Address to National Aboriginal Press Club

Senator Patrick Dodson

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Good afternoon.

I acknowledge the Traditional Owners of the land where we meet, the Ngunnawal people.

It is an honour to be asked to give this inaugural address to the brand new National Aboriginal Press Club, and I congratulate Wayne Coolwell for the work he's put in to bring this event to a reality.

It's good to see, too, that the Media Entertainment and Arts Alliance, and the National Press Club, are supporters.

We need national Aboriginal organisations like this new Aboriginal Press Club to promote the agendas of First Nations people.

One particular national organisation we need is a Voice enshrined in the Constitution, but this Government doesn't seem to be able to bring itself to embrace that concept.

I want to say more about that later.

What I first want to do in this address is traverse the history of Aboriginal journalism – that is, journalism written by Aboriginal people themselves.

The first known publication by an Aboriginal community or organisation is the *Flinders Island Chronicle,* published from 1836 to 1837 by the Tasmanian Aboriginal (or Palawa) community who had been exiled from the of Tasmanian mainland – ostensibly for their safekeeping.

The Chronicle was written by those exiles, under the sanction of the commandant, but it was really nothing more than a propaganda sheet.

Take this example from the edition of 17 November 1837, and I quote:

“Now my friends you see that the Commandant is so kind to you he gives you everything that you want. When you were in the bush, the Commandant had to leave his friends and go into the bush and he brought you out of the bush because he felt for you and because he knew the white men was shooting you and now he has brought you to Flinders Island where you get everything.”

That was apparently the work of an Aboriginal man, Thomas Brune, who signed off as Editor and Writer in the Commandant’s office.

Now, whether Thomas was somebody’s uncle, I don’t know, but the treatment of his countrymen on Flinders Island was nowhere near as benign as he described.

Of the 200 or so exiles, more than 150 died during the 13 year life of the settlement before it was closed in 1847 and the survivors relocated to a former convict station south of Hobart.

The destruction of the Aboriginal population on the continental mainland may not have been as concentrated as in Tasmania, simply because of the vastness of the spread of European occupation, but the result was just as devastating.

So-called Protection Acts across the mainland states stifled opportunities for Aboriginal people to control their own affairs and exercise basic political rights, and it was not really till the late 1920s that Aboriginal people began to organise as a polity and assert their rights to land and entitlements of citizenship.

Various Aboriginal organisations began to emerge in the 1930s.

In Victoria, the Yorta Yorta man William Cooper, a mentor to many Aboriginal people including fellow Yorta Yorta man Sir Douglas Nicholls, helped establish the Australian Aborigines League in 1932.

William Cooper, as some of you may know, dedicated many years of his life to gathering signatures for a petition to King George the Sixth which asked, among other things, for Aboriginal representation in the federal parliament.

He gathered more than 1800 signatures of Aboriginal people – although there's evidence that others around the country were reluctant to sign for fear of victimisation – and the petition was presented to Prime Minister Joseph Lyons in August 1937 for transmission to the King.

It never got to Buckingham Place. The Lyons Cabinet simply decided in February 1938 – and I quote from the Cabinet minutes – "that no action be taken".

The ceaseless advocacy of William Cooper and the Australian Aborigines League inspired the formation of the Aborigines Progressive Association in New South Wales in 1937.

A year later, the sesqui-centennial of the arrival of the first fleet of British ships in Australia, the two organisations planned to mark a Day of Mourning.

Meeting in Sydney, about 100 Aboriginal people passed the following motion:

"We, representing the aborigines of Australia, assembled in conference at the Australian Hall, Sydney, on the 26th day of January, 1938, this being the 150th anniversary of the whiteman's seizure of our country, hereby make protest against the callous treatment of our people by the whitemen during the past 150 years, and we appeal to the Australian nation of today to make new laws for the education and care of aborigines, we ask for a new policy which will raise our people to full citizen status and equality within the community."

Only two months later, and a century after the *Flinders Island Chronicle* was circulated in Tasmania, a radical Aboriginal newspaper was born in Sydney– *Abo Call*.

It was published by Jack Patten, one of the organisers of the Aborigines Progressive Association and the 1938 Day of Mourning.

Abo Call was a monthly tabloid, selling at threepence a copy – established, it said in its first issue of April 1938, to present the case for Aborigines, from the point of view of Aborigines themselves.

It claimed to reach 80,000 Aboriginal people.

The first front page proclaimed that the paper had, quote, “nothing to do with missionaries or anthropologists or anybody who looked down on Aborigines as an inferior race.”

It campaigned for equal opportunity, full citizenship rights, for Commonwealth control of Aboriginal Affairs and for the creation of a stand-alone Department of Aboriginal Affairs.

