THE ERIC JOHNSTON LECTURE
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REFLECTIONS ON BEING IN GOVERNMENT 2001-2007
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It’s great to be here this evening among so many friends.

These days I spend much of my time travelling and paying my respects to the traditional custodians of the country. To be paying my respects to Larrakia custodians must mean I’m home.

We’d been in government just under a year when a senior public servant took me aside and said, with a lot of weariness in his voice: Clare, your government has to slow down; our public servants want to work with you, but you’re wearing them out. Slow down. Government is not a sprint. Government he said is a marathon.

Well, his words certainly made me stop and think, and it didn’t take very long to realise he was probably right. We were a Government in a hurry. We were sprinting.

We hadn’t been in government long. We hadn’t expected to be in government. But we were driven by promises to keep, an economy to kick start, legislation to pass and changes to make. We were also keenly aware that we had to prove to Territorians that the vote on August 18 2001 was not some impetuous mistake.

Let me take you back to 2001.

Labor had never been in government in the Territory. In fact, Labor had nearly 27 years of not being in government and there was almost a given that Labor was simply the party of opposition. Election after election hopes had been raised, then dashed, so much so that former Labor leader Brian Ede described the task of a Labor MLA as doing your bit in Opposition and then handing the Labor baton on to your successor.

And 2001 didn’t feel that different.
We had some major impediments to winning government: the Alice to Darwin Railway, after a hundred years of expectation, had finally been funded and signed off.

Who would vote against a Government that had delivered on that iconic project?

And who would vote for a political party that was flying in the face of public opinion... both in the Territory and across the country... with their opposition to mandatory sentencing for property crime.

I’ll never forget how my heart sank when I walked into the polling booth at Parap Primary on election day and found a wall of bold red and white posters reminding every voter that Labor would end mandatory sentencing. After all our campaign attention on jobs, and health and education, in the end it seemed to me it was just one issue, and as I said my heart sank. I thought we were doomed.

I spent the day, with a smile on my face, going from booth to booth, handing out how to votes, and keeping that smile and enthusiasm going, while all the while thinking that this was very much a David and Goliath contest...and don’t forget that Labor had seven seats in the Parliament, the CLP had 18...and I felt it was all going Goliath’s way.

So that night as I sat with friends on my back verandah vainly attempting to eat dinner...I was far too nervous for food... I was totally stunned when Kerry O’Brien and the election analysts on the ABC started talking about a swing to Labor and then a possible Labor win.

We were all surprised...the politicians, the analysts, Territory voters, and probably most of all Labor supporters who had only ever experienced election wakes, never victories.

The next morning the ABC’s election analyst Antony Green described that surprise on national television. It made me laugh as he drew analogies with the surprise release of Nelson Mandela from gaol and the equally surprising fall of the Berlin Wall.
But that’s enough of the ‘getting there’ to Government.

However what I would like to do this evening...and can I thank our State Library for the invitation...what I’d like to do is to make some reflections on my years in Government, personal reflections on some of the challenges we faced, the steps we took, the lessons we learned, and despite the wise advice given early to slow down, the urgency we felt as a new Government to build the opportunity for all who lived here, especially opportunity for aboriginal Territorians.

From those six years there is so much to talk about. Government is amazing for the multitude of tasks that it involves, for the enormous amount of information that has to be absorbed, for the decisions that have to be made and implemented, for the multitude of problems to be solved, not only the problems that are known but the unexpected ones and the unwanted ones.

So there we were...an accidental and surprised government, having moved from 7 seats to 13, but now having to learn the task of government as quickly as we could.

One of the first big questions was how to govern? How to govern as a new government with the barest of majorities? How to best use all available talent and energy to do what our slogan said we would do “Build a Better Territory”.

It was certainly not by chopping off the senior heads in the public service, as many expected us to do, nor was it in punishing those who had been close to the previous government, who’d worked with them for years.

The challenge for us was to win broad trust and harness energy and ideas, regardless of any past or current political affiliation. It was Territorian first (and I did take some licence and declare it only took five minutes to become a Territorian), with party politics coming a long way back.

My instincts on that approach were reinforced by a call from former Prime Minister Bob Hawke who in blunt Hawke style warned me not to do as some other new governments had done, and sack public servants, in a kind of
clearing of the decks. He said, among many other things, the challenge was to get them enthusiastically working with us.

