

Charles Perkins Oration

Mick Gooda

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner

Australian Human Rights Commission

Thursday 15 October 2015

University of Sydney

Acknowledgements

Thank you Stephen for your sincere welcome and can I also thank Uncle Chicka for your generous Welcome to Country.

I begin by acknowledging the Traditional Owners of the land on which we sit this evening, the Gadigal Peoples of the Eora Nation.

I honour your Elders that have come before you, those that are here today and wait in optimistic anticipation for those Elders who are yet to emerge.

Uncle Chicka, I stand here proud to bring you a message from my Gangulu Elders. They tell me to pass on their salutations and their thanks for allowing me to live and work on your lands and have asked me to let you know they are aware of the strength and resilience of Gadigal people, past and present, in standing strong in

the face of the forces of colonisation.

They recognise Gadigal land has long been a significant meeting place for Aboriginal peoples and they stand in solidarity with you.

Please also let me acknowledge Professor Gillian Triggs, the President of the Australian Human Rights Commission.

Professor Stephen Garton, Acting Vice Chancellor, I acknowledge your place, the University of Sydney. You are the custodian of Australia's oldest University, a place of learning not far from where our oldest living culture first came face to face with the tall ships of the British, over 227 years ago.

You honor Charles Wentworth whose dream of Sydney University, Australia's first, was to provide "the opportunity for the child of every class to become great and useful in the destinies of this country". You have breathed life into that vision for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples by establishing Australia's first Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Indigenous Strategy & Services, a position occupied by my countryman, Professor Shane Houston. Yet again, the University of Sydney has set the standard for others to follow.

Finally, I honor Charlie's equally spirited, strong and resilient family. His wife Eileen and children Hetti, Rachel and Adam, all of whom have continued to advocate for our mob in their own unique and special ways.

Friends, I feel really privileged to be here in the Great Hall this

evening to pay my respect to the strongest of advocates for our people, Dr Charles (Kumantjayi) Perkins.

An Arrernte / Kalkadoon man who left Australia an enormous legacy of equality, self-determination and respect for our culture and the arts. He was the first Aboriginal man to graduate from any Australian University and in 1966 he was awarded his Bachelor of Arts right here at Sydney University, an event now celebrated with the naming of the Charles Perkins Centre.

I am particularly humbled to have been asked by his family to deliver this annual lecture and am personally heartened and at the same time particularly terrified to see you all here tonight. Eileen, Hetti, Rachel, and Adam, my one wish is to do justice to Charlie's legacy as I speak about his life.

Life and Legacy of Dr Charles (Kumantjayi) Perkins (1936-2000)

I want to begin tonight by recalling aspects of Charlie's life, and, utilizing a rights framework to explore his influence and legacy.

Two years ago on the 20th anniversary of the creation of this Social Justice Commissioner position, I related how meaningful relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and a human rights based approach has been a key part of the advocacy of all Social Justice Commissioners. I spoke about how previous Commissioners all in one way or another worked on the development of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and how that Declaration reaffirms the

rights we hold as a peoples and contains four fundamental human rights principles:

- self-determination
- participation in decision-making underpinned by the concept of free, prior and informed consent and good faith
- respect for and protection of culture, and
- non-discrimination and equality.

Charlie valued all of these principles and much of his work can be understood as a long campaign for their realisation and for the real outcomes that can flow from them. There is so much we could say about this enormous legacy, but in the timeframe we have tonight I'll take us on a journey of some of his great work, reflecting on the current challenges and opportunities facing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples today.

I'd like to begin with Charlie's cultural foundation. As I mentioned earlier, he was a proud Arrernte / Kalkadoon man.

His mother was an Arrente woman, whom he described as 'a very strong willed and highly principled person'¹ and his father was a Kalkadoon man whose people had endured significant historical battles with the European settlers. Charlie summed up this heritage from his parents beautifully when he said:

¹ <http://www.australianbiography.gov.au/subjects/perkins/interview1.html>

‘Arrente people are peaceful, introspective, deep into the culture and the Kalkadoon people are very strong and war like and really never take a backward step on things.’²

I think this gives us a great insight into the passion and determination that Charlie brought to his life and the fight for the place our people should occupy in a modern Australia. In a lifetime of exceptional achievement and dedication to better outcomes for our people, he would need this passion and determination every waking day. Day to day living in the period of Charlie’s early life was extremely hard. Enduring government assimilationist policies, segregation and racism were the ways of life for our mob.

