

**The 6th Henry Parkes Oration
National Library of Australia, Canberra
17 October 2008**

**WEAVING THE AUSTRALIAN TAPESTRY
Creating a society 'of beauty rich and rare'
from threads of harmony and contradiction**

The Hon. Linda Burney

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Thank you, Alan.

I acknowledge Dr Neal Blewett, Ian Thom, Jane Gray and family, and other distinguished guests.

Good evening all.

It is an honour to be here.

May I begin by formally recognising the traditional owners of the land on which we meet:

Ballumb ambol Ngunnawal yindimarra ngudu-yirra bang marang.

I pay my respects to the ancient Ngunnawal nation.

These few words are from my language – Wiradjuri – one of more than 250 languages that were spoken in Australia when the British arrived in 1788.

Whether it was “settlement” or “invasion” depends on whether you were standing on the shore, or on the deck.

Wiradjuri country spans the fertile plains that stretch from Nyngan to Albury, from Bathurst to Hay.

It’s one of the largest tribal areas in Australia...

..and includes the Murrumbidgee, Lachlan and Macquarie Rivers.

In Wiradjuri these rivers are the Galari, Wambuul and Marrambidya.

I am of the Marrambidya Wiradjuri.

My children are:

- Binni Dironbirong. Strength like the shaft of a spear and the red colours in the setting sun.

- Willurai Ngurumbi Karramarra. Sweet like bush honey, winter water.

I named my children in the Wiradjuri language as a means of reclaiming some of my lost culture.

As an Aboriginal Australian I proudly continue the ancient custom of seeking permission before entering someone else's country.

Isn't it extraordinary to think that a custom so ancient has survived, albeit in different forms, over so many thousands of years?

I extend a warm greeting to members of the Henry Parkes Foundation, and to his descendents who are here this evening.

I am conscious of the standing of those who have given this address in previous years: the Honourable Gordon Samuels, Professor Helen Irving, the Honourable Dr Geoff Gallop, the Honourable Senator John Faulkner.

All these individuals have played a part in creating the Australian story...weaving the Australian tapestry. And I am honoured to be in their company.

Thank you all for coming.

Our democracy can't be in too bad shape when people are willing to come out on a Friday night to listen to an oration.

Mind you...

- 84,000 Americans crammed into a Denver football stadium to hear Barack Obama

- we might get a crowd like that at the MCG for an AFL match but hardly for a speech from a politician about the political process.

Americans love their politics. And their leaders are masters of political rhetoric.

Australians are more likely to have their political conversations with the local greengrocer, or over a few drinks with friends.

But wherever we meet, it's always good to see Australians talking about politics and exchanging ideas, whether it's in the pub, at work, or at a formal oration such as this.

I applaud the mission of the Henry Parkes Foundation to encourage Australians to understand their nation's political history.

And what a history it is...

...the creation of a new nation at the ballot box by a vote of the people.

As former Premier Bob Carr said in a speech at Centennial Park, 1 January, 2001, to mark the centenary of federation:

“Australian democracy is not a gift, it’s not a fluke. It’s at the heart of our very being. A hundred years of democracy – that’s not an accident. It reflects the genius of a free people.”

But let me make an important point about the founding of our nation.

It is often said that Australia has differed from so many other nations in that no blood was shed...

...there was no civil war, no outbursts of violence.

But this statement denies the historical fact of the bloody conflicts that occurred as Aboriginal people fought to defend their land.

And I will speak more of that later.

First let me come to the themes of my speech this evening: responsibility and truth-telling.

Both our political leaders and the citizenry are responsible for the health of our democracy.

A strong democracy needs both parties, and I will make some comments about this.

Another theme for my address tonight is truth.

In Australia I do not believe we have embraced the concept of truth-telling to the extent necessary if we are to consider ourselves a mature and healthy democracy.

We’re certainly not a nation that has reached the point of reconciliation.

Australians have struggled with the historical fact that our development as a nation came at the cost of the original inhabitants...

...for years we avoided discussing the “Australian stain” of our convict history...

...behind the happy image of tolerance and diversity we project to the world, there is still fear, misunderstanding, ethnocentrism and intolerance...

...think Cronulla, December 2005

...Pauline Hanson

...the hatred unleashed over “asylum seekers”, people who we used to call “refugees”.

I believe in the power in truth-telling.

It’s not comfortable or easy. You have to dig deep. But truth-telling helps us grow, as individuals, and as a nation.

It helped bring about peace in Northern Ireland.

It was part of the healing in post-apartheid South Africa.

