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**Janine Haines Lecture, Sydney 2003:
Women and Self Governance
Presented by Professor Lowitja O'Donoghue**

Thank you very much for inviting me to give the Annual Janine Haines' Lecture.

It is a great privilege – and actually, one of my favourite pleasures – to talk about women, social change and the sort of leadership and conditions we need to create a more socially just society.

Thank you too for coming out in such a chilly Adelaide winter!

That shows real dedication and commitment – which of course, are key ingredients for leadership success. And so clearly, we have a disproportionate number of potential leaders in this very room this evening.

The Democrats have a history of attracting large numbers of incredibly intelligent, energetic women who create inspiring historical milestones!

There is Janine Haines of course, to whom this lecture is dedicated. I was sorry to hear that ill health has prevented Janine from being here with us this evening. I'm sure the thoughts and best wishes of us all are with her. Janine was the first woman to lead a political party in Australia and has been inspirational in her achievements.

And Natasha Stott Despoja was the youngest ever leader of a parliamentary party. She has inspired so many Australians – particularly younger Australians – to participate in politics and to see the connections between real life issues and political policy. Natasha and I have often found ourselves at the same political functions around Australia, and I am always inspired by her energy and commitment, her warmth and that absolute powerhouse of a brain she has! And I have to admit (even though I know it is absolutely politically incorrect) that I used to wonder: How can all of that be wrapped up in someone so little and so young! When I first met her she reminded me of Shirley Temple! But seriously, I know that she has an enormous role to play in the Democrats party and in the future of Australia.

And Kate Reynolds, who has invited me here tonight, is doing a great job at keeping the "bastards honest" in relation to Indigenous issues.

And truly, never has there been a more important time to monitor what is going on in this area.

But more of that later...

I am always inspired by examples of people having the courage to act on what they know to be right. It sounds simple – but I believe that it is a rare quality in the contemporary economic and political landscape. It is

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difficult enough in any sphere for a woman to succeed in positions of leadership.

In fact, I was recently looking at The Australian newspaper's 'Fortieth Anniversary' series, special edition. And in their 'forty named people of influence' during the last forty years – only four entries were women. And one of those was Pauline Hanson! (Another was Kylie Minogue!)

What can I say?

So, don't buy the popular view that things have changed – and that we've moved beyond the need for strong action in terms of justice for women! And I believe it is even more difficult for a woman in a leadership position if she challenges the status quo and the values that drive and protect it. If she takes this role, she challenges both male power, and the systems that support and maintain it. (By definition she will be regarded as mad or bad – and sometimes as both!)

And – bizarre as it may sound in the so-called progressive 21st century – to stand up for the rights of Indigenous people in this country, is a major challenge to our political leaders and to the populist thinking that they have encouraged.

It is for this reason that I am particularly pleased to see that Kate is persisting!

She has recently reminded parliament of the government's Indigenous Employment strategy launched in 2003, in which it aimed for the outcomes such as the following:

- That the SA public sector be an employer of choice for Indigenous people
- That there be increased employment of Indigenous South Australians at all levels of the public sector.

And importantly, she has raised key issues about redundancies as a result of the demise of ATSIC and the mainstreaming of the functions of ATSIS, for Indigenous people living and working in SA. This is an absolutely vital issue.

I won't tonight go into the details of the politics and problems that existed within ATSIC. I'm sure that you will understand that, currently, Aboriginal people are heavily involved in working out our responses. But I do think it represents a pivotal moment in our history. And I'd like to share with you some of the thoughts that I have been having about it.

Firstly, I was the first ATSIC Chair and so I feel a great personal sadness at its demise. I remember and carry with me the hopes that we had of it. They were hopes that it would enable initiatives and projects that were effective for Indigenous people and at the same time meet the requirements of whitefellas' systems. Hopes that we could grow together in understanding and outcomes.

