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Imagine – A Community First Party

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I'd like to start by acknowledging the Aboriginal traditional owners of the place where we meet today, and by paying respect to the elders and their culture – the oldest living culture in the world.

I've had a fairly varied career, and if I bring anything to a gathering such as this it's the value of having been exposed to a variety of different perspectives.

Working for farmers and resource industries for twenty years -- forging some links between farmers and the environment movement, leading to the decade I spent with Landcare -- dealing with Aboriginal people through the reconciliation process.

I firmly believe that the natural strategic alliance in this country should be between the farm sector, the environmental movement, and Aboriginal people – because though they come to it from different directions, deeply ingrained in each of them is the desire to care better for country.

I should say that I've now got a brand new career, that of a handbag.

At the last election in NSW my wife was elected as the first Aboriginal member ever of the oldest parliament in Australia.

That, too, has helped me enrich my perspective on a range of Aboriginal issues.

Still, I want to make it clear that this afternoon I can speak only for myself -- I don't have a constituency anymore. I also want to say that I don't think I'm part of any elite (no matter what John Howard says).

If I had to define myself, I suppose I'd say that after working for over thirty years in the political arena I'm a pragmatist.

I've learned three very basic things.

1. One, in the last analysis we're all change managers, the pace of change is accelerating, and how we deal with change defines us as a nation and as individuals.
2. Second, relationships are absolutely critical in how we go forward, because in practice they determine the pace of change.

3. Third, we need to care a **lot** better for our country.

What I want to do in this talk is to give you the basic context I'm coming from, then touch on a few of the issues that are important to me, and then in what I hope is a pragmatic way deal with some of the political options available at this time.

My context is something like this.

There's no going back from the process of internationalisation. The decisions taken in the eighties -- to float the dollar, to reduce industry protection, to break down the centralised wage fixing system – are things we can't now move away from.

The issue is really how we manage change, how we take our place in the global market.

Our society in many ways is defined by our environment, and we need to remember that we live on the lowest, the flattest, and the driest inhabited continent in the world. Australia is 32 times bigger in area than the UK, but our population is only 20 million; and we've now got 85% of our population living within 50km of the coast.

We're a resource-based economy, but we're not using our natural resources in a sustainable way. Our major river systems are stressed, some agriculture is clearly inappropriate, soils are becoming more acidic, salinity is increasing and we're losing biodiversity.

In regional Australia agricultural enterprises have aggregated to achieve economies of scale, and irrigation is increasingly going to shift to higher value crops as the cost of water increases.

Partly as a result we're seeing the closure of many small country towns, which are being replaced by what I call regional service centres – cities that provide services on a regional basis. Around these cities are small non-commercial farms where the owners have significant off-farm income.

There are more and more larger farms, and also more and more smaller farms, and it's the middle-sized family scale operations that are coming under most pressure. In my view, one of today's

critical issues is the depopulation, in relative terms, of the inland – an issue that doesn't seem to be on any policymaker's radar screen.

As that occurs, the Aboriginal population continues to grow faster than the national average and to become a higher proportion of the population in rural and remote areas, bringing the focus on our relationship with Aboriginal people.

I've got to say that a lot of that's unfinished business. Aboriginal people remain, of course, the most disadvantaged group in our society, as can be shown by looking at only two statistics. Their life expectancy is still twenty years less than the rest of us, and twice as many Aboriginal children still die in childbirth. That's shameful.

The national conversation with Aboriginal people is a lot harder since the abolition of ATSIC. There does need to be some kind of national indigenous representative body to inform the debate. Let's turn to the issues that are important to me – issues that bring out a difference in approach between Robert Manne and myself.

I tend to look at issues and how to steer those issues through the political system rather than defining myself with reference to any cultural stream or political party. Perhaps that's the pragmatist in me.

The first issue is how to manage, and to nurture, the inland. As part of that agenda we need to use water more efficiently, and I'd argue that there's no place in Australia any more for flood irrigation.

Some farming practices have to change, particularly in marginal areas, and some farmers have to go rather than remain propped up by routinised subsidies that were originally intended only for extraordinary circumstances.

