

AN INTERVIEW WITH HON LINDA BURNEY

by April Long & Simone King



The Hon Linda Jean Burney is a member of the Legislative Assembly, representing the electorate of Canterbury. In addition, she is the former Minister for the State Plan and Minister for Community Services, as well as a member of the Australian Labor party. Linda is the first Aboriginal person to serve in the NSW Parliament.

In her inaugural speech to the Legislative Assembly she said:

I am a member of the mighty Wiradjuri Aboriginal nation. For the first 10 years of my life, like all Indigenous people at that time, I was not a citizen of this country. Growing up as an Aboriginal child looking into the mirror of our country was difficult and alienating. Your reflection in the mirror was at best ugly and distorted, and, at worst, nonexistent.¹

Linda Burney talks to April Long and Simone King about the importance of having Aboriginal people in politics, most notably women, and how she maintains her identity as an Aboriginal woman working within the profession of politics. Linda also reflects on the importance of the *Indigenous Law Bulletin*.

Can you tell me a little about your background?

I was born in 1957 in the Murrumbidgee area in the town of Whitton, and later attended Leeton High School. My mother was non-Aboriginal and my father was Aboriginal. However, I did not meet my father until I was 28. I was

raised until I was 15 by my Great Aunt and Uncle, who were brother and sister and both non-Aboriginal. They were a big influence in my life. They grew up during an interesting time in Australia; post-World War One, World War Two and the Great Depression. They ensured that I grew up with old fashioned values, which have served me well in the political arena, and, in fact, my whole life. I met my father after much searching; it took 5 years to find him. And the ironic part of that is that he and my 10 brothers and sisters actually grew up very close to me, around 30-40 minutes away. My parents were unmarried, so I grew up with the double taboo of being illegitimate and black, which was an interesting thing to carry with me in that era... it was pretty tough. But ultimately I think it built my character and my resilience. It taught me to respect others.

I later became a school teacher. I taught in Mount Druitt and became involved in policy work, primarily in Aboriginal education. Being involved in Aboriginal politics led me to become involved in mainstream politics. I was the first Aboriginal graduate of Charles Stuart University and in 2002 the university awarded me an honouree doctorate, which was indeed a great honour.

Can you share your views on the representation of Indigenous women in parliaments across the country?

When you look at the Indigenous people that have been elected into Parliament, most of them have been women. At one point not long ago, there was something like nine Aboriginal people in parliament across the country and a high number of them were women. There is myself in New South Wales, we had recently an Indigenous woman, Kathryn Hay, elected in Tasmania (no longer in Parliament), we have Carol Martin in the Western Australian Parliament and we have five Indigenous people in the NT legislature, three of which are women.

So Aboriginal women are doing pretty well. It's a nice collegial thing... we all know each other. However we have never seen any Indigenous women elected in the Federal scene - although we currently have an Indigenous man, Ken Wyatt. We have also never had any Aboriginal people elected in the South Australian, Victorian or Queensland parliaments, which I'm both surprised and disappointed at.

What would you say to any Indigenous law students considering careers in politics?

Politics is hard, but I would say go for it! But it is something that you would only make a decision about

after a lot of thought and after talking to people to find out what is involved. I don't think many people realise the really hard work you do outside of Parliament sitting weeks in your electorate. If you are a Minister or Shadow Minister, the hours and the requirements are enormous. Something suffers... and quite often it is your health and your family. And the other thing that you lose is any anonymity; you and your family become public property, nothing is private. Personal relationships suffer because you just don't have the time. The game is a hard game... it's not for the faint hearted. But, on the other hand, it really is a profession where you can do some really wonderful work, change society, and provide leadership. What we do is make laws and they have to be laws that serve people well, and mostly they do.

In the time that I've been in parliament I have supported some really important changes like same sex adoption, stem cell research and changing the age of consent for young gay men. Those are things that I'm really proud of. We have also achieved incredible changes in child protection, which is another thing I am very proud of. Parliaments should reflect the communities that they represent and in the main they haven't - they have been, up until very recently, basically white blokes. In some parliaments in Australia that is still the situation. However, what we are starting to see now is much more of a reflection of diversity in Parliament.

It's really important for Indigenous people to understand that your Aboriginality is not going to get you there; it's an amazing attribute, but to go into mainstream politics you have to have the capacity to represent everyone. That comes about from experience, from believing in humanity, from being able to stand in the shoes of other people and see their point of view. I represent an entire electorate, which is an enormous responsibility and serious business. It's an electorate with over 140 different languages and I feel so moved to represent such a diverse, special and rich place. Politics really is a calling... not just a job. You have to understand that if you join a political party, you are part of that party. One of the things that can mean is that you are required to vote and support things that you are perhaps not fully in agreement with. You need to know where your line is... where your line in the sand is, and be able to prosecute your views.

Is establishing that line how you have maintained your identity and your beliefs in politics?

I'm often asked whether I have maintained my beliefs and identity since being in politics and I very much

have. I don't feel like I've had to compromise who I am. I think that comes from a number of places; strength of character, deep thought and a belief in what you are doing and why you are doing it. You also have to know what battles are worth fighting and what you have to let go to the keeper, because there is only so much energy and time in the day.

This year marks the 30th Anniversary of the Indigenous Law Bulletin. How important do you think it is to have law journals that critique the law and government policy?

I remember the Bulletin 30 years ago, when I was first getting involved in Indigenous affairs. I think it's a really fine journal. It's something that has clearly survived the test of time, and not all journals and publications do that. I think it's such a respected journal because it examines issues that mainstream journals do not – issues that people find important. It has a really strong human rights focus and it has diverse contributions from lots

of different people. It has also survived because the University of New South Wales has such a strong, long-term commitment to Indigenous law students.

1 New South Wales, *Parliamentary Debates*, Legislative Assembly, 6 May 2003, 295-298 (Linda Burney) <<http://www.parliament.gov.au/Prod/parlment/hansart.nsf/V3Key/LA20030506036>>.

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