

RECONCILING CULTURE AND ADVANCEMENT

The following is the address and reply by **Alison Anderson** to the NT Legislative Assembly on 23 October 2012 in Darwin. This edited version is reproduced here with permission

I see people, not categories, divisions or races. I see people and the potential for us all to work together to bring clarity and progress into the world we share. Our task as politicians is to represent the whole community, and that I pledge to do. This is a moment of hope, a hinge in time. It is a long delayed day of promise for all Territorians and for all Australians. The nation is watching us today and it will be watching in the months to come as we chart the course ahead. We will bring resolve and advancement to the bush and knit the different worlds of our Territory more closely together. We are in this together. We are one Territory, and at the outset of this parliament that will be much more stable than its fractured predecessor, I believe we should dedicate ourselves to debate, to policymaking, to discussion, to the highest values we can summon.

With that, I turn to a brief account of the landscape I see and what must be rethought and done anew in the years ahead. There is a weight on the shoulders of all of us today. It is the weight of the failure of most of those who have sat in these seats before us. They failed to educate most of the Indigenous people of the Northern Territory; failed to make them healthy or create jobs for them. It is a failure shared by both parties here and in Canberra, and shared by people outside of politics. It is a failure of Australia. I include in that all Indigenous people who have not taken up the opportunities that were offered to them. It will be hard for some of my friends, for members of my family, to hear that but it has to be said. There are few heroes in this story.

I mention these things not out of despair but to remind all of us there is no point in being in this place unless we have something

new to contribute. Much of what has been done before has failed and it is our job, the one for which we were elected, to do things differently. The first step is to think differently. Behind most failed actions are failed ideas. Often it started life as a noble idea and become corrupted along the way. This is what happened in the way Australia has treated Aboriginal people. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a great moral awakening when white Australia realised what it had done to us and began to make amends.

That move to acknowledge our sufferings and our disposition was a noble one. The laws to return land to us and encourage independent development were fine achievements that grew out of the best intentions. Yet all this produced the twin corruptions of welfarism and the belief that Aboriginal people ought to live forever in a cultural Stone Age. It did not happen quickly; those corruptions crept up on us over time and became entrenched. They have proved almost impossible to change. Now we have the sicknesses and abuse, the ganja and the crowded gaols, the empty schools and suicides. How did all this happen? For the usual reason: because we continued to judge our ideas by their noble intentions



Alison Anderson is the Northern Territory Minister for Indigenous Advancement.

instead of by their results. We did this for many years after those results proved the ideas had failed. They also became entrenched because government passed laws and set up agencies and funded them to create jobs. Those jobs were filled by people who build careers based on the idea that separate development was the way forward for Indigenous people.

As the American writer Upton Sinclair wrote: 'It is difficult to get someone to understand something when their salary depends on not understanding it.' That is true everywhere and it is true in the Northern Territory. The idea that separate development was the answer provided hope for many and jobs for an increasingly powerful few. However, it has failed. I suggest that the past 40 years of Aboriginal policy has been a sort of experiment, an experiment with human lives costing billions of dollars. Walk through Alice Springs after dark or visit Papunya and speak with my relatives—the people are sick in their bodies and in their souls. They are uneducated, orphaned and widowed. They are in gaol and in cemeteries. It was a great experiment, perhaps even a necessary one, but it has failed.

The time has come to reject those beliefs and say that Indigenous people need to engage with other Australians. In particular, we need jobs, and for jobs, we need education.

As I said earlier, we have not been elected to this House to despair. We have been put here to face the facts of the past failure and propose solutions and try to put those solutions into practice. We do this humbly aware of how many good people have failed in the past. However, we do it with determination. We know there is no alternative. We know there is no time to be lost.

I am a desert woman from Central Australia who is a grandmother, an artist. I have the richness of traditional Aboriginal life in my bones and in my imagination. I am closely linked by blood to the joys and suffering of

many people in Indigenous communities in this nation's centre and its desert. I attend their baptisms and I go to their funerals. These are the people of my heart, the ones for whom I speak today.