First Nations people would have to wait three decades for the latter to be achieved in the 1967 Referendum, and a few years after that till the Whitlam government established a department.

The New South Wales authorities were clearly apprehensive about the strident advocacy of *Abo Call*.

Just a month after the first issue, two senior coppers visited to pore over the books of the Aborigines Progressive Association, and two days later the publishers were hit with a demand to enter into a recognizance of 300 pounds under the Newspapers Act of 1898.

Jack Patten had no way of meeting that demand – but, fortunately, a sympathetic publisher came to the financial rescue of *Abo Call* and the paper was able to continue its agitations over a few more editions.

The 1930s marked the beginning of political awakening and organisation by Aboriginal people, but for the next few years, possibly because of the Second World War II, there was something of an hiatus in Aboriginal media activity.

In the 1950s, a revived upsurge in Aboriginal community awareness and activism saw a number of publications appear, including

- the *Council for Aboriginal Rights Bulletin* in 1955
- in my home state, the *Westralian Aborigine* was published from 1953 to 1957, a newspaper of the Coolbaroo league, a Noongar advocacy and social organisation
- and the *Aborigines Advancement League Newsletter* in 1959.

In her PhD thesis published in 2010, the Griffith University academic Elizabeth Burrows concluded that Aboriginal print media she'd analysed from the 1930s through to the 1970s aimed to provide an independent voice, to protect language and culture, focused on the development of Aboriginal communities and showed solidarity with other indigenous communities.

Dr Burrows determined that the news values of Aboriginal newspapers during this time differed from mainstream publications because they were driven by the needs of their community of interest – and that's a theme I want to develop later.

From the 1960s to the 1980s, heightened Aboriginal activism, including the rise of the Australian Black Power Movement, spawned an impressive spread of Aboriginal publications, some of them militantly radical – like *The Koorier*, produced by Aboriginal man Bruce McGuiness.

There was *Black Australian News* under the editorship of Michael Anderson, Cheryl Buchanan's *Black Liberation* and Ross Watson's *Black Nation*, which was a vehicle to promote protest around the 1982 Commonwealth Games in Brisbane.

They were all produced on meagre budgets, and, not surprisingly for the times, they drew the attention of police special branches and ASIO.

The Aboriginal land rights cause, which gathered force in the 1970s, produced its own set of publications.

Out of Queensland in the mid-1970s came *NQ Messagestick*, and out of the Northern Territory came separate *Land Rights News* publications by the Northern and Central Land Councils.

National Messagestick came later, published by the National Federation of Land Councils, and *Land Rights Queensland* was published from the mid-1990s by the Foundation for Aboriginal and Island Research Action.

Reviewing this set of publications, the academic Elizabeth Burrows has written that they all covered issues outside of the spectrum of land rights and native title.

Conflict and timeliness were not prized, she's written, and conflict might be actively avoided if it was between different Aboriginal organisations or communities.

This avoidance was based on cultural sensitivity and recognition that such disputes were likely to be seized upon and inflated by mainstream media attention, or the opponents of their cause.

Above all, these publications gave communities, and appropriate leaders and spokespeople, an outlet to promote discussion of issues important to them, on their own terms.

That has been a philosophy which has underpinned the proliferation over the past 40 years of Aboriginal radio and television enterprises in our cities, and regional and remote communities.

That proliferation has been no surprise to me, of course, given the oral traditions of Aboriginal culture.

Broadcasting technology has given us the modern message stick.

First Nations media services are vital to communities as a means of two-way conversation, self-determination through access to information and ensuring people have access to health and education information.

But, beyond those primary services, they're a way to express identity, connect communities and build bridges with the wider community.

The First Nations media industry began in the late 1970s when groups of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in different parts of the country, including Alice Springs, Townsville and Ernabella, decided they wanted to have their own voice.

In Alice Springs, the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association, CAAMA, received the first Aboriginal radio licence in 1980 and next year will celebrate 40 years of storytelling in modern media formats.

In Sydney, the foundations for Radio Redfern were laid in 1981, when Maureen Watson and her son, the late Tiga Bayles, started broadcasting on community radio station 2SER .

Radio Redfern played a vital role in coordinating political protests against the Bicentennial celebrations in 1988 and Tiga Bayles would establish the Brisbane Indigenous Media Association which operated the radio station 98.9 FM .

Tiga Bayles hosted the program *Let's Talk*, and was the inaugural winner of the national Deadly Award for Indigenous Broadcaster of the Year.

In 1986 CAAMA established Imparja Television Pty Ltd to apply for a TV broadcasting licence for central Australia, and began broadcasting via satellite television in 1988 using the new AusSat system.

From those early beginnings, First Nations media have expanded into a vibrant industry that employs around 500 people across 40 community-owned and managed not-for-profit media organisations, reaching almost 50 per cent of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people nationally each week through radio services in 235 regions, broadcasting in more than 25 languages across the nations.

