

## **Governments can close gap by buying from Aboriginal businesses**

Two days after I turned 18, my life was at the crossroads. I woke up on remand in Bathurst Jail, facing the prospect of a custodial sentence if the judge didn't give me one last chance.

It was likely I was on an all-too-familiar path of incarceration, substance abuse, welfare dependence, a fractured family and short life.

If a fortune teller had said to me that day that I would become the chairman of the NSW Aboriginal Land Council and serve on the Prime Minister's Advisory Council, I would have laughed.

Such things were beyond my imagination because I believed all the things that had been said to me. At 15 years and nine months I was told to leave school. My maths teacher said: "You'll never amount to anything so you should just go on your way."

I drifted for years until that day in Bathurst. All I had going for me was a supportive family. We lived on the Nanima mission, where my mum raised eight kids on her own. Her brother was a local community leader. He told me I should start doing some TAFE courses to try for a job. Eventually, a government subsidy allowed me to be employed as a field officer working on family violence prevention in my community.

This experience of work and the small salary I received at the time began to broaden my horizons and give me more control.

I felt like I was making a worthwhile contribution to the community. For the first time I had the freedom of being able to walk into a business and buy something that I wanted.

It also made me realise that the real enemy of our people isn't the police or teachers — it's welfare dependence. It might not sound like much, but that field officer job transformed my life.

All around the country, stories like mine are being replicated as Aboriginal land councils establish businesses and provide employment for their members. Access to employment gives Aboriginal families the resources to be able to choose where and how they live. It provides purpose and a sense of achievement. It helps families escape from substandard and overcrowded housing and the social dysfunction that this can produce. It enables children to access and succeed in education.

But just as jobs can transform individual lives, they also can transform a people.

Only a serious involvement in the economy as individuals and communities will ensure our survival as a self-determining people in a fast-changing world.

But when it comes to Aboriginal employment we are falling behind. As the Prime Minister's recent Closing the Gap report revealed, although there has been progress, the target of halving the gap in employment between Aboriginal people and other Australians by this year is not on track. Indeed, we've slipped backwards. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander employment fell from 48 per cent to 46.6 per cent.

We can help turn this around if governments buy more goods and services from Aboriginal-owned businesses.

This is crucial because, according to the federal government, indigenous businesses are 100 times likelier to employ an Aborigine or Torres Strait Islander.

Up until recently the federal government was largely going it alone on Aboriginal procurement. The Indigenous Procurement Policy introduced in 2015 has seen more than \$1 billion in contracts awarded to about 1000 Aboriginal businesses. And last year most state governments introduced their own targets for indigenous procurement.

Victoria has a 1 per cent target, Western Australia hopes to reach 3 per cent by 2020 and Queensland aims for that soon after.

Now NSW — the state with the largest population of Aboriginal people — has its own policy on such procurement, also set at 3 per cent. For the first time, all NSW government departments, statutory authorities and other agencies will be required to develop Aboriginal participation strategies and annually report on their progress. This should create about 3000 full-time jobs for Aboriginal people across three years.

The capacity of Aboriginal businesses to deal with growing demand is also vital. That's why the NSW Aboriginal Land Council is developing an Aboriginal business development hub in western Sydney, to capitalise on the growth from the federal and NSW governments' Western Sydney City Deal development.

It is impossible to overstate the importance to the nation of getting Aboriginal people to work at a rate that is comparable to other Australians. But as the many examples of successful land council-owned businesses remind us, this need is matched by a willingness to work. Across Australia, there are many thousands of Aboriginal people who, like me all those years ago, just need encouragement and a helping hand to find a job that delivers a better life for themselves and their community.

If administered effectively, the recent commitments by state governments to match Canberra on Aboriginal procurement can help create and grow this opportunity for us all.

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