



THE **STORIES**

10

FAIRFAX SYNDICATION



Linda Burney

Indigenous Educational Reform

In August 2016, when Linda Burney stood to deliver her maiden speech as the first Indigenous woman elected to the Australian House of Representatives, she touched hearts and minds across the country, and in fact the world, as she told of the journey travelled to bring her to that day.

From beginnings that would have left others broken and angry, Burney used the challenges and adversity she faced as a child to strengthen her spirit and fire a determination to bring about positive change in terms of how Indigenous people lived, were treated and perceived in Australian society.

Given up by her unmarried white mother at birth, and not knowing her Indigenous father until adulthood, Burney credits elderly Scottish-born Letitia and Billy Laing for making her the person she is today. Despite the racism and intolerance directed towards Indigenous people inherent in Australian society at the time, the Laings bravely became foster parents to the tiny baby and passed on to her their own values of courage, tolerance, wisdom and respect for others.

“I think I was very lucky to be raised by my great aunt and uncle who are brother and sister, who developed in me a great love of learning and reading.

“I’ve also had the great fortune in my life to have both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people around me that have supported me and allowed me to rest on their shoulders, and they’ve given me a wonderful set of principles to live my life by.”

It is those principles which have seen Burney already achieve well beyond the expectations many from her home town of Whitton had for her as a child, and which some believe may carry her one day to the highest office in the country. Previous President of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG), a member of the Board of Studies and previous National President of the Australian Labor Party 2008–2009, Burney is now the Federal Member for Barton and shadow Federal Minister for Human Services, but she says it’s her achievements in terms of educational reform, not politics, of which she is most proud.

“I think my most important contribution thus far is probably the extensive work I did in the education arena, in particular the curriculum work. I was President of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group (AECG) and a member of the Board of Studies for a very long time, so I had enormous influence on curriculum development. I also led the policy debate for many years both in NSW and nationally on ways to incorporate Aboriginal studies into the curriculum, and also discussion on things like Aboriginal conditions, employment, education and social rights.”

Burney says one of the most important elements of the overall reform strategy was the Aboriginal Educational Conferences of the 1990s.

“The conferences were critical!”

According to Burney, the real value of the conferences lay in the way they enabled organisers to bring different people with different perspectives together in discussion.

“It’s as simple as that: they put people together.”

“Certainly there was a very definite political element to the conferences and participants were always mindful their overall objective was to bring about policy change, but it was the way the conferences brought everyone together to establish common goals that helped us achieve the level of success which we did.”

“We had the involvement of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people and we all knew we were there working for a common cause.”

Burney says the conferences were always about two things: equitable outcomes for Aboriginal children, and Aboriginal studies and truth-telling for all children.

“Firstly we needed to make sure Aboriginal kids were getting literacy and numeracy education and all those sorts of things, but secondly there was the fact that for me, going to school in the 70’s, the version of history we learned about Aboriginal people was that they were non-existent or if the story was told in schools at all, it was very biased.”

Power Of Conferences

“If you read the statement that I often make of my experience as a 13 year old kid being told in class that your people were savages and they were the closest examples we had to stone-aged man, well they were some of the moments in my life that led me to be an educator.”

“The respect and admiration that non-Aboriginal youth have for indigenous Aboriginal people today is much greater than it was 40 years ago, and that’s all come about through the curriculum work I’ve been involved in.”

As well as the ongoing conferences, the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group held an AGM each year which lasted for three or four days.

“Of course we would look at the organisation’s constitution and elect office bearers and everything, but we would also have representatives from the Department of Education there to inform and listen, and other agencies such as TAFE would come in to give reports. This helped significantly because those groups were then accountable to the AECG for what they were doing in terms of Aboriginal education, so it was absolutely setting the agenda for the future.”

“Having those agencies come back and report annually [at conferences] also really helped us to monitor how things were going.”

In addition to evaluating activities and setting the agenda, Burney said conferences also played a role in the bigger picture of reform for Aboriginal people that began in the 1980s.

“In those earlier days there were conferences that were just for Aboriginal people, where we started striking out and demanding self-determination and to be listened to.”

Then, in the middle to latter part of the reconciliation process, when John Howard was winding back Native Title policy, Burney was involved in the organisation of the 1997 Australian Reconciliation Convention in Melbourne.

“That was a ground-breaking conference. We had international speakers and brought 2 000 people together to talk about reconciliation, and we really set the direction for where we wanted to go.

“That was probably the stand-out conference for me.”

When she was Director General, NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs, she also used conferences to bring together elders from different Aboriginal settlements across the state.

“Those conferences were absolutely brilliant, and it’s a crying shame that they’ve not been continued. I brought together for the first time, in a very long time, Aboriginal elders from across NSW and it was powerful.

“It was important in terms of culture, in terms of giving elders the status and respect they deserve, and we set the agenda for a whole range of social justice areas, like juvenile justice, education, and more. Those discussions then informed debates in other areas, such as what was ethical, what wasn’t ethical, Aboriginal political representation, Aboriginal languages, and the judiciary. What was important about those conferences was that we were able to look at future directions from the elders’ perspectives.”