Handing over the final report of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu said, and I quote:

“It is up to all of us South Africans to say 'this is our land'; we are committed to it. We are concerned about the welfare of all South Africans, not just of my particular section or group.”

But before I get to the heart of that discussion, I want to tell you something of my own story.

That is a one of the wonderful things about Aboriginal culture...

...the practice of story-telling.

If you’ve been lucky enough to spend time with Indigenous people – whether in Canberra, or Mount Druitt, or a remote community in the Kimberley – you will have experienced some of our most talented story tellers.

Funny, descriptive, engaging tales that may concern important matters of culture and law but are just as likely to be a hilarious account of a simple mishap a person has experienced the day before.

That’s not to say blackfellas have a monopoly on story telling!

Think about Henry Lawson, Banjo Patterson...about nights you’ve spent in country pubs listening to the locals spinning yarns.

So tonight I’ll begin with a little of my own story.

I’ll tell some of Sir Henry Parkes’ story.

And I’ll speak of two other Australians from around the same era – Louisa Lawson and Jack Marsh.

While Sir Henry Parkes was building a fledging democracy; Louisa Lawson was agitating to change the system; and Jack Marsh, a name you may not recognise, was fighting to be included and, ultimately, for his own survival.

First, a few things about me.

I was born in a small town called Whitton near Leeton, NSW. My mother was of Scottish descent, my father Aboriginal.

In 1957 it was a disgrace to have a child out of wedlock...

...to have a child with an Aboriginal man was scandalous.

I was raised by my mother's Aunt and Uncle, Nina and Billy Laing, a drover and a station hand, a brother and sister, both unmarried, who taught me my core values of honesty, loyalty and respect...the gift of compassion and the importance of humility.

They taught me manners, too, and I think a few more of those wouldn't go astray in a healthy democracy, either!

It was a typical country kid's childhood – riding horses, cooling off on hot days with a swim in the irrigation ditches, building forts in the rice stubble after the harvest.

Of course, being Aboriginal in a conservative country town had its challenges.

I'll never forget sitting in class in my first year in high school listening to the teacher describe the Australian Aborigines.

They were savages, she explained...with no culture and no technology...the closest thing to Stone Age man in existence.

I wished I could turn into a piece of paper and quietly slip through a crack in the floor.

At the age of 27 I met my father.

What a day that was.

I learned I had 10 brothers and sisters and discovered that during all those years of growing up and wondering, my father lived only 40 minutes away.

Such was the power of racial segregation and denial in those dark days.

During my career I've held many roles – teacher, executive director, social activist, board member, mother, politician, Cabinet Minister and volunteer.

But my core purpose has remained constant: driving change, working for social justice.

To me, Sir Henry Parkes – that grand old man of Australian politics – is both inspirational and intriguing.

He arrived from England as a young man from a poor background with very little formal education.

Just like the waves of migrants who followed him, he saw the possibilities of a creating a new life and dedicated himself to his new homeland.

His love affair with Australia began as soon as the ship sailed into Sydney Harbour, a waterway that his forebear, Governor Arthur Phillip – founder of the first British colony in Australia – described as the “finest harbour in the world”.

Arriving in Sydney in 1839, Sir Henry was inspired to immortalise his impressions in verse:

The wild bush stretching far o'er ridge and creek
The homesteads scattered o'er the smiling land,
The expanse of quiet water, and the gleam
Of the fair city in the summer beam.

I'd have to say Sir Henry was more successful in politics than poetry!

As a political leader, his skills were legendary...

...five times Premier of NSW, architect of public education, champion of universal suffrage, advocate for Federation.

He was also married three times, hopeless with money and as Premier imposed a tax of 100 pounds on Chinese immigrants, which represented around 50 weeks pay.

As a Member of the same Parliament where Sir Henry spent much of his working life, I can assure you his presence is still felt.

One of the most stately and elegant rooms in the building is named after him and a portrait painted by Tom Roberts hangs in the foyer.

...the serious face, the full white beard, and the thoughtful eyes: watching Members come and go.

Sir Henry Parkes devoted his life to developing a fair and democratic society through the institution of Parliament.

As a woman, Louisa Lawson was excluded from society's institutions...

...so she fought and won her battles in other spheres.

In 1888 she set up the ground-breaking feminist magazine *Dawn: A Journal for Australian Women*.

At one point she employed 10 staff, all female, defying the NSW Typographers Union which refused to accept women as members and tried to close her down.

Louisa Lawson campaigned for marriage and divorce reform, for women's right to work, and for women to take their rightful place in public life.

Most significantly, she fought for women's right to vote.

If Sir Henry Parkes is the Father of Federation, then Louisa Lawson is the Mother of Women's Suffrage.

