**Cornell lecture, Canberra, 11 September 2008**

First, my thanks to Professor Dodson for his introduction and to Reconciliation Australia for bringing me back to Australia and for making this event possible. It is a great pleasure to be here again. I also want to thank Matilda House and the Ngambri-Ngannawal   people for the privilege of being in your country.

**Closing the Gaps**

This series of lectures is about "closing the gaps"—the socioeconomic and other gaps between Indigenous and mainstream populations in Australia. You might well wonder what a Yank academic is doing leading off such a series. I have to admit that I've wondered that myself. And I find myself somewhat intimidated by this audience, including as it does people—both in government and out, both Indigenous and non—who have invested not only good intentions but a lot of energy and intelligence and sheer hard work in trying to address those gaps. My knowledge of the on-the-ground problems here in Australia is modest in comparison to many of yours.

But I'm hoping I can persuade you today that there is relevance in exploring the experience of other countries, for yours is not the only one that faces this challenge. Earlier in this decade, New Zealand government policy toward Maori operated under a "closing the gaps" banner. There's frequent debate in the news media in Canada about why the Aboriginal peoples of that country continue to languish in poverty.
And my own country—the United States—has an Indigenous population that ranks at or near the bottom of the scale in household income, employment, health, housing, and other indicators, all of which lag far behind the American population as a whole.

The reasons for such gaps are not hard to find; the histories of all four countries offer ready and persuasive accounts. The more urgent question is:  What do we do now? Here, the U.S. experience may be helpful. What I want to do today is to say a bit about the U.S. experience and then offer some reflections on the Australian situation. Over the last twenty-plus years, the gap between the U.S. mainstream and its Indigenous populations has begun to close. There is a very long way yet to go, and there are many American Indian communities still trapped in poverty. But taken as a whole, the Indigenous population located on Indian lands (called reservations in the U.S.) has begun to make a remarkable socioeconomic comeback.

Here are a few illustrations, drawing on U.S. census data.  Between 1990 and 2000, per capita incomes among reservation-based American Indians rose by more than 30%, as opposed to per capita income growth in the U.S. population as a whole of just over 10%. Growth in real median household income was between 35 and 40%, as against growth for the U.S. of 4%. The proportion of reservation-based American Indian children in poverty fell from approximately 50% in 1990 to 40% in 2000, while in the population as a whole it fell from 18% to 17%. The same period saw striking rises in employment

on Indian lands, including self-employment, and increases in the number of productive enterprises—many of them tribally owned—on Indian lands.

These changes continued a pattern that was already emerging, in more modest form, in the 1980s. While we lack comparable data for the current decade—the next U.S. census won't take place until 2010—the trend appears to be continuing.

Two caveats. First, as I say, these gaps are by no means closed. These rates of change start from an extremely low baseline. If things continue to improve at these rates over the long run, it will still be decades before the reservation-based Indigenous population reaches parity, by such indicators, with the mainstream.

Second, this is highly aggregated data. Within it there is gender variation, regional variation, variation across individual Indian nations, and so forth. But the overall picture is clear: significant progress is being made, and it is having measurable, positive effects on the lives of a large number of American Indian citizens.

How did this happen? Did federal programs do the job? Was it federal investments in education, or job creation, or health care? Was it the impact of tribal involvement in the gaming industry? Was it a change in government policy? Did Indian nations themselves make it happen? What's the story?

**Accounting for Change**

Several of these factors have played a part, but two things appear to have been particularly important. The first is a major change in U.S. government policy toward Indigenous populations, coupled with a change in the role the U.S. government has played in Indigenous communities. The second is a set of actions and investments—not so much of money but of time, energy, and ideas—by Indigenous communities themselves.

The shift in government policy came in the latter part of the 1970s under the rubric of self-determination, a familiar rubric here, although I think the U.S. version of it has been quite different. First, some quick background. The U.S. government began to focus on Indigenous poverty in the late nineteenth century. Since that time, it has tried an impressive array of policy initiatives designed to close the gaps between Indigenous populations and the mainstream: breaking up and privatizing Aboriginal lands; removing Indian children from their families and forcing them into boarding schools; shutting off federal support for tribal communities; relocating Indians to cities where the jobs supposedly were; massive federal War-on-Poverty social service programs; and so forth. None of them worked. The gaps proved persistent.

