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WHO DO YOU THINK THAT I AM?

* P. Turner

I am delighted at the opportunity to address you today and I would like to start by quoting a section from the speech made to Aboriginal people by His Holiness, Pope John Paul II, when he visited Australia last year.

His Holiness made reference to the strength of Aboriginal culture and the need to preserve it. He chose to make an analogy between the culture of the Aboriginal people and the indomitable nature of a native Australian tree.

If you stay closely united, you are like a tree standing in the middle of a bushfire sweeping through the timber. The leaves are scorched and the tough bark is scarred and burned; but inside the tree the sap is still flowing, and under the ground the roots are still strong. Like that tree you have endured the flames, and you still have the power to be reborn.

This sentiment is particularly important for Aboriginal people as we approach the Bicentenary year, for while non-Aboriginal people are celebrating a new life in a new land, we Aboriginals are remembering our own place in the history of this continent, remembering that our ancestors have spent 40,000 years managing the environment of this land, building up a culture and a store of knowledge that is only just beginning to be understood by the wider Australian and international society.

Against such a background, the last two hundred years can be viewed as a bushfire, incredibly destructive perhaps, but of very brief duration compared with our 40,000 year history, an upheaval which we have endured, in which we have suffered, but which we have survived.

I am glad to say that non-Aboriginal Australia is beginning to recognise that Aboriginal people and Aboriginal culture have much to offer the whole of society, and I believe that we look now to a future in which the values of our past are promoted to the greatest advantage for all Australians.

* Ms Pat Turner, First Assistant Secretary, Corporate Development Division, Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Canberra. Address delivered at the National Conference, Catholic Women's League, held at the University of Queensland, St Lucia, September, 1987.

These are values which reflect an enormous respect for the individual, combined with an emphasis on consensus. They are values in which there is an abiding sense of community together with a commitment to the sharing of resources. These arise from a great love and respect for the land, the very foundation of Aboriginal culture.

The first Europeans in Australia claimed that Aboriginals appeared to have no religion, even though they saw that a ceremonial life existed. What they failed to recognise was that, despite a simple material life, the religion and culture of the Aboriginal people was rich and complex. They could not comprehend that harmony with the environment and relationship with the land was the very basis of Aboriginal religion and Aboriginal identity.

So, I'd like to respond to the theme of today's conference, *Who Do You Think That I Am?*, by talking about this aspect of Aboriginality. In particular, I would like to talk about the position and identity of Aboriginal women in today's society.

In traditional Aboriginal society, the role and status of men and women were once complementary and well-defined. Aboriginal women today, unfortunately, have been largely deprived of their traditional economic functions and left at the bottom of the economic ladder. Their average incomes are even lower than those of Aboriginal men, for whom the rate of unemployment is five or six times the national average. I think you will agree that this is a situation which would be quite unacceptable to most Australians.

Despite this, or perhaps in spite of it, Aboriginal women have much to be proud of. Aboriginal women have been a major motivating force in the provision of better services to their people in areas such as health, education and, more recently, broadcasting. Here I am referring to women such as Grace Smallwood, a member of the National Advisory Committee on AIDS, and Freda Glynn, the driving force in the Central Australian Aboriginal Media Association.

Indeed, Aboriginal women have done much to improve conditions for all Aboriginals. Aboriginal women are often the backbone of Aboriginal groups and organisations. Women such as Kath Walker, Naomi Myers and Evelyn Scott have been in the forefront of struggles in the political arena.

The social position of Aboriginal women in Australian society is quite different from that of non-Aboriginal women.

Generally, Aboriginal women have a larger number of dependants than other women, and their rate of re-entry into the workforce after the age of 24 is very low, despite a trend towards reduced fertility among older Aboriginal women. Of Aboriginal mothers, 30% are sole parents. Aboriginal women have children at a very early age, partly because child bearing is sometimes considered a prerequisite in kinship structures.

Women's roles in the Aboriginal extended family are vitally significant and much respected. Their roles as mothers, aunts, sisters and grandmothers encompass the responsibility for the raising, care and discipline of children. Families revolve around the women and depend upon them to counter outside influences and maintain their strength and togetherness as families. The women are also heavily relied upon for the continuation of Aboriginal values and practices within the family. This is despite rapid changes both within the family unit and in the wider society.

While I agree that Australian women have particular concerns and aspirations, a fact which this conference attests, I think it is important that we acknowledge that Aboriginal women have very special needs, perhaps as a result of their being doubly disadvantaged by race and gender. I am pleased to say, however, that these needs can now be addressed more adequately thanks to the upgrading of the Women's Unit within the Department of Aboriginal Affairs. Earlier this year the Unit became the Office of Aboriginal Women, located within the Department's Corporate Development Division, which I am in charge of.

The original Women's Unit was established in 1984 through a Community Employment Project which saw 50 women employed in Central, State and Regional Offices for 12 months. After the completion of the CEP project, the Unit's work was continued by officers transferred from within the Aboriginal Affairs portfolio.

Combined with this, the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet established the Aboriginal Women's Task Force. The Task Force talked to hundreds of Aboriginal women throughout Australia - the first such nationwide consultation - and produced a report called *Women's Business*. Although the Task Force in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet has since been disbanded, DAA is now responsible for implementation of its recommendations.