It was particularly harsh for Charlie where he was born in Alice Springs, where it was illegal for Aboriginal people to live in town, so Charlie and his siblings were moved to the ‘Bungalow’ also known as The Old Telegraph Station about a mile north of Alice Springs.

I would like to think that all of us here tonight take the right to freedom of movement for granted, but like many Aboriginal people of his generation across Australia, Charlie grew up in a compound closely monitored and surveilled by police and government authorities. Men, women and children were separated, generations were isolated from each other and Aboriginal people needed permission to go to town on certain days for limited number of

² <http://www.australianbiography.gov.au/subjects/perkins/interview1.html>

particular purposes.

I remember Charlie telling of how distressed mothers would go to a certain part of the fence around the Bungalow to see their kids and to pass through everyday treats such as a packet of biscuits – just to let them know they were loved and remained in the forefront of their mothers' mind. But this was a risky business. Being caught meant removal and yet another confrontation with the police and the authorities.

Wanting a better life for her children, Charlie's mother made the heart wrenching decision to allow him travel south to go to school at St Francis House, a boy's home in Adelaide. Again, life was hard, being separated from his Mother and family, and as a very young man Charlie's strong will and courage began to emerge. His love of sport at St Francis House provided both sustenance and escape – he played rugby union, rugby league and Australian rules but it was in soccer where he made his real mark and where he excelled.

Playing alongside his cousin John Moriarty and Gordon Briscoe, soccer was eventually to take him around the world.

Sport has always been a metaphor for our struggles. From tennis to hockey, track and field, boxing, basketball and golf – this list of sports where Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have reached great heights goes on. And the football field is no exception – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders men, and more recently, women have taken to the field in all codes with great success. This year in the AFL and NRL grand finals, Cyril Rioli and Jonathan

Thurston, both proud Aboriginal men, won the Norm Smith and Clive Churchill medals respectively for best on ground. And who can forget Kyah Simon scoring the goal that knocked Brazil out of the Women's World Cup this year.

But it remains a great shame of this nation, that this success is not always celebrated the way it should be, and Charlie was no stranger to racism on the football field.

We've seen racism towards Aboriginal players again recently in the poor treatment of Adam Goodes. In the tradition of men like Charlie Perkins, Michael Long and Nicki Winmar, Adam Goodes spoke up against racism on and off the field.

I have a fair idea of what Charlie would have said to fans, both the supporters and the detractors, when Adam took the decision to stand down due to 'burn out' from the booing and racist taunts. Like Adam, Charlie was the constant target of all kind of abuse for the simple reason of calling out unfairness, advocating for our mob and not taking a backward step.

And, in the same way that Adam gave us a rallying point this year, so did Charlie. Their honesty, strength and courage have inspired us. I remember growing up in Central Queensland and listening to my Dad talk with admiration of this man from 'down south' who was fierce in the way he took up the fight for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and how my dad said this gave us all great hope.

For giving us that great hope and inspiration I take this opportunity

pay my respects to Adam's incredible sporting ability and his humble leadership in the tradition of Charlie Perkins, calling out racism, as well as advocating for Constitutional Recognition and Reconciliation. I know Adam's next professional 'leap' will be exceptional.

One of Charlie's best known legacies is his powerful advocacy for equality in public spaces – another first for Australia. The courageous 1965 Freedom Rides throughout Western NSW towns were inspired by the 1961 Freedom Rides of the American Civil Rights movement.

Back in 1965, members of Sydney University's 'Student Action For Aborigines' group embarked on a journey into the heartland of rural NSW, raising awareness about the living conditions and the imposed segregation of Aboriginal people. These conditions were out of the usual line of sight for the general population and the media.

In Australia's Rosa Parks moment, the students boldly challenged the rules that prevented Aboriginal children from entering the local swimming pools in Moree and Kempsey³ and adults from accessing the Walgett RSL.

I can only imagine what it must have been like for Charlie to be the spokesperson for this group, taking on the pro-segregation attitudes of the locals at the time, raising awareness through the media and

³ <http://aiatsis.gov.au/exhibitions/1965-freedom-ride>

calling for state and federal government legislative change. On the ground, it must have been very tense and at times frightening, however, together, they drove real change for equal rights in the face of strong opposition and Australia as a whole is the beneficiary of their courage.

I look back in admiration of Charlie and the members of that Sydney University group for their courage to stand up and draw attention to the unequal treatment of Aboriginal people in those towns.