Another challenge that wasn’t quite so easily solved was how would this new Government, with its commitment to new regulatory measures...and measures that the previous government had steadfastly resisted...ranging from Builders Registration to stronger smoking laws to Freedom of Information legislation...how would we avoid being tagged as full of southern ideas and therefore be described as anti-Territorian.

Now you might find that a bit sad that I’d be worried about being tagged anti-Territorian, but don’t forget that for many years, the great enemy here was “southern ideas” and folk would be frequently lambasted for “bringing those southern ideas to town.” The other regular insult would be “if you don’t like what we’re doing, then just leave and go back south.”

So here was this new government committed to bringing into the Territory a lot of what we thought were good southern ideas. It was going to be our challenge to demonstrate that these new laws would strengthen and enhance the Territory...not clip Territorian wings.

Mind you, I don’t actually know what a Territorian is... what are the characteristics of a Territorian? Just looking around this library tonight, here we are, Territorians in all our diversity...not aligned on political views, not aligned on things like what are the best developments for the Territory’s economic future, not aligned even on what’s the best way to live... an elevated house on a 800sq metre block, or a unit in a high rise in the CBD. We don’t even agree on the weather.

Sometimes I think being a Territorian has more to do with being thousands of kilometres from the south east corner of Australia... and that distance and isolation from those decision makers and mass of population brings us together more effectively than anything else can. It makes us strong in our belief about the future of this place.
But putting all those reflections aside, we were determined to be an effective, inclusive and active Government.

Our first and biggest issue to tackle was our contracting economy. Growth was sluggish, private sector investment had largely dried up, and with it many jobs. The railway was the great job hope, but in August 2001, it hadn’t yet delivered. In the suburbs of Darwin and Palmerston it was easy to see what was happening: utes were quickly being packed and heading off west in hope of work; left behind were families who had always supported themselves but now forced, for the first time to line up at Centrelink. There was most definitely hurt in our community.

However, before our feet hit the government ground, the world changed. On September 11 2001, the World Trade Towers came down, and on September 12, the next day Ansett Airlines went into administration. We shared the shock of the world, although at that stage not really understanding the full implications of those events. First thoughts though were for our tourism industry and the inevitable hit it would take.

The immediate task for us was to lift Government spending to fill the gap left by the private sector. But there were surprises in store. None of us in that first Cabinet will ever forget the first Treasury briefing which told us that the small deficit shown in the Budget Papers was not small at all. In fact, twelve times bigger. We sat and looked at each other. Our election commitments had all been carefully based on that Budget, carefully checked and ticked off by ACCESS Economics. Our promises for more police, teachers and nurses looked doomed.

But there was more to come. One of the key areas of job creation for our subcontractors was the Transport and Works Budget. Spending on repairs and maintenance was a source of reliable work: our briefing showed that that cupboard was bare...no funds. I remember Syd and I turning somewhat pathetically to our Cabinet Secretary and asking for help. What could we do?
Advice came forth, not just on that occasion but whenever it was needed. That’s what made it work for this bunch of rookie ministers...wise, sane and creative advice from our very senior public servants...and my thanks go them all...especially to Paul Tyrrell, to Jennifer Prince and to Barry Chambers.

The Territory economy presented us with a big challenge: how to move it from the boom and bust of the past to a more sustainable future. While always welcoming big projects, like the Army Presence in the North, or the Railway we needed a plan for a more diversified, stronger and sophisticated economy.

So we decided to hold an Economic Development Summit to tap into the experience and best ideas of a whole range of Territorians, so that we could establish an agreed economic course for our future.

It was a good summit. Over 200 business and community leaders from all over the Territory met and found much common ground, especially positive was the common ground between some aboriginal and non-aboriginal leaders, many of whom had never met before.

What emerged was a comprehensive plan, identifying areas for growth in our existing sectors, like resources, defence, tourism and primary industries, but also targeting new areas for future growth. The Summit participants very clearly told Government that gas had to come onshore from the Timor Sea, a trade route must be developed between the Territory and Asia, Darwin needed a convention centre and Government should be spending money on infrastructure projects that would leverage private sector investment.

A big emphasis for the Summit participants was skilling Territorians for jobs in present and future industries. Jobs right throughout the regions, with a special emphasis on jobs for aboriginal Territorians.

