

SPEECH NOTES
'Same same but different, and that's okay'
Kirstie Parker, LBQ Women's Health Conference
Sydney, 14 July 2017

– *Check against delivery* –

Good morning, everyone. It's an honour to be here.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional owners of this place, the *Gadigal* people of the Eora nation, their ancestors and future generations. I thank them for their enduring custodianship of this beautiful place, their leadership and their generosity in allowing me – all of us – to walk on their country. Know that, wherever you've travelled from to be here today, it was...is Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander land.

I want to acknowledge the collective wisdom and experiences of everyone here and state what will quickly become obvious; I am not an academic. The views I express here are shaped by my own lived experience. I don't claim to speak for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, women, or even those at this conference – although I do wish to pay special tribute to them and thank them for their sisterhood, love and support. I am Aboriginal, a First Nations person, a *Yuwallarai yinaar* originally from northwestern NSW who is in love with another *yinaar*, from Wiradjuri country (some of you heard her sing last night and will hear her speak later this morning...De Greer-Yindimincarlle).

I want to thank the organisers, especially Kel Watson and Mish Sparks from ACON, for inviting me to speak and for opening up this space to the voices and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women. And, all of you, for standing in solidarity on improving the health of all LBQ women.

I have been allotted some 30 minutes to speak to you but my esteemed colleague and friend Dr Vanessa Lee have colluded to agree that we will speak in succession and then jointly open up the floor for questions, comments and statements. This is one big yarning circle.

I flagged in my abstract that I would speak about identity and intersectionality from the perspective of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LBQ women. But no-one here needs a lesson from me about intersectionality per say. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LBQ women, intersectionality is quite simply the collision – for good and frequently bad – of race, gender and sexuality, extending to other aspects of our identities.

In my reading on intersectionality, I am aware of what has been described as 'oppression or discrimination Olympics'. I'm not interested in competing – I want every human, living and spiritual being to thrive – but there's no denying that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LBQ women are a minority within a minority within a minority...and then some. As Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, credited with coining the term intersectionality, has said – we need to have language and understanding around all of this so we can address it.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LBQ women's intersectionality affects how and, literally, how long we live. The stakes are high.

I am going to go out on a limb and assume that most of not all in this room stand with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, or at least have no wish to stand in the way of

our 'ness', and that consequently you want to know us. I will begin by telling you something about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people generally:

- As adults, we die an average of 10–17 years earlier than non-Indigenous Australians, and experience much higher rates of chronic illness such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, some cancers, kidney and liver disease.
- Our babies die at more than twice the rate of other Australian babies.
- As many as one in every two of our people experience some form of disability.
- Despite native title and various land rights regimes, many of our communities remain impoverished. Our unemployment rate is at least four times that of the general population. The median income for our households is just over half that of non-Indigenous households.
- We make up something like 25 per cent of Australia's homeless (although we make up just two to three per cent of the broad Australian population).
- We make up 27 per cent of the prison population. Our men are twice as likely to be in prison than in university. And our women are the nation's fastest growing prison population, now 21 times more likely to be imprisoned than non-Indigenous women (and at more than double the rate of our own men). Eighty per cent of our women who are in prison are mothers.
- Our women are hospitalised due to family violence-related assaults at a rate 34.2 times that for non-Indigenous females.
- Child removals are sky high – nine and a half times the rate for non-Indigenous children, and much higher now than during the Stolen Generations era.
- Our daily experiences of racism – a key driver of poor mental health – are around 25 per cent higher than for non-Indigenous Australians (although not as high as, for example, the Muslim community).
- We report suffering psychological distress at around twice the rate that non-Indigenous people do, and are more likely to be hospitalised for self-harm;
- Our kids suicide at a rate three to four times that of non-Indigenous kids, and the rate of suicide amongst our young men is the highest in the world.
- Of more than a thousand of our Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people who responded to the 2016 Mission Australia Youth Survey, close to 20 per cent felt *very negative* or *negative* about the future. While the figure was lower for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young women, **10 per cent of our young men rated their happiness as zero out of ten.**

Now, I do not deny that efforts are being made to address at least some of these statistics and gradual improvement is being made; I had the privilege of co-chairing the Close the Gap national steering committee for a time, and have been close to some of these noble efforts and worthwhile strategies.

But that is a laundry list that would surely make the blood of any decent person run cold. Frankly, whenever I rattle it off, I marvel at the fact that my mob are still upright.

Because so much of this is deeply rooted in historical legacy; a legacy of invasion, denial of our sovereignty, dispossession, discrimination and oppression, we are still reeling. We are

on a long road. Australia, as a nation, has to do something about this. I will speak more of that – what you can do – later.

Shortly you will hear from Dr Vanessa Lee, who has a firmer grip than I on the extrapolation and nuance of these statistics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait LBQ women. But I can say with absolute certainty that all of these statistics are compounded for us. This is our intersectionality at play.

