Let me pay respect to the Wurundjeri First Nation: I bring greetings from Cape York Peninsula. Thankyou friend John Wiley and the State Library of Victoria for the honour of presenting this year’s Oration in memory of Sir Keith Murdoch, whose family we acknowledge tonight.

My subject is the legacy of the great American public intellectual and politician, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the author of one of the most famous briefings in the history of public policy. As an aide in President Lyndon Johnson’s Labor department, Moynihan’s 1965 paper ‘The Negro Family: The Case for National Action’ argued the US Government was underestimating the damage done to black families by “three centuries of sometimes unimaginable mistreatment” and the “racist virus in the American blood stream” would continue to plague blacks in the future. He wrote:

That the Negro American has survived at all is extraordinary – a lesser people might simply have died out, as indeed others have ... But it may not be supposed that the Negro American community has not paid a fearful price for the incredible mistreatment to which it has been subjected over the past three centuries.

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1 Noel Pearson co-chairs Good to Great Schools Australia (see www.goodtogreatschools.org.au) and is a director of Cape York Partnership (see www.capeyorkpartnership.org.au/).
2 See https://web.stanford.edu/~mrosenfe/Moynihan's%20The%20Negro%20Family.pdf (accessed 18/10/2016)
The Negro family, battered and harassed by discrimination, injustice, and uprooting, is in the deepest trouble ... While many young Negroes are moving ahead to unprecedented levels of achievement, many more are falling further and further behind.

Fifty years later, we live in the shadows of Moynihan’s electrifying thesis on African-American prospects in the wake of civil rights. The discourse reverberated here in Australia.

Moynihan’s was an attempt to identify the radical centre in thinking about the legacy of slavery and racism and its effects on African-Americans, and what it would mean for the hopes and dreams they held after the catharsis of civil rights. These fifty years saw a tumultuous dialectic play out: between those captured by Moynihan’s striking call to arms, and those alarmed by his interpretation. This discourse began immediately with a vehement campaign by liberal social reformers and leftist activists to oppose the adoption of Moynihan’s thinking by the US federal government.

The first riposte to The Negro Family came from Harvard academic, William Ryan, taking aim at Moynihan’s identification of the black family as the ground zero of black poverty and social crisis, later published in book form in 1971, Blaming the Victim. I re-read Moynihan and Ryan in preparation for my remarks tonight, as well as a bracing retrospective by Ta-Nehisi Coates in Between the World and Me. Coates is the leading black intellectual of the Black Lives Matter movement and his book is a searing analysis of the ongoing American dilemma.

Consider this: up to 10 per cent of males in the leading black cities of the US are in prison. African-Americans comprise a tragic proportion of the 5 million prisoners in the world’s leading incarcerator.

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4 Coates, T.-N. (2015). Between the world and me.
Last year on its 50\textsuperscript{th} anniversary, the Atlantic re-published \textit{The Negro Family}\textsuperscript{5} and Coates’ article, \textit{The Black Family in the Age of Mass Incarceration}\textsuperscript{6}. It is astounding that the entire leftist argument that any attempt to attribute responsibility or personal agency to individuals in respect of social problems has its genesis in Ryan’s accusation that one may be ‘blaming the victim’. It became the most powerful nostrum of leftist objection to social analyses on personal behavioural terms and any policy responses predicated thereupon. In my reading of Ryan however, I cannot gainsay much of its insight and perception. Unlike the leftist discourse he spawned in subsequent decades, Ryan’s original critique cuts to the quick and warrants contemporary reflection.

I won’t rehearse the terms of that original disputation, except to say Ryan objected to the so called ‘tangled pathology’ within African-American families as a misattribution of their predicament. Whilst Moynihan’s denunciation of the ongoing horrific effects of racism against black Americans was unequivocal, Ryan cogently argues slavery was not the immediate cause of the problems manifesting in black families: poverty and discrimination was their cause. Similar problems were manifesting with other peoples around the world in like circumstances.

I find Ryan’s critique sobering in long retrospect, because he reminds us of the danger of pathologising specific aspects of black life, particularly family life in the ghettos, without turning our eyes to the economic and structural circumstances in which these families live and the deprivations they not only suffered in the distant past, but continued to endure. Social policy responses in the modern era have been confined to addressing segments of egregious disparity without looking at the broader circumstances that gave rise to those problems and which, more importantly, drive these problems into the future.

