

**Fred Chaney**  
**Dinner Address – Indigenous Economic Forum 6 March 2003**

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**Address by Fred Chaney**

Thank you Chief Minister for the introduction and thank you too to Pat Miller, the Deputy Administrator of the Northern Territory for your welcome to country.

Just a few days ago I was talking to Professor Mick Dodson about the meaning of reconciliation. One of his comments was that in a reconciled Australia it would be unremarkable for an Indigenous person to hold any position in the land. It is good to be in the Northern Territory when it is unremarkable -- but wonderful -- to have Aboriginal people as Deputy Administrator, Minister and Members of Parliament

In other parts of Australia we have welcomes to country in circumstances where most of the country has gone from native title. So I like in those circumstances to talk about people like the Martu in the Western Desert who have high order -- exclusive possession -- native title to an area the size of England.

Acknowledging traditional owners is not an empty gesture. And I think of the 20 year struggle of the Martu, and I think of that as being part of the reality that we are on someone's country when we hear that welcome. And here in Alice Springs where I'm sitting next to the Mayor, Fran Kilgariff, she spoke to me about the good impact of the recognition of native title here in Alice Springs. And all of this is part of a picture which for me is of an Australia which is moving in a direction that I personally really like.

Can I acknowledge the Chief Minister, and in doing so acknowledge the sentiments that she expressed when she spoke to us all today (applause). I think that's a very appropriate response because I believe that to move from a confrontational position to a position of negotiation and the seeking of agreement is again to move towards the sort of country that we all want.

And I acknowledge all the many people of great significance who are here. There is another minister, there is a Federal member, there are many people, there is an ATSIC Commissioner, Kim, a very new ATSIC Commissioner. There are people who are undertaking all sorts of important roles in this community and I suppose the important thing is that we are all here with a very strong sense of common purpose.

Because we all heard the Taylor presentation today. John Taylor's report on the statistical position reminded us of the realities with which we are dealing and we are all here because we want it to be different. And we are determined that it

should be different. I think the outcome of these two days will be that we take further steps towards it being different.

I wear a lot of different hats, although I'm getting rid of as many as I can. One of my hats is as co-chair of Reconciliation Australia and I just want to say something very quickly about the relevance of these two days to the whole idea of reconciliation. I want to quote someone who came originally from this town, the late Charlie Perkins. Charlie worked with many of us who are here. Charlie was a constant spur to us and a reminder of how much we had failed. He said this:

'There is a strong and inescapable link between progress towards social justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the goal of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The second, that is reconciliation, is unobtainable without the first.'

And again, as someone who is devoted to the notion of reconciliation for Australia, I just want to acknowledge to all of you that what you are striving towards is a critical and intrinsic part of Australia being a reconciled nation.

If I can put on my native title hat for a moment, can I say that the really splendid thing about native title is not of course that Aboriginal people are being drawn into some of the most ridiculous, protracted, technical and stupid pieces of litigation that the human mind can imagine.

A distinguished judge and previously the head of the National Native Title Tribunal, described native title law after the High Court decision in **Ward** as like trying to swallow a porcupine. But that's the negative side of native title. The positive side of native title is that all around this country there are Aboriginal people at the negotiating table as of right. They are not there because somebody is being nice to them. They are at the table because they have the right to be at the table. And that is a very different Australia. (applause)

So whilst it is a delight to come to the Northern Territory and to hear the Chief Minister say as she did today, that she has a government policy of consultation and negotiation and not litigation, can I say to her that she should not feel lonely about that. It may not have been the fashion here, but it has, increasingly around Australia, been understood to be the sensible way to proceed.

Leadership has come often not from politicians as we're getting here at the moment, it's often come surprisingly from the mining industry. They, earlier than most of the governments in Australia, understood that they faced a totally different context. And it's been good today to hear some positive things said about some mining companies. I know there are Newmont people here and I promised I'd mention them. Several times today they have been mentioned in a very positive way by Aboriginal participants. And isn't that again a reminder of how Australia is changing for the better?

It's perhaps worth remembering that mining companies didn't actually fall off their horse and lose their blindfold like the Apostle Paul on the road to Tarsus. What they did was to understand that there is a different legal and moral framework flowing from that legal change which Mabo represents which requires Aboriginal people to be regarded as stakeholders and not as some form of nuisance.

So these are all the things which I suppose make me feel that things really are moving in the right direction. Notwithstanding the real truths with which we were confronted by John Taylor and which must drive us in our determination to make things are different.