And so, in the 1970s, in the face of tumultuous Indian demands and government-wide policy exhaustion, they shifted to something called self-determination. The details of the policy matter less than its overall thrust, which was to move decision-making power out of the hands of government agencies and into the hands of Indigenous communities.

In essence, the U.S. government committed itself to the idea that Indigenous peoples should be the primary arbiters of what happens in their communities and on their lands, and to the accommodation, in policy, of Indigenous interests and priorities.

It is difficult to say to what degree the U.S. government actually intended, through this policy, to empower Indian nations. It was called self-determination, but there is considerable evidence that government's notion of self-determination was a very modest one, much closer to self-management or self-administration than to self-government. It was largely limited to the idea that Indigenous communities could take over the administration of social service programs conceived and developed, and previously run, by federal bureaucrats. So it had more to do with a shift in personnel than a shift in real power, replacing federal bureaucrats with tribal ones, but with little change in program goals, content, or process.

Indian nations, on the other hand, chose to view self-determination very differently. They interpreted the new policy not so much as self-management but as the exercise of significant decision-making power over such things as the design of community governance systems and organizations, the making of their own economic policies, the management of their lands, the education of their children, and a host of other functions. Their response to the federal legislation was to take it at its word: self-determination means we—Indian nations—determine what happens in our communities and on our lands, and how it happens.

They saw it as referring to *governing*—translating the will of the community into sustained and organized action—and not simply to administering social service programs. And they moved aggressively to enact that understanding.

This was not separatism. Separatism has little if any support in American Indian communities today. Indian nations see themselves as inseparably part of the American republic. Instead, they were saying, it's time we became the decision-makers in our communities, within the context of the American political system.

But—and here the second factor comes into play—many of the nations asserting self-governing powers also realized that if their idea of self-determination was going to yield results, they would have to govern well. They would have to deliver, and they set out to do so. Beginning on a large scale in the 1980s, a growing number of American Indian nations have invested significant time and energy in developing governing institutions capable of supporting their economic, political, social, and cultural goals. In some cases they have drawn on long-standing cultural templates in the design of those institutions; in others, they have borrowed from each other and from the American mainstream to create institutions that can get the governance job done. The result is diverse, Indigenously generated, and therefore more effective systems of governance.

This has not happened overnight, and it has not happened without mistakes and false starts.

These are human communities trying to overcome decades of powerlessness and poverty during which they were not allowed to make the major decisions that most directly affected their lives. Self-governance with real teeth is a return to something long denied them; small wonder that not everyone gets it right the first time out the gate.

But today these communities are making laws, resolving disputes, regulating environmental, business, child welfare, and other matters, negotiating new relationships with state and federal governments and corporations, revitalizing language and other cultural practices, and yes, also running social programs. It took time, and not everyone is doing it, and some are doing it much better than others, but it is happening. And these nations are not simply replicating federally prescribed models of how to govern. Many of them are drawing on mainstream models, but many of them also are drawing on rich organizational traditions and knowledge of their own, the sort of stuff that you are often unaware of until you spend enough time in a community to realize that there is organization there, that things get done, that there are authority structures that may not be visible but are capable of delivering the goods when that becomes their own priority. And because these communities are engaged in governance on their own terms, it has legitimacy in those communities, and they invest a great deal in it.

And for the first time in more than a century, we are seeing sustained, positive change in the socioeconomic conditions of Indigenous peoples.

They have become central players in the effort to close the gaps, and that effort is bearing fruit.

Of course other things are at work as well. Investments in education, economic development, health, and other things have helped. But those investments have paid off in part because of these factors. Without capable governance in Indigenous communities, educated people leave. Without capable governance, economic development runs through one cycle of investment and dies. Self-determination—at least as realized in the U.S.—puts decision-making power in Indigenous hands, while the emphasis on capable governance turns that power into effective decisions—and that makes other investments more likely to pay off.

**What about Australia?**

So that's a capsule version of the U.S. story. I offer it here not because I think it can be directly replicated in Australia but, first, because I think it offers hope—here's a story of progress in addressing the gaps—and second, because I think there may be lessons or principles within that story that are helpful.

But what about Australia? I'm sure the last thing you want is some nerd academic from the United States showing up here and claiming to know what you should do, and I do not wish to play that role. My knowledge of Indigenous issues is heavily reliant on US and Canadian experience; as I've said elsewhere, others, more knowledgeable than I am, will have to judge the relevance of that experience to the Australian case.