The Plan was most certainly a blueprint for a more resilient and sophisticated economy, and it set the new Government running. By June the next year, we released the Territory’s Economic Development Strategy, with targets and a regular reporting framework. A flat economy was no longer an impediment. We were off and running.
Mind you, it was all very well having visions and plans, but they take time, much detailed effort and persistence. Our economy didn’t pick up overnight. The Territory Budget had very little spare money and the private sector wasn’t much better. The Business Round Tables I held each month frequently brought together angry and frustrated business people, no matter where they were held in the Territory, and I was the target of their frustration. What was worse, however, were the quarterly Sensis Business Surveys which regularly spelt out how little confidence business had in this new Labor Government.

But lack of funds was not just a frustration for business. Cabinet shared it as well. I will never forget our second Budget Cabinet. We always went out of town for Budget Cabinet, spending a couple of days away making decisions about where the money would go for the next year. This time we went to Kakadu to the old South Alligator Inn. It was wet season and the rain came down. The room we were meeting in leaked, so there were buckets scattered around the floor. Day Two was the day that we allocated the new funds. That year as the roof leaked and the rain poured down out of heavy grey skies, I had to tell my colleagues, who had bids for very worthy projects worth tens of millions of dollars that all we had was twelve million dollars in total. Half of them got up, packed their papers and were heading for the door until I exerted some semblance of Chief Ministerial authority and called them back. It was a miserable day!

But the economy did pick up and the turning point for that pick up was GAS. Bringing gas on shore was iconic for Top Enders, although not so much for Central Australians who had their own gas and graciously shared it up the pipeline to the north. But we all knew the oil and gas resource was there in the Timor Sea; we knew about fields like Sunrise and Bayu Undan, we’d seen Methanex nearly set up in the Territory and then disappear west; and we’d fought off challenges from floating LNG plants.

There was such anticipation when the word got out that Conoco Phillips and their partners were seriously considering bringing gas to Darwin and building an LNG plant. You could almost feel it. Confidence started building on the possibility and swung into full flight when on June 15 2003 the decision was made public.
The gas announcement for Darwin was momentous. This 1.5 billion dollar decision by major international investors was a significant vote of confidence in us and our economic future.

But let’s not forget the railway.

A hundred years in the promising, nearly 400 million taxpayers dollars, 2 million sleepers, 146,000 tonnes of rail, 2.8 million tonnes of ballast, 90 bridges and jobs... jobs in civil construction, jobs in sleeper plants, in fencing, catering... and importantly jobs for aboriginal Territorians in some of our remote towns and communities. It was a massive project that captured the country’s imagination.

History was made when that first freight train left Adelaide to much cheering on January 15 2004 and that cheering lasted all the way to Darwin.

I have wonderful memories of that first trip as I joined communities along the way in their celebrations.

However, first place in celebration has to go to the people of Tennant Creek.

The train was due in to the town about nine in the evening, so about a thousand locals had gathered to enjoy some music, the irreverent humour of Master of Ceremonies, Fiona O’Loughlin and a community BBQ. The kids were excited, so were their parents as the time drew closer.

I was the one who had to tell them the train was running late...something had slowed it down. As I apologised for the delay, this wise voice in the darkness said: “Don’t worry, Chief Minister. We’ve never had a train come to Tennant before. We’ve waited years for this and a little extra wait is no problem”.

And it wasn’t. We all stood there in the darkness, watching with great anticipation over that very flat Barkly land south of the town, until finally seeing a light in the distance turn into the very first train ever to come to Tennant Creek.
But the train wasn’t all happy stories: many locals missed out on seeing it arrive into Darwin; its teething problems were put under the media and community microscope and there was disappointment that freight costs didn’t drop straightaway.

However, what did happen immediately was the enormous and unexpected success of The Ghan, with hundreds of travellers booking to experience the romance of a journey through the heart of Australia.

Again though a lesson for me, that while building the rail was an immense achievement...and I do pay tribute to previous Chief Ministers for their pivotal role in making it happen...the real task was always in realising its potential for moving all manner of freight both into the Territory from interstate and from our north and justifying the billion dollar expenditure.

A convention centre was another of the challenges that emerged from the Economic Summit and it wasn’t an easy one. While Alice Springs had shown it could be done, and done well, the previous attempt in Darwin had failed. The advice was to think big. Put a hundred million dollars down and then challenge the private sector to come up with proposals that included both a convention centre and a major redevelopment of a very special, but disused area of the city: the old Waterfront.

