

2007 Bendi Lango Opening: APS President's speech

Below is the speech given by APS President, Amanda Gordon, at the opening of the 2007 Bendi Lango Art Exhibition:

“Your Excellency, Ms Quentin Bryce AC, Governor of Queensland and Mr Michael Bryce, Mr Murray Swyripa, General Manager, Communications and External Relations, Rio Tinto Aluminium, Ms Carol Currie, Members of the Board of Directors of the Australian Psychological Society, honoured guests, dear friends. For those who don’t know me, my name is Amanda Gordon, and I am President of the Australian Psychological Society.

I would first like to acknowledge country and thank Carol Currie for her kind welcome to her land. I would also like to acknowledge with enormous gratitude Kylie Cann and her team of helpers. Kylie, an APS member, has spent hours and hours of voluntary labour ensuring that this wonderful event would come together for you all. Her commitment to the needs of indigenous peoples is a driving force for her, and her attention to detail can be at times terrifying. Jenny Hillman and Susie Spira – our curators and now dear friends – you bring this exhibition together so that it has a life of its own, and we hear the artworks tell us their tales. Chris Simpson, Kylie Egan and the others at the APS who have donated their time and effort to this cause because you know it is important – I thank you.

Governor, we are so grateful for your support for this event. Joy Murphy, a Wurrundjeri (Victorian) elder, kindly named our initiative Bendi Lango, meaning cutting edge, as she felt that it could be a way of making a real difference in redressing some of the terrible inequalities suffered by our indigenous peoples in this country.

For within the diverse population that is multicultural Australia, there is the disadvantaged Australian Aboriginal. Disadvantaged because they have never had a voice. Disadvantaged because they have been systematically taken from the sources of their self-esteem – their land, their language and their families, for generations. They have had few role models whom they could emulate in their quest for self-actualisation.

The recent Northern Territory report that culminated in Federal Government interventions in aboriginal communities in Australia has highlighted the disadvantage and despair in which many indigenous Australians live. Psychologists have been appalled. We abhor child abuse and say so. We know that it is not limited to indigenous communities. But the cycle of abuse that it seems has characterised many communities can’t just be sorted out with the click of our fingers. It will take significant and long-term involvement by people who can work with both the victims and the perpetrators. The safety of all those who live in the communities has to once again become the responsibility of the men and women who live there. Family and community need to be reshaped, to become safe havens for indigenous peoples again.

We know that Government interventions can't work if they don't engage properly with stakeholders. We know that they need long-term responses to long-term disadvantage, if they are really to make a difference in indigenous peoples' lives. We know that healing will only occur if culturally appropriate practices are used.

The practice of psychology covers a wide range of areas – mental health, addictions and health are well-known, but psychologists are also strong contributors to educational practice, community engagement, occupational wellbeing and criminology.

We know that there isn't an aboriginal community that is not in a constant state of grief and mourning for the losses they have suffered over the generations – of their land, of their children taken from them, of their dreaming. And in the 21st century, they suffer the losses further, through drug and alcohol addiction, suicide, loss of pride, loss of identity. There is no doubt that mental illness co-exists with these problems, and the compounding of depression, anxiety and psychoses with the reality of the lives that are being lived, means that the intervention of psychologists is vital.

We know that children's learning outcomes are directly related to their mothers' literacy, so running literacy programmes for the women will make a difference to these kids. We know that health outcomes for families are directly related to women's literacy – so we want there to be literacy programmes for the women. We know that women can better protect children when they have role models of women like them, so we need indigenous women to be trained as health workers and counsellors, to use culturally appropriate interventions with women.

Indigenous Psychologists will also address the problem of poor attendance at school of indigenous children, and the subsequent low level of educational attainment that continues the cycle of unemployment and disadvantage through the generations. Indigenous psychologists who could be involved in their communities in the educational sector could help to address the ongoing disadvantage suffered by our indigenous communities. Indigenous psychologists could also address the despair suffered by many young aboriginal people, who believe that the only way out is suicide. We will support indigenous people who can intervene to protect the young men who will one day be the elders in their own communities.

We know some of the things of which I talk through common sense – that street lighting is the best protection against violent criminal acts at night, and that the Government should be providing both street lighting and police activity to counter the problems that occur in remote aboriginal communities.

People need to be engaged in meaningful activity to give meaning to their lives. Not very profound – but being given money for the dole, with no access to meaningful employment, is not likely to turn abusers into productive members of society. And making geographical

boundaries around alcohol is only a stop-gap measure – we need long-term programmes to assist indigenous peoples to live without alcohol as a crutch and as an escape.

With fewer than 20 practising indigenous psychologists for one percent of the Australian population, it is no wonder that the rate of suffering of significant mental health problems in these communities is rising, despite real advances in our understanding of them, and our ability to use psychological strategies to enhance peoples' lives generally, and reduce the scourge of mental illness.

COAG has agreed to support networks of indigenous men and women in local communities so that they can better help people who report incidents of violence and abuse. There is no doubt that indigenous men and women with psychological knowledge, who could input into their community councils, could be of immense benefit to the communities. There needs to be indigenous people trained to use the knowledge now available to make a difference at a community level.

The need has been acknowledged, and we want to do something about it!

Your Excellency, I know that you have a commitment to taking a longer term view of issues facing Australia. We at the Australian Psychological Society applaud your approach that includes mentoring, and developing role models for indigenous youth, that will heighten their belief in themselves and their own potential. I welcome you now to the lectern to share some of your vision with us."