

NAIDOC Breakfast
Hosted by IBA
10 July 2008

Speech by Joseph Elu

Good morning distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. It is with great honour that I am back here on the ancestral lands of the Ngunnawal people. I thank Aunty Agnes for her welcome to country.

I also want to thank Indigenous Business Australia for hosting this breakfast this morning and inviting me to speak to you today.

In March this year, after over eleven years, I resigned from my position as Chairman of Indigenous Business Australia to take up a new role as Mayor of the Northern Peninsula Area Regional Council. In this new role I hope to build on the work in my community of Seisa, and the surrounding region, to set up an economic base for our future. I am also continuing to work as Co-Chair of Indigenous Community Volunteers.

Although I am no longer Chairman of Indigenous Business Australia, I am still very much interested in the participation of Indigenous people in the economic future of this country, and the ways in which our people can take advantage of all the opportunities open to them.

This year's NAIDOC celebrations invoke the theme of a "fair go" for all Australians. As I have long advocated, this must include an equitable share for our people in the economic prosperity of this country.

At my community of Seisa I have demonstrated how to go beyond the rhetoric of economic development and put in place real measures for the development of my community and its residents.

At Seisa we developed opportunities, for example, by building the community store into a viable and growing business. We looked at our petrol station and added some services and allowed it to operate as a commercial venture. We noticed a lot of tourists visiting the Cape so we set up a campground area and a restaurant and we noticed visitors wanted

to fish so we invited some professional fishermen to operate from our community and then we added cabins for the fishermen to hire.

We have also turned our minds to beef production where we grow some of our needs on a property we purchased in the tablelands and we are now supplying other communities as well as our own.

At IBA I enjoyed the opportunity to apply the lessons learnt from building commercial opportunities in my community in a national organisation focused on economic participation and independence for all First Australians. IBA enabled me to act locally and think nationally or globally.

I want to talk a bit about the growth of IBA over those years.

IBA started with the idea that for Indigenous people to engage in economic development we need to build assets to create wealth and provide jobs for our people.

When I was originally appointed, IBA (or the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commercial Development Corporation or CDC, as it was known then) was a small organisation with 13 staff, all located in Canberra, and with net assets of less than \$60 million. The organisation was focused on creating investments with Indigenous and industry partners.

The CDC had been established in 1990, as an initiative of the Hawke Government, specifically to focus on economic rather than social outcomes and to stimulate Indigenous involvement in business. The CDC was required to operate along commercial lines and be largely self-funding. The CDC negotiated and financed partnerships between Indigenous communities and non-Indigenous businesses across industries and across the country.

In 2001 the Coalition Government established IBA as a statutory authority to replace the CDC to better focus and coordinate the Government's approach to sustainable Indigenous economic development. As an independent statutory authority, focused on commercial programs, IBA could have greater effect and financial leverage in the commercial sector.

Since then IBA has grown considerably. In 2005 IBA's role expanded with the addition of ex-ATSIC home loan and business development

programs. We have grown even more since then, now with around 230 staff located in Canberra and across Australia and a net worth of nearly \$1 billion.

IBA's goal to facilitate economic development for Indigenous Australians now involves broader and more holistic strategies and includes programs for supporting investments, enterprises, home ownership and other initiatives such as construction to benefit Indigenous communities.

Under my leadership, IBA maintained its commercial focus and leveraged the capital growth of the added programs to ensure a real shift towards Indigenous economic independence, including business, home ownership and employment outcomes.

IBA has also built new partnerships between Indigenous Australians, the private sector and Government that have brought new opportunities for engagement of Indigenous people in the economy.

Despite IBA's successes, we have a long way to go. The gap is still huge. We have a number of very good examples of progress but I have to say that my observation is that we are still failing to treat economic development as anything other than a set of words.

Meanwhile our people still suffer the poorest levels of economic and social well-being of any group in the country. I would like to be able to point to positive examples of what has been achieved and I want to stop talking about what could be. Talk is cheap but actions are the means by which we can be seriously measured.

I have for a number of years been saying at forums like this that we have to adapt to the changing economic environment and start to look at ways we and our children can move from the devastating effects of welfare dependency to finding ways of participating in the mainstream economy.

Successive governments have tended to treat the First peoples of this nation as victims rather than seeking to ensure they have the opportunity to participate in the mainstream economy at the same levels enjoyed by most Australians.

I recently participated in a forum where a State Premier's Chief advisor suggested improving Indigenous economic participation in terms of leading a donkey with carrots and a stick. It was suggested that we needed the carrots and the stick to get the old donkey moving.

I was not happy about this thinking and said that if we are still talking about moving donkeys with carrots and sticks at this point in our history then we have a long way to go. Maybe that donkey is too smart.

We need to move on from talking about carrots and sticks and start talking business. Maybe that donkey is ready for some real business.

The current Government has clearly signalled that economic participation is critical to Indigenous health and well-being and that it is willing to take the necessary steps to improve the current situation.

It has been one year since the Federal Government implemented the Northern Territory National Emergency Response to stabilise Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory and protect Aboriginal children from abuse. The measure has included the implementation of health checks, income management, community clean-ups, improved management of some community stores and additional police in some communities.

The Intervention should not stop there. The current Government has committed to reviewing the Emergency Response to assess what is working and what needs to be changed. This review also needs to look for opportunities to support the economic development of our people.

Communities need to build their capacity to create and take advantage of economic opportunities – to have a job, economic security and a lifestyle that provides a positive future for our children.

This means educating and training our children so they have the knowledge and capacity to participate as equals in the economy.

It means having child care and aged care support so people of working age with carer responsibilities have an opportunity to participate in paid employment. It means investing in infrastructure and other measures to support economic and commercial development in communities.

It also means building on our assets, including our land. I have long argued that the disconnect between regaining our rights and connection to land, and our ability to develop our lands for the benefit of our children and our grandchildren, needs to be addressed. We need to move on from being land rich but dirt poor.

We should be looking at ways of not only negotiating for our rights to land but at how we can explore new economic horizons to make use of our land for the prosperity of our future generations.

State and Federal governments have or are in the process of amending land tenure arrangements to provide for leases for home ownership and economic development.

The current Government has agreed that land is critical to economic development and the well-being of our people and has committed to reforming native title legislation to improve its workability. Still more can be done. And we Indigenous Australians need to build on the opportunities that exist.

We need to look at ways to maximise the benefits of royalty payments, where they exist, so that this money does not reduce incentives to work and goes toward building a sustainable economic base in these communities.

It often distresses me when I see opportunities being ignored or when the communities are not even told of the opportunities available to them. I don't believe that our future is dependent on what governments hand out to our people. The donkey just wants a fair go, like every other Australian.

When I returned to my community and moved into local Government the General Manager of IBA was concerned I might lose my commercial focus but when I presented him with a number of potential new business concepts recently I am pleased to say to all of you that this is a focus of mine that will never go away.

Keep an eye out for the tip of Cape York as we are looking at how we can address our future prosperity through business participation.

I don't see remoteness or the difficulties of access to reliable transportation as anything more than an opportunity and if we can develop so can our other communities.

Being in business for some of us means we often need a tonic to maintain our passion. My tonic is seeing a future for my people and the people I represent. When I reflect on my 11 years in IBA, the growth of my own community in Seisia and then look to the future I see nothing but

opportunity. My challenge is bringing the community members along on the journey of development.

My vision is for our communities to be able to provide the means for our children to get a better education and to aspire to a future which offers more than boredom and addictions to grog and drugs.

This is the challenge for the new Government and for all of us here today.

Thank you