It's always not the farmers' fault – they've just reacted to market signals. For example, the government wanted to boost irrigation production, and so over allocated water to properties.

In the past, too, the government has made land clearing a condition of various leases. However, some of our present farming practices just can't be sustained.

We need to be creative in looking for new economies in rural and regional Australia. Some farmers, say, might be paid for ecosystem services, to manage country. Aboriginal people could be contracted to protect their traditional country and to preserve its cultural heritage. There may be other possibilities – carbon sinks, emission trading, or ecotourism and cultural tourism.

As we undertake that task and look at those issues we need to understand that we're dealing with social restructure in rural and regional areas as well as economic adjustment. More and more corporate enterprises, regional rather than local communities, an ageing white population shifting to the coast, an increasing Aboriginal population – if we're going to deal with all those issues then we've got to build capacity to manage change in those communities.

This is where relationships are critical, and especially power relationships between various groups in negotiation. Unless there's equity in the power relationships the outcomes are going to be flawed and in the long term unsustainable.

We also need forums to bring the different interests in regional Australia together, and this is an area where local government has an extraordinarily important role to play.

We also need to understand the enormous scale of the issues. Furthermore, existing trends are being exacerbated by climate change, and the costs will be high and ongoing. The longer we delay, the higher the cost.

The only way to deal effectively with these sorts of issues is to develop long-term partnerships between the community and government. That in turn means that we need long-term political commitments and long-term funding to generate the necessary confidence – which means in practice a bipartisan political approach by the government and the opposition.

We need to put on the agenda some sort of environmental levy as part of the tax system – a transparent mechanism that can

generate predictable revenue. To be successful, that levy would have to be administered by some sort of an independent body – let's call it a Sustainability Commission – to ensure public confidence. And of course it seems that the Treasurer's Future Fund has arrived at a similar model.

The next important issue is our unfinished business with indigenous peoples. Once again I start from the pragmatic perspective that whatever you think, and whatever your politics, the issues aren't going to go away.

Aboriginals perceive themselves as involved in a battle for the survival of their culture, and under their own law – a law that has now been acknowledged in High Court decisions – they can't give up. So they won't give up.

There are always going to be two parts to the indigenous agenda – social justice, and their right as First Peoples to protect their culture. What news to be clearly understood is that the practical reconciliation agenda won't succeed unless it can operate effectively in indigenous culture. The two agendas have to be accommodated.

Perhaps the sharp end of this debate is that past approaches to service delivery just haven't worked. As I've pointed out, the levels of indigenous disadvantage are absolutely shameful – and Dr. Peter Shergold, the Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, acknowledged as much in Canberra last week at the reconciliation conference. Past methods haven't worked, he said, and we don't know what to do (that's almost a direct quote).

The Prime Minister, too, has tried to come to grips with that issue, and he of course said last week that the agenda must include rights as well as responsibilities – a big step forward in language that, however, still remains to be tested in practice.

The bottom line is that effective service delivery requires in turn effective indigenous governance structures, and those structures are only going to be effective when they take their legitimacy from cultural authority. Once again, there needs to be an intermeshing of a rights agenda and a practical reconciliation agenda.

But – I make the point again – the way forward is more difficult now because we have no national indigenous body to inform debate and consider proposals. The proposal outlined last week was for a two-year conversation in the lead up to a Reconciliation Convention in 2007.

That conversation is likely to include a bill or rights and a change to the Constitution to include a recognition of indigenous rights, as well as a discussion of how indigenous people can develop their own economic base and take their place in what Noel Pearson refers to as 'the real economy'.

I note from the weekend's press that the Lingiari Policy Centre is to be formed, with a distinguished Aboriginal Board that includes Patrick Dodson and Noel Pearson. Its vision is, and I quote, "for Aboriginal children to have the same expectations of life as their fellow Australians; to develop their unique cultural, economic and social capital, secured by a new framework for Aboriginal rights and responsibilities."

That policy Centre will no doubt play a significant role in informing the national debate over the next two years.

I acknowledge that there are a number of other issues that are also important; everyone has their own perspective. In my experience, though, most important issues have in common that they require a long-term vision and a co-ordinated strategy to move forward.