The chief accusation against Moynihan is the Negro family’s causal role in poverty. This is I think unfair. The better way to understand Moynihan’s argument is that the Negro family

was the victim and became the transmitter of poverty. Once entrenched in poverty with all its effects on black family life, the family then becomes the means by which poverty is transmitted to future generations.

When I reflect on the history of this discourse over half a century, I wonder how much better it would have been if the insights of these two great intellectuals had somehow been reconciled. Each correcting and balancing the other, rather than repudiating the other. Instead, they became polar opposites in an unresolved discourse that organised a liberal progressive tribe on the one side, and a conservative tribe on the other. Charles Murray’s 1984 book *Losing Ground*, which laid out the modern articulation of welfare reform, is the legatee of Moynihan’s *Negro Family*. However the very alarm harboured by Ryan that the political and intellectual right would pathologise and blame African-Americans for their own predicament was realised when Murray and Richard Herrnstein subsequently published *The Bell Curve*, spuriously arguing that black Americans were innately intellectually inferior to whites. The problems of poverty and social inequality had their source in the innate character and genetics of black people, and the old assumptions about black racial inferiority found its new sociological cloak in *The Bell Curve*.

Attempts to build policy in the radical centre found their apotheosis in President Bill Clinton’s enactment of the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) in 1996, aiming, in Clinton’s invocation of Moynihan’s original words, ‘to end welfare as we know it’. It sought to reconcile the behavioural dimension of welfare dependency and the structural opportunity of employment. These reforms were supported by the now New York Senator Moynihan, to the dismay of the welfare rights lobby. There is great debate about the success of the PRWORA reforms, but it is clear this reconciliation was dependent upon the availability of work. The deal worked during the Clinton administration when jobs were available, but could not be sustained in the economic downturn. You can mandate personal responsibility but not employment opportunity.

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My interest is the radical centre. This is the place where those in search of a better society might best hunt. It is the sweet spot representing the right combination of conservative, social and liberal ideas and insights. Rather than the weak, ‘lowest common denominator’ compromise between left and right, the radical centre is the highest, noblest compromise. It brings together high ideals with hard realism. It is high minded pragmatism informed by intense dialogue and negotiation.

Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and other social democratic leaders around the world were the chief proponents of radical centre politics, however its invention began in Australia with the Hawke-Keating government in 1983. Keating was its greatest exponent. My own view is the difference between Keating as the champion of the radical centre – seeking to produce social good underpinned by economic reform – and John Howard, is that Howard was the great manager of the centre, whereas the exceptional character of Keating’s leadership was to drive the radical centre: to pursue reform and not just management.

The politics of the radical centre have declined in the past decade and a half and we have retreated to that old tepid partisanship, plying for the promiscuous affections of swinging voters. The terms of public political debates are largely between the 15% of the far right against the 15% of the far left, with the middle just sagging. There was a brief emergence of third way political philosophies in the nineties, and the political strategy of triangulation, employed by Clinton and other so called Third Way leaders. But this turned the radical centre into mere tactics, rather than a means of creating better policy and politics.

My thinking about welfare dependency and reform for my people and Australians generally evolved in the shadow of these developments. Daniel Moynihan, William Ryan, Charles Murray, Bill Clinton, Tony Blair and Paul Keating’s Working Nation were critical contributors to my emerging thought.

As perspicacious as William Ryan is in Blaming the Victim, in retrospect his thesis informed a half century’s worth of leftists encouraging the poor to see themselves as victims. This was not his intention, but it was his effect. His riposte to Moynihan was a nostrum that became an ideology that became a mindset, and legions of leftist social workers and academics
compounded the idea that the victimised were indeed victims and entitled to a sense of victimhood. I have long argued against the horrific results of this legacy. Inculcating a sense of victimhood in the victimised is for me to remove power from the victims. In a sense the right’s relative heartlessness was preferable: better to object to the right’s hypocrisy than to succumb to the left sanctifying victimhood. The frog falling in the fire can at least jump, whereas the frog in the freezer hibernates peacefully unto death.

In 1999 I published my thesis: *Our Right to Take Responsibility*. My conviction was in the difference between poverty and passivity. Poverty in the Third World as I had witnessed in Vietnam, was of a different character to the passivity in my home community. Like Ryan however, from my reading of Theodore Dalrymple’s accounts of the social pathologies of welfare dependent white people in England, I saw clearly the problems caused by welfare are not racially or culturally unique. They apply to any peoples placed in similar circumstances. Dalrymple’s accounts could well have been written about our communities in Cape York.

