



# Late Report: Key Conference

**Opening a major conference on the media and indigenous Australians in Brisbane in February, prominent Aboriginal identity Lois O'Donoughue said that she looked forward to seeing how the mainstream media, well represented at the conference, would report it.**

O'Donoughue, who is chair of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was destined to be disappointed. On the whole, the conference received fairly superficial coverage in mainstream media, confirming claims that issues of concern to indigenous people are often ignored, or covered only when they involve controversy.

CU believes the proceedings of this conference deserve a wider audience; they are still topical, particularly in view of the upsurge of activity and comment - often ill-informed and hysterical - flowing from the Mabo decision.

This article does not attempt a comprehensive overview of the conference, but is intended to draw attention to some key papers and direct interested readers to the conference papers which recently became available\*.

## Outrage Over Paper

The conference did produce a controversy, and the incident was a classic example of the kinds of issues it was attempting to highlight. The trouble began when Jack Lunn, editor of the *Courier Mail*, defended his paper's record on covering indigenous Australians and their concerns, against a backdrop of slides of that coverage, quoting among other things the number of stories (432) published about Aboriginal people during 1992.

The tone of this paper outraged many present. Michael Meadows of QUT claimed that the slide show was selective and had edited out stories linking Aboriginal people to crime and cannibalism, topics which had been

'fairly common' in the paper during 1992. He said that merely counting the stories said nothing about the quality of the stories, and he questioned the *Courier-Mail's* response to complaints about its reporting of stories about indigenous people.

Lunn's patronising reaction to criticism caused further outrage. (A sample: 'We did a piece about the young [Aboriginal] chap who became a lawyer, we had a nice photo and a nice story on him').

The following day, Chris Warren from the Media Alliance said that he 'cringed with shame for the craft of journalism', a response to the appearance in the *Courier Mail* of an edited version of Jack Lunn's speech, in all 46 paragraphs on the feature page. The rest of the conference rated 34 paragraphs at the back of the paper.

Concern about the *Courier Mail's* performance led the conference to carry overwhelmingly a motion calling on the paper to allow right of reply.

The first article written in reply was scathingly critical of the *Courier Mail* and Lunn refused to publish it. A second, more general article was accepted and published.

## Strong Line-up

The conference was sponsored by the ATSIC, the Departments of Transport and Communications and Employment, Education and Training, and the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. It assembled an impressive line-up of contributors, and - as might be expected - a much higher proportion of indigenous speakers than is usually the case at media conferences. These included representatives from bodies like the Island Co-ordinating Council, the Townsville Regional Council, WAAMA, and Katherine Radio, as well as the more familiar high profile speakers like TIGA Bayles of the National Indigenous Media Association of Australia (NIIMAA), Sol Bellar (ATSIC)

and former ABC board member Neville Bonner.

Topics focused on five main areas:

- the portrayal of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in the media;
- codes and practices relating to the presentation of Aboriginal issues;
- training future journalists;
- the role of indigenous media organisations; and
- increasing indigenous employment in media organisations.

Many speakers stressed that these topics were closely interrelated and that change in one area was inevitably dependent on what was happening in another area.

The second day of the conference involved a number of informal discussion groups, in which it was possible to explore aspects of these topics in more detail with contributions from a wider range of participants.

## Portrayal Issues

*We still have a failure to include the Aboriginal people within the community of readers. It is still the old 'them and us' syndrome, as if the Aboriginal people are not part of the community. They just do not exist. So we exclude them as if they are not part of the society - still not seen.*

Pat Dodson, Chairman, Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation

Lois O'Donoughue said in her opening paper that the emergence of a new style of reporting Aboriginal issues had been a significant change for the better in the last decade.

This was strongly questioned by Jack Waterford, deputy editor of the *Canberra Times*, whose view was that the last ten years had seen a decline from the period mid-1970s to mid-1980s, when media attention, 'most of it... highly sympathetic', had reached its peak. There had been a destruc-

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tion of the consensus that had formerly prevailed in Australian politics, with a much higher proportion of unsympathetic material and a reduction of coverage.

