

Thank you Uncle Wally, for welcoming us to the country of your people, the traditional custodians of this beautiful place. As a Gamilaraay woman, a guest on your country, I pay my respects to your elders and hope that my words and intent here today honour the spirit of your ancestors and mine. Importantly, I also acknowledge Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families, whose lived experience gives meaning to our collective work.

I extend my gratitude to all of you who have come here today, committed to our children and young people.

My name is Natalie Lewis, I am the Chief Executive Officer of the Queensland Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Child Protection Peak and Co-Chair of the National Family Matters Campaign.

I share the proud ancestry of my Gamillaray mother and Scottish Australian father. A yinar, a mother, a wife, a sister, aunty, daughter, an Australian. I find peace and purpose in knowing where I am from and where I belong and I am empowered and emboldened in the knowledge that my future is mine to create.

The right of our children to know, grow and experience a sense of self, of place and connection to our ancestral culture is too often denied.

In Australia, First Nations children too often experience poorer health outcomes, lower educational attainment, endure poverty, homelessness, higher exposure to mental health problems and to statutory systems. We have born witness to this statistical norm for so long, that I fear we have become desensitised to the realities that they represent.

We are firmly committed to reform and to the partnerships that are necessary to create transformational change. But it is **not** my role to create some kind of middle ground synthesis that brings people together without **really** coming to terms with the deep conflicts that maintain the overrepresentation of our children as a common feature of contemporary child protection systems across our nation.

This is the reality that confronts us not only as professionals working in this space, but as mothers, fathers, Aunts, Uncles, brothers and sisters—as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, this is profoundly personal. It is our collective challenge for today and mandate for tomorrow.

It is for me, simply not possible, to set the scene for today, without addressing some of the horrendous, harmful and unhelpful dialogue that has re-emerged.

***Unfortunately, the public discourse on this complex issue has been dumbed down, to the detriment of Aboriginal children, families and communities. It is complex and worthy of intelligent discussion to enable an appropriate solution as opposed to those oversimplified solutions, grounded in untruths and paternalism that have been spouted of late. This forum is an opportunity for such discussion, and the fourth action plan of the National Framework is an opportunity for change, through deliberate positive action.***

So to be clear on a couple of things – in **Every jurisdiction, Child Protection legislation holds the child’s safety and well-being as the paramount principle.** Our children have the same rights and expectations of safety as all Australian children. We recognise and uphold our obligation to report and respond to the harm of our children. **In this there is no ambiguity and there is no double standard.**

**Child Sexual Abuse is abhorrent and unacceptable, irrespective of whether the victim is Indigenous or not.**

**Child sexual abuse is unacceptable and inexcusable whether the perpetrator is black or white, whether they are a family member or foster carers, leaders of Aboriginal organisations or leaders of the Church. Authority, personal power, entitlement or culture are never justifications for perpetration of abuse against children.**

**If the fail-safe answer or solution was simply for non-Indigenous people and faith-based institutions to save and raise aboriginal children and deliver them to the promised land of Australian prosperity, then we would have had a National celebration in 2008 not an apology.**

Nobody is more invested in a new narrative for our children, families and communities than Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. We are over our story being told by everyone else, where we are characterised as hopeless, disempowered, and the nation’s problem to solve.

We are tired of the industry that has emerged, in an attempt to fix the Aboriginal problem. Our misery is apparently marketable, and there is no shortage of organisations bidding for a piece of the action. Governments continued to be convinced that investing in mainstream approaches to resolve issues that disproportionately affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, is the way to go, despite there being clear evidence that this does not work. It also costs more and failure to recognise this is morally reprehensible, and financially irresponsible.

We are constantly confronted by a characterisation of our people and organisations as something that needs to be fixed. We absolutely reject the constant excuses for denying our rights to be self-determining based on a random, undefined notion of capacity that apparently needs to be built. The capacity that gets tossed around, in fact has little if anything to do with skill or ability or vision, but simply the space to lead, the authority to make decisions and the resources to do what needs to be done.

For decades, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have come to the houses of power across this nation, to forums such as this, presenting solutions to the issues that confront our nation and confound our governments. Inquiry after Inquiry, Report after report, recommendations upon recommendations. I could maybe understand the hesitance or reluctance to act if it were the case that the solutions put forward by Aboriginal people across sectors and the passage of time were wildly inconsistent, or devoid of an evidence base to support them, or if the financial cost of abandoning the status quo was simply prohibitive or unjustifiable. But none of these reasons for inaction stand up.

There has been and continues to be fierce agreement in terms of the action required. The core recommendations from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, the Bringing them Home report, Senate Inquiries, the NT Royal Commission, key asks from campaigns such as CTR, Closing the Gap, Family Matters and the Redfern Statement are absolutely consistent, and draw upon international human rights obligations, to which we are signatories. Not extra rights, not special benefits for black fellas— obligations that Australia, voluntarily agreed to uphold, FOR ALL Australians. Obligations which, without significant change, we will continue to fail to meet, especially when it comes to Aboriginal children.

Despite calls for increased focus and investment in prevention and early intervention, not just from Aboriginal organisations, but committed to by all Governments under the National Framework for Protecting Australia's Children, we continue to see movement in the opposite direction.

Despite acknowledgement that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community Controlled organisations are best placed to design and deliver necessitated local responses, we see more and more money, wastefully invested in mainstream, generic programs. This investment strategy has failed consistently and it is our children that bear the burden of the system's inability to get this right.