My thesis was based on the idea that we needed to assume responsibility as a power. As a power to take control over our lives and to have the kind of self determination that successful citizens, communities and peoples need, expect and are entitled to in a liberal and social democratic society. Like Moynihan, my thesis however aroused objections from the Australian left, indigenous and non-indigenous. A similar discourse that engulfed the Moynihan report played out in a provincial echo here in Australia.

I want to go through the main contentions in this discourse that have eluded common ground. Firstly, in relation to social disadvantage and poverty, the issue of explaining the ultimate origin of these problems going back to the colonial past, to the legacy of racism and exclusion, versus more proximate explanations such as indigenous communities leaving the cattle industry and joining the welfare rolls, and the rise of substance abuse epidemics, is the subject of great convulsion. My argument has been that, though historical wrongs have ongoing impacts, many problems now manifest in our communities are of recent origin.

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They concern the rise of substance abuse epidemics and welfare dependency in recent decades.

Another debate centres on causation. What drives poverty – is it the structural circumstance of disadvantaged peoples, or is it the behaviour of the peoples themselves that explain the cause of these problems?

Yet another dimension is the effect of racism. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have experienced and continue to experience appalling racism in Australian society. But in responding to that racism, should we inculcate a sense of victimhood in the victimised, or should we resist racism whilst ensuring it does not become our burden. I mean not in any way to diminish its soul-crushing effects on individuals and communities – I only mean to say that we should never inculcate a sense of victimhood, otherwise we let the racists win.

And finally, the whole question about agency. Should we focus on personal agency or structural reform? The left say structural reform and the right say personal agency. Like Clinton and Obama, I say both/and. The crucial question is however: what should the relative emphasis be? My view in relation to analysis: at least 51% is structure and 49% is agency. However, when it comes to policy, then my argument it is at least 51% agency and 49% structural reform. Because at the end of the day, it is personal agency that will drive structural reform. We can’t just sit back and hope structural reform will somehow happen, and absolve ourselves of the necessity of agency. This is the passive leftist dream of social justice. Social justice in truth can only be secured when two by two, clutching our children to our breasts, we climb the stairs of social progress in pursuit of better lives for our families, animated by the engine of our own liberal self-interest, whilst supported by the social underpinnings of that staircase built by the distribution of opportunity.

We need strong, healthy, educated children to emerge in distressed communities whilst at the same working for the structural reforms for the progress of our communities. The stronger our children are, the better they will be able to fight for structural reform.
In 2015 eight regional communities across Indigenous Australia developed and provided the Federal Government an agenda for Empowered Communities\textsuperscript{11}, which grapples with the structural dimensions of indigenous empowerment.

This blueprint sought to answer the call for empowerment made in the 1990 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. 25 years after the Royal Commission the number of indigenous people in prison doubled. Australia’s Indigenous imprisonment rate is the highest in the world: 27% of our prisoners come from 3% of the population. No statistic speaks more profoundly to the structural nature of our predicament than this one. If there is not a structural, indeed constitutional basis for 3% of any society filling 27% of its jails, then we would have to subscribe to a theory of innate criminality on the part of those peoples. The most notorious figures concerning the indigenous plight in this country make plain this is not a problem of criminology or socio-economic development – this is a problem of disempowerment derived from that people’s status in the nation.

We proposed a comprehensive policy program for consideration by the federal, state and territory governments. Essentially, the challenge of creating a level playing field between the Elephant of government and the Mouse of indigenous Australia is to find the right fulcrum between the two, to create a relationship of negotiation and mutual responsibility and respect, rather than a top-down relationship of mendicancy and control.

The other structural agenda that is imperative, in my view, is the constitutional recognition of Indigenous Australians. This, too, is about empowerment and responsibility. Australia’s First Nations must be empowered with a voice in relation to the laws and policies affecting our people.

Finally, the country needs to embrace the indigenous heritage of Australia in a way that celebrates it as the heritage of the entire nation, and which provides assurance to our First Nations that the extraordinary languages and cultures of this land may endure long on this continent. As they have done for more than 50,000 years.


