

NAIDOC Breakfast  
Hosted by IBA  
10 July 2008

Speech by Bob Blair

Good morning distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. I too am honoured to be here today on the ancestral lands of the Ngunnawal people. I pay my respects to the elders both past and present and thank Aunty Agnes for her welcome to country.

As Acting Chairman of Indigenous Business Australia I am pleased to support this breakfast this morning to mark NAIDOC week and to celebrate Indigenous culture and achievements.

NAIDOC week is an opportunity to celebrate.

This morning's event has been designed to celebrate the significant efforts of Mr Joseph Elu in promoting Indigenous economic development at the national level over the past 12 years and secondly IBA is taking the opportunity to let the broader community know what IBA has achieved over the past 12 months.

Joseph mentioned the parable of the donkey in his speech and I want to say that we have reached a point in time when we need to encourage more of our people to participate in the growth and prosperity of this country.

We used to worry about Josephs tendency to take his quotes from the bible but it seems these days he has taken to reading different sources for his inspiration and we hope we can keep pace with him and his development plans for the northern part of Cape York.

Leadership is a major issue for our people and encouraging our people to join the vision that many of us share is a major part of my ongoing role as a Director of IBA and as a businessman from Rockhampton.

For those of you who don't know me I am an executive director of the Rockhampton Dreamtime Cultural Experience which offers experiences in the Tourism, accommodation and retail sectors. We also run a radio station and are exploring other ways of creating a sustainable future for our community.

It took a mixture of vision and just plain hard work to get our concept into reality and since we have been in business we have had to adapt and modify our business model.

This breakfast has also provided the opportunity to launch Indigenous Business Australia's corporate plan and I thank Leah for this.

I would also like to thank the Member for Corio, Richard Marles, for being here today join in our celebration of NAIDOC and to share with us the Government's messages on Indigenous economic development.

IBA's corporate plan provides a five-year framework to help us build on our successes and continue to find commercial solutions that offer jobs, better incomes and economic participation for our people.

As we heard from Joseph this morning, IBA's history has been one of growth and success in breaking down barriers to Indigenous participation in the economy.

As a Board member of IBA for almost ten years, I have seen first hand how IBA has changed and the headway we have made as an organisation promoting Indigenous economic development. However, as Joseph pointed out, more can and needs to be done.

My talk today is focused on how IBA can and does make a difference, how we will meet the challenges of today, and our ideas for the future.

I also want to talk about how we can engage with Government to expand our vision for a nation in which First Australians are economically independent and part of the economy.

In working towards this vision we must adjust to the dynamic and changing landscape in which IBA, Indigenous groups and industry operate.

In parts of Australia we see the economy is booming. A challenge for Indigenous Australians, for Government and for organisations such as

IBA, is ensuring that the First Australians directly benefit from these opportunities.

It is not good enough that Indigenous Australians are unemployed or that they live in poor quality, crowded and substandard housing while nearby, demand for Australia's natural resources results in a fly in, fly out workforce.

But right across Australia, we see that Indigenous Australians do not yet fully share in employment, business development, education, health outcomes, and income levels.

The current Government's message is that economic development is essential for building healthy and strong individuals and communities and the Government is acting on this message.

I welcome that focus as I believe it is appropriate that we look to development opportunities that are sustainable and capable of providing a future for our young people.

The Government is also currently reviewing the Indigenous Economic Development Strategy providing an important opportunity to consolidate on and develop successes in this area.

I will be pressing for a comprehensive approach and not one that just tinkers with established programs. Our future will be enhanced by Governments at all levels looking at what makes communities work and participation in the mainstream economy is an important part of the solutions we must find

I believe there is a fit between the accumulated expertise and service delivery capacity of IBA and the Government's proposals to increase the economic development focus as part of 'closing the gap' in Indigenous disadvantage.

IBA has a strong track record of achieving success with the limited resources provided to us whereby we can meet the home ownership, business development and asset accumulation aspirations of many Indigenous Australians.

We also have been looking at an improvement program to enhance the operation and delivery of our programs. For example, we have

streamlined the process to access small business support and finance to meet mainstream industry standards.

We believe our performance in terms of the survival rates of the small business loans we write have improved significantly and yes that has meant we have had to face criticisms of being very strict in our commercial focus.

We have also invested an extra \$45 million dollars in the Home Ownership program to help address the extensive waiting list for this program. We are progressing the development of business infrastructure projects in Cape York and elsewhere to support commercially viable retail, office and accommodation facilities to encourage the development of local Indigenous enterprises.

As a commercial organisation we have to ensure that we get good returns from our investments. But we are asking ourselves at the same time about the other social and economic dividends that might flow to Indigenous people from our activities.

We have taken up the Government's challenge and set employment and training outcomes as a key objective for IBA. We have also set up a scholarship fund as our investment in education.

We are keen to participate in the Government's Indigenous Economic Development Strategy and we believe that it needs to be approached from a holistic perspective - recognising the causal links between education, employment and business that results in the significant gaps in current economic participation levels.

It should also recognise that in order to stimulate a significant move away from welfare dependency there must be in place a range of measures which encourage Indigenous Australians to see the value of education as a pathway to longer term benefit and of employment as the vehicle for improving quality of life.

The role of the private sector in supporting this approach is crucial so that we achieve critical mass in terms of resources as well as the necessary skills and leadership. There are a number of existing Indigenous entrepreneurs who could be enlisted to champion the principles and approaches adopted.

IBA has begun this process by recently setting up, with the Western Australian Government, a new association of Indigenous commercial organisations in Western Australia. The group will champion the cause of Indigenous participation in the Western Australian economy.

We are looking to set up more networks like this in other states.

Many of the directions I have expressed here are at least being partially pursued in a range of quarters. However, the challenge is to bring these efforts together in a more focused and sustained way which will require the combined effort of many Commonwealth and State agencies.

We also have some new ideas to provide a more holistic approach to Indigenous economic development that we hope to progress with the support of Government. For example,

- ◆ IBA is well placed to provide a service as ‘trusted broker’ to advise and support groups receiving funds generated through Native Title settlements or land rights processes to improve the economic value and sustainability of these funds;
- ◆ IBA could establish a Commercial Infrastructure fund for the construction and management of commercial infrastructure in major Indigenous communities to stimulate local economies and better utilise Indigenous assets; and
- ◆ we could also establish a function to enhance the access of Indigenous entrepreneurs to markets by:
  - establishing networks and creating linkages for Indigenous businesses;
  - utilising existing programs, such as, the new Remote Enterprise Centre, to increase product sales;
  - assisting with the distribution of Indigenous products through local and international markets;
  - developing e-business solutions for online market opportunities;
  - sponsoring trade fairs; and

- enabling Indigenous mentoring by large successful companies.

I believe that without Indigenous Australians participating equally in the commercial life of the country, the goal of closing the life expectancy gap will not be realised. Social issues will not be solved by social programs alone – developing economic and commercial opportunities and jobs are essential.

IBA acknowledges the challenges to economic participation faced by Indigenous groups. We believe we have a lot to offer to help build sustainable economic futures for Indigenous people.

My fellow Board members and I look forward to the challenges ahead and we know that one of our major tasks now, is to inspire more vision amongst our Indigenous leaders to see the benefits of the processes, we believe, will give our people the quality of life that we all deserve.

Thank you