

“Building a Strong, Respected Voice for Indigenous Peoples”

Keynote Address to the
National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples

Remarks by Jacqueline Johnson Pata, Executive Director
National Congress of American Indians (NCAI)

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Introduction: A New Era

Tlingit greeting.

Before I begin my remarks, I would like to take a moment to pay my respects to the Wann-gal people, the traditional custodians of this land.

I am from Southeastern Alaska, a remote area of America’s largest state. So I understand the challenges those of you from remote communities face. Only our problems with transportation and access to services generally have to do with snow and ice rather than heat and rain!

I have also lived in my nation’s capital city, Washington, DC, for the past 20 years so I understand the challenges faced by those of you who live in urban areas.

Over the past two years, Native people in the United States have experienced an array of policy victories that led NCAI President, Jefferson Keel, to remark in his State of Indian Nations speech earlier this year that we were embarking on a new era in relations with the federal government.

I think it’s fair to say, that at this important moment in the history of the Indigenous peoples of Australia, you are on the threshold of a new era as well.

We share common purposes and beliefs as Indigenous peoples. We share a common history of colonization and navigation of complex European relations. But perhaps most importantly, we share a common story of survival. Today, we stand on the shoulders of our ancestors, ready to move our people into a new era of prosperity and self-determination.

To open the first meeting of the National Congress of American Indians in 1944, one of the meeting organizers announced: “I think you all realize that the eyes of the Nation are upon each and every one of us...” These words ring true for us here today...the eyes of the Nation are upon each and every one of you.

I am excited and honored to share this occasion with you, and to have the opportunity to share just how the National Congress of American Indians developed a strong, respected voice for Indigenous peoples in the United States.

I certainly hope that what I have to say is helpful to you as you embark on this important work, but I want to be clear that this is not a speech by someone who has all the answers.

The world over, our Indigenous cultures teach us humility and balance. I am not here to tell you what to do. Rather, I am thoroughly convinced that there are things we can learn from one another. The most exciting thing about the invitation to speak here today was the opportunity to learn from you.

WHO WE ARE

The National Congress of American Indians is the oldest, largest and most representative Native organization in the United States. We are a membership organization that represents the broad interests of tribal governments throughout the United States.

You can see on the slide the full mission statement of NCAI but in short, our mission is to protect and enhance tribal sovereignty. For 67 years, we have been working to inform the public and US Congress about the governmental rights of American Indians and Alaska Natives and the ability of tribes to self-govern and engage in their own governmental policymaking.

The governmental status of tribes makes our work unique. It means we are not just serving a disadvantaged community, though many Native communities are among the nation’s most disadvantaged. Tribal nations are governments, and Native people are citizens of these political entities, in addition to their strong cultural ties to their tribal nations. We are not simply members of a racial or ethnic minority.

The members of NCAI – and our leadership – are elected tribal officials who have the opportunity to implement innovative policy that can change the discourse on a range of key policy issues.

Now I’m told the word “sovereignty” might be scary here in Australia. But when it comes down to it, sovereignty is really something we all aspire to each day – it’s something we learn to exercise ourselves. We teach our kids to exercise sovereignty. We want them to grow up and to develop the capacity to responsibly,

and effectively, make and enforce their own decisions. And for Indigenous nations, that's what sovereignty is – the ability of our communities to make and enforce our own decisions.

So I'll use the term “sovereignty” throughout my remarks today, but remember there are many paths to sovereignty. We have treaties in the United States, you don't. But that doesn't mean Indigenous communities can't make and enforce their own decisions. It is likely that many of you in the room today come from communities that are already exercising sovereignty, you just might not use that term to describe it.

WHERE WE CAME FROM

Tribal nations have always been included among what we at NCAI call the “American family of governments.” Before contact with Europeans, our tribes functioned as unique political entities. Even before the existence of the United States of America, treaties were signed with tribes that acknowledged their status as distinct political entities.

The US Constitution includes tribes in the Commerce Clause which states that the United States Congress has the power to regulate commerce with “foreign nations...the several states...[and] Indian tribes.”

NCAI was founded in 1944 in response to termination and assimilation policies that the United States government forced upon tribal governments in contradiction of their treaty rights and status as sovereign nations. NCAI stressed the need for unity and cooperation among tribal governments for the protection of their treaty and sovereign rights, and this national movement to halt termination succeeded.

The federal government was involved in starting NCAI but within two years the organization was led exclusively by tribal leaders. Our founders gave themselves the distance that was necessary to effectively advocate for tribes and work with our partners in the federal government.