Again, despite considerable research and community consultations, there was lots of negativity towards the project: the convention centre was in the wrong place and it was ugly; retailers in the CBD would lose business; the heritage value of an old industrial site would be lost. Loud voices gathered with objections. I was so determined at one critical stage to get support for the project that I stood for many many hours at Casuarina Square beside the model of the Waterfront and talked up the value of the convention centre, the public landscaped spaces and the private residential investment. Most people however wanted to know where the wavepool would be!

But despite those early objections the project has and is working.

The Convention Centre is in a perfect spot; the links to the CBD are coming together and the walk is not too far; there are lots of arguments about the
aesthetics of the residential and hotel developments...which is a very Darwin thing to do...and the wave pool... the once infamous wave pool...it seems to be going just fine.

However, I think it’s time this evening to take off my hard hat and steel capped boots, even though I haven’t spoken yet about mines, or tourism developments or shipping and trade routes or business parks... all of which are exciting economic developments that have contributed to the much stronger Territory economy that we have now.

The economy wasn’t alone in performing poorly in 2001.

Our educational results were simply not good enough. Literacy and numeracy levels were the lowest in the country; as were our secondary education results, our apprentice and training numbers were way down; our relatively new university was struggling and it was well documented how poor education was in the bush. Bob Collin’s Learning Lessons Report had graphically described its extent.

Education and doing well in education was not, I believed a top priority for too many Territorians. Our top students did as well as their counter parts interstate, but for too many others their results were ordinary or they were failing. Getting parents to be involved in their children’s education...at parent teacher nights, on school councils, or being concerned about what their children were being taught was a challenge and that applied equally in the city and the bush. But given our young population, we had to turn that around. I wanted education and educational results to be as much talked and argued about as the football.

Education and training had to be a top priority for the Territory, so with the Deputy Chief Minister carrying the portfolio we set to work, knowing however that change would take time and resources.

We carried out our promises: extra teachers in place, along with attendance officers; the recommendations of the Learning Lessons Report were implemented; teacher housing was upgraded, so were school buildings and extra funds allocated for school equipment.
The Jobs Plan put tens of millions of dollars into building the skills so badly needed by business and young Territorians alike...training numbers grew strongly, and a quarter of those trainees were aboriginal.

Secondary education and how to improve results was tackled in the Ramsay Review that focussed on those crucial early years of high school...that often difficult age group between eleven and fourteen. The middle school recommendation from the review was probably the most contentious, but with it was: new counsellors in schools, better professional development and support for teachers, a revamp of distance education and importantly the roll out of secondary education into bush communities.

Much to my disappointment, the initial community response to the consultation under taken by Gregor Ramsay was relatively subdued because I hoping that we might get some lively public discussion going about education. But Territorians were just biding their time, because once the recommendations were released the debate heated up ferociously and I do think for a while at least that debate gazumped football.

But just as important as secondary education, was our tertiary sector. The old NTU was doing it tough; new, underfunded and seeming to have lost its focus. Change was needed and through the experience and determination of Ken McKinnon as Interim Vice Chancellor, and financial support from Commonwealth and Territory Governments, a new institution was formed from NTU and Centralian College...the Charles Darwin University.

Education is one of those areas, crucial as it is, that doesn’t get quick results. Building literacy and numeracy takes time, even with the success of the accelerated literacy program we introduced. School attendance is an even tougher one. I remember a group of women in one community asking me how they could get their children to go to school: school attendance in their community starting the year with good numbers and then falling away over the year. Their solution was to ask me to gaol recalcitrant parents.
But while we knew we wouldn’t necessarily see sustained change, there were indeed rays of hope and one of those were the three students at Kalkaringi who in 2003 made history by passing year 12 in their community. It had never happened before, because until we started the secondary education roll out in the bush, the opportunity had never been there. What also aligned with that decision was the presence of two extraordinary teachers at the school, a Community Council that prized education and three students who realised that opportunity started with a Year 12 qualification.

The three students were Lianna Brown, Meshach Paddy and Rhonda Rankin, all with some secondary education at boarding schools, but dropping out and going home. Rhonda was working at the petrol station and was starting to think that filling cars with fuel would be her future. She grabbed this chance to continue her education before as she said she got too old.

George and Robyn Hewitson were the kind of teachers you want in any and every school, especially schools in the bush where the challenges are many. They taught, they drove the school bus, they mentored, they were tough and they never counted the hours they put in.

And it worked. All three students graduated and went on to university.