She was also the mother, of course, of one of our best loved poets, Henry Lawson.

She is every bit as much a towering figure as Sir Henry Parkes and other political figures of the past century.

For me, she is a huge inspiration.

Finally, Jack Marsh.

Jack Marsh was a Bundjalung man. He was born in about 1874 on a station called Yulgilbar on the Clarence River in NSW.

This was the era of missions and reserves, of Government sanctioned policies of child removal, of paternalism, control, racism, and exclusion from mainstream society.

Jack's passion was sport.

In 1894 he ran the hundred yards in 9.8 seconds, equalling the world record and becoming the fastest man in Australia.

His achievement received little coverage and soon disappeared from the public record.

Three years later a cricket official saw him throwing a boomerang at La Perouse and recruited him as a fast bowler.

For a while he was the fastest in Australia – until falling victim to a raging controversy about bowlers being accused of “throwing”.

Despite his talent, calls for Jack to represent Australia were ignored.

One selector said he didn't have “enough class”.

In 1902, a visiting English team refused to play a tour match if he was in the side.

Warren Bardsley, who later captained the Australian team, said the reason he was “kept out of big cricket was his colour”.

Jack died in 1916, aged about 40.

He was beaten to death in a brawl outside a hotel in Orange.

Two men were tried for manslaughter but acquitted.

A judge is recorded as saying, and I quote: “Marsh may have deserved it.”

Let’s think about what was happening in other parts of the country at around the same time.

In 1928...12 years after Jack Marsh died, between 60 and 100 Aboriginal people were killed in Central Australia in retribution for the death of a white dingo hunter.

That was the Coniston massacre.

A board of enquiry laid the blame on Aboriginal people, concluding the shootings were justified on the grounds of self defence.

The son of one of the men killed recently sang at a ceremony to mark the 80-year anniversary – finally, there is a memorial at Baxters Well, 180 kilometres south of Tennant Creek.

Louisa Lawson and Jack Marsh speak to us clearly from history, reminding us that as much as we honour Sir Henry Parkes for the role he played in building a nation...

...as much as we honour the achievements of our governors and prime ministers, our businessmen and architects and surveyors, our engineers and explorers...

...we also honour the radicals and activists who championed the cause of women...

...and we honour the First Australians, whose land, language and children were stolen...

...and who were kept outside the boundaries of the new nation that was being built on the land they and their forebears had lived in and nurtured for more than 60,000 years.

When I look at these three stories, I realise that despite the massive change that has occurred over the last century, some things never change.

Let me offer you a classic Louisa Lawson quote from the October 1890 editorial of *Dawn* magazine:

“Men govern the world and the schemes upon which all our institutions are founded show men’s thoughts only.”

Women are still fighting to take their place on equal terms with men...in the parliament, the board room, in local government and the professions.

But imagine Louisa popping in to the 21st century and meeting...

...our first female Governor General...

...our first female Deputy Prime Minister...

...and, as of six weeks ago, in New South Wales, our first female Deputy Premier...

I wonder how Henry Parkes would rate our nation’s progress against his ideals?

The Henry Parkes Foundation’s website defines his vision as:

“To build a just, fair, egalitarian society through a democratically elected Government with everyone educated and aware of their rights and responsibilities with equal opportunity to participate.”

I think he’d say there’s plenty of room for improvement.

Three years ago my colleague Senator John Faulkner delivered the Parkes oration at the Tenterfield School of Arts. His title was: *Apathy and Anger: Our Modern Australian Democracy*.

It was a powerful speech in which he argued that our democracy is “drowning in mistrust”...

...with a “dangerous indifference to politics accompanied by a simmering resentment of politicians”.

Three years after that speech, I’d have to say that in my home state of NSW, that sentiment recently reached boiling point.

In fact, just last weekend I heard someone say, lamenting the recent state of affairs: “Democracy’s had it.”

There is public cynicism about politics and politicians.

But despite its many failings, let’s all agree that democracy remains our best and only option.

As Winston Churchill famously said:

“Democracy is the worst form of Government except all those other forms that have been tried.”

The election of the Rudd Government 12 months ago did much to restore public confidence.

And we are now setting about the task of regaining the trust of the electorate in NSW under the leadership of new Premier Nathan Rees.

I believe confidence can and will be restored...

...by creating and implementing sound policies,

...managing the State's finances responsibly,

...and changing the way in which we operate.

And I think our new Premier has already demonstrated a significant change in approach.

He's a straight-talker and someone who understands social justice.

The electorate wants to see vision, intellect and passion in their political leaders...

...they want to see sensible, successful administration...