Now let me give you my parable for why everybody here should be confident that they can create change. I don't think there's ever been a more important change to Australia in terms of its relationship between the settler society and the Indigenous people than the Mabo case.

Where did that case come from? It came from a university gardener. It came from an Indigenous man who had a humble job at a university in Queensland and who didn't really approve of the status quo. He got into conversation with people that normally we all like to despise - academics and lawyers, and so began a most extraordinary personal saga of insistence that what was unacceptable would be changed.

That was a ten year saga and there are so many elements of it which we need to keep in mind, all of us who are here tonight, in I believe a common cause. Because the ten year saga of Mabo was a partnership between Indigenous determination, absolute determination to right the wrong, and people like the late Ron Castan QC, and indeed a team of others, who joined those Indigenous people in believing that things had to be different. When I am set back on my heels by the statistical reality with which we've still got to deal, they're the things which remind me that all change is possible.

Now, I want to say a few things about land. What a fantastic start to today to hear Galarrwuy. I keep half insulting Galarrwuy by saying that I remember so clearly knowing him all those 25 years ago when he was so young, handsome and vigorous and Clare corrected me and said he's still very handsome and vigorous!

But the fact is they were exciting times when the battle was still there to be won and Galarrwuy talked today about the 30 year struggle. He talked about the struggle to gain the rights to land, he said, "to use and develop as we wish". There wasn't a hint in what Galarrwuy said that he was exhausted by the struggle so far which has occupied so much of his life. And there wasn't a hint that that land had been obtained other than to enable Aboriginal people to use it and develop it as they wish.

I thought one of the really inspiring things about today was the story of the railway line. It had its unhappy bits, it had an unhappy bit about the lack of employment further in the south. But the reality is that the story of the railway line is something of a parable for the future. You see, the story of the railway line is that the hard won rights of the First Nations people of this country don't have to be lost in the name of development. Those rights are just as compatible with development in the Northern Territory as the rights of the Duke of Westminster are compatible with the development of the City of London.

You see, what's been achieved as I understand it, is that an important economic development has occurred without extinguishing the Indigenous rights which underlie (and command and demand) the First Nation status of Indigenous Australians. What's happened is that the Indigenous community has been able to preserve its fundamental inheritance and to leverage that into at least the beginnings of answers to the issues we've been debating, and probably agonising over, today. This is the way of the future, I believe.

The truth is that these are in many respects the best of times. Notwithstanding our manifest failures in so many areas, this is a time of extraordinary opportunity. The new culture of negotiation is one in which the extraordinarily broad land rights of the Indigenous people in this country now can be leveraged into both social and economic development and growth in the direction that Aboriginal people wish to take, and I believe into the economic integration that I regard as necessary for a truly satisfactory Australia.

Jon Altman reminded us today that there are infinite subtleties in this, and you can even discount some of John Taylor's statistics from the realities that Jon Altman also talked about. There are many elements of the Aboriginal economy which are not measured. We regard them as carelessly in the economic zone as we regard the lifelong efforts of my spouse who reared children to make, to do, to assist, to work in the community. None of this is measured by the bloody economists.

The truth is there is a huge unmeasured economy and that to some extent that ameliorates the figures that we have painfully pored over again today. But I don't think that being careful and sensitive about this should be taken too far. I don't hear very many Aboriginal spokespeople, men or women, who are not saying that they do not want the fruits of economic development. Of course that's not an economic development which is careless of traditional values and of culture. But the reality is that much of what the rest of Australia enjoys is what Aboriginal people now see as also part of their birthright. I think that the presentations today have certainly confirmed my sense that Indigenous people wish to be socially and economically integrated, not assimilated, but integrated.

That brings me to what I regard as the delights of today. In all this difficulty and doubt the truth is that what people are telling us today is that things can be

different. I just want to mention a few of the things which absolutely delight me about what the future can hold if we've got half the guts of Eddie Mabo.

For a start there's no golden key. But there's a discernible pattern. If there's a clear purpose, and that's the starting point, if there's a clear purpose, and if that purpose is pursued in partnership with all of the people who can effect that movement towards it; and if resources are applied and directed towards community owned purposes in particular, then amazing things can happen.

I naturally prefer to talk about the things of which I have a personal knowledge and a personal association, purely because we're always most comfortable with the things that we know well. But I say again that the Northern Land Council's story about the railway is, it seems to me, a classic cameo of what can be achieved, the leverage that can shift things.

