him, I miss him a great deal. In this 14th Eric Johnston Lecture I want to talk about the man himself, and two major fields of his endeavor, Vice Regal Office and Indigenous education.

Eric established his Territory reputation in the aftermath of cyclone Tracy. The critical role he played in command of the military forces assisting in the clean-up and rehabilitation of Darwin and the style and good humour with which he carried out that task gave him a permanent place in the hearts of all of us who were there at that time.

His subsequent appointment to Vice Regal Office as the Northern Territory’s Administrator was inspired, and warmly supported by all Territorians. Eric and Joan Johnston invested the role with a whole new meaning. They took the Office of Administrator to the people of the Northern Territory in a way that had never been done before. Eric and Joan literally took it to every corner of the Northern Territory and Joan threw herself as well into work on behalf of children in the Northern Territory which she carries on to this day. I am not a person who normally enjoys formal occasions, but I can honestly say that I looked forward to the invitations to Government House I received as Leader of Her Majesty's loyal Opposition during Eric and Joan’s time there. I recall some memorable occasions during that time, of dinners with among others, Prime Ministers and Governors-General and our recently reaffirmed Head of State, the Queen of England. A gracious, well-informed and charming lady. Absolutely nothing wrong with her that being an Australian wouldn’t fix.

There were lessons to be learned from the dishonesty of the recent campaign on the Republic. As much as I disagree with John Winston Howard on retaining the Queen of England as our head of state, I agree with him in his opposition to a popularly elected non-executive head of state under our Westminster system of responsible government. I could not help but think of Eric Johnston when reflecting on the potential instability that could be caused by a popularly elected head of state if that person ever decided to take a political stance independent to that of the government. If there had been a position of elected Governor of the State of the Northern Territory during Eric’s time he would have won the contest in a romp. There was no doubt that during his time as Administrator he was the most popular and universally well-regarded public figure across the whole of the Northern Territory, but with the strength of appointed office placing him above party politics.

Australians do not directly elect the Prime Minister. The democratically elected members of Parliament and Parliament itself do that. The same process that provides us with the much-praised century old stability of our executive Government could not be trusted apparently to
appoint a non-executive ceremonial Head of State. The leaders of the pack in cynically pushing this line were not only some of our elected politicians themselves, but in some cases Ministers of the government.

Peter Reith would be the last person in Australia to truly support a proposition that a President could take a political position contrary to that of the elected government and not be a ‘puppet’ of the Prime Minister. Yet that is the position he put with a straight face again and again during the campaign. After attacking the credibility of politicians and continually stating that they cannot be trusted, Tony Abbot no doubt will tell the people in his electorate at the next federal election that they can trust him completely.

It is sad that 200 years after becoming a British colony, a great country such as Australia was incapable of replacing a ramshackle and irrelevant British monarchy with one of our own citizens as our Head of State. What is sadder however is that we had people who should have known better taking the always-popular line of denigrating our own democratic institutions in the process. They are also sadly mistaken in thinking that a proposition to establish a Republic with a popularly elected non-executive President and a Prime Minister who cannot claim such a mandate, will win the support required by the Constitution. Once the blowtorch was applied to that proposition in a real referendum it would fail, assuming that you could find a Parliament to put it up in the first place – a very large assumption. The only alternative to the defeated proposition I would support, would be the absolute minimalist position advocated by the New South Wales Premier Bob Carr, where the Governor General simply becomes the Head of State with no other changes at all. I know however that if I ever do get the chance to vote again on the issue I will be a great deal older than I am now.

One fundamental lesson from this, commented on by many, was the widespread lack of knowledge in the electorate of our constitution and our existing forms of government. A better-educated electorate on these issues would be less prey to misrepresentation and deception. Education provides personal empowerment even if there isn’t always a job at the end of it. The recent publicity attached to events in Kakadu and at Maningrida, highlight the deep-seated problem that many of the quarter of our population who are Indigenous Territorians have very real control over their own lives. Better educational outcomes for all Indigenous students and in particular better English literacy skills is the key to turning this around and always has been.

The ‘Learning lessons’ review found unequivocally that educational outcomes of indigenous students in the Northern Territory, particularly those in remote schools, are not only unacceptably bad, but getting worse. This worsening situation is linked directly to poor attendance that has become an educational crisis. The report is a wake-up call to all involved to reverse a trend that is utterly destructive of the desire of indigenous Territorians to gain control of their own affairs. Unless the worsening educational outcomes can be immediately reversed we will entrench an existing social disaster where over a quarter of the Territory’s population remain in real terms a profoundly unequal part of the Territory community.

These same Indigenous Territorians own half of the land in the NT, 80% of its coastline and adjoining islands, and are party to an increasing number of multi-million dollar investment decisions in respect of economic development associated with that land. The real involvement and understanding of that economic activity and the full exploitation of it in benefits such as employment by Aboriginal Territorians is minimal. A relatively small group on behalf of the broad community controls the economic and other management on Aboriginal land and the employment generated continues to go largely to others. This entirely unsatisfactory situation has as a major contributor, the poor and deteriorating educational skills, and in particular the poor literacy skills of the broad Aboriginal community, and alarmingly of its younger generation.

The front page story of the problems experienced in Kakadu carried in the Australian newspaper underlines the real-life situation I’m talking about. I spent an extraordinary amount of time as a politician getting rid of, or attempting to get rid of, a never-ending parade of
thieves, carpetbaggers and downright incompetents from Aboriginal communities and organizations. This position is no better now than when I arrived in the Territory more than 30 years ago, and arguably with the additional amounts of money now potentially available, even worse.