...and they want to see fundamental change for the benefit of society...

At the very least they expect absolute honesty and integrity from their elected representatives.

But let me make a point here.

As a politician I can tell you the public does sometimes have an unrealistic view of politics.

Most of us put up our hand because we want to make a difference.

As John Faulkner said in his address:

“Politics is as it is, not because of the nature of politics but because of the nature of people.

To expect the practice of politics to be somehow nobler than your own workplace or community organisation, to expect politicians to be better and more virtuous than you yourself are, is to guarantee disappointment.”

Having said that, people do expect a higher standard of their leaders, and rightly so.

It is, after all, an immense privilege to hold public office and to serve the community.

As Faulkner also said: “Politics without a social purpose is the empty pursuit of power, brutal and meaningless.”

Every time I talk to a constituent, take part in a Cabinet decision or vote on a bill in Parliament, I am reminded of the enormous trust that the people of NSW have placed in me.

I must also admit that when I have attended a function seven nights in a row and been button-holed by everyone in attendance I am also reminded of the people’s sometimes unrealistic expectations!

In just over two months I take over as National President of the Australian Labor Party.

I’ll make a confession to you tonight – just between you and me...

...I didn’t vote until the age of 26.

While Aboriginal people have been eligible to vote since 1962, voting was not made compulsory until 1984.

The message I took out of that was:

- you don’t have to vote so you’re not really accepted as part of society
- and that society had let Aboriginal people down.

So, like many of my peers, I felt an outsider; alienated.

I remember thinking about the Aboriginal Diggers who returned from the war to find they were barred from the RSL clubs, and their wives not eligible for benefits.

In time, I realised I wasn’t exercising the most important right of a citizen in a democratic society – the right to vote.

And I came to the realisation that being an “outsider” was in part my own creation.

Today I challenge young Aboriginal men and women...stand up, I tell them, take your place! You never know where you might end up.

For me to become the first Aboriginal Australian to serve in the NSW Parliament and to become National President of the Australian Labor Party is

something I would never have dreamt of when I was a child running through the rice stubble after the harvest.

I am passionate about working within the Party to make our processes more open and democratic.

It's the only way we will succeed in growing our membership base.

The ALP is the oldest political party in Australia – it is a tough and resilient institution that has demonstrated its ability to evolve.

As National President, I will seek to start a conversation within the Party:

Currently, the term of National President is one year; with a president, vice president and junior vice president elected to serve on a rotational basis, with 12-month terms.

As a colleague recently suggested, it is a kind of rotisserie arrangement.

Perhaps a new method needs to be cooked up.

The Party needs to ask itself – is this the best model?

Or should we end the rotisserie and allow the President to establish themselves and serve a three year term...and have a vote on the National Executive.

One strength of the current model is that the President is elected by the rank and file.

And perhaps this approach could be extended to the State branches.

I'd also like to look at ways to improve the quality and diversity of people entering politics.

For a start, the men and women who stand in local government elections should be those who have worked hard to win the support of their fellow residents by advocating change and solving local problems.

Their election to council, therefore, should be based on merit...not just affiliation...

...not just on their rise through the local branch of the Labor Party, or, for that matter, the Liberal or any other party.

And, another issue that is close to my heart:

- I will seek to build and strengthen the *Indigenous Labor Network* – with a view to getting Aboriginal people voting, active in the Party, and standing for Parliament.

But what about the responsibility of the broader community?

I fear that some Australians may see their job as done once their vote is cast.

Their job is then simply to stand back, watch the drama unfold, commentate and criticise.

When anything goes wrong – and I mean anything – it's the Government's fault and the Government's role to fix it.

Perhaps politicians have fed the culture of blame and complaint with their grand promises and commitments.

But let me tell you right here, right now: Government cannot solve every problem.

Society's expertise, money and resources and energy are by no means confined to our elected leaders and our permanent public service.

As citizens in a democratic state we all have responsibilities – not only to obey the law, vote and pay taxes...

...but to contribute to the health and wellbeing of that society in whatever way we can.

That might mean volunteering with the local sports club or hospital, as millions of Australians do.

It might mean big business making an effort to employ people with disabilities...or going beyond mere compliance to actively contribute to environmental protection and rehabilitation.

It might mean calling on an elderly neighbour to see if they're ok.

And it certainly means taking part in the conversations, the public contest of ideas, and the political processes that are the cornerstones of a democratic society.

Throughout my career I have always taken opportunities to mentor young people, especially young women.

One of the things I say to them is: get active in your community, look for opportunities to show leadership.

Now let me come to my final theme this evening.