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It needed people in it, therefore, who could straddle both worlds with credibility. This is possible, but it is a tenuous tightrope to walk – with some people on either side more than happy to push you off from time to time. The very fact that I spoke out on issues of Aboriginal rights and justice was enough to bring death threats and cause tyre slashings, as a regular occupational hazard.

There is also the underlying criticism or subtle message available from either group – that “you are not really one of us”. There is a belief (perhaps it is a fear) among some Aboriginal people, that if you are getting along with the powers-that-be, then you must, in some way, have sold out. And certainly, that is an ongoing question that has to be posed. At the moment, for example, Aboriginal leaders understandably feel that John Howard’s proposition that the government will select prominent Aboriginal people to “advise”, falls into this ‘sell out’ category.

There is truth to the point that some members of ATSIC were not performing well. And truth to the point that some members were unsuitable for office. However, it is also true that some terrific work was done by ATSIC, and many of the programs are operating extremely well – particularly in the regions. Significantly, there has been little discussion about alternative structures. ATSIC apparently was, to quote John Howard, “an experiment that failed”.

Some major questions arise for me from this for example:

Why is there such an intense level of public suspicion directed at Indigenous organisations and initiatives? From where is it generated? And what is it about?

I cannot come to grips with how it is that the Howard Government, having been frequently exposed as dishonest about serious life and death issues (to name just a few: children overboard, weapons of mass destruction), can enjoy the trust and respect of so many people. Or, on the other hand, why the problems that ATSIC experienced are subjected to such vicious public condemnation. There are some serious contradictions at work here – and they echo some deep contradictions within Australia generally about Indigenous people.

I’d like to illustrate this complexity with a story. It is (sort of) topical because we are now approaching the Olympic Games in Athens.

In 2000 I was acting in an official role at the last Olympic Games in Sydney. One of my pleasurable tasks was to host VIP visitors at an official dinner at the opening ceremony of the Games. (It was important that there was an Indigenous presence in this way). Now, I have to tell you that I loved it! I always enjoy being sociable and putting people at ease. I met wonderful people, the atmosphere was fabulous, the food was great (always an important point). And there was a genuine atmosphere of celebration. And this continued throughout the Games. We were all especially elated of course, by Cathy Freeman’s performance in that unforgettable 400 metre race.

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The opening ceremony had been spectacular too – and contained important symbolism for the future of Indigenous and non-Indigenous people living in harmony. (Remember the Aboriginal Elder as he walked off into the future, hand in hand with Nicki Webster). People were absolutely captivated. It was as if we were living in the sort of world we might all dream about – where people are actively celebrating differences and hope for a shared future.

This was great stuff!

But of course, it bore no relation at all to the real conditions of Indigenous people in this country. The powers-that-be were (and often are) happy to embrace the symbolism and the exotic aspects of Indigenous culture, such as our dancing, songs, stories and art. But it is another matter entirely when it comes to the hard and unromantic work of changing the lives and possibilities for Indigenous people so that such a dream might be realised.

I will not recite the litany of inequalities that exist for my people. I know that people here are well informed. Suffice to say, that while John Howard is feeling “relaxed and comfortable” with life as he experiences it in Australia, Aboriginal people are struggling to survive in conditions that are comparable with the worst of those in third world countries. And so, as someone who is regarded as an Aboriginal leader, there are serious issues involved about when to be supportive of the system and when to challenge it.

In my role as host at the dinner I would not have dreamt of “spoiling” the evening. And yet I was aware that in attending the opening ceremony, meeting me and seeing Cathy Freeman win, many international visitors could well have a completely false idea about what the realities of Aboriginal life in Australia are all about.

It is paradoxical that at the same time that these wondrous images of reconciliation and harmony are being beamed around the world, Australia is also (without much publicity at all) being censured by United Nations Committees for its poor human rights record! And what is our Government’s response to such censure? Well... it is as sophisticated as you might expect – I think the exact response was: “They can’t tell us what to do”.

Now in the face of this level of thinking and response it is clear that we need to develop and sustain strong leadership in this country – particularly in relation to social justice.

