

The next generation of Indigenous leaders shows great promise for Australia's future

@IndigenousX host Charles Prouse is calling on young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders to go beyond their great local work and shout their message to the nation



‘Recently, Government House in Kirribilli saw a rare event in the coming together of 40 key Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders from around the country to discuss a path forward on constitutional recognition.’ Photograph: David Moir/AAP

[Charles Prouse](#) for IndigenousX

Charles Prouse is a Nyikana man from Derby, West Kimberley, and chairman of the Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre.

Thursday 1 October 2015 12.13 AEST

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have some of the most charismatic and intellectually accomplished leaders in Australia and indeed the world. People such as Marcia Langton, [Noel Pearson](#), Patrick Dodson, Michael Mansell, Pat Turner, Larissa Behrendt, Galarrwuy Yunupingu and others before them such as the late Neville Bonner and Charles Perkins have earned their stripes in the fight and advocacy for our rights as the First Peoples of this nation.

Those leaders continue to work hard in our name and for the betterment of this nation Australia.

Recently, Government House in Kirribilli saw a rare event in the coming together of 40 key Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders from around the country to discuss a path forward on constitutional recognition with then prime minister Tony Abbott and opposition leader Bill Shorten.

There were some of our own who protested that those at the meeting didn't represent them and had no right to speak on their behalf. And that situation can be true of many leaders across many communities. It is nigh on impossible to get complete consensus on leadership representation.

However, leadership is required in difficult and changing circumstances. Those who step up to the plate and have the skill-set, wherewithal, courage of conviction and are guided by the moral compass of justice are to be respected. It takes a lot to put yourself out there and be tested by the community.

We all know there is a lot more work to do if Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are to experience the same social and economic opportunities as other Australians. We also know we as First Nation peoples are in the best position to address those challenges. But to do so, more of our people need the skills and opportunities to step up and take leadership roles. And this is where I have hope.

While our current leaders continue to work tirelessly with non-Indigenous leaders to find pathways forward, there is a growing army of new leaders emerging. Some a bit younger, some a lot younger. It's only natural. And with those leaders come a fresh energy, enthusiasm and an emergence of ideas, some of which are a result of the digital age.

The [Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre](#) has more than 2,500 graduates from every part of this country, in every industry, and in leadership positions in their community or on the national stage.

The [Cape York Leaders Program](#) fosters an emerging leadership cohort in northern Queensland. There are similar leadership programs in each state that are helping build the leaders of tomorrow.

And young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander school children are increasingly exposed to programs designed and run by Aboriginal people such as those offered by [Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience](#) (national), the [Korin Gamadji Institute](#) (Victoria), the [Yiriman Project](#) (West Kimberley), and countless others.

Universities have Indigenous education centres supporting Indigenous tertiary students in completing their studies. I benefitted from such support at UWA in Perth.

We are slowly but surely getting greater academic success at leading overseas universities due to Charlie Perkins and Roberta Sykes scholarships, and the work of the [Aurora Education Foundation](#) and [The Aspiration Initiative](#). In the last three years, 13 out of 13 students have graduated with postgrad qualifications from Oxford and Cambridge. This year there are 14 postgrads at Oxford and Cambridge with 10 of them undertaking PhDs in such areas as anthropology, art history, criminology, cyber security, education, oncology, public health and systems biology. There is also a scholar at Harvard undertaking a PhD in history. The list goes on. Graduates are increasingly in management positions across the country and across industries.

All this gives me hope. It reassures me there is a growing leadership group for some whose time is come. But it's not enough to have the education and training. We must step up and take the responsibility that comes with leadership. We must be active, we must be diligent and we must give each other trust.

A fresh conversation is needed. A conversation that is guided by our rights as First Nation peoples; one that embraces the wisdom and teachings of our elders and the leaders before us

who have fought hard in the pursuit of justice and decency; and a conversation that is respectful of difference of opinion as we move to a better future for our people.

A younger generation of leaders can be seen in people such as Glen Kelly, who has led the South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council to bring a single overarching Noongar Native Title claim together and negotiate a billion-dollar package with the Western Australia state government.

People such as Wayne Bergman in Broome and Melissa George and Joe Morrison in Darwin are working with multiple land councils from Broome to Townsville as traditional owners activate their native title rights to both care for country and harness its economic potential for the people.

Misty Jenkins is working as a National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) postdoctoral fellow in the Cancer Cell Death laboratory at the Peter MacCallum Cancer Centre in Melbourne. Indigenous doctors have been galvanised for some time and are led by Kate Thomann who is CEO of the [Australian Indigenous Doctors' Association](#).

But those names are just the tip of the iceberg.

My mother is a local government councillor, another Aboriginal woman in a position of leadership. She tells me of meeting a federal minister in Derby in the Kimberley and him being blown away by the level of knowledge, leadership, innovation and sheer hard work Aboriginal people on the ground are doing across Australia and particularly in remote Australia. He asked her why they don't come to Canberra and speak to the politicians. She said it was because "we are so busy doing our job on the ground every day, we don't have time to go to Canberra."

And therein lies the problem.

We need those that can, to get the message to Canberra and the wider Australian community that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander leaders are amazing. And maybe some additional fresh faces joining our established leadership will be the boost that we all need.

So to all you Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander young people that are being told by your community elders (that's how we do it in our culture) that you are in or are moving to a position of leadership, then I call on you to step up. Go beyond your town and connect with a national conversation.

- *"Our stories, our way" – each week, a new guest hosts the [@IndigenousX Twitter account](#) to discuss topics of interest to them as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people. Produced with assistance of Guardian Australia staff.*
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