During the awesome yarning circle run yesterday afternoon by Indigilez co-founders Bec Johnson and Tanya Quakawoot, together with Aunty Dawn Daylight, there was a question that bears repeating here: Do Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LBQ women sometimes have to choose between culture and sexuality?

I won't use the word 'choose' but, certainly, our gender and sexual identities are strongly connected to and, for some, may be secondary to our cultural identities. Like many of you, I'm sure, we're highly influenced by family support and acceptance (I am proud and happy to say I personally have this) as well as the roles women generally are expected to play. Sometimes, for example, despite our **gender** largely rendering us the 'care givers' in our communities, there can be a lack of association between our LBQ women and motherhood. Stigma does exist in our communities, some of it based upon the influence of Christianity, and there is work to be done.

But I also want you to know that there's another side to us – one of acceptance, pride, resilience, achievement, success, excellence. Despite all of the trauma that we collectively endure and the tight knot of grief we all hold in our bellies, we are still here, still upright and staunch, forging all kinds of pathways, kicking goals. Look at the sisters in this room alone. This goes to vulnerability and strength, and how they co-exist within us.

Ask any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women at this conference and I'm confident they'll tell you that culture is core, fundamental to the way we do things. Its importance cannot be overstated.

There is no informed contemporary study of our lives that has not come to the conclusion that, through identity, culture and belonging to country, community and kin, we are more enriched, nurtured, stronger, better than we might otherwise have been. To us, these are cloaks, shields, glue and balm.

It is no accident that identity, culture and belonging are at the centre of all strategies currently being pursued by or with meaningful involvement of our people have all of these at the centre – whether it be the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan, or strategies around land, education, suicide prevention and so on.

Fundamentally, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people crave what **you** crave – safe (in all respects of the word), happy, meaningful and dignified lives. We want to be valued and treated fairly. I personally want to be able to legally marry the person I love.

I referred just before to a knot of grief in our bellies. I think this is matched by a whispering in the hearts of many non-Indigenous Australians. People who are greatly discomfited by the past, as well as ongoing stereotyping and vilification, and who want to do more than merely **tolerate** Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people – the First Australians – and to actively support and celebrate us, our histories and cultures. People who know that this

enriches the whole nation. It is to this 'coalition of the willing' – you included – that I speak now. As per my abstract, we are going to need your help.

I want to share with you an important example but, before I do, some general points that I know will have been reinforced elsewhere during the conference.

I'd like to borrow, quite opportunistically, from something I saw on social media last night but which really resonated with me in thinking about what I would ask of you all this morning. The source of what was titled 'Tips for showing up in solidarity', devised during the Dakota Access Pipeline protests in the United States, are Dr Adrienne Keene, Brown University, Standing Rock Solidarity Network, Amnesty International USA, Camp of the Sacred Stones. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people share many experiences, challenges, perspectives and values with other Indigenous people around the world. Those tips are:

1. Listen to, respect and follow Indigenous leadership
2. Recognise and be mindful of the historical and cultural context of the space
3. Be aware of how much space you are taking up and know when to step back
4. Always ask for consent and permission
5. Respect the people, culture and space
6. Show up with an offering, never show up empty
7. Centre the stories around the community, not yourself
8. Be responsible for yourself and self-sufficient
9. Match your intent with you impact and be accountable for your behaviour
10. Saviours are not needed, solidarity is.

In the context of Aboriginal ad Torres Strait Islander LBQ women, I would add:

- Accept the need for you to build your personal cultural competency, and **do it**.
- Ensure, if you are engaged in anything – anything – that involves us, that our perspectives are included, indeed front and centre; and
- Respect the good work being done in this and related spaces by many in this space – Indigelez, ACON and its Aboriginal programs, Black Rainbow, Queensland's 2 Spirits program to name a few.

So, to the example I mentioned. About six weeks ago, I attended an historic gathering at Uluru, on *Anangu* country in Central Australia. It was the culmination of years of work and a specific Indigenous led and designed process of consultation with our people on proposals to 'recognise' us in the Australian Constitution. At the end of this three-day gathering, a statement was issued. It is, essentially, an overture to the nation. It is very important that the statement is heard and I ask your indulgence while I read it now:

(Read the Uluru Statement from the Heart – attached)

In finishing, thank you to those who will stand silently, respectfully when Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander LBQ women speak, sing, cry, but raise your voices in chorus with ours when we ask. We need to know you have our backs. Extend your hands, we will take them.

The title of my talk has been 'Same same but different, and that's okay'. We are. And it is.

Thank you.

ULURU STATEMENT FROM THE HEART

26 May 2017

We, gathered at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention, coming from all points of the southern sky, make this statement from the heart:

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs.

This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from 'time immemorial', and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty.

It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?

With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood.

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. This is the torment of our powerlessness.

We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a rightful place in our own country.

When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

We call for the establishment of first Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution. Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: the coming together after a struggle.

It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.

We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.

In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard.

We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.