The issues that were at the forefront in NCAI's early years are not unlike the issues NCAI works on today: protecting tribal sovereignty in a range of policy contexts, highlighting the important political power Native voters hold, advocating for investments in education, and many more.

Throughout our history there have been many who have doubted our ability to continue our important advocacy work, but generation after generation of Indian leaders have embraced the task of building a national, representative body to advance the priorities of Native people. Even when the tasks looked enormous, tribal leaders knew this work was too important. Failure has never been an option.

INDIAN COUNTRY CONTEXT

Before I share some thoughts about our current work, I thought I'd give you some context about Indian nations in the United States

This map shows the location of reservation lands belonging to the 565 federally recognized tribes throughout the country. As you can see, the land base of tribes varies significantly from the more than 17 million acre Navajo reservation in northeastern Arizona; to small tribes in California with a land base of less than an acre. In total, Indian land represents about 5% of the US landmass.

As you can see, a number of states have a high proportion of Native people including my home state of Alaska, where almost 20 percent of the state's residents are Alaska Native. Similar to the situation here in Australia, there are a number of urban areas throughout the United States that are home to significant numbers of Native people.

The map also shows the growth of the Native population over the past 50 years, from less than 400,000 in 1950 to more than 4 million in 2000. Indian Country is a young and growing population – more than 1/3 of Native people are under the age of 18. Recent 2010 Census data on the Native population showed a total of 5.2 million Native people representing almost 2% of the total US population. This is a growth over ten years of almost 3 times that of the general population.

Indian Country faces many socioeconomic challenges that parallel the challenges Indigenous communities face here in Australia. However, we have seen significant improvement in outcomes over the past few decades.

Much of that progress is built on the capacity of tribes to exercise self-government. The 1975 Indian Self-Determination and Education Assistance Act provides the mechanisms for tribes to contract with the federal government to run programs like health care, public safety, welfare, etc. that were formerly operated by the government.

This policy of self-determination was built on a vision embraced by a conservative Republican, former President Richard Nixon, when he delivered a special message on Indian affairs to the US Congress. It has been the policy of the United States ever since. You can see a key passage of that speech on the slide, in which the President affirmed the importance of self-determination and self-sufficiency for Indian tribes and Native people.

This adherence to the self-determination policy has been a bipartisan commitment that culminated in recent years, particularly under President Clinton and now with President Obama. Both have acknowledged and repeatedly affirmed the

importance of the government-to-government relationship between the United States and tribes.

President Clinton hosted a first of its kind meeting with tribal leaders at the White House and issued an important executive order directing all federal agencies to consult with tribes on issues that could potentially impact them.

Since President Obama's election in 2008, he has worked vigorously to keep his campaign commitment to engage with tribal nations. He has held annual Tribal Nations Summits and he appointed a senior advisor on Native American Affairs in the White House.

This policy of self-determination and self-governance has allowed tribes to demonstrate something that we as Indigenous peoples have known for generations – we have the capacity, ingenuity, and expertise necessary to deliver services to our communities in the most efficient and effective ways possible.

HOW NCAI WORKS TODAY

After almost 70 years, the National Congress of American Indians occupies a unique place in Indian Country. We are the oldest, largest, and most representative Indian organization and in that role we focus on convening Indian Country and leading consensus decision making processes to influence the future of our communities.

Our Structure

NCAI is guided by a national board of tribal leaders representing all regions of the country. The board is made up of 12 regional vice presidents, elected in regional caucuses, and a four member executive board of a President, First Vice President, Secretary and Treasurer who are elected by the entire membership.

NCAI's members – tribal governments – determine the policy agenda that the staff of NCAI work on each day. They provide this direction by formal resolutions and through informed, deliberative processes at three annual meetings and other events throughout the year.

Our three meetings serve as a gathering place for Indian Country. Our largest meeting each year, Annual Convention is held at central locations within Indian Country on a rotating basis. As many as 3,000 tribal leaders join us at this meeting. It is our primary policymaking conference: tribal leaders meet in regional caucuses each day; they convene in 5 committees and a total of 21 subcommittees to consider resolutions which are then debated and passed by the General Assembly of the conference. Every two years, we hold our elections at Annual Convention to determine our executive officers.

Our Mid Year Conference is also held at a location in Indian Country, with over 1,000 tribal leaders joining us. The Mid Year meetings focus on tribal leader capacity building. For the past six years we have held a research focused forum, our Tribal Leader/Scholar Forum on the second day. Like at our Annual Convention, tribal leaders meet in regional caucuses and committees but the resolutions passed at Mid Year are meant to be national in scope or emergency in nature.

Our Executive Council Winter Session is a meeting that focuses on legislative issues and it is held in