Now you could say that was only three students, but very soon it became more than that. Once other communities realised that the Gurindgis could do it, they determined to follow and over the next few years, there was much celebration as graduations took place in communities all across the Top End from Yirrkala to Wadeye.

And it’s so appropriate that this achievement in education started, in such a small way, on the lands of Vincent Lingiari who inspired the Paul Kelly song “from Little Things Big Things Grow”.

We confronted similar challenges in health.

The Health Department was reviewed and restructured and more resources, as they became available, were poured into our highly visible hospitals as well as into vital community services: primary care, especially health centres in the
bush, renal dialysis, disability services and child protection. Hospitals and clinics were upgraded, sometimes as with Alice Springs Hospital, no easy task, the promised Palliative Care facility was built and the Darwin Birthing Clinic.

As in education, progress in health is mostly slow with the poor state of aboriginal health and protecting our children being the two most serious challenges. It was heartening to see aboriginal women’s life expectancy grow by three years in our first years in government and aboriginal infant mortality halve. Also in those years, we quadrupled the resources in child protection and commissioned a report on better ways to tackle the problem. Child protection then became the trigger for the Federal Intervention, and I’ll talk more about later on.

But now I’d like to turn to one area where protecting children should have been straightforward but turned into a mess that really tested the Territory community and their good will towards us and tested us as a government.

That was introducing new standards for swimming pool fencing.

It was one of those “Territory things” that had to be tackled, with new standards bringing the Territory into line with the rest of the country. No government could ignore the appalling facts of child drowning. To our shame, we had the worst drowning rate in the country, with a hundred deaths over the previous decade.

I was convinced I had the best public policy on my side, but was very conscious I was taking on a section of our community who wanted no interference in their backyards.

Our first mistake was that we moved on the legislation too fast, adopting the best legislative framework available, but not taking the time to understand how it would fit into the existing Territory pool environment.

And it didn’t.

Australian pool standards were very precise and if you were building a new pool, then they worked. But applying them to existing pools...it was a nightmare! We ended up just make people angry: there were those who simply objected to any legislation at all; there were those who were trying to
apply the legislation with all their best efforts and failing; and then finally there were those who lived next door to pools who were being told by our legislation that they had to change their backyards as well. At one stage, 1000 pools had been inspected and half of them had failed.

Neighbour was fighting neighbour, pool inspectors were being threatened, those who were trying to sell homes keep failing compliance and the real estate industry was threatening revolt. My office was inundated by complaints, it was all over the media and the Opposition was telling us the Territory community would never forgive us.

This was not a case for amended legislation. We had to throw it out and start again.

There was only one way out for me: an unequivocal and unreserved apology to the Territory community, which I did. I don’t think it brought immediate forgiveness but it certainly stopped the intense irritation from escalating.

But this new government learnt a big lesson: in future, don’t rush, take time to consult effectively and make sure that what looks fine in principle and theory actually works in practice.

I should have been better guided by that early advice: government is not a sprint, but a marathon.

At least with the changes to swimming pool fences, no one threw raw eggs at my office and home. With the changes we made to our road rules and speeds they did throw them.

But just as with doing all we could to prevent children drowning in backyard pools, action had to be taken to stop the carnage that was happening on our roads. The figures were chilling.

A Territorian had a three times greater chance of dying in a road accident than other Australians; one person was killed on Territory roads every week and nine were seriously injured. Not only was it a disgrace, it was a human tragedy...lives pointlessly lost, families and friends grieving, injuries that took years to recover from.
As a government, we couldn’t ignore what was happening. But I knew that taking action to reduce our road toll would inevitably mean confronting something that we Territorians treasured, something that made us different...our open speed limits.

Driving faster than was allowed interstate over the long, long distances of the Territory made sense. And driving fast wasn’t just for Territory rev heads. We all did it and trusted our ability to drive fast and well. We also didn’t mind that other Australians viewed it as a part of the Territory’s difference...that up in the north there was still that edge of adventure...a bit of frontier.

So I asked for an expert and honest assessment of what could be done to make all of us safer on our roads. But the picture that came back from the Road Safety Taskforce that began its work at the start of 2006 was even grimmer than I imagined. We were still drinking and driving far too much, frequently not wearing seat belts and regularly doing that most dangerous of things, running red lights. Just one example of that red light running was at the intersection of the Stuart Highway and Westralia Street at Stuart Park in my own electorate. In one twenty four hour period, cars ran the red light, not the orange one, the red one more than 230 times and that intersection was by no means the worst one in Darwin.