Burney says that, again, these conferences were critical in achieving the outcomes for Aboriginal people being seen today.

“What happened at those conferences was extraordinary. We took instruction from the elders and set parameters for other discussions going forward, particularly in terms of NSW.”

But she adds that, apart from the social justice and reform outcomes, the conferences were a way of acknowledging the important role the elders played within their culture.

“Apart from anything else, it was a good way to recognise what these people had done, and to simply bring them together. It doesn’t always have to be about setting an agenda or achieving massive outcomes. This was also about recognising and respecting the wisdom of the elders and giving them a chance to be together to reinforce their strength or resilience, and to just talk about whatever they wanted to talk about.”

Power Of Conferences

Importantly, she said opportunities to gather and talk in such settings often led to outcomes in and of themselves, and often in ways that may never be known.

“Meetings and conferences can set the long and short term goals and priorities, so you know what you have to do going forward, but they can be just as important for the networking and support opportunities they provide.

“For example, the AGMs of the AECG were fundamentally a network of regional and local volunteer groups, and so to bring those people together annually was really important for exchanging ideas and for being able to say, ‘look you know – you’re not the only one out there feeling this way’ or ‘Yes, it’s hard, but this is what we did to resolve that situation in our area – it may not work in your area but maybe it will.’”

With her political career gathering momentum, Burney believes conferences may have a part to play in the resolution of other major issues, such as terrorism and abuse or deaths in custody.

“Absolutely they [conferences] can play a part in those types of issues. I don’t believe – even with the advent of social media and other technologies like video conferencing or teleconferences – that anything can replace people sitting down together in a room, over dinner, over a drink, over a discussion in a workshop.

“You just can’t see the body language.

“Not only do conferences have the face-to-face, sitting down talking in the formal session, but importantly there’s also the social setting around a conference where people can really thrash out issues, set priorities and collaborate. You just need to be able to see people and to see how they’re reacting in order to judge how the conversation is going. There is nothing that can replace that face-to-face dialogue.”

She believes that with the range of settings usually offered at a conference there is flexibility to use different strategies to achieve your objectives.

“If you start a conversation and it doesn’t go well, you know you can pick it up again that afternoon or in a social setting. Likewise, if you try something in the conference and it’s not working out, you have the capacity to change direction, to change the agenda, to mould it around what the needs are of the people that are there.”

“You can have new people come in, you get stimulation, you get presentations, you get ideas ... and apart from that they’re bloody good fun sometimes.”

“It’s called creating friends and relationships.”

With the successful conference outcomes Burney herself has experienced, she believes they will continue to be an important part of the way forward. And she believes the range of benefits that result from a well-run conference far outweigh the costs.

“It seems to me there’s been this kind of attitude of ‘Oh, it’s too expensive ... they’re just talkfests’ ... but I don’t see conferences that way at all. If they are properly run, and well structured, the values are enormous. If they’re not run well, then maybe they’re just talkfests ... But good conferences have tangible benefits and outcomes. I’ve organised so many of them, and they’re bloody hard work, so you don’t do it because you want a good time and a talkfest.”

Burney says the logistics of organising a conference are crucial.

“You need to plan everything down to what cheese is going to be on the cheese platter is my approach. You make sure you have a long lead-in time and you have to get the right people there. Most importantly, you have to make sure your purpose is absolutely clear, that everyone knows why they’re there, and that your facilitators are fantastic.”

With the increased focus on financial accountability, Burney worries that the value of conferences may be overlooked.

“I suspect that as money becomes tighter and tighter, the one thing that will go by the wayside is gatherings of people.”

Power Of Conferences

And whilst conferences may have the potential to engage the wider community in important issues and influence social policy, Burney says it depends in many ways upon the type and level of media and political exposure that has been generated.

“Engaging in the political process was crucial in getting the outcomes we did, particularly when it came to influencing social policy. One of the things we always did, particularly through the NSW AECG and the National AECG was invite the minister of the day [to] come and speak. We would also get other ministers from various portfolio areas because that would help raise the status and set the agenda.”

“Having the minister come and face up to a whole group of people was always very powerful and very useful, because not only did you get an understanding of what they thought was important – but they also got an understanding of what you thought was important.”

Burney adds that while involving politicians in conferences can have an impact on social reform, shifts in public opinion can only occur if the messages created are allowed to reach the wider community.

“Conferences can shape social policy and political discourse, but I’m not sure how successful they are in shaping public opinion, because the public still needs to get access to what’s talked about at that conference. Basically it just depends on what the conference has organised in terms of getting the messages out there.”

In summing up, Burney rates the importance of conferences for stimulating innovation a 9 out of 10, and gives them a healthy 8 out of 10 in terms of their contribution to knowledge sharing.

She also believes that, despite advances in technologies and communications, well-organised and resourced conferences with clear agendas and purpose will continue to be one of the most important tools available to those seeking to bring about social change.

“New media is not going to replace the value of people physically coming together ... the role that they play in society is that they bring people together, they set agendas and they set goals for various organisations – including government – to attain.”