I want to talk briefly now about what is involved in strong leadership and good governance for Indigenous people at this time in history.

- It is important to remember that Indigenous people are not all the same and do not speak with one voice on all issues. Therefore, to ask a question such as “What is the Indigenous point of view?” is about as useful as asking “What is the non-Indigenous point of view?”

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- Yet it is also true that Indigenous people have much in common – including of course, living with the consequences of white settlement – dispossession, marginalisation, economic disadvantage, and so on.
- So communities need to be consulted about their needs and priorities – and processes need to be in place to hear the different voices. Indigenous people will withdraw from political participation if they know that only the interests of a few are being listened to.
- Then (and this is the crucial part) we need the structural support and systems in place to be able to reach these goals in our local contexts. In a paper that Mick Dodson recently wrote, he says, and I quote:

*"Governance is not only about structures, processes and power; it is also about resources. Sound governance requires access to, and control over, financial, social, economic and natural resources and technology. Without an effectively resourced capacity for governance, there is unlikely to be sustained community or regional development."*¹

- We don't need any more quick fixes and short term studies. As one Aboriginal health worker said to me recently: "If we get any more pilots we'll be able to join Qantas"!
- I think the phrase "capacity building" has become well used as jargon in recent times. But I cannot emphasise enough its importance for Indigenous communities.

One example of the need for capacity building is in responding to the crisis in family and domestic violence in some Aboriginal communities. It is just not good enough for people to turn their backs on the problem and then cop out by saying it's an issue of self-determination. Of course communities need self-determination in establishing their needs and goals but they aren't going to be able to fix major and entrenched social problems without the structural support and resources to achieve it.

I quote Dodson again here, when he says:

*"Having good governance means being capable of future-oriented planning, problem solving, revising objectives, re-designing structures, and taking action. To do this governing bodies must be backed up by supportive institutions. No social group can simply rely on the goodwill of either its leaders or its citizens, or on their promises to do the right thing. Social groups need institutional mechanisms. These are the 'rules of the game'—both formal and informal—that regulate and delimit the behaviour and authority of individuals and groups."*²

And importantly, people of influence need to put Indigenous issues onto the agenda and persist in ensuring that they stay there. I'm afraid that the harsh reality is that there are not many votes to be had in Aboriginal affairs. Yet we need leadership that will turn the situation around. We are quite literally talking about the very survival of the nation's first peoples here.

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New Zealand is making good progress with its reform agenda for Indigenous peoples and Canada has taken its commitment in this area very seriously and maturely. In 1998 the Canadian Government released its policy about Indigenous people. It was called Gathering Strength and it was a response to a five-volume report of The Royal Commission on the Indigenous people of Canada.

Gathering Strength begins with a statement of Reconciliation that acknowledges the mistakes of the past. It includes a statement of renewal that expresses a vision of a shared future for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. And it outlines objectives and strategies for action. It is a beautifully worded document. And I would like to read you an extract so that you can get a sense of the generosity of spirit that drives it.

For thousands of years before this country was founded they [indigenous people] enjoyed their own form of government. Diverse, vibrant aboriginal nations had ways of life rooted in fundamental values concerning their relationships to the Creator, the environment, and each other, in the role of Elders as the living memory of their ancestors, and in their responsibilities as custodians of the lands, waters and resources of their homelands.

..... Sadly, our history with respect to the treatment of aboriginal people is not something in which we can take pride. Attitudes of racial and cultural superiority led to a suppression of aboriginal culture and values. As a country, we are burdened by past actions that resulted in weakening the identity of aboriginal peoples, suppressing their languages and cultures, and outlawing spiritual practices....We must acknowledge that the result of these actions was the erosion of the political, economic and social systems of aboriginal people and nations.³ [End quote]

The statement goes on to highlight particular issues such as the physical and sexual abuse that many of their Indigenous people suffered. And it concludes with clear statements about the building of a shared future which avoids the mistakes of the past, involves all citizens, and which enhances the collective identities of Indigenous peoples. What is even more impressive is that the statement is supported by significant actions.