These are the structural agendas of indigenous policy to which we must employ the shoulders of the nation. But achieving them must be the mutual responsibility of Indigenous Australians and non-Indigenous Australians alike. We all recognise the problems and yearn for solutions. The question is: will the nation’s leaders take up this challenge? Are we willing to work together to make the paradigm shifts that are needed? Is anybody willing to lead?

As a nation, we must have the courage to change the way we do business in Indigenous affairs.

I put these views forward from the unfortunate conclusion that there is little that is promising in what has been done and being done under the banner of ‘welfare reform’ in Australia. Fiddling around with entitlement design and conditions is not by itself going to reform welfare. They will be components of a comprehensive agenda, but they are not sufficient to constitute real reform.

Indeed we have probably worsened things with the move to outsourcing human service delivery to the private sector. Whilst this outsourcing may be said to be more efficient, the truth is that we have now created and entrenched industries whose sole rationale is the existence of social problems. Beyond the employment and training services industries, we now have private industries in all manner of social need and misery: the dead end of which is child protection. The profit motive now exists in the space that separates lost children from their mothers’ bosoms. These vampire industries have completely colonized indigenous communities, and constitute the Australian Welfare State’s main response to poverty and the problems that arose from welfare dependency.

Now that rentals flow in these industries there is no incentive for players work to resolve the social problems that is their market. Rather the imperative now is to simply manage and indeed sustain them. The purveyors of quasi-markets of outsourced government service delivery now hold the commanding heights, and resist reform.

My belief has always been that we need to pursue reform on both fronts: at the behavioural and structural levels. I do not resile from mutual responsibility and conditional welfare. By themselves they will not solve our problems but there is no escaping the fact that disadvantage over time becomes dysfunction, that poverty over time becomes passivity.
This is where our hindsight on William Ryan has 50 years more evidence.

The struggle for structural reform is not easy. Even where we have developed concrete agendas for empowerment, the country’s political leaders do not know how to respond. If I have learned anything these past 15 years it is that reforms to secure the radical centre on poverty and disadvantage require national leaders to lead them. You need the equivalent of Paul Keating to lead real social reform, as the flip side of economic reform. The radical centre cannot be secured by activists and provocateurs from the outside, and neither by minor ministers. Only a Lyndon Johnson or Paul Keating can have the dexterity and authority to do what needs to be done.

Finally, let me tell you why I so passionately believe that welfare reform and structural reform is crucial. My friend Danny Gilbert, founder of Gilbert + Tobin is here tonight, and together with an extraordinary group of corporate leaders including Ann Sherry, Gab Trainor and Ken Henry, they support us in the prosecution of our reform agenda. We are confident of the progress we are making.

We are stemming the transmission of disadvantage: I see it with my own eyes every day. There are more than 300 students Cape York children who have attended high-quality boarding schools. These young men and women are now found in universities across the country. They are graduating with all manner of degrees, entering an array of professions.

Some of them are now starting their own families. I can assure you that the transmission of poverty is now well in reverse with these young men and women. They are transmitting aspiration and hope to their children.

And then there is the ultimate short-circuit – a job. There is no more effective a measure that will stop intergenerational welfare dependency in its tracks than a parent going to work every day.

Let me show this short I-phone video of this beautiful young girl from the Coen campus of the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy. She has received Direct Instruction as a Pre-
Prep student, and is putting the magical pieces of the reading jigsaw together. She is 4 years old and is on the way to reading by the time she starts her first year of primary school. She is no different from her colleagues.

**Video played:** See [http://www.goodtогreatschools.org.au/Files/Coen-School-Reading.MOV](http://www.goodtогreatschools.org.au/Files/Coen-School-Reading.MOV)

These are the great pleasures of my work. Nothing excites me more than seeing this kind of magic. I have utmost optimism for this little girl’s future. Her parents send her to school at above 90 per cent attendance rates. Her family puts money aside into a trust account for her education every week. She has hundreds and at times more than a thousand dollars in her trust fund, depending whether uniforms, tuckshop, musical instruments and books have been purchased from her funds. Her mother and father know something is going on for their beautiful child here, and they are engaged.

The only thing I worry about is whether her black skin will raise barriers to her future, and whether she will enjoy her Aboriginal language and heritage, along with all of the privileges of her citizenship as an Australian.

While I hope she will develop her own resilience to the slings and arrows that she will surely face, I pray that she will have the future she deserves and has reason to value.