This year marked the 50th anniversary of this activism and was celebrated here this year with many of the original Freedom Riders joining Rachel to retrace the original journey.

Recognition – Constitutional Reform

After university and his involvement in the Freedom Rides, Charlie's focus turned to ensuring that our people have our own voice in civil society and have a say in managing our own affairs. He played a fundamental role in the push during the 1960s towards community control of Aboriginal services and entrenching a voice for Aboriginal people in both government and civil society.

As the Manager of the Foundation for Aboriginal Affairs, and member of the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders, he was instrumental in the drive towards community control of services. It was a time of great activism and along with other Aboriginal community members such as the late Chicka Dixon, Ken Brindle, and Kath Walker he took a key role in the lead up to the 1967 Referendum

With characteristic insight into practical community need and vision for the future, he wrote to then Prime Minister Holt outlining his ideas about how the government might use its new power – some of these ideas were for:

- a national legislative body for Aboriginal Affairs;
- employment and training centres,
- an Aboriginal Education Foundation;
- an Aboriginal housing program;
- a federal racial discrimination law;
- proper Aboriginal health policy and services; and importantly, for our land rights to be recognised.⁴

In the subsequent years, Charlie played a key role in giving practical effect to many of these proposals. He brought his honest, straight shooting, courageous style to this work in the public service where he was really able to influence and make change, but not without, as they say, breaking a few eggs.

In this period, Charlie was active on a new front line. During the Freedom Rides he was toe to toe with opponents on the streets of rural towns. Now he was on the front line of government, inside the bureaucracy working with the country's public servants – politicians and bureaucrats.

When I pause to think about the title of tonight's talk "whose voices shape reform – politicians or people?" I think Charlie's life has been an extraordinary example to many of us, including myself, that while it may

⁴http://indigenoustrights.net.au/resources/documents/letter_from_charles_perkins_to_harold_holt_june_1967/page_1

appear that politicians and hold much of the power, we can all play a part to influence how that power is exercised.

Charlie was one of the first to work at the Office of Aboriginal Affairs initially as a Research Officer overseen by the Council for Aboriginal Affairs which included Dr Nugget Coombs. In a portent of things to come, Charlie quickly found himself in trouble with both the Council and the bureaucracy for his outspokenness about the absence of Aboriginal people in decision making roles. But typical of Charlie he was suspended when he made public remarks about the Country Party. In his defence, in those days the Country Party provided plenty of fodder about which any reasonable person would want to offer public comment.

It was this fight for Aboriginal people to have an independent voice that was a constant driver of his aim for our people to take control of our affairs. In the mid-seventies, he began to see a change when the first election for the National Aboriginal Consultative Council brought 41 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders into the first iteration of Indigenous decision making within the Federal Government.

He became the first Aboriginal person to be appointed head of Federal Government Department in 1984, but in 1988 his low point arrived when he was dismissed from this position.

Bob Hawke summed up his situation almost perfectly when he said Charlie, “sometimes found it difficult to observe the constraints usually imposed on permanent heads of departments because he had a burning passion for advancing the interests of his people”.

This is the conundrum which faces all of our mob in many positions in which we find ourselves, how to balance those 'constraints' with the interests of our people, but working with Charlie provided us all with a great template.

His final public positions were with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission as Commissioner for Central Northern Territory and NSW where he was the Deputy Chairperson. It was at ATSIC that I came to really know Charlie and experience that quality of his of never taking a backward step and heard his mantra of Government setting us up to fight like camp dogs over the few bones thrown our way.

I remember his stoushes with the shock jocks of the day like John Laws when he would ignore all advice to just turn the radio off and then take the gloves off in a bare knuckle on air rumble. I would pay a million bucks to see how Andrew Bolt would go against him today.

However, that dismissal of Charlie provides us with a sense of irony. Here he was a man feted upon his appointment for his advocacy his people but this very advocacy that was one of the main reasons for his dismissal.

Our world is full of such ironies. Another of the many ironies we endure in the world of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs is that as some governments are making restitution for monies they controlled, others are creating new systems for the control of income. I'm currently involved in some very exciting work in Queensland that will continue to address the issue of stolen wages.

QLD Taskforce

Charlie and I were fortunate to live in time where we were actually paid a salary, governed by a proper award, for our work. But many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, across the country, had their wages stolen from them and used by successive governments for a host of public purposes – usually quite unrelated to the people who earned the money in the first place. It is another example of the strict controls people lived under and the obstacles they faced to asserting themselves or following their dreams.