After receiving a report like the one we did, there was no option but to follow the recommendations in front of us. The Territory’s open speed limits had to go (although we did adapt that just a little and kept 130 kph on our major highways); we introduced demerit points and increased a whole range of fines...as well as a lot of other measures.

We were criticised for not consulting Territorians about whether these road safety measures were warranted. It was pointed out that we had consulted on many other issues so why not on this one, especially as it was introducing so many and new restrictions on how we behaved on our roads.

It was a valid question and goes to the core of what our community expects of its Government. Mostly it’s about working with the community to tackle issues and bring about change that is strongly supported.
But there’s also an expectation, and a very valid one that Government must from time to time, take tough and maybe unpopular decisions, especially when those decisions address individual and community safety.

Finding the balance between those two ways of operating is most definitely the challenge for any Government.

Whatever the judgement is on our Government over the way we changed our road culture, I am pleased we acted and that our roads are now generally a little safer, just as our children are now safer around pools in our backyards.

While both those issues were tough and challenging, they weren’t anywhere as near as tough as the challenge thrown up by the Ward High Court decision in August 2002. What the decision did was question the validity of the declaration of forty nine of the Territory’s parks and reserves... which meant all of them were now open to claim either under land rights or native title.

It was decision that no one saw coming, but what it triggered was the prospect of decades of courts and lawyers, litigation and costs as each and every one of those parks and reserves went through the time consuming land claim process.

What it also opened up was a possible resumption of some of the worst of the ugly battles of the past between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Territorians over land...and they were ugly...just remember the election over Uluru, the bitter land claim over Katherine Gorge, or the thirty years of battles on the Cox Peninsula over Kenbi which cost about 20 million dollars and much good will.

As Government we had every right to demand a full court process. We could spend the millions of dollars and the years in court, which would have most certainly diverted efforts away from developing the environmental, cultural and tourism potential of those parks and the jobs that could be created in those regional and remote areas.

The alternative pathway was to find a resolution... which is what we did. We recognised legitimate aboriginal interests in those parks and reserves, both under ALRA and native title in return for immediate leaseback of the land to the Territory for 99 years. But before that happened, core principles had to be met. All parks had to remain open, with no fees and permits, existing tourism
and mining ventures had to be protected and the development of a parks master plan supported.

There was no precedent in the Territory’s past for a deal like this. The aboriginal winning of land was always seen as a loss of that land to the broader community and sadly that was a very deliberate strategy taken by the previous government. I’d seen it play out successfully in many election campaigns: sometimes it was the backyard under threat; often it was fishing access and sometimes a threat to jobs in major economic developments.

So while the logic and fairness of what we were proposing was strong, I was quite fearful about what might happen. Perhaps I had badly misread Territorians and that this solution was not going to be tolerated. But while the Opposition did their best to whip up fear, claiming that this was just the start of a massive give away of Territory land and that it was all about paying off Labor debts to our mates in the Land Councils, Territorians, to my vast relief, supported us.

So in the end, there were no regrets...just a good and fair solution that held the promise of new jobs, of tourism developments and proper recognition for aboriginal Territorians of their strong cultural relationship with these beautiful parks and reserves.

But on that issue of regrets, I thought it was important this evening to be clear that I came away from my years in Government with much pride in things that were achieved, but also regrets about things that did and didn’t happen.

Tackling the damage caused by alcohol abuse is one of the most difficult and complex issues facing the Territory. It’s not a new problem but despite much effort by governments over many years, and especially action taken by Marshall Perron and his Living with Alcohol Strategy, it still causes immense damage to both the drinkers themselves and our community.

Dealing with behaviour caused by alcohol abuse consumes a ridiculously large amount of police time in the Territory, about 70% in the suburbs and up to 90% in the bush. I’ve been out on police patrols in Darwin and Alice Springs and watched drunken violent fights in Mitchell Street between young white
men and very similar fights between aboriginal drinkers in the sand of the Todd River bed. Our hospitals are too often swamped by the injuries and disease the abuse causes and families and communities are damaged. The overall cost to the Territory each year is hundreds of millions of dollars.

Over my years as Chief Minister, the problems caused by alcohol abuse were a constant source of tension, quite legitimately with our community and much energy and time was spent on finding ways to reduce its impact: legislation was changed and toughened, alcohol courts introduced, more night patrols, more cameras and better security measures, personal identification required for takeaways; takeaway hours restricted, supply restricted, measures to reduce demand put in place, better rehab, dry areas, more police patrols, mounted patrols, bike patrols... and yet it often felt that very little had changed.

