

**SPEECH FOR PROF. MICK DODSON
DIRECTOR RECONCILIATION AUSTRALIA FOR THE
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT DINNER**

Once again, let me say that I am honoured to be on the ancestral lands of the Arrernte peoples. My greetings to all of the Arrernte and, in particular, I pay my respects to your elders.

This afternoon I made the point that there wasn't a whole lot I could tell you as an Aboriginal Australian about prosperity but there was a great deal I could tell you about place and people.

I'm not big on dinner speeches but this evening, for just a few minutes, I do want to make good on the offer I made this afternoon. To talk about place and people, so that perhaps you can take something from that, for tomorrow's deliberations and for when you back to your workplaces and communities.

Perhaps you can think about how understanding these things can deepen your capacity to engage with Aboriginal people and together with them to create prosperity.

The acknowledgement of country I did this afternoon, and again just now, is about understanding history. It's about taking special note of a place and the people who belong to it.

I'm from Broome in Western Australia and thanks to the hard work of our senior law people we've recently been recognised as the native title holders there. That recognition is enormously important to us but we celebrate it in the knowledge that many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across Australia are never going to have legal recognition like this.

It makes it even more important for visitors to acknowledge the traditional owners of country – to publicly recognise that this is their place.

Perhaps it took a white man to truly express what it means to Indigenous Australians, this sense of place, although he admitted:

“No English words are good enough to give a sense of the links between an Aboriginal group and its homeland.”

The admission came from anthropologist W.E.H Stanner, whose Boyer lectures on black and white relationships in this country are, I believe, works of poetry, beauty, genius and, above all, honesty.

They are as relevant today as when he delivered them more than 30 years ago.

That line I just quoted is part of a longer quote and I want to read it in full:

“Our word ‘home’, warm and suggestive though it be, does not match the Aboriginal word that may mean ‘camp’, ‘hearth’, ‘country’, ‘everlasting home’, ‘totem place’, ‘life source’, ‘spirit centre’, and much else.

“Our term ‘land’ is too spare and meager. We can scarcely use it except with economic overtones, unless we happen to be poets.”

This conference is an opportunity to think about how your engagement with Indigenous people and their places can enhance prosperity – for them and for you, and for the nation.

You’ve heard from others about successes and failures in this process called community engagement. It is an exercise in which your industry, more than any other – more than government certainly – has considerable experience and relative success.

My starting point is something many of you would have learned - that to engage with someone, you need to understand something about them including, for us, this Indigenous idea about country.

Stanner was spot on. We are not on about the ordinary English use of the word ‘country’. Country might mean to some, a sovereign nation state that has a right to be a member of the United Nations. Or it refers to quieter, less populated areas outside the main cities where people go for a drive on a Sunday afternoon.

When we talk about country we mean something different. We might mean homeland, or tribal or clan area and in saying so we may mean something more than just a spot on the map. We are not necessarily referring to a place in a geographical sense. We are talking about the whole of the landscape, not just the places in it.

The word country is an abbreviation of all the values, places, resources, stories and cultural obligations associated with that area and its places. The word best describes the entirety of our ancestral domains.

It is place that gives meaning to our creation beliefs – the stories of creation form the basis of our laws and explain the origins of the natural world to us.

And there are places that we regard as particularly significant or even dangerous. People sometimes refer to them as sacred sites and it is not always easy to explain these places.

It is mostly about the spiritual. But they are also about the living and who we are. Because country is also centrally about identity.

Take Uluru for example – some still call it Ayers Rock but it has always been Uluru to the Anangu – Uluru was built during the creation time or what the anthropologist like to call the dream-time. It was built by two boys who played in the mud after it had rained. After they had had their play they went to a place called Wiputa to the south just north of the Musgrave Ranges (I'm not sure who Musgrave¹ was but he certainly was not Anangu!) they killed and ate a wallaby there and headed north again to a place Anangu call Atila – some might know it better as Mt Connor – again I don't know who Connor was.

Not far from Atila is a place called Anari. One of the boys threw a club called a tjuni at a wallaby but missed and hit the ground. The club broke the ground and a spring of fresh water was formed. This boy refused to tell the other boy where the water was and the other boy almost died from thirst. Eventually the boys went to the top of the mount and you can see their bodies there today – preserved as boulders.ⁱ

Similarly, on the island of Mer in the Murray Islands where Eddie Mabo and others fought so strongly and won native title for all of us, there is a rounded summit. It has a long sloping side – this side is Gelam the dugong. He came a long time ago from the Island of Moa and settled down there. He had brought with him seeds and fruit and vegetables and good soil. He scattered these around the Island that is why Mer is so fertile and rich in food crops.

It is through stories such as these we are able to explain the features of our places and landscape. It is the cultural knowledge that goes with it that serves as constant reminders to us of our spiritual association with the land and its places. Even without the in depth cultural knowledge, knowing country has spiritual origins makes it all the more significant and important to us.

It may not seem to fit with the theme of the conference to speak of such things but it's fundamentally important to tell people like you about our country. To let you know what our protocols are.

It's important so that we can treat each other with respect and dignity. We can honour who we each are, and honour our common humanity.

That forms the basis of understanding that allows us to learn from each other, build networks, share ideas and become friends.

And surely as friends, we have a much better chance of moving forward in sustainable harmony and prosperity.