More recently, successive Queensland governments have grappled with the best way to repay that money and make restitution for the harms done by those policies. Along with eleven other people, I am working on a way of distributing \$21 million as a gesture of reparation and reconciliation for the wages and social security payments stolen from our people, including my mother, up until 1971.

Healthy Welfare Card

At the same time though, this very week we have seen a debate in our National Parliament around a new mechanism to control Aboriginal people money – the so called Healthy Welfare Card.

I am deeply concerned about the impact of new measures such as the Healthy Welfare Card. In the days that Charlie was drafting his letter to Prime Minister Holt, we were shaking off the shackles of the old welfare protection measures that, among other controls on day to day life, exerted almost total control over Aboriginal peoples' remuneration.

The current trend back towards management of Aboriginal people's and Torres Strait Islanders' incomes is worrying on two fronts. Firstly, while there's no doubt that many disadvantaged Aboriginal people would like support, the evidence in relation to income management is mixed to say the least. Any possible benefits must be weighed against the sense of disempowerment people report, the stigma they feel and punitive perceptions. I have grave concerns about the most recent proposal of the Social Security Legislation Amendment (Debit Card Trial) Bill 2015 which passed in the upper house without amendments on Wednesday evening, and its implementation.

The Healthy Welfare Card is not exactly identical to income management, but it imposes restrictions on the ways people can spend their money and will almost certainly impact disproportionately on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

It is also not identical to the regimes that stole our peoples wages and social security payments, but with those regimes still fresh in our collective memories it is no wonder that this card concept reopens old wounds and forces many of our people to revisit that past trauma.

The hardest part of this proposal to accept is that yet again the treatment of our people will be different to mainstream Australia and it is this differentiation of treatment that Charlie fought so hard to bring into the open.

Despite the progress in the measures in Charlie's letter to former Prime Minister Harold Holt, we are seeing backward steps in relation to a

number of criminal justice issues. We still face unacceptable rates of violence, against women, children and men, but responses like the paperless arrests in the Northern Territory are heading in the wrong direction. In my 2015 report, I will note that they result in longer periods in custody for largely minor offenses and provide nothing to address the underlying causes of the conduct or prevent recidivism.

In relation to land rights though, we saw great improvements during Charlie's lifetime across a number of jurisdictions. In 1992 we saw the High Court's decision on Native Title following nearly a life time of struggle by Eddie Koiki Mabo.

Successful claims under land rights and native title legislation have provided access and utilise land and waters across the country. In this post claims era, Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander leaders are working with the strengths and limits of these rights to land and water.

The new frontier is in part, about utilising the land and waters for economic development to realise the aspirations of our communities. Earlier this year, we held a Roundtable with a diverse range of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from the Torres Straits, the Gulf of Carpentaria, Cape York, Sydney, the Kimberley and Darwin.

Property Rights Roundtable

A number of key challenges that face Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were explored, particularly when it comes to the full realization of our rights under various land rights and native title legislation. Key themes included:

Fungibility – this refers to a difficulty faced by traditional owners who want to use their land for economic development but are unable to use it as security because of the communal, inalienable nature of the actual title. The second key theme was about the need to build relationships across financial service sectors, and institutions like IBA and the ILC to explore investment options. Participants were keen to send the message that there is a fair dinkum business case for investment and we have had enough of welfare and charity.

Roundtable participants also want to build capacity of our mob to have the necessary advocacy, governance and risk management skills to successfully engage in business and manage our estates in order to secure the best possible outcomes for our communities.

The issue of compensation was also important as a mechanism to leverage finances to support economic development. There was a collective frustration at the lack of successful compensation cases despite the years of fear mongering about the rivers of money that were supposed to flow from the realization of our rights under land rights and native title.

Finally, participants talked about the ways we might implement the right to development on native title lands. I was really pleased to hear these discussions, because for some time I've thought too much of the dialogue on this issue in Australia that revolved around how to protect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples from development as opposed to how to realise our rights to development and the associated benefits that come with it. This right is clearly set out in the UN

Declaration, adopted by the General Assembly in 1986 and defines it as an:

'inalienable right, by which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realised'.^[6]

I'm confident that Charlie would have been right at home with these Roundtable Participants as they think creatively and realistically about the ways to make real change for their people today and future generations, while respecting the cultural significance of the land, waters and their ancestors.

But, as I flagged earlier, in the same places where we're seeing progress and possibility, we're experiencing some of the worst backward thinking from government.