Eight months ago in this city, just a short walk from where we meet this evening, a momentous event occurred.

Our Prime Minister, less than three months into the job, offered a solemn and genuine apology to the Indigenous people.

It is a day that I will never forget.

When I left the Chamber, an elder from South Western Sydney, Aunty May Robinson, came up to me carrying an old black and white photo in a frame.

It was of a young Aboriginal girl at Cootamundra Girls' Home.

“Linda, she said, I've brought Mummy with me.”

This was a day that will be recorded in the stories of Aboriginal people to be passed down through the generations.

A great hurt had been inflicted.

And the truth of what happened needed to be told.

Finally, after years of needless prevarication, it was.

In the grand, colourful, complicated tapestry that is Australia, that moment in history will stand out as a pivotal event.

I encourage you to learn more about the truth about Australia's history by watching the current series on SBS, *The First Australians*.

The first episode told the story of the resistance leader and warrior, Windradyne:

- a Wiradjuri man who fought against the encroachment of settlers in his country, my country.

In 1824, after an outbreak of violence that resulted in the deaths of several stockmen and the indiscriminate killing of Aboriginal women and children, Governor Brisbane placed the western district of NSW under martial law.

The Wiradjuri became legal targets and the results were devastating.

It was my people who first drank from those poisoned water holes.

These are important historical facts. This is part of the truth we need to face and accept as a nation.

I pay tribute to historians such as Henry Reynolds, Marcia Langton, CD Rowley and Inga Clendinnen who have brought these truths to light.

Of course, an apology, no matter how heartfelt, doesn't translate into better health, clean water, adequate housing, a longer life expectancy or an end to welfare.

As the Zen proverb says:

“Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment chop wood, carry water.”

A huge amount of work needs to be done and I acknowledge the Prime Minister’s genuine commitment to “closing the gap”.

But do not underestimate the importance of that moment of truth in the history of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relations.

Let me come to another example.

Part of truth-telling is plain speaking.

So let me speak plainly on the subject of Australia’s ethnic diversity.

We are a culturally diverse society – nearly a quarter of Australians were born overseas and over 30 percent speak another language at home.

The evolution of our country’s physical landscape over millions of years is evident in the layers of rock and sediment.

To see the evolution of our population you need only walk the streets of my electorate of Canterbury...

...you will see every wave of immigration represented

...layer upon layer of migrants who arrive and, in time, settle.

My experience as Local Member in one of the country’s most culturally diverse areas is overwhelmingly positive.

Of course, there are many examples where this is not the case.

I think we need more plain speaking.

More truth-telling.

More conversations between different groups at the kids’ netball club or the local community centre.

One positive to come out of the Cronulla riots was the initiative *On the Same Wave* that set out to break down the Anglo-Saxon dominance of surf lifesaving.

Go down the beach this summer and you will find Abduls, Mohameds and Habibs on patrol.

As a newspaper recorded a father from Bankstown saying as he watched his son train in the local pool:

“I want him to be a part of Australian life.”

What a great quote – an immigrant father’s wish for his young son...

...to be a part of Australian life.

Think of the hope and optimism contained in that simple sentence!

When I think about Australia, I think first about the land – our great continent, the driest on earth...

...with its wet tropical wilderness, arid centre, and snow covered mountains.

I think about the original inhabitants, from whom I am descended.

And that momentous day in January, 1788, when the 11 ships of the First Fleet sailed into Sydney Harbour.

...the Gadigal people standing on the shore...

...watching...

...unaware of the dramatic upheaval that was about to occur.

I think of the millions who have fled here to escape terror and violence, or those who came looking for jobs and a better life.

And of the individuals like Henry Parkes, Louisa Lawson and Jack Marsh who have been part of the Australian story.

When I think of Australia I cannot help but contemplate her contradictions...

...Dorothea Mackellar’s drought and flooding rains...

...our belief in the fair go that is being tested as wealth becomes concentrated in certain stratas of society...

...and where poverty is entrenched in many of our postcodes...

...I think of how an Aboriginal painting will sell at auction for a million dollars...yet on the news that night we see another story about Aboriginal children with lower health standards than their counterparts in third world countries.

Yet it works.

Our Australian tapestry is fascinating, strengthened by the weaving together of many threads and colours.

The last 220 years make up a small section compared to the 60,000 years or more of Aboriginal life that preceded it.

But think of what is crammed in to those two centuries!

And of what is yet to come.

I don't believe democracy has "had it".

But it needs our attention:

- more responsibility on the part of leaders and the citizenry,
- more truth telling.

Tapestries tell a story.

They can take a long time, and many hands, to make...and they can be repaired.

Thank you.