Waterford went on to say that journalists ignored certain issues, like violence by Aboriginal men against Aboriginal women, which was 'the most significant under-reported story in Aboriginal affairs'. He said that an unwillingness to criticise Aboriginals, even individuals, had done neither the people themselves, nor reportage, much of a service.

Waterford also slammed the journalistic habit of using the same spokesperson on every Aboriginal issue, 'whether or not those people have got the right or the authority or the knowledge to speak in those areas'.

This provocative paper surprisingly did not generate a strong reaction, but one participant told *CU* that the conference was 'very tightly controlled' by the organisers and left little opportunity for feedback and questions.

*I think it is a sad and sorry state of affairs that after years of analysis, at least 20 Royal Commissions, numerous governments of political persuasions recommending various policies and strategies that the Australian media has refused to accept that the negative stereotyping that they have created and perpetuated and the lies about Aboriginal people need to be corrected. I think the only thing that you can say about it is it is a sad indictment of journalism in this country and...a poor excuse when you hear journalists justifying their coverage because it is in the public interest, a term which is obviously open to subjective interpretation.*

Owen Cole, general manager, CAAMA.

Lois O'Donoghue mentioned that a number of Aboriginal media groups are monitoring local media and responding to unfair and biased reporting. 'Neither Aboriginal people nor the wider community will tolerate biased and sensationalist reporting overlaid, as it generally is, with racist overtones', she said.

Federal Minister Robert Tickner referred to the myths, often fuelled by the media, that Aboriginal people do not want to work and are drunks. Over 20,000 indigenous people around Australia have in fact given up the right to receive an unemployment benefit in order to work on projects involving community advancement and development under the Commonwealth Development Employment program. As many as 35 per cent of Aboriginal men do not drink alcohol, compared with 12 per cent of non-Aboriginal men.

## Indigenous Media

A constant theme at the conference was the important role that indigenous media organisations in Australia have played and would continue to play. Tiga Bayles said that from a handful of people working in the media a decade ago, there were now some 30 groups using public stations, 85 BRACS communities, indigenous people working in the ABC (70 according to David Hill's paper) and SBS.

Ripeka Evans from IWI Television, NZ, spoke about the impressive development of indigenous broadcasting in New Zealand and how this had been brought about. Maori images and messages about Maori people in their own language and/or English have been broadcast to almost every household in the country nearly every day of the year for the last eight years, she said.

## Training

*The underlying policy, the editorial policy that is a reflection of the mainstream society toward Aboriginal society is often the first thing that is learnt when a journo starts his job. It's not written in his duty statement, but they would tell you how to deal with the black issue....*

Wayne Wharton, secretary, NIMAA

In a session on training future journalists, James Button of *Time Australia* said a major problem was that very few journalists have Aboriginal people

as colleagues and friends, and a 'combination of guilt and some sort of fear prohibits those who might be interested in covering issues from doing so'. He suggested regular meetings between journalists and Aboriginal people, with journalists perhaps spending time within communities if the people were willing.

Helen Molnar from Swinburne said that tacking Aboriginal studies on to journalism courses was not the solution, 'because it is about questioning the whole news process and why it gets handed on from generation to generation of journalists in this uncritical way'.

## The Future

Summing up the conference, Sol Belleair suggested that a number of tasks should be pursued:

- priority given to ensuring that programs about indigenous Australians are produced by indigenous Australians;
- completion of a broadcasting policy paper with specific policies, strategies, guidelines and an order of priorities;
- a training package for indigenous broadcasters developed with media organisations other than the ABC and SBS;
- continued work towards a protocol on the representation of indigenous people in the media;
- development of awards for reporting indigenous issues;
- ensuring the employment of indigenous people in the media;
- training programs for journalists to make them fully aware of the need to take account of and respect cultural sensitivities;
- ATSIIC to develop a program of formal and informal contact between indigenous people and the media. □

\* Conference Proceedings, *The Media and Indigenous Australians Conference*, 15-17 February 1993, publisher not named, 221pp. Cost: \$40.00 from Carillon Conference Management, PO Box 177 Red Hill, Q 4059, phone (07) 368 2644, fax (07) 369 3731.