I have no doubt that Charlie would have had plenty to say about the Western Australian government's attitude to Aboriginal people still living on country in remote areas.

Closure of WA Communities

Approximately 12,000 people live in the 274 remote communities in Western Australia.¹

In November 2014, Premier Colin Barnett announced that up to 150 remote Aboriginal communities may be closed.² How does one close a community? How do you say to people living in a liberal democracy in

the 21st century that they cannot remain on their ancestral lands? Human rights principles, including the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples are clear that Indigenous people should not be removed from their territories. This includes policies that make life on country untenable such as the devolving of government responsibility for essential services such as water and electricity to bodies that cannot sustain them.³

Since the announcement by the Commonwealth government of its policy of abandoning essential services, we have seen the familiar justifications (child abuse, family violence, poor education outcomes, and the limited prospect of employment⁴) which portray remote Aboriginal communities as dysfunctional and stigmatise residents. We have also seen a narrow-minded approach, which counts the costs per capita of service provision but fails to offer the cost to the community of disruption and dislocation, or explain how other centres with their own high rates of unemployment and social problems will absorb and accommodate these new arrivals.

Throughout the process, there was no engagement with Aboriginal people before or immediately after the announcement, even when it came clear that the situation was creating huge uncertainty and distress for our mob.

It was not until a few months later, after a solid campaign of online activism attracting national and international attention (not to mention a few celebrities) and protest on the streets of our capital cities that the WA Government responded with a plan for service provision of services⁵ including establishment of Strategic Regional Advisory Councils in the Kimberley and the Pilbara.

Again, in this arbitrary action by the WA Government we have seen a move away from self-determination and back to the days of government telling Aboriginal people where and how they will live. The memories of the Bungalow and the control of people's movements seem less like ancient history and more like history repeated in a new form.

Even today, we wait for the WA Government to provide certainty to its constituents, and the services that make life on country possible.

Constitutional Recognition

As many of you would be aware, we have another opportunity to progress this agenda in the move for Constitutional Recognition. Charlie and the Foundation were strong advocates for the 'Yes' vote in the 1967 referendum. I want to make some remarks about the 1967 Referendum before moving on to talk about today's issues. I believe we sometimes miscast that last referendum. Its wasn't an end in of itself but part of a bigger movement for advancing the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples but I will make an observation that there was a missed opportunity to capitalise on the momentum that it built in creating governance structures that would help realise our right to self-determination.

Since the 1967 Referendum, there have been ebbs and flows of legal and political wins and losses for our people.

As the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, I have long advocated for Constitutional Recognition of our people and it has featured in all of my Social Justice Reports.

While I am generally optimistic, substantive legal and process issues remain. As no Constitutional reform perimeters have been defined or set, the political process towards a referendum on Constitutional recognition has been largely ad hoc. With numerous consultations conducted by the Expert Panel, the Joint Select Committee and the Review Panel, clarity is now needed from the Government and Opposition of their positions to substantially move this forward.

When Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people met with former Prime Minister Abbott, and Opposition Leader, Bill Shorten in July this year to determine the next steps towards holding a referendum, there was a consensus from our mob that any change to the Constitution must lay the foundation for the fair treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples into the future. It was generally agreed also that a minimalist approach does not go far enough and would not be acceptable to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Significant concern from our mob was expressed that the Constitution as it stands enables current and future parliaments to enact discriminatory measures against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Any reform option must address this concern and must be accompanied by other measures to address the historic and

ongoing disadvantage that has resulted from our past mistreatment.⁵

Mr Abbott and Mr Shorten agreed that a referendum could not be held before the next term of Parliament and they proposed three next steps:

³⁵
¹⁷ A series of community conferences across Australia.

³⁵
¹⁷ The development of a discussion paper by the Joint Select Committee on issues regarding constitutional change in order to facilitate that community discussion, and

³⁵
¹⁷ The establishment of a Referendum Council (reporting to the PM and the Opposition Leader) to progress matters including settling a referendum question, the timing of a referendum, and other constitutional issues.⁶

Following the meeting, the rejection from government on the proposal put together by Pat Dodson, Noel Pearson, Megan Davis and Kirstie Parker for Indigenous specific conferences⁷ demonstrates there is limited understanding in the political sphere of the importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples voices and decision making in this constitutional recognition process.