In addition, we now have a National Indigenous Radio Service producing daily news bulletins from its base in Brisbane, three television stations, NITV nationally and ICTV in the remote regions.

The First Nations media industry is represented by a community-controlled peak body, First Nations Media Australia, based in Alice Springs.

They run professional development events such as the Remote Indigenous Media Festival which is happening on Thursday Island next week and will bring 150 First Nations media workers from remote communities together for a week of skills development workshops in cinematography, digital archiving, podcasting, music production and digital storytelling.

The First Nations media sector delivers value to the community at a ratio of roughly three times the amount of investment Government makes in these services. A study by Social Ventures Australia has found that for every dollar of Government investment in the industry returns a social value of $2.87 on average across the country.

There are community leaders across the country who have got their start in the First Nations media industry and taken those communication skills into a broad range of careers.

My colleague Malarndirri McCarthy began at the ABC and finished her broadcasting career at NITV before she entered the Senate.

Others in mainstream media now – such as Stan Grant, Brooke Boney, Grant Hanson and the team at the Marngrook Footy Show, Walkley Award winning journalist Lorena Allam who writes for The Guardian, the whole team at NITV who are breaking stories every day, Francis Kelly and the Bush Mechanics and other filmmakers like Warwick Thornton and Erica Glynn – are all people who have built careers in media that do our nation proud.

First Nations media emerged because of the failure of mainstream media to adequately represent the stories of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

As Lowitja O'Donaghue, then chair of ATSIC, said to a Media and Indigenous Australians Conference in Brisbane in 1993, that Aboriginal people have become more politically aware and politically astute and would no longer accept the media setting the agenda on Aboriginal issues.

Lowitja went on to say that we should not underestimate the role that Aboriginal organisations have played in bringing about a change in attitudes of the media in reporting Indigenous issues and in bringing about a better understanding of Aboriginality by the wider community.

There are times, though, when I wonder just how much those attitudes have really changed among those who work in the mainstream media.

Because those attitudes flow from values which mainstream journalists, overwhelmingly non-Indigenous apply to their work.

Let me cite one recent exposition of those values.

In May this year, the Northern Territory Parliament's Social Policy Scrutiny Committee was hearing evidence in relation to a new Youth Justice Bill.

The Darwin Press Club, whose members work across all the Territory's media outlets, made a submission, and its vice-president, a Mr Craig Dunlop who covers court and crime for the only local paper, the NT News, gave evidence in support of the Press Club submission.

Here's what he said, and I quote from the Committee Hansard:

"The reality is that media outlets publish what is most read and the stories we pursue are based on what our readerships are looking for. In this day and age, we know how many eyeballs get on the screen. It is about day two of journalism school, where they tell you a bad news story will perform better than a good news story. That is, across the board.

"Say what you will about how that reflects on human nature, maybe it could be looked at positively, because most of the world is good and that is not that interesting. People are attracted to bad news stories. That is just how it is." End quote.

Now, I don't accept Mr Dunlop's assertion that ordinary, reasonable people are drawn only to bad news stories.

To accept that assertion is to suggest that we are not drawn to, or uplifted, by stories of human endeavour and achievement, of human kindness and good works.

To accept that assertion is to ascribe a basic ghoulishness to us all.

To accept that assertion demeans us all.

But what Mr Dunlop's evidence does reveal is a certain mindset that infects mainstream coverage of minority groups, not just Aboriginal people.

Remember the context of his evidence – a submission about youth justice in the Northern Territory.

And youth justice in the Territory has all to do with Aboriginal youth.

It's Aboriginal youth up there who are overwhelming over-represented in the daily court lists.

It’s Aboriginal youth who almost exclusively are incarcerated in the infamous Don Dale Detention Centre in Darwin, and the similarly infamous Alice Springs Detention Centre.

So, the extension of the assertion that bad news stories rate best is that bad news stories get to predominate mainstream coverage.

That’s certainly the case with the NT News, which serves a jurisdiction whose population is one-third Aboriginal.

I’m not wanting to single out just the NT News’ obsession with negative stories about Aboriginal crime, driven by the wrong-headed idea that only the bad news stories get the ratings.

The values that drive that sort of coverage are to be seen elsewhere in other mainstream media, in their coverage of African gangs in Melbourne, for example; or, in their coverage of refugees and minority groups in general.

And the application of those values does have a negative impact in the public sphere, it does serve to reinforce prejudice and stir moral panic.

By comparison, a study by Dr Elizabeth Burrows has found that journalists working in the Indigenous media tend to utilise a range of news values quite different from mainstream journalists.

Her findings show the news value of conflict is less important for Aboriginal journalists, and reflects a cultural distaste for conflict.