I have been a leader for a long time, and in all that time, I have been learning—always learning. I have held positions at the local council level and I have been an ATSIC [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission] commissioner. I have been in parliament for seven years and served as a minister before, always learning. I am proud of what I have learnt and what I have done. However, I am fully aware how much remains undone. This is why I stand here today and give you my honest view of our situation. It is complicated, of course. Everywhere you look there is something that is broken and needs to be fixed. I have learnt what we need to focus on.

There are two goals I will strive for. I will be doing everything I can to deliver these things—real education and real jobs. I am not the education minister and I am not the employment minister—I am the Minister for Indigenous Advancement. Those are the two areas, in particular, where I will be throwing my weight behind the efforts of my colleagues. Let me tell you why.

Too much of the public discussion about Indigenous people has assumed that whatever the problem, government is the answer. It has been assumed that any problem can be solved with the right policies and the right amount of money. I would have no issue with that if it was correct but the history of the past 40 years, including the [Northern Territory] Intervention, shows it is wrong. I believe it failed because over time it came to treat Indigenous people as passive, and by treating us as passive, it helped make us passive. It also treated us as different and encouraged us to live in a parallel world that was supposed to be a dreaming but became a nightmare. The time has come to reject those beliefs and say that Indigenous people need to engage with other Australians. In particular, we need jobs, and for jobs, we need education. I mean real education and real jobs. Any policies that interfere with

these two goals need to be thrown into the scrap heap.

Of course, we will need government to help achieve this but it needs to be designed to liberate us, to make us independent human beings and this is possible. Governments can do bad things—we have seen enough of that in the Territory—but can also be a force for good. We Indigenous people need to be more like other Australians. I do not mean we should abandon our beliefs or our language, but like dozens of other cultures in Australia, we must learn to combine our own identities with participation in the broader society that will not weaken us. It will make us stronger in who we are. To preserve the old ways, we must embrace the new ones.

There are plenty of jobs in the Territory, in the communities and in government, in tourism and national parks, and mining. My dream is simple: to see Indigenous people filling more of those jobs in the future because of the quality of our education and because we make ourselves the best people for those jobs. Having a job is not mainly about money. It is about getting up in the morning and looking after yourself. It is about staying in the same place for five days a week. It is about wanting your children to be educated so they can get a job one day. It is about pride and respect but we cannot put the cart before the horse. Many people who have been to Indigenous schools in the past generation are so poorly educated they have never had a real job. In employment terms, they are the lost generation. Our schools stole their futures from them. All we can do now is fix the problem for the next generation. It is a huge challenge but I believe we can do it.

The problem is this: We have been treating education politically but a good school is not political. What is taught and how it is taught should not be determined by the local community. A good education is like good policing or good health care. It is something most people in Australia recognise when they see it. It is the same in Geelong or Townsville, and people are happy for the government to determine its shape whether in public or private schools. Like good health, good education is

the same everywhere and we do not need to debate it. The people of Perth and Brisbane do not want to run their local school or tell the teachers what the curriculum should be. They just want to send their kids out the door in the morning and know they are going to learn to read and write and count, use computers, and find out about the world. That is real education and many of the schools in the Territory are not providing it; in fact, our Indigenous schools are a continuing disappointment.

A good education is like good policing or good health care. It is something most people in Australia recognise when they see it.

We tend to speak words of encouragement about the state of things and not confront the facts head on. In doing so, we patronise young Indigenous school students. We fail to tell their parents how poor the results really are. We fail to hold those parents responsible in a rigorous fashion for their part in schooling their children. We mask and soften the truth. At times, it seems as if we still operate a double standard of expectations. For remote communities, we are prepared to ask for, and accept, second best.

I want to draw, for a few moments, on the research done by Helen Hughes and her son, Mark, published by the Centre for Independent Studies. Professor Hughes' family escaped the Nazis and came to Australia where she became an economist and worked for the World Bank and the United Nations for many years.

For the past five years, she has been researching Indigenous education and doing some work in East Arnhem Land, and recently Mark and she wrote a paper about what the latest NAPLAN results were for Year 3 pupils. They showed that the past rates for Indigenous pupils in the Northern Territory are 47% for numeracy and 32% for reading. That means over half our eight-year-olds cannot do sums and two-thirds cannot read. No other state or territory comes close to that level of failure.