But those who invited me to do this lecture asked me to reflect a bit on what I've seen and heard here, on this visit and others, and to say what I think. So I want to share some thoughts about the current policy situation here, things that have caught my attention. Perhaps I have zeroed in on them because they seem uncomfortably familiar from the U.S. experience. But in any case, here's what I see.

1. *An impoverished notion of governance.*

When I talk about the governance system of an Indigenous nation or community or organization, I refer to *the principles and mechanisms by which the will of that community is translated into sustained, organized action*. I don't propose this as necessarily the best definition, but it is what I mean when I talk about Indigenous governance.

If you think of governance in those terms, then it turns out to be a critical feature of everything communities or nations attempt to do. I have heard conversations in Australia about where government and others ought to invest time and dollars in the effort to close the gaps. Should we invest in education? Maybe in health? Should it be housing? Perhaps governance? Maybe financial literacy?

Governance, in these discussions, becomes simply one of a number of options.

But investments in education or health or housing or dozens of other things are unlikely to pay off without a capable governance system in place that can translate plans into action, priorities into concrete strategies, commitments into behavior, and so forth. Governance is not one of a number of silos standing out there in the Indigenous world. It is a foundation of effective action across the board.

The tendency then is to say, well, yes, we need a capable governance system. There isn't one there now, so let's stick one in there. And the result is Government, or somebody, going into communities and saying, you need good governance and here's the good governance system you need. But governance, conceived in the terms I've proposed, is not simply a managerial regime set up to administer programs or clean up the trash. That's only part of what governance is about. It is an expression of the people's vision of what kind of community they are, of the relationships within that community that they value and want to sustain, of the ways they feel decisions should be made and people should be treated, of their place in the world around them. This is one of the reasons why external impositions of governmental form have such a poor history of success around the world. They cannot capture the allegiance of the community because they do not express the community's own vision of what governance should be and do.

Now one might argue that in some communities, that vision is long gone, or radically inappropriate somehow, or inadequate to the tasks at hand. But visions change as people gain the freedom to innovate, as they learn from their mistakes, as they are

invited into the process of addressing problems, not through consultancies or advisory boards, but through direct engagement in the responsibilities of governance.

   *2. A narrow view of capacity-building.*

Capacity building is a hot topic these days, in your country and mine, and a bundle of money is being thrown at it. But in my experience, in both countries, we give it much too narrow a meaning. In the U.S., capacity building seems to mean sending a few people off to get trained in computers, or doing a workshop on how to deal with the latest set of government funding requirements. Important stuff, yes, but not the key to closing the gaps or to engaging Indigenous communities in a collaborative effort to address problems.

We also tend to view capacity building as a one-way transfer process: we've got some skills and tools that you guys don't have, but you need them, so here we are to give them to you. Fair enough, but I think it has to involve more than that. It needs to involve strengthening the capacities that are already there and allowing them to work.

In one of the most impressive cases of Indigenously generated governance solutions that I've seen in Australia, one of the keys was development officers who worked with the community, not imposing some externally generated model or process or set of skills, but helping those communities shift their own already-existing decision-making skills into a larger arena, and then supporting those communities in their efforts to discover and implement a governance process of their own. That was capacity building. It was a government investment of time and energy that, in partnership with Indigenous leaders, led to an organization that could problem-solve in new ways and on a larger scale—in other words, to a more capable Indigenous organization.

Capacity building also involves the collecting of models, ideas, lessons, and stories from Indigenous governance cases that work, and then making those available to those who are looking for new ways of doing things. The primary question should be, not how can we produce an Indigenous organization that does a better job of complying with our requirements, but how can we produce an Indigenous organization that does a better job of providing what its people want and need. Capacity building then becomes a partnership activity.

   *3. A tendency to mistake efficiency for effectiveness.*

Let me quickly tell two Australian stories that I've learned in recent months. One has to do with an Indigenous service delivery organization. This organization has an Indigenous governing board. There are sixteen clans in the communities that it serves, and the board includes two people from each of these clans, one old, one young, one male, one female. I'm sure there's some logic in that to which I am not privy, but at the very least you can see in it attention to succession issues, to the maintenance of good governance over time, to gender issues that may be of great significance there and elsewhere, and to the necessity of keeping these sixteen clans engaged together in

6

governance. The result is a board of 32 people. Now that might sound like a large board to you, but it works for the people of that community; in their view, it is the best way for this organization to remain a community organization and to deliver services. And apparently it works. This organization, under the leadership of that board, was a finalist in this year's Indigenous governance awards, having convinced a sophisticated judging panel of the soundness of its operations.

