

SPEECH FOR JOHN CUMMINS MEMORIAL FUND

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From Little things may Big things grow

I never met John Cummins.

In the course of discussing him with his wife Di, she said he was probably best expressed by the motto of his union: Dare to Struggle, Dare to Win.

When I read those words the first struggle that comes to my mind is one that occurred in Britain less than 200 years ago – the anti-slavery movement, from which was born the social reform movement which transformed 19th century society - spreading the vote to all men and then all women, ending child labour in British factories, paving the way for the trade union movement. It's only in our own time that the word reform has lost its moral or social sense and come to mean nothing more or less than economic re-structuring.

I come from Tasmania and am endlessly fascinated by the differences between Tasmania and Victoria. One difference is that at the time Tasmania was founded, a slave trade in human beings was legal under English law. Slaves were then the leading commodity in world trade. The slave owners actually owned blocks of seats in the British parliament. They had the most powerful political lobby group in the country with public champions like the Duke of Clarence, later William IV, and England's great naval hero of the day, Horatio Nelson.

The first thing I noticed when I read the debates of the day was that the arguments in support of the slave trade were not, as you might have expected, new to me. Rather, they were amazingly familiar. The slave trade was defended, for example, on the basis it provided employment for sailors. There was also a view put by persons of authority that the slaves were happier being slaves - and, of course, wouldn't you guess? - slavery was defended on Biblical grounds. In the port of Liverpool, nine tenths of the

local council had connections to the slave trade. Politically, it was a done deal.

In 1785, a young Latin scholar named Thomas Clarkson went to Cambridge on a scholarship for the sons of dead clergymen. The topic for the university's Latin prize that year was set by an Anglican clergymen who had been upset two years earlier by reports of what had happened on a slave ship sailing out of Liverpool called the Zong. The captain of the Zong had thrown 132 slaves overboard and then claimed them on insurance saying that, as they were sick, they constituted cargo that had perished at sea. The English chief justice of the day held that the captain could not be charged with murder since, in the eyes of the law, it made no difference whether slaves or horses were thrown overboard since both were the property of the owner. With this in mind, the Anglican clergyman set as the topic for that year's Latin essay prize: Is it lawful to make slaves of others against their will?

Young Thomas Clarkson entered the prize and won it. He then found himself haunted by the subject. The question that began in his mind - if what I wrote is correct, why doesn't someone do something about it? - gradually became - if what I wrote is correct, why won't I do something about it? His studies completed, Clarkson rode to London to take up a career in the church. Halfway there, near Wades Hill in Hertfordshire, he dismounted and, in his own words, "sat down disconsolate...if the contents of the essay were true, it was time some person saw these calamities to the end". At that moment, Thomas Clarkson knew not one other person on earth who thought as he did.

The battle to end the slave trade was fought on three fronts. Firstly, and possibly most significantly, by the slaves themselves in armed uprisings on the island of Haiti when they defeated the imperial powers, France and England, who of course cited that word "security" as the reason for their actions. In the House of Commons, the fight was carried by the silver tongue of William Wilberforce. Each year for nearly 20 years, he rose and put the motion for the abolition of the slave trade. Some years the abolitionists lost by a bigger margin than they had the previous year, but still they persisted. Meanwhile, out on the highways and byways, Thomas Clarkson became what the trade unions here tonight would call an organiser. For a long period, he was the only organiser. He rode the length of the land, organising support, getting statements from seamen who had been to the West Indies about what they had actually witnessed to do with the treatment of

the slaves. Clarkson was threatened and nearly pushed off a wharf when he couldn't swim. In a diary, he described climbing a staircase and the edge of the stairs bouncing about in his vision and you realise he was on the edge of a nervous breakdown. But for six decades he persisted and he lived to see a hateful human practice abolished. That is what I understand by dare to struggle, dare to win.

Maybe Thomas Clarkson was a man like John Cummins, was motivated by similarly deep beliefs.

The other struggle I wish to talk about tonight is the struggle of indigenous Australians for respect and dignity in their own land. To this end, I thought I would talk about the Gurindji strike in the Northern Territory in 1966 when Aboriginal stockmen sat down for better pay and re-acquainted themselves with the fact of whose land they were sitting on. Whitfeller way, the leader of the strike was the chief stockman, Vincent Lingiara. Blackfeller way, he was the senior lawman of the Gurindji. During the strike, he forbade one of his fellow strikers from marrying an Aboriginal woman who was the wrong skin group for him. He also resisted union pressures to call out all his stockmen. Those taking water to the cattle were kept working because he didn't want any stock dying.

The Howard Government chose not to attend last year's 40th anniversary of the walk-off, notwithstanding the fact it represents a chapter in Australian history that can be seen as bringing honour to the Liberal as well as the Labor Party. When Labor Prime Minister Gough Whitlam poured sand into Vincent Lingiara's hand, what he was symbolically handing over was a leasehold title. It was Liberal Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser who converted the Gurindji title to freehold.