Take for example, the issue of sexual abuse of children, a topic which is unfortunately very topical at the moment, especially in Adelaide. The Canadian Government established that sexual abuse was widespread, that it commonly occurred in institutions where Indigenous people were taken, and that it happened to many thousands of people over decades. It therefore provided \$350 million dollars as part of the Gathering Strength Policy, to support community based healing initiatives for people who had been affected.

A number of programs have been developed. The titles of some of them will convey their intention. For example:

- Healing – community approaches

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- Developing and enhancing aboriginal capacities for healing processes
- Honour and History – the creation of historical records -- and the honouring of those people who never returned home (be it mentally, physically or emotionally).

I believe this speaks of a country that is taking its history on board in a mature and honest way.

Contrast this with John Howard on the topic of guilt about the Aborigines. I quote:

"Now I totally agree that they have been appallingly treated in the past. But I didn't do that. I won't feel guilty about it. But because we feel guilty we have these nonsenses such as treaties. And it is nonsense. I say let's forget the past..."⁴

How about that for a mature, generous response!

We cannot as a matter of human rights – and as a matter of the reputation of this country internationally - allow the plight of Indigenous peoples to continue to deteriorate. And as well as the broad political directions that are needed, there must also be action from individuals. Joan Kirner once said, and I quote:

"There is no such thing as being non-political. Just by making a decision to stay out of politics you are making the decision to allow others to shape politics and exert power over you. And if you are alienated from the current political system, then just by staying out of it you do nothing to change it, you simply entrench it."⁵

And so self-governance also relates to your own governance of your actions and positions. As the old slogan goes: *The personal is political*. It is important to accept personal responsibility for change, no matter how small. Don't assume that someone else will do it. Don't be complacent. Even small things like refusing to laugh at a racist joke can make a difference. And don't be daunted by the size of the problem. As Margaret Mead once said: Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.

Reflect on your own behaviour and on the cultural practices or beliefs that you find confronting or difficult. It is healthier to name and discuss the issues that you find difficult, than it is to try and be saintly.

And importantly, while I'm thinking of slogans, maintain your rage (to borrow one from the Labor party this time!). Also maintain your hope, your optimism and, wherever possible, your sense of humour, because you'll need it at times!

I think it is very important as well, to take the time to talk to your colleagues about the sort of workplace culture and values you want to develop and how you are going to make it happen. After all, there is no point in advocating for women to be in positions of leadership if all that

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they do in them is mirror the values and practices that currently exist. (This point could easily lead me to talk about Margaret Thatcher... but I'll resist going along that path... I think you take my point)

And, as I said earlier, any women who challenge the status quo, will, as they say in footy parlance "be under the pump". So you will need to be supportive and strategic.

Also, remember to celebrate your successes. We are often well practised at worrying about what has to be done – without taking account of the positive things we have achieved. And so in your discussions remind yourselves of the good things too.

And finally, I want to say that despite my despair about the lack of progress for Indigenous people in this country, and my fury at the current Government's responses to the issue, I still have optimism. It is the optimism of experiencing first hand, the goodwill of people on the ground. All over this country people are working for change in the conditions of Indigenous people.

This goodwill and commitment to justice needs leadership and political representation that it can trust and look to for strength. People need leaders who have the courage to articulate and act on their principles.

I urge you all to put Indigenous rights at the top of your political agenda. And I wish you all the courage, strength and creativity to make a real difference for my people.
Thank you.

Endnotes

¹ Mick Dodson and Diane Smith, *Governance for sustainable development: Strategic issues and principles for Indigenous Australian communities*, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, ANU, 2003, p. 16..

² *ibid*, p. 14.

³ Quoted in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, *Social Justice Report 2000*, HREOC, p.144.

⁴ Quoted in the *Weekend Australian Magazine*, July 17-18 2004, p.14

⁵ Joan Kirner at Women Into Power Conference, Adelaide, October 1994.