Another academic researcher, Professor Kerry McCallum from the University of Canberra, analysed the reporting of indigenous violence by seven major metropolitan newspapers over six and a half years from January 2000.

She found that reporting of Indigenous Australia was increasingly focused on news of violence, conflict and corruption in remote, rural and urban settings.

Further, she concluded that journalists, mainstream journalists that is, are content to talk-up, rather than really talk about the many causes and problems facing remote Indigenous communities.

Journalists, she said, appeared unable, or unwilling, to engage with communities when they tried to address complex but important social issues.

The most egregious example of deliberate non-engagement was the ABC's *Lateline* story about Mutitjulu in Central Australia in 2016, which helped precipitate the Commonwealth Government's Northern Territory Emergency Response, the Intervention.

The story about sex crimes at Mutitjulu was produced without the program ever having visited that community.

And, let me remind you that the explosive allegations of paedophile rings were never proven, despite extensive investigation by the NT Police and the Australian Crime Commission.

Any commentary on the media scene today has to recognise the omnipresence of social media.

The new platforms have quite rightly been identified as disruptive.

But the reality is, as mobile phone coverage continues to spread, Aboriginal people continue to join these new media with gusto.

They're an agency of progress, and they've opened up whole new means of immediate communication, reaching now into our most remote communities.

But these new media are as much a force for discord as they are for discourse.

I'm deeply troubled by the strife among our peoples that's being wrought by social media warriors who so readily and thoughtlessly punch out abusive messages, or simply retweet baseless allegations often made by white racists.

And then there's the dreadful phenomenon of fake news, and I think Aboriginal people, particularly in remote areas, are especially vulnerable.

Misinformation and falsehoods are peddled, received without interrogation and retweeted. No one appears to check the facts or the truth.

Reputations are too easily trashed and fear and loathing unleashed, sometimes with tragic consequences.

Once the genies are swirling round, it's nigh impossible to right the record.

And this is where a strong, independent Indigenous media sector can be a voice of moderation, to educate our people about the dangers of using social media as weapons of abuse.

I have great faith in Indigenous media, but I wonder if our messages are really getting through to the public at large.

There has always been, in the mainstream media, a fundamental bias against Indigenous stories – there's a maxim in the game that black stories don't rate.

Mainstream media really need to come to a better understanding of Indigenous cultures and their rich histories. They need to appreciate that Indigenous voices are valid and alternative.

Good reporting on Indigenous matters takes time, resources and money, especially when it comes to coverage in remote communities.

To mainstream media, I'd say reporting should embrace as full a range of sources as possible.

Don't just keep seeking comment and opinions from the elites.

It shouldn't be that the best organised and connected get access to money and influence.

In all communities, there's a range of Aboriginal voices out there that are rarely canvassed by the mainstream media.

And talking of voices, let me conclude by harking back to the Government's proposal for a Voice to Parliament.

It's been 10 weeks now since the Minister for Indigenous Australians fronted the National Press Club here in Canberra and announced that a local, regional and national voice would be delivered, and that Indigenous Australians would be recognised in the Constitution, after a process of true co-design.

That Press Club speech raised false expectations – any hopes that a national Voice would be enshrined in the Constitution, as the Uluru Statement from the Heart demanded, were quickly dashed by the Prime Minister and his conservative allies.

But where's the rest of Minister Wyatt's agenda?

He's had two public opportunities since his Press Club address – his speech at Garma on the 31st of July and his Vincent Lingiari lecture on the 15th of August – to put some flesh on the bones of his Press Club speech.

But there's been nothing from Minister Wyatt to have any confidence that he has any sort of plan to implement his proposals.

In fact, what really are his proposals?

He told the West Australian newspaper at the weekend that recognition was too important to rush.

Well, nobody's talking about rushing, and of course I agree that recognition is important.

But what sort of recognition will it be? Just some feel good words in the preamble to the Constitution? That won't be good enough.

What we want from this government is an agenda, a timetable, certainty about where we're heading, detail about the process of co-design.

That will go to clarifying the purpose, function and operation of the Voice, and a clarification of words to go to a referendum and entrenchment in the Constitution.

There's no momentum, we're going nowhere, we're in the dark.

And, why has the matter of a Voice being enshrined in the Constitution been so swiftly swept off the table?

It's a miserable little ask, and this government's too miserable to even give the idea serious consideration.

It's a miserable ask, because our focus should be on those bigger demands of the Uluru Statement from the heart – truth telling and an agreement-making commission..

That's the real business we should be attending to, but the government's been completely silent about that.

But until we grapple with truth and treaty, we're just tinkering around the edges.

Thank you, and I extend my best wishes to the National Aboriginal Press Club for a successful future.