But now it has been told to change. A new requirement has come from the Registrar of Aboriginal Corporations that there can be no more than twelve seats on any such board. You can apply for an exemption from this rule, but even under an exemption, you can have no more than 16.

Now I have no idea how this came about. Maybe it was a carefully thought out requirement and I'm simply ignorant of the facts—that's entirely possible—or maybe somebody in some agency read somewhere that the ideal size of a board of directors is no more than twelve. But be that as it may, the point is that this requirement, without consideration for local conditions or preferences, goes out to Indigenous organizations, and they have to submit to it.

But what is the effect? It seems to me that this is sending at least two messages to the community. The first is—this isn't really your organization. We'll tell you how it should be structured and run. And the second message is that the primary test of an organization is not effectiveness; it's the fit with some outsider's notion of what a proper organization should look like. You may have developed a solution to a problem. You may have managed to get strong community support for that solution. You may even have developed an organization that actually works—that gets the job done. But if your solution doesn't fit our idea of what a solution should look like, then you'll have to change it.

To me, this is the opposite of community engagement, and it is the opposite of sound public policy.

My second story has to do with a set of Northern Territory communities, linked by language and culture, that spent four years working to develop a regional authority that could act as an umbrella organization and governing body.
Their work began under one Northern Territory policy regime that was eager to find ways of supporting governance structures that had legitimacy with the communities being governed. And the effort worked. It took a long time, a great deal of negotiation, and the involvement of dedicated government personnel at ground level. But the result was an organization that local communities trusted, viewed as their own, and supported. Not only that, but this organization had addressed and solved some very difficult issues, such as deep traditional understandings of who can speak for whom and for where, of how to make collective decisions across critical social divides, of how to organize on a large scale where no such large-scale organization has an Indigenous history—issues that the rest of us seldom, if ever, have to deal with.

Then along came the one-two punch of a new Northern Territory policy regime that replaced regional authorities with shires, followed not long after by the Northern Territory intervention on the part of the Commonwealth. In neither case were the Indigenous peoples consulted, and in neither case was the work this group had done to create a credible, effective, regional organization supported. Overnight, or what seemed like it, they were told, in effect, that their own governance work had been wasted and that they now had to start over under a new set of policies and rules.

What's the message to the community here?

The message, it seems to me, is this: we talk about the need for Aboriginal communities to take responsibility for themselves and to deal with dysfunction. You've spent four years putting together a regional governing body that reflects your own ideas, worked out in hard labor, about how to do that. But now that you've done all that remarkable work, we've decided to step in and take over. We're going to impose new geographical boundaries on your organization that introduce new culture and language issues into the mix; we're going to tell you how you have to organize and work; we're going to tell you what the bottom lines are and what performance we expect.

And through all of this, the message that keeps going out to the world is about the dysfunctionality of Aboriginal communities. I have to say, and again, my own knowledge may be faulty, but this looks very much to me like the dysfunctionality of Government: continually changing the rules of the game, unable to sustain community engagement, unable to recognize or take advantage of Indigenously generated solutions, and uncertain how to cope with diversity in those solutions.

That, at least, is my impression, but even if I overstate the case, which is certainly possible, these are things that all of us who work in this field, in government and out, have to talk about and wrestle with. This is the stuff that matters. And I hasten to point out that we've done the same things at one time or another, and with equally devastating effect, in the United States.

Perhaps different circumstances have allowed us to learn a little sooner that such approaches don't work and to begin to discover some that do.

Two last points, and then I'll try to answer questions.

4. *I want to suggest a caution about the topic that has prompted this lecture series: closing the gaps.*

I think closing the gaps is essential. But in my experience, when people talk about closing the gaps, they're usually talking and thinking about individual outcomes measured by individual metrics. If we can get employment rates up, we're closing the gaps. If we can get health indices up, we're closing the gaps. And so forth.

What we risk losing here is the aspirations of communities, of peoples, of nations. Now one might argue that such things should not matter. We're all individuals here. I don't want to get into a discussion of individual vs. collective rights; for the purposes of this discussion, at least, my point lies elsewhere. The evidence from the United States indicates that if we're serious about changing socioeconomic conditions in Aboriginal communities, wherever those communities may be, we're going to have to engage with them and bring them into the change process, not as recipients but as genuine partners—which means the pattern of change may not go quite the way we once imagined.