And here's where it gets hard for me, because I really think I'm starting to change into a grumpy old man. All the issues that are important to me require long-term vision, long-term funding, and a whole-of-government partnership with the community, and it's the same for many other issues.

That's very hard for our current political structures to deliver. Any government, Labor or Coalition, prefers to give no assurances beyond the current term of government, if that.

It's extremely difficult to create common cultures, particularly between the Commonwealth and the States. Most issues, therefore, have in practice a three or four year horizon before the next election.

Part of the answer has to be bipartisan approaches by the major political parties. It's not impossible – we achieved it over ten years at Landcare, which was supported by all parties in the parliament.

But bipartisanship is very hard to construct. Political parties need to generate choices for the electorate, and so a co-operative approach isn't natural behaviour for them. They have to be pushed in to it.

Political parties also seem to accept that they're constrained in the choices that they can offer by the need to reflect the views of the majority of voters, particularly in marginal seats.

My observation today is that politicians seem to follow public opinion rather than lead it. They work on the basis that the primary goal is to win power and to hold on to it – the Graham Richardson "whatever it takes' attitude, reflected on the other side by the Coalition's multi-billion dollar spending spree before the last election.

My problem is that my issues require a farsighted and effective government, but I don't think I'm getting it. And I'm getting grumpier and grumpier.

So what are my options? Well, the Howard government has disappointed me by dissembling on Tampa, the war in Iraq, the operation of detention centres, the refusal to apologise for the stolen generation, reduction in the social safety net, and so on. It's a government that lacks compassion.

Labor has also got its problems, however. It's preoccupied with leadership issues and the need to balance its factions (it's run by the factions). It doesn't seem anxious to do the hard yards on policy development and community networking. With the exception of a short period around the last election, the small target strategy seems to have prevailed. The party does not instantly generate confidence.

The Democrats have self-destructed, and the Greens have no economic credibility. So what do you do?

Start another political party? That's a big ask. You have to sign up members, develop policy across a broad range of issues, run a secretariat, select candidates, manage postal votes, pre-poll votes, and election booths, run advertising and promotion, and fund travel -- and public funding requirements today favour the existing parties.

Funds are paid out according to your votes at the previous election, so if you're a new starter you're going to have to have a very big kitty and very deep pockets for the first three or four years.

A hard task.

So what can I do? The answer I've arrived at myself is to think national, sure, but act local. I'm not going to depend on a grand master plan devised by someone else and put in place by someone else.

As an individual, I accept that I have a responsibility to progress the issues that are important to me. That's what I've been doing for the past ten years. There are all sorts of individual actions that can be taken in the workforce and in the neighbourhood, so it's not always just a flick pass to someone else.

There was a classic example at a Reconciliation Conference workshop last week, where a large mining company got up and said "We've stopped racism."

I said "What?"

He said "We've stopped racism."

And what they've done is that their position on racism is part of their induction for all employees. It's made very clear that racism will not be tolerated.

It's unacceptable, and if there are racist remarks or racist actions there's no second chance, it's "out of here, Charlie. On your bike."

The mining company says that those institutional arrangements are changing behaviour. They may not change attitudes, but they **are** changing behaviour in the workplace. And that's what you can do.

There are actions that can be taken by a company to combat racism, to introduce employment targets, to review their production methods to be more sustainable.

There's also a lot that individuals can do. Independents are now being elected to state and federal parliament – particularly former mayors with a long history in local government. They've earned their community support and command large personal followings.

I make the very basic point that if enough independents are elected they can have the same impact as a formal party. As a group, they could exercise the balance of power in every parliament in the land – and perhaps that then becomes the most effective scenario.

Keep electing independents until the major parties are forced to deal with the issues that come direct from the community rather than through the filter of the party machine – and in so doing, what you do is create a virtual community first party, one that takes its legitimacy from local communities rather than deals between factional groupings – a party that has no formal structure but that comes together as independents in the parliament when there's sufficient mutual interest.

Perhaps that's one way communities can take greater control.

Thank you.