Details about what comes next are still unclear and bipartisan political support has resulted in a few active steps to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

⁵ Statement presented by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander attendees at a meeting held today with the Prime Minister and Opposition Leader on Constitutional Recognition, HC Coombs Centre, Kirribilli, Sydney (Monday, 6 July 2015) <https://antar.org.au/sites/default/files/187s1033.pdf>

However, the events of the last few weeks with Malcolm Turnbull becoming our 29th Prime Minister might provide the momentum to get this issue moving.

Meaningful Engagement

There also seems to be some tension between the voices of politicians/government and the voices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. I would like to make an observation, simply, if a more collaborative approach is taken, it would leave more energy to put into achieving better outcomes for our mob.

I believe that it is this framework that has the power to elevate the aspirations that we have as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and provides the tools to guide us with this new conversation with Government around the full realization of our rights.

In this year's Social Justice Report, I will talk about the features of a meaningful and effective consultation process with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Some of those key features are:

- the objective of consultations should be to obtain the consent or agreement of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples affected by a proposed measure, and equally important;
- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must not be pressured into making a decision;
- adequate timeframes should be built into consultation processes;
- consultation should be in the nature of negotiations; and
- consultation processes need to respect the representative and decision-making structures.

For constitutional recognition, proper engagement will help ensure that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples understand and have confidence in the process, providing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples with the best opportunity to effect meaningful change.

For the WA Government, proper engagement that incorporates the above features provides will help ensure that the mistakes made in the initial conversation about remote community closures are not repeated.

Conclusion

Ladies and gentlemen, in this job I get to see the whole gamut of challenges experienced by our people. I have witnessed many things in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that are heartbreaking and disturbing, but I am also amazed at the many stories of resilience and hope.

Then I have experiences that are overwhelming and humbling, and this year I got to deliver lectures for three of our true legends.

Rob Riley, Eddie Mabo and tonight, Charlie Perkins. These three men are inextricably linked by both circumstance and nature. The circumstances were the beginnings from which they rose. They all had harsh upbringings having experienced the worst of the assimilationist era in this country, where, particularly with Rob and Charlie they were taken

from their mothers and put in awful places like Sister Kates in Perth and the Bungalow in Alice Springs.

If there was another circumstance that brought them together was the struggle for land rights.

Rob was at the forefront of the fight for land in Western Australia, particularly at Nookanbah and when the WA Government led the resistance to national land rights legislation.

In my tribute to Rob, I mentioned how losing that fight for national land rights lit the fires for what was to become the fight for native title leading to the High Court decision championed by Eddie. Charlie would be there sometimes at odds with other parts of the leadership but nonetheless still fighting for the best deal that could be reaped from that High Court decision.

But it was also their nature that binds these warriors together, it is as if those harsh beginnings built the fires that steeled them for the future battles they would both endure and thrive. Fierce, leader, warrior, fearless, sons, fathers, grandfathers and inspirations, never taking a backward step and never shying away from a fight for the underdog. These are my enduring thoughts when I hear those names.

So in the battle about who shapes reform the best I believe it is the activists like Charlie, Eddie and Rob who set the agenda, it is the activists who push the envelope particularly when it comes to the disenfranchised and the disempowered.

If not for Charlie arguing to the point of suspension for us to participate in decisions that affect us, would have some benevolent government invited us in.

If not for Eddie's dogged determination to pursue the right to his homeland on Mer in the Torres Straits would have some Government voluntarily overturned the myth of terra nullius.

And if not for Rob's fierceness in raising the issues of racial tensions, police brutality and discrimination would we have ever heard of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody.

Now I am a well-known optimist, a glass half full fella, but not even I can see some of these fundamental changes being enacted without the advocacy and agitation of men like Charlie Perkins.

So tonight let us pay tribute to an Arrente / Kalkadoon man, a man who has inspired countless Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women and men across Australia, a man to whom many of us counted as a friend and mentor, a man who challenged the status quo of expected behaviour of our Aboriginal women and Aboriginal men of being seen and not heard.

Ladies and gentlemen, tonight I pay tribute to my friend Charlie Perkins.

Thank you for listening.

⁶ The Hon Tony Abbott MP, Prime Minister, and Bill Shorten, Leader of the Opposition, 'Indigenous Recognition' (Media Release, 6 July 2015).

⁷ Anna Henderson, 'PM calls meeting to address impasses on referendum ahead of week in remote Indigenous communities,' *ABC News* (online), 19 August 2015 <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-08-18/pm-calls-meeting-with-key-advocates-of-indigenous-recognition/6707088>>.