Through this process of consultation, Aboriginal women identified the following areas of need:

- * dignity, and the need to be treated as individuals in our own right,
- * acknowledgment and encouragement of our culture,
- * the need for culturally appropriate services,
- * health and housing,
- * the need for more effective consultation and participation in decision making,
- * the need for information about Government services and programs to be disseminated in a culturally appropriate way, including in Aboriginal languages.

Aboriginal women are also concerned with the impact of excessive alcohol consumption, especially as it gives rise to domestic violence and disruption of traditional community organisational frameworks.

I am pleased to say that there are very real signs that Aboriginal people are taking advantage of increased educational opportunities, which is evidenced by the number of our people moving into a broad spectrum of careers and professions.

Aboriginal people are taking up the challenge of higher education and the latest figures show that there are nearly 1500 Aboriginals studying business management, commerce or law, about the same number studying engineering or taking techno-industrial courses, more than 300 Aboriginals are studying medicine, dentistry or pharmacy, and more studying behavioural sciences such as sociology.

There are a number of fields that have been identified by Aboriginals as having a significant impact on Aboriginal people. Special efforts should be made to encourage Aboriginal students in these areas. They are law, medicine, nursing, management and administration, linguistics, anthropology, communications, social work, economics, politics, environmental science and education.

In addition, the education of non-Aboriginals about the culture, lifestyle, values, aspirations and needs of Aboriginals is an important complementary process in improving the quality of education available to Aboriginal people. It also provides the basis for a more harmonious Australian society.

Aboriginal women are currently eligible to participate in Aboriginal and mainstream Government education programs. In

June 1980, women represented 67% of participants in the Aboriginal study Grants Scheme (Abstudy) and 36.2% in the Training for Aboriginal Programs.

Government policy aims to improve the education outcomes for Aboriginals by facilitating their access to an education which is in harmony with their cultural values and chosen lifestyles, which promotes pride in their identity, and equips them for further personal development.

The policy is further aimed at providing Aboriginal people with the opportunity of participating fully in the general Australian community.

A major aspect of this policy is the employment of Aboriginal people in the decision-making process.

Government has recognised that changes can only be achieved if Aboriginal people are responsible for developing and implementing the measures. This is true from the national level, with the determination of policy and allocation of funds, through to the local level, with the development and administration of individual projects.

Associated with this must be greater Aboriginal representation and involvement on bodies making decisions about the services available to all citizens.

I believe that yet another response to the theme of today's conference is reflected in the events leading up to and following the 1967 Referendum. This historic event is regarded by many as the turning point in the Aboriginal struggle for recognition of identity, when the Commonwealth Government was finally allowed in the Constitution to legislate on Aboriginal affairs, and the Aboriginal people were at last allowed to be counted in reckoning the population.

This meant that Aboriginals were finally recognised as Australian citizens, a recognition which the Constitution had previously specifically denied.

The overwhelming endorsement by the people of Australia of the changes to the Constitution indicated that the nation as a whole finally accepted that Aboriginals are Australians and are entitled to basic human rights.

In the twenty years that have followed the referendum, the full extent of Aboriginal disadvantage - exacerbated by the original omission of the Aboriginal people from the political contract embodied in the 1901 Constitution - has become clearer.

There are many Australians who are disappointed with the pace of change, and it is obvious that racist attitudes towards my people still exist, but the important thing is that there has been positive, if not overwhelming, achievement in a number of important areas. I believe that while things may not be as good as they should be, they are not as bad as they were.

There are no simple solutions for meeting the challenges of a race of people who are in transition, whose traditional life-styles have been profoundly disrupted, and who, in a relatively short space of time, have been forced to make fundamental adjustments to their basic way of life.

As I have mentioned, the current basis of government policy is to maintain and support our cultural identity, to enhance the dignity of our race and to promote the security and well-being of all Aboriginal people.

But Aboriginal affairs is not an area where we can simply sit back and leave to government the solutions to its problems, even if those problems are of such an enormous scale that only governments can address them. Non-Aboriginal community organisations and people such as yourselves also share a responsibility to break down the barriers of racial tension and alienation.

No doubt a major responsibility also rests with Aboriginal people ourselves to recognise and build on the positive aspects of our experiences within the wider Australian society. We must also realise that within Australia's multicultural society Aboriginals are not the only minority that suffers racist comment and actions.

But Australia still has to come to terms with its attitudes towards my people. Australians generally do not comprehend the enormous extent of disadvantage endured by Aboriginal people.

The real needs of today are not only material - in terms of housing, water, education and employment - but spiritual. In the past, Aboriginal people and Aboriginal culture have been denigrated and have come to accept this denigration. We had a lack of faith in ourselves and low self-esteem - because that is what non-Aboriginal Australia had taught us.

The theme of this conference - *Who Do You Say I Am?* - therefore has particular relevance for me and for all Aboriginal people.

We are answering that question by attempting, through agencies such as the Office of Aboriginal Women, to re-establish within ourselves the essential moral ingredients of confidence and dignity, and by re-asserting ourselves as valuable and vital members of a new Australia. At the same time, our Aboriginal culture is being recognised for its ancient and its contemporary worth.

We answer the question by saying that Aboriginal identity has survived, like the native tree in the bushfire, and that there is new hope for the future.

Thank you.