We all knew it was a problem not easily or quickly solved, but would take heart from time to time when measures worked a little... when hospital admissions went down or when there was a drop in alcohol related crime.

But the real inspiration was Groote Eylandt, where the community took some hard decisions and those decisions have worked for them

Alcohol had come on island with the start of the manganese mine in the sixties and had been since then a growing problem for the aboriginal communities. The senior people say the 1980s were the worst, with alcohol-related violence, children not attending school, and high absenteeism from work.

Some attempts were made to limit aboriginal drinking in the 90s, but with only limited success. The communities continued to be beset by anti-social behaviour associated with excessive drinking: break-ins, violence, deaths and growing community tensions.

In mid 2002, the women of Angurugu determined that the alcohol related violence had to stop: that determination was supported by their own council, the Anindilyakwa Land Council, the mine, the police and Racing Gaming and Licensing. A Liquor Management Plan was drafted. In fact it went through 12 different versions before a final one was presented to Government.
What it asked for was that permits should be required by anyone on Groote Eylandt who wished to consume takeaway alcohol.

It was a radical and confronting proposal and it caused considerable resentment in some parts of the community as was evident at the Liquor Commission hearings.

Three years after the women of Angurugu first decided to take their action, a new alcohol management plan came into effect on Groote. Getting there had taken time, but that time was important. Because the crucial ingredient of success for the plan was that it was not imposed on the community but had come from the community and was owned by them: community and Government working in partnership.

And it has made a difference to life on Groote.

In the first two years, that difference was quite dramatic with a marked improvement in community function and harmony. Alcohol sales went down, along with alcohol related arrests, house breakins, a massive 86% down and protective custodies fell. CDEP numbers grew, and absenteeism from work was down.

Certainly Groote still has problems with alcohol and drugs (especially with marijuana). There is still disturbance and unrest on island but the permit system has now given the community an ongoing and effective mechanism to deal with those issues.

My regret is that we didn’t find such a logical model earlier. It was already halfway through my time in Government before it was demonstrated so clearly the results a community driven, yet tough process could bring to such a difficult Territory problem.

It had such obvious application to managing alcohol abuse right throughout the Territory and promised more success than things tried before.

Inspired by Groote, Nhulunbuy started a similar community model and I set off to Alice Springs.

Alice Springs had and has a huge issue with alcohol abuse. Many measures had been tried over many years but despite all efforts the problem just grew.
Alice is a service centre for over 250 small remote communities and that role brings with it economic opportunity, but also social problems, the worst of which are alcohol abuse and social disruption.

The lesson from Groote was obvious. Alcohol abuse needed an ‘all of community’ solution and those solutions needed to be radical.

My argument to Alice Springs was that unless radical action was taken in tackling alcohol abuse, the town would continue to be smothered by the problems it created....shocking media reports about violence, the hospital struggling to cope with the impact of disease and injury, tourism development in jeopardy, educational outcomes inadequate, the community fearful of its safety and what was the worst of it, an increasingly untrusting relationship between aboriginal and non-aboriginal Central Australians.

To get everyone together took time, especially the aboriginal leadership but in the end there was a comprehensive group...the Combined Aboriginal Organisations, the Town Council, Chamber of Commerce, CATIA, health providers, licencees, AHA and the public service.

The group was prepared to support change and it was fascinating to see how ideas that once would have been rejected in a town like Alice won acceptance, especially proposals like declaring all public areas within the town boundaries dry and introducing an ID system for takeaways. The final plan had many more elements than just those two, but they were certainly the most controversial.

We’d only just started to see some early results...with alcohol related admissions to hospitals down, sales of pure alcohol down, serious sexual assaults down when the Howard Government came in over the top of our careful and community supported measures with his Federal Intervention in June 2007.

And it’s over that intervention that I have my most serious regrets.

Over my years as Chief Minister, I’d always taken the approach of working as constructively with John Howard as I could, despite from time to time having some serious political differences.
But finding pathways for cooperation was my preferred approach. That cooperation was there in many vital areas for the Territory, especially when it came to improving outcomes and opportunities for aboriginal Territorians. Particularly significant was in April 2006 when the first Overarching Agreement on Indigenous Affairs was signed between the Commonwealth and the Territory. We were the first in the country ready to sign. It was an agreement that established the foundation for more effective funding for indigenous affairs. Prime Minister Howard was most complimentary about the Territory’s determination to tackle aboriginal disadvantage and keen to work with us.