And when we accept Indigenous communities as genuine partners, it also means we're going to have to take their aspirations into account. Otherwise, why should they partner with us? So that they can realize *our* dreams? I don't think so.

I have encountered numerous tribal communities in the U.S. that are quite willing to forego certain economic benefits so as to maintain particular relationships and cultural practices, because for them, the vitality of the community and the continuity of a distinctive place, peoplehood, and culture simply matter more than individual prosperity. For them, the appropriate indicators of success may be different. They are not favoring poverty. But the trade-offs matter.

So my caution is simply this: be wary of one-dimensional measures, those that address only individual fortunes and that reflect only outsiders' ideas of what matters. One of the biggest gaps we have to close is the gap between our understandings of each other, the gap between the respect we demand that others give to our institutions and the respect we are willing to give to theirs.

   5.  *Finally, I see evidence of success and a basis for hope.*

I am repeatedly struck by the success stories being generated by Indigenous Australia.

They aren't hard to find. For example, I wasn't invited to Australia to give this lecture; I was invited by Reconciliation Australia to attend the Indigenous Governance awards ceremony and luncheon in Melbourne two weeks ago.

In the United States, we run a program called Honoring Nations that identifies and celebrates examples of excellence in tribal governance. A few years ago, Reconciliation Australia, with the support of BHP Billiton, launched an Indigenous Governance awards program here that, while organized differently, similarly identifies and celebrates outstanding examples of Indigenous governance.

This year, to my great good fortune, they invited me to attend the awards luncheon—the third in the life of this program. It was a stellar event that ought to be required of anyone who is in despair about the future of Indigenous communities. It was a window on something that, in my experience, gets too little play in either your country or mine:

Indigenous peoples brilliantly addressing the challenges they face at the community level.

But in addition to being at the awards luncheon, we then had the opportunity to visit two of the winning organizations in this year's competition, the Traditional Credit Union in Darwin, which provides financial services to eleven Northern Territory communities, including remote ones, and the Southwest Aboriginal Medical Service in Bunbury, south of Perth, which is the only Aboriginal medical service in a large, mixed urban-rural area.

And I was enormously impressed with both organizations: with the quality of their leadership, with the resourcefulness and innovation evident in their service provision, in their sensitivity to cultural issues in making service provision work, and in their commitment to the direct involvement of their communities in program planning and execution. Either one of those organizations would have been an easy award winner in the Honoring Nations program in the United States, and in fact, I think they are even more impressive than many of our award-winning programs, thanks to the conditions under which they operate here—the relative lack of government support for Indigenously generated solutions to socioeconomic problems, the enormous weight of reporting and compliance requirements under which they labor, the logistical challenges sometimes involved, and the greater educational and other gaps that are prevalent here. If Australia were to export such stories to the world, it would be doing Indigenous peoples everywhere a service.

This awards program has been identifying successes for several years now. And they're not the only ones. The Indigenous Community Governance Research Project run by CAEPR at the ANU and by Reconciliation Australia—the most comprehensive research program on Indigenous governance that I have come across—has been out there, on the ground, studying Indigenous governance, figuring out what works.

They're not short of subjects—there are learning opportunities everywhere—what they're short of is the resources to do all the work that needs to be done in documenting and understanding what works in the governance arena: find the things that are working, figure out what's going on, distill the principles involved, make them available to others who can put those principles to work. It's an essential activity.

This government, as I understand it, has committed itself to evidence-based policy in Indigenous affairs. That sounds just right, although I'm not sure that the emerging evidence from programs such as these is being fully incorporated into policy yet. But the opportunity is there.

And the evidence—both here in Australia and elsewhere—seems to me to argue that if you give Indigenous communities the freedom and the support necessary to develop governance solutions of their own, there will be both failures and successes, but over time, the successes will build and the failures will diminish. Indigenous communities, in my experience, are as capable of learning as the rest of us, but we too seldom allow

them to do so on their own terms. But they're also capable of teaching, including teaching us better ways of addressing the problems that they face.

And this is true in urban, rural, and remote communities, where Indigenous knowledge about what the problems are, how the authority structures work, where the critical boundaries of community lie, and a hundred other things is an essential ingredient in closing the gaps.

Thank you.