The strike is said to have started over pay. Ted Egan, the administrator of the Northern Territory, remembers meeting some Gurindji stockmen at the races around this period with money in their hands for the first time in their lives. It was said the stockmen and their families got rations. What the stockmen said they got were bits of slaughtered animals like the skull and the shin bones. At last year's commemoration, one of the old strikers who has since died, was wheeled to the microphone. "They treat us like dogs",

he croaked. One of the strikers' complaints was that they could be whistled like dogs. Another was that their women were "degraded" when they were absent from the camp, which was most of the time.

Patrick Dodson told me Vincent Lingiari knew there was another way for whites and blacks to co-exist because he had observed the way the American Army treated its black soldiers when it was in the Northern Territory during World War 2. Patrick Dodson was at the Wave Hill anniversary celebrations. As a kid, he wanted to be a stockman. He was 13 and living in nearby Katherine when the walk-off occurred. He calls the Rights for Whites rally which followed in Katherine the most frightening racism of his life. In Darwin at the time, Ted Egan heard people say of the strikers that they'd starve them out. The strike had been triggered in part by an Aboriginal trade unionist, Dexter Daniels. The union sent a truckload of food. To drive from Darwin to Wave Hill now in a good car on good roads takes nine hours. In those days, in a truck, it took several days. Brian Manning, the unionist who drove the truck, was at the anniversary. He told me that, with his 15-year-old off-sider, they arrived at night. People rushed at them out of the darkness. They weren't sure if it was white rangers coming at them with guns.

On the morning of the anniversary an article had appeared in The Australian newspaper in which the journalist dismissing the significance of the walk-off by the Gurindji stockmen, saying it was "a core cameo of the Left" which was "wrong in almost every detail". Curiously, this was also the week when the Howard government announced its so-called reforms to the Northern Territory Land Rights Act. In the course of the weekend, I didn't hear one Aboriginal person speak in support of the "reforms". Not one. And I heard plenty against.

At the time I wrote the following line - If you want to get a perspective on what is called white Australia, which is really John Howard's Australia, step into black Australia and look back. What I saw from Wave Hill was a government which had no regard as to the feelings and opinions of people it was meant to be serving. I saw the same arrogance and ignorance which had accompanied the invasion of Iraq.

These so-called reforms to the Northern Territory Land Act have now re-emerged as part of a raft of measures the government would have us

believe has been put together with the sole intention of protecting Aboriginal children. To some extent, this is an Aboriginal debate - Noel Pearson has made it so by insisting that well-meaning whites can do, and have done, damage to Aboriginal people with their ideas. It is not for me to tell Noel Pearson about the reality of Aboriginal life, but as a journalist I am entitled to say that among Aboriginal people I know, both here and in northern Australia, I don't hear any support for what the government is doing. What I hear is fear. Why should Aboriginal people trust John Howard? He has been in federal parliament 33 years. When has he championed a single cause they believe to have been in their interests? When has he stood with any humility before Aboriginal culture and learned, or even understood, what is meant when a human being says the land does not belong to them, that they belong to the land.

In 2005, in *Quadrant* magazine, Peter Howson, a former Liberal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, informed his readers that now ATSIC was done, the next step was the reform (that word again) of the Northern Territory Land Rights Act to open the way for the uranium industry. Howson believes the uranium industry will benefit Aboriginal people economically. The question is how many Aboriginal people share his opinion. Patrick Dodson vehemently believes what is happening in the Northern Territory has the potential to destroy the foundations of traditional Aboriginal culture, to wipe out language and kinship, attachment to land and affiliations among people. Obviously, the interests of children are paramount but as Archie, the great Aboriginal singer and song-writer, said last week, "There has to be a better way".

Auntie Cathie Mills, one of the territory's best-known indigenous identities, was at the Wave Hill anniversary. She said she wanted to take Little Johnny Howard out into the bush and get the fear out of him. Funny how indigenous people look at George Bush's *Man of Steel* and see someone who never managed to jump over the fearful shadow in his own mind about his own country and its indigenous people. Auntie Cathie also gave me the blackfeller story of the strike.

Once the Gurindji sat down, once the old man thought about the fact it was Gurindji land he was sitting on, he took the strikers to a sacred site about nine kilometres away at a place called Dagaru. It's near a river which flows all year round through the rough, dry land. That sacred place is where Vincent Lingiari waited for Gough Whitlam, Prime Minister of Australia.

Whitlam's utterances that day are reasonably well-known, Vincent Lingiari's much less so. For Lingiari also made a speech. His was in the Gurindji language and measures only 200 words but in those 200 the word ceremony was used five times. Here, in this place of ceremony and tribal business, the lawman told the Gurindji this accord with the whitefellers had the force of Aboriginal law. To Whitlam, he said, "We be mates now". To stand in that place is to be in the presence of something much bigger than yourself, a grand belief to do with the future of our nation.

In concluding, I want to note that a famous Australian song, written by Paul Kelly and Kev Carmody, came out of the Gurindji land strike called

"From Little Things Big Things Grow".

And that is my wish for Di Cummins and the other people behind tonight's function.

From Little Things May Big Things Grow.

Thankyou