I quite reasonably thought on that occasion, and others that there was a workable relationship between the two Governments.

So when the report into child abuse in our communities, the Little Children are Sacred Report, was released and the call was made in it for the Commonwealth to work with us, to put more resources towards tackling this insidious problem I imagined that the relationship that had been built over six years would continue.

There were 98 recommendations in the Little Children Report, that essentially said the Territory had put increased its efforts in tackling child abuse, but much more was needed and it was needed urgently.

But the goodwill of six years was cast aside by a Prime Minister who was six months from an election and struggling in the polls. John Howard saw the report as a political opportunity and he took it.

So why can I say with such certainty that it was a political opportunity? Because that’s exactly how Alexander Downer described it on the day after the election when the Coalition had lost. Without any sense of shame, Downer said that the Coalition taking the intervention action as they had done seemed like a good way to lift the Coalition’s standing in the polls. But he regretted it hadn’t worked...the lift in the polls didn’t happen.

Child abuse, wherever it occurs in this country, is a most serious issue and one that deserves to be tackled strategically, wisely and firmly. Child sexual abuse in our aboriginal communities is often hidden and the perpetrators protected. Overcoming this sometimes impenetrable barrier needs the building of trust
and community partnership and that takes a marathon effort, not a military led sprint.

The manner of the Howard intervention was neither strategic nor wise. Hundreds of pages of legislation on everything from land acquisition to income support management were hastily thrown together, tens of millions of dollars spent without any plan or real accountability.

I asked one of our larger communities a year after the intervention how they were going. Had the intervention made a difference? Well, came the reply. There is way more federal public servants flying in and out of the community on chartered planes, our work programs have been disrupted, people who always thought they had a job have now been told they’re on the dole, families have only just stopped panicking about their children being taken away, but we’re all still worried that our land will be.

But what about the positives, I asked? There must be positives. The reply was that for the community the last twelve months had been traumatic and messy, but that they were used to white people doing that. However all would be forgiven if the promised housing came through. Requests for dollars to build urgently needed bush housing had been the subject of discussion between Territory and Commonwealth Governments since self-government, but always refused. So this was the first time some serious money had come through...600 million dollars worth.

But that community along with many others are still waiting for its housing.

John Howard could have taken such a different path in June 2007. He could have taken the report seriously, for a start; looked at its recommendations, talked to the Territory and maybe as a start matched the Territory’s three hundred million dollar investment in finding solutions for child abuse dollar for dollar. His could have been a wise and productive leadership. Sadly, for aboriginal Territorians, it was not.

Australians have a curiosity about the Territory, but know so little about us. We are such an unknown quantity; a sixth of the continent, but just one percent of the population. Because the Territory is so far away from Australia’s
south east corner is in part why John Howard could take the actions he did in 2007, singling out a section of the Territory community on the basis that they were aboriginal and lived on aboriginal land. So it didn’t matter to John Howard if that aboriginal person had led an exemplary life as a pillar of their community. All aboriginal people were cast indiscriminately in his child sexual abuse net. He would never have dared take that same action in a suburban electorate in Melbourne or Sydney.

So I just want to finish tonight by saying it is time for Territorians to stop being that unknown quantity and tell to our story, in our voice to the rest of Australia. But in saying ‘our voice’ I don’t mean one voice. The Territory has a magnificent diversity, especially aboriginal Territorians have that diversity and we need to puncture and lay to rest the often ignorant and condescending views other Australians often have about us. Just one recent example:

Last week, for example I ran into a former Federal politician at Sydney Airport who told me I must be so relieved not to have to live in Darwin anymore. Adding that he didn’t know how anyone could possibly live in Darwin. I didn’t tell him he was a rude bastard, but in retrospect I wish I had and I will in future.

But it is that kind of condescension and ignorance we have to tackle...and I’m sure that everyone here tonight would have had similar experiences.

I like the proposal that’s been floated by Barney Glover, Vice Chancellor of our university that an institute, attached to the university be set up; to analyse territory issues, to encourage discussion and debate; to contribute a Territory perspective into national debates; and some national understanding of just what this Territory is all about.

This Territory has so much to be proud of, has achieved so much, with so much more to do. I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to play a small part in that.