

Where there's life there's Hope

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Three weeks ago I drove down the streets of my hometown. The community had transformed the place. The streets were clean, the lawns manicured, the buildings painted. It was a stark contrast to the Hope Vale I described in my piece in *The Weekend Australian* earlier this year (17-18 February). I had been torn up by my article – written in a state of visceral emotion – because whilst there was no denying the reality it described, I felt strongly for the shame and distress it caused my people. I know that it would have been easier and preferable for my family had I not written what I did. It placed people under tremendous pressure. It placed my relationship with my own people in the crucible, and I didn't know what would become of my relationship with my hometown. I am a patriot of my community, and many would read contempt rather than love into my words.

I came to attend a ceremony for signing a new agreement on welfare reform initiatives centering on home ownership, between the Commonwealth Government, represented by Families, Community Services and Aboriginal Affairs Minister Mal Brough, and the Hope Vale Community, represented by Mayor Greg McLean. Several hundred Hope Vale residents were present. There was a protest by some community members. Particular reference was made to my description of the community as a “ghetto”, “war zone” and “hellhole”. An explanation was demanded of me. This is what I said:

“Thank you very much to the traditional owners for welcoming us here. I am in the controversy business, unfortunately. It would be so much easier not to be in the controversy business. I could only take on those things and say those things and only argue those things that people readily support, and I have done that in my time. If I were here to say that Aboriginal people should be free from discrimination, we would all support that, there would be no controversy. If I were here to say that Aboriginal people should have their land and be respected in relation to their land, there would be little controversy. If I were here to say that Aboriginal people should recover the wages stolen from them by Government, there would be no controversy. If I were here to say that Aboriginal people's rights and entitlements should be respected by government, there'd be no argument. I'd be a hero. People would pat me on the back, and I've had many pats on the back for doing those very things.

“But my hard message is one that angers, that distresses, that annoys, that upsets. But I can't apologise for it, because I have some messages about the very Hope Vale that I'm proud of too. I'm proud of this place and I love this place, and I love the people. There're no people on the face of this planet whom I love more dearly than the people of my hometown. But I can't say things that are going to make everybody happy, because there're some things that we all have to challenge each other about. There're some things we all have to challenge each other about. And I don't retreat while kids are suffering. And I'm not going to let the carpet be swept over kids not getting the right treatment from their parents.

“You know *nganhthanun* [our] people here in Hope Vale, our people here in Hope Vale were a forthright people. We were a forthright people. You didn't have to be the father of someone to tell somebody they were doing the wrong thing. You didn't have to be the grandfather of someone to hold them to account. You didn't have to be a relative of someone to tell kids to go home. The Hope Vale of yesteryear and the Hope Vale that we at later time grew up in does not resemble the Hope Vale of today.

“Driving into town this morning, and I see the beautiful streets, I've never had a feeling like this for a long time. I've never had a feeling like this for a long time. But I can tell you that you have within your reach here in this community the potential to be great again, the potential to live up to the achievement of your grandfathers. Because at the moment we are an embarrassment to their heritage. We are a pale moral shadow of their original achievement. We are a pale shadow of their achievement. They didn't have two cents to their name, but they never neglected their children. They never had ten cents to rub together and they brought up their children and sent them to school.

“Everybody knows the seething undercurrent. Why do you think the government is taking 80 children per month to the Child Safety Department, across Cape York Peninsula, including from this community? And you think I am going to sit back? Sorry, I am not yielding to anybody, because this is as much my home as yours. I am not going to allow my grandfather’s and godfather’s achievements to just be washed down the toilet. There’s got to be some leadership. There’s got to be community leadership. We can’t be all gutless. We can’t all agree that there are these problems, and not have the courage to deal with them.

“Yes there are issues to do with traditional ownership and there has to be respect for the *Thuubi Warra* [traditional owners], there has to be respect for the *Gamaay Warra*, there has to be respect for the *Dingaal Warra*, and we historical people who benefited from being hosted by the *Thiithaarr Warra*, we have got to show respect to them. Yet at the same time all of us have got to take responsibility as well. And I won’t be yielding to anyone about the definition of Hope Vale’s future. This is my place. Half of those kids there are my grandchildren. And if there’s nobody willing to stand up and speak for them, I’m sure as hell not sitting down.

“I have absolutely no animus for those people who feel uncertain, who’ve got lots of legitimate questions, who feel that they have not been apprised of all of the necessary information. But there’s got to be leadership. There has to be leadership and Gregory, I want to say that you have shown a leadership in these recent months and years the like of which we have seen too little of in recent decades, the like of which we have not seen enough of. I didn’t think much of your rabble-rousing before you became Mayor, down the street. But when you became Mayor Gregory – you’re my younger brother – your father’s spirit rose in you. You’re not perfect, but I can see the spirit of your father who has a generous concern, a tender concern for the future of this community. And I don’t say this to say that we all don’t share this concern. But we can’t just have the concern and not have the guts and stand up for it. We can’t just say we’re concerned about that last kid that was taken off to Cairns to be placed in foster care when we’re too gutless to do anything about it. I’m here for a confrontation with our problems. I’m here for a confrontation with our problems, and I will yield to nobody. You can have your say to the media and to Mal Brough and to the Government, you can put your point of view and I will put mine, with no apologies.

“I think there’re fantastic opportunities with this agreement that Gregory has spent so much of this energy in bringing about. We’ve got to have home ownership, we have to increase the number of homes available. I’ve got nephews, nieces in this place who’re about to start young families in this place. They need homes, they need to set a foundation for their kids here to have more opportunities than I’ve had, and I tell you the opportunities available to me: I don’t have to come here and stress myself in front of my community and get flailed on the cross. I could be living large somewhere else, because the opportunities that education and concern by parents to send you to school and to teach you obedience, amazing things can come out of that. And we’ve got to lift our expectations, we’ve got to stop being low class in our outlook for our kids.

“So I’m going to say Greg, you’ve shown a leadership against a strong wind, and Godspeed to you for your efforts. You’re not a perfect leader and neither am I, there are many legitimate things to criticise about yourself and me. But I can tell you, with today’s agreement, there is the real potential to solve the housing problem for the people of Hope Vale. But it’s going to involve new rules. The new rules, the new rules are no more handouts. No more handouts for nothing. And if you think that’s just my rule – Sorry! It’s the way Mal Brough thinks, it’s the way John Howard thinks, it’s the way people are thinking about these things all over the planet. In France, in Britain, in America, in New Zealand, everybody is moving from handouts to a helping hand up.

“And the one thing that has destroyed our heritage has been the handout. Our Elders, when we came into our citizenship 40 years ago, they wanted a hand *up*. Imagine if the government had given them a hand *up* instead of a hand *out*! We would have sailed, because we had people with moral standing, with a hard work ethic, and responsibility in their veins. But the big mistake that was made was that we got a hand out instead of a hand up. So the new availability of housing and business opportunities for this community, for the Traditional Owners, for the rest of the communities, these new opportunities are not going to be available on a basis of a handout, they are available on the basis of hand up. You do your bit, you’ll get the support of the government and the council.

“So I want to say once again I have absolutely no animosity, I have no animosity for anybody who has legitimate and febrile concerns about rapidly changing circumstances. But I’m afraid there’re some issues that we all agree can’t be swept under the carpet. I’m here to tackle grog, I’m here to tackle drugs, I’m here to tackle gambling, I’m here to tackle neglect of children. That’s my policy. I’m against those things. I’m against abuse of grog, drug use, abusive gambling and neglect of children. And I will argue till Kingdom Come about the correctness of those positions and the need for action. Thank you.”

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