If we do not change that, we will never improve the lives of Indigenous people in the Territory.

So what is the problem? Is it that our kids are Indigenous? Obviously it is not. Most Indigenous kids in Australia live in towns and cities and do just fine in education. Is it because our kids speak a second language at home? No, it is not. Australia is full of kids who speak another language at home, but do well at school. Is it because there is not enough money? Unlikely. Indigenous kids here get 40% more spent on their education than other children. So what about remoteness? Are small remote schools the problem? Not really, according to Helen Hughes. She points out that while Indigenous pupils in remote areas have a reading pass rate of 25%, for non-Indigenous pupils, it is 93%.

The Northern Territory is Australia's own third world. It is the nation's internal colony. We have to ask other Australians to help us change that; we cannot do it alone.

So what is the problem? Helen Hughes says, and I agree, that the problem is the quality of the schools, particularly the curriculum and the teaching methods. If we taught our kids the same way kids are taught in Newcastle and Fremantle, their results would skyrocket. The Hugheses are not the only people to recognise this. Three years ago on Cape York, Noel Pearson and some colleagues did the report called the 'Most Important Reform' that came to the same conclusion. We need to fix our schools. A real education is a basic human right and it has been denied to Indigenous people of the Northern Territory for too long. The beauty of focusing on education is it is one of the few things governments can actually do. At least if it has the will, there is a way. With the right curricula and policies and funding, we can get properly functioning schools with proper teachers. If you get the schools right other things will gradually fall into place.

Take truancy, which is the curse of good education in the Northern Territory. At the moment we try to fix it with carrots and sticks,

by trying to force parents to send their kids to school or by bribing the kids to come, but the Hugheses' research shows that once schools start to provide a real education, the pupils will come anyway. Not all of them, but most of them. Most people are not idiots; they want the best for themselves and their children.

Let me describe how a remote community of the future might look. At its heart would be a proper school, just like a small version of a school in Darwin or Sydney. There would be at least one full-time teacher with a university degree and five years experience. We would attract those teachers by paying them well and providing decent housing and community support. There would be a community committee to support the school. Not by telling it what to do, but by helping it run like other schools in Australia. The committee would help the teacher settle in, help care for the school grounds, help feed the kids and take them to the clinic if they were sick. Help make sure they come to school in the mornings.

In other parts of Australia, the parents do those things. It is a sad fact—many Indigenous parents are like children themselves—that is something we have to face up to. For a while we are going to rely a lot on the grannies of the community to make our schools work. We need to ask the grannies who have already done so much, to do some more. To help us make our schools normal.

I hope that one day, parents will start feeling ashamed of the situation, start looking after their kids a lot better, but that day is a long way off. We have to be realistic. I am hoping, if we start to turn our communities into places that welcome education, young teachers from other parts of Australia will want to come here for a few years. Look at the old missionaries and the American Peace Corps. Look at all Australians today who volunteer in third world countries. There have always been people prepared to lend a hand.

The Northern Territory is Australia's own third world. It is the nation's internal colony. We have to ask other Australians to help us change that; we cannot do it alone.

One of the things we have to do to make schools normal is introduce normal curriculum

just as they have in Melbourne, London, or New York. I am not suggesting we abandon our traditional culture or language, but teaching them should not be done in schools. It should be done after school and on weekends and during the holidays. That is when most of the other cultures in Australia teach their children traditional ways. The job of the teachers in our schools will be to teach what is taught in normal schools around Australia. You can buy the curriculum off the shelf from any state you like. That is the only way our children will grow up to be able to compete for jobs and work alongside people educated in other places.

Another thing we have to do to make schools normal is to stop holding events that take kids away—no more sports events that go on for days. Some people say these events are traditional, but I have my doubts about that. Some have traditional roots, but they have grown because of the welfare world, because people have had so much empty time to fill. We need to educate parents to see that a new approach to education will involve some hard choices. There will no more excuses for children missing school. There is something government and local councils can help with. There should be no more support for any type of event that takes children away from home during school term.