In my life and in my role I have had the distinct privilege to witness the strength of communities of care, in contrast to actions and approaches to the care of our children that are incongruent with the dominant narrative about Aboriginal families and communities. Where children and families thrive together, despite adversity. People and places that have experienced healing and hope. Pockets of brilliance that do not capture the attention of research agendas nor prominence in collections of literature about what works. These approaches and the people and communities that nurture them are not visible in the evidence base that shapes policy and dictates investment. We are characterised too often as the problem and not the solution. This must change.

Our sector, certainly the QLD Community Controlled child protection sector which our organisation represents recognises that we have to move from an us and them paradigm to us and our kids, us and our families, us and our communities - the paradigm that fits best with who we are and honours the obligations that we have to one another, but first and foremost to our children.

We also must be conscious of the power of the words we use and the narrative that we adopt. The crisis narrative brought us to this point, but it will not sustain us. Our story, must now be shaped on the aspirations of our children, families, communities and the vision that we have for our sector. That is not to say that we pop on our rose coloured glasses and make out that everything is perfect, it is not, nothing ever is. Our children deserve truth and our advocacy and action to address what is clearly wrong. But, we have to be hopeful and aspirational. We need to celebrate success, acknowledge positive changes and start to communicate a version of us that lifts us up and keeps us moving forward.

I once read, that 'Empathy is not simply a matter of trying to imagine what others are going through, but having the will to muster enough courage to do something about it. In a way, empathy is predicated upon hope'. (Cornell West) We are going to need that in abundance to see the type of transformational change we know needs to occur.

***The National Framework is an important mechanism, to disrupt this paradigm. I, personally, am committed to this process, I keep showing up because I find hope here.***

I witness commitment and I see the capacity to be courageous, especially when I look over there and see Muriel Bamblett and my Aunty Sue Blacklock.

We've made progress, the recognition of the 5 elements of the Child Placement Principle in the 3rd Action plan presented a real opportunity- a straightforward policy platform - a blueprint for change, a reconceptualisation of a foundational principle, which had been developed and driven into legislative existence by Aboriginal people, those whose legacy of fearless, relentless commitment to our children, continues to inspire me.

We certainly had (and still have actually) our challenges, convincing people that the Placement principle was about far more than placement. We are still far from realising the full potential of this, but I believe

that implementation of all 5 elements with faithful and diligent regard for the intent of the principles provides us with a real opportunity to create meaningful, mind blowing change. I think that the best practice implementation resource that we developed is helping people to wrap their heads around it, and importantly, understand how to apply these principles, in the context of their daily work, regardless of whether they are frontline practitioners, work in policy or program development or manage processes such as procurement or performance management. More than 3000 copies of this document are now in circulation in QLD alone.

The concept of active efforts is also gaining traction and allows us to move from a passive acknowledgment of principles to active adherence - implementation that gives effect to the intent of the child placement principles and low and behold - cultivates a practice culture that enables safe care and connection of Aboriginal children.

We are catching glimpses of the change we have imagined.

Progress in Victoria, such as the transfer of Guardianship, and the incredibly successful and awe inspiring first term of Australia's only Independent Commissioner for Aboriginal Children. In QLD, the past 12 months has seen the launch of a 20 year, generational strategy to eliminate overrepresentation, in partnership with Family Matters. The establishment of the QLD First Nations Children's Board, to independently oversee and report on the implementation of the strategy and provide advice to the Parliament on matters that directly impact upon the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children. We have also seen the passage of progressive rights-based legislative reforms, which included all 5 constituent elements of the child placement principle, and the ability to delegate authority to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander organisations. These changes enable us to see what is possible when governments create the space for Aboriginal people to lead. In our own National Framework context - The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Working Group showcased that, even when that space is small and overcrowded, we will make the most of it, in the interest of positive changes for our kids, families and communities.

We need to ensure our children grow up safe at home, strong and proud in who they are. We need to consolidate our efforts and maintain a clear and single focus on improving the lives of our children, all of our children.

The challenge before us today is to pave the way for change in an area which is seen by many as too complex and difficult. Those that have a responsibility in lobbying for improvements, and crafting the policy agenda must know that the point of truth exists in the voices and potential of our children. **We must**, as a collective, be prepared to hold the mirror up and take a stand as individuals and organisations to restore the humanity to the human services, an "industry which over time has become corporatised, comfortable with a supply and demand relationship in a quest to solve the aboriginal problem, where the disadvantage of our people is commodified and recognising that in that paradigm the industry thrives and succeeds when our children and families fail."

I cannot accept that—I expect more from this collective of knowledgeable, well intentioned and influential people.

I want to be a part of something that clears a path for our children and lays the foundation for them to excel, to disrupt, to innovate, to create, to lead, to find their place. I want to invest my time, my energy and my passion in their future and we can't do that by digging our heels in, claiming and justifying a role in perpetuating their present.

The realities of inequity and inequality in our country hold the futures of our children hostage and have enabled a narrative of despair and dysfunction to become the accepted frame of reference for Aboriginal children.

I truly believe that the legacy of our elders endures, in the promise of our children. That promise cannot be fulfilled without committing to a new narrative for our children, one characterised by hope and limitless potential rather than by crippling disadvantage.

***Change takes courage, and it takes commitment. Your participation here today speaks to your commitment, I thank you and I look forward to working with you today and over the life of the 4th Action Plan and beyond in the interests of our children, their families and our communities.***

Natalie Lewis  
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