I have particular affection for the Gumala Mirnuwarni project because that education project in the Pilbara, which is now being copied in various centres in Western Australia, has to my personal knowledge transformed the lives and opportunities of a whole series of Aboriginal people.

I sometimes wonder, where's the next generation of leaders? A very rude thing to say when we have got Kim Hill, a newly elected leader here, but where is the next crop of the Galarrwuys and the late Wesley Laynhapuys (check spelling please) and the people who for so long carried the flag. I know that we have got to have Aboriginal people who are as confident in the majority culture as they are in their own culture if we are to have leadership into the future that is going to work for Australia and for Aboriginal people.

I think of the boy, he's a boy when you're my age, who got the top employee award at the national awards in Canberra, a young chap called Clinton. Clinton came out of a very disadvantaged Indigenous community in Roebourne. Clinton was a boy who was marginal at school. Clinton was a boy who ran into real personal difficulties in year eleven. Clinton was a boy who at any point could have fallen off the trolley. And Clinton is a boy who is now in his final year of his apprenticeship and who gets up in the parliament house in Canberra and said 'I am proud of what I am doing and I am doing it for my two beautiful children'.

I know that that really matters. I know that in that project working with mining companies and educators and teachers and parents and kids and out of the Polly Farmer Foundation, I know that there is a transformation going on. I know that that is what changing John Taylor's statistics is about.

I really love it when I go to the Argyle Diamond mine and they say that 'for 20 years we've been struggling with Aboriginal employment and we've managed to employ four and a half percent of our workforce. And you know we've just re-jigged the way we employ people and in the last 18 months we've gone to

thirteen and a half percent. And we're going to get to fifteen percent soon, and by the way when we go underground we're going to have thirty percent'.

I really liked talking to the Newmont guys here today, who told me that twenty percent or so of their workforce is Indigenous. I really love the turn around in Maree, Moree, I'm sorry, Maree I didn't get her to turn around at all (laughter) the usual lack of success. I went up to Moree and I spent the day with a guy called Lyle Munro, an Aboriginal leader of my generation. Lyle Munro went off to the United Nations and complained about the government of which I was a part, so we've had quite a stormy relationship. Lyle Munro spent a day taking me around Moree pointing out examples of how bad Moree had been and how good it is now. Moree the place of the Freedom Riders; the place where the kids weren't allowed to go in the swimming pool; the place where until recently you couldn't get any insurance on a shop; the place where until recently blacks and whites were at daggers drawn. In Moree they have banners in the streets proclaiming that they were a reconciliation town. In Moree they have plaques commemorating the bitter history of the place.

There is a transformation going on there which is about reversing - I'm sorry to keep labelling you with it John, the reality of these things - the transformation which is about changing those painful statistics.

I actually want to finish by saying I think there is a risk. And I tell you what, I think the biggest risk we've got in 2003 is a failure of imagination. A failure of imagination. A failure at the community level, at the individual level, at the government level, at every level of our society to understand what we can do and what we should seek.

I really worry about whether Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory and in other parts of Australia are being given by their leaders a sense of what is possible and that there is a really good life available for every Australian if we just work at it hard enough.

One of the things that has turned those Gumala Mirnuwarni kids around is that the understanding of what they can have, of what is possible for them, has been changed. They have been sufficiently exposed to what is possible for them to know that it is worth wanting what is possible. I think that for Indigenous Australia today with its footprint on close to twenty percent of the Australian land mass, a footprint which is going to grow and increase, there is a capacity to leverage that fundamental legal interest in the Australian continent they once owned completely, a fantastic opportunity to leverage that in social, economic, political and indeed constitutional terms.

When the Premier of Nunavut in Canada visits Australia under the auspices of Reconciliation Australia, and talks of the achievement of a tiny band of North American Indigenous people who now govern a vast territory, you can't help to

be struck by the possibilities that are there for a new Australia. An Australia which recognises its First Nation, and which provides an appropriate place for them in all aspects of its life.

That's what these two days is about ladies and gentlemen, and I am deeply privileged to be part of it. I would like to finish by saying that for anyone who thinks it can't be done, I suggest you go away and think of Eddie Mabo.

What could be more unlikely than a gardener in a university turning the land laws of Australia on their head? That's what guts, determination and stamina and a belief in right can achieve.

Thankyou.