Let us imagine we can improve education; we can make it real. That will take many years even if the changes I am describing come in. It will be many years before the first group of kids to receive a real education leave school. However, let us imagine that happens. Where will they go? I see them going for interviews for jobs now automatically filled by nonIndigenous people who often come to the Territory from other places. I see Indigenous people starting to fill those jobs because they are well educated, and sometimes, because of their local knowledge. They understand this place and its people better than the other applicants for the position. That happens in many places; locals have an advantage. It should happen here. I am talking about real jobs, not blackfella ones.

My sister-in-law has been a teaching assistant for 25 years and, although she is a good worker, it is a dead end. She can never use that

experience to move up or on. We need to phase out all the jobs we created for Aboriginal people: the teaching assistants and the special positions for Aboriginal police and healthcare workers, and all the rest. They imply that Aboriginal people cannot do normal jobs. We need to replace them with real jobs that require real education: jobs that are not dead ends but that could lead on to other jobs, including jobs in other places if that is what some people want.

At the moment we are being advised into the grave by people better educated than us. This needs to change. We need education to set us free.

In that way, education can set us free. It can make us independent for the first time of all the nonIndigenous advisers who have tried to control our lives. At the moment we are being advised into the grave by people better educated than us. This needs to change. We need education to set us free—free of dependence, unemployment, welfare and victimhood. Education has set billions of human beings free; it can do the same for us. Once we are independent we will have choices. Most 25 year olds in Sydney can work anywhere in the world. They have the education and the work experience. I want our 25yearolds to have the same choices.

Of course, many young people will want to stay in their communities, but even to do that requires education if they are to take advantage of the job opportunities that exist. There are opportunities, both existing ones and jobs we can create, to grow food, make bread, and fix cars. For people who can read and write and use computers to keep learning, there are plenty of job opportunities in the communities.

It always surprises me how hard it is to get fresh food in remote places. There has to be a potential to change that. We have the land and the sun, and we have the example of the old missions where food was grown successfully. I see hundreds of new jobs across the Territory in that one area. Again, we will need help. Again, I suggest we ask other Australians to assist us. Not bureaucrats or soldiers, but gardeners,

bakers and mechanics to stay with us for six months and share their knowledge. However, that is a vision for the future. First we need to make our communities places outsiders would want to live in.

I know there is much to be done; however, I believe the rest of Australia cares about what happens here and is just waiting for us to take the first step. It has more to offer us than a view of Indigenous people defined by their victimhood—more than welfarism or the intervention. We need to convince it that the Territory is not a museum and is not a nightmare. Above all, we need to show our fellow Australians we want to be normal. We want the right to be just like them and keep our identity, but to live fully in the twenty-first century.

Today I have been describing a dream, but it is not a romantic dream. I hope it is not an impossible one. It is a dream based on looking at the past and being honest about what has gone wrong. It is a dream that does not aspire to the creation of some Utopia of a sort that has never been seen on the face of the earth before. My dream is we should get real and, for the first time since Europeans came to this land, Indigenous people should be thought of and treated just like everyone else. To someone in Melbourne, Shanghai or New York, that might sound like a very modest dream; however, as all of us here today know, it is actually a big one to suggest that Indigenous people in the Northern Territory should live normal lives with real education and real jobs. That is the most radical dream of all.

Become a member and support the CIS

Over the next few years Australia and New Zealand will confront economic and political issues of unprecedented difficulty. Solving these problems will demand energy, wisdom and enterprise of the highest order.

The CIS is committed to maintaining and improving economic productivity, political freedom and free enterprise.

Join the CIS as a member (see benefits below) and be a part of history, influencing the directions of policy in precisely the directions that are now most needed.

	Friend	Associate Member	Member	Donor Member	Sustaining Member
<i>PreCIS</i> newsletter	x	x	x	x	x
Invitations to seminars and special events	x	x	x	x	x
<i>Policy</i> quarterly magazine		x	x	x	x
Occasional Papers (OPs)		x	x	x	x
Issue Analysis				x	x
Policy Monographs (PMs)			x	x	x
Tax-deductibility on donation above the Member rate (in Australia)				x	x

To apply for membership, or to donate, complete the secure online form on the 'Support CIS' page at www.cis.org.au, telephone the Centre on (02) 9438 4377; or email development@cis.org.au for more information.