The review findings Territory wide were consistent with a submission made to ATSIC in 1997 by the Aboriginal councils in one large region of the NT which described a situation which any society would hope would be the other way around.

On the whole the literacy level of the communities is very low. The elderly have some literacy skills. The people in the younger age groups have very low levels of literacy skills, so little that they would not be able to acquire a driver’s license or fill out a social security form without substantial assistance.

There are many cultural and environmental impediments for Indigenous students to overcome in acquiring the skills necessary to successfully survive in or interact with mainstream Australia. But the dominant issue linked to poor and deteriorating educational outcomes, is poor and deteriorating attendance at school. The pattern that had developed across the Territory is for sporadic attendance up to Year 7 at which point students drop out of the education system completely.

The education situation is mirrored by and directly linked to poor health outcomes. The chief contributors to the poor health and early death of many Aboriginal Territorians are now what are referred to as ‘lifestyle diseases’ associated with poor diet, obesity, heavy smoking and alcohol. Improvement in educational and health outcomes are inextricably linked, and failure to improve education standards will lead to an endless loop of poor outcomes in both.

In comparing educational outcomes over time it is important to have regard to the rapidly changing environment in which that education is being delivered. Those changes over the past twenty to thirty years have been significant and make the challenge of delivering education more difficult than it has ever been. There is now a far higher level of income available that has provided benefits, but also a growing level of welfare dependency that is sapping the strength and morale of Indigenous communities. Welfare dependency has become entrenched, but the problem goes even further than this. When a community has a long-standing pattern of most jobs in the community requiring even minimal educational skills being occupied by a non-local, that also becomes accepted as a normal part of the landscape.

What all this means at the end of the day is that poor literacy is the greatest single barrier to the employment of those Aboriginal people seeking employment. Many are unemployable outside their own communities and even there are most commonly employed in unskilled and low paid work. In most of the communities that I have visited regularly over the past 30 years most jobs in the community requiring even basic educational skills are still held almost entirely by non-locals and the same applies to the peak bodies representing those communities. The converse of course is that those Aboriginal Territorians who have acquired those skills have significantly enriched the options available to them and their families and have not become less "Aboriginal" in the process.

The immediate and long-term social imperative for improving Indigenous educational outcomes is far greater for the Northern Territory than for any other part of Australia. The Northern Territory Department of Education has provided a good standard of education in urban schools for a long time. A standard comparable with any other school system in Australia. However 37% of the total student body in the Northern Territory are Indigenous children, many living in the most remote communities in the Northern Territory. I for one am glad that people are living there. With almost 40 per cent of the total number of students Indigenous, and with the overall gap between the outcomes of that identified group and other students being as great as it is, narrowing that gap must be the most significant challenge still facing the department.
No better example exists of the value of a better education for Indigenous people than the graduates of the Batchelor Institute. Batchelor Institute is providing an invaluable source of better trained local teachers for Indigenous children, but it is also providing wider options for its graduates. A study carried out at the Institute found that over 80 per cent of Batchelor Institute graduates were employed. As noted in the “Learning lessons” report we found those graduates not necessarily teaching in schools, but employed in council offices, health clinics, and community organisations.

Eric Johnston was appointed chairman of the then Batchelor College Council in 1989. It was a critical time for Batchelor as it coincided with it receiving recognition for funding purposes, from the Commonwealth government, as a higher education institution. It was also the beginning of a period of growth and expansion, unparalleled in the College’s history, which was to lead to its present status as a nationally and internationally recognised institution of unique capability in providing a wide range of education and training programs to Australia’s Indigenous peoples.

As chairman of the institution’s council, Eric Johnston brought to Batchelor his deeply-felt commitment to the Northern Territory and his knowledge and understanding of its multicultural society, forged and sharpened by his years as a most highly regarded and admired administrator of the Territory. This was important for Batchelor and for Indigenous education. His status as a Territorian of considerable reputation and respect gave great weight to the efforts of Batchelor in furthering its goal of becoming recognised as a true quality provider of education and training to Indigenous Australians. He was the right person, in the right place, at the right time.

Whatever the future of what is now the Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education, its capacity to face that future with confidence is significantly underpinned by the work of Eric Johnston.

Eric did not live to witness the outcome of his endeavors for Batchelor College when it became an independent tertiary education institution on the 1st July 1999. However, his memory is perpetuated in the name of the model health clinic on the Batchelor campus, in the memories and hearts of those who knew and understood his commitment to all Territorians, and among those who came together to share in the traditional smoking ceremony at Batchelor to mark his passing.

As the head of a predominantly Aboriginal governing council, and in close association with a professional staff led by the college’s director John Ingram, he was committed to a “two-ways” philosophy of bringing together indigenous knowledge and teaching and Western academic ideals and standards.

I know from the many conversations I had with him during that time that he would have strongly agreed with the statement in "Learning lessons", that:

The underlying philosophy for Indigenous education in the Northern Territory is to restore at a community level the involvement and ownership by Indigenous people of the education for life of their children, and in partnership with the providers, to progressively improve attendance, teaching, and outcomes across all Northern Territory schools.

There are many examples throughout the Territory of both good teaching practice and a strong desire from both parents and communities to turn things around. If this is supported by Government and Indigenous communities and peak bodies being prepared to make this task critical core business, there will be significant improvements in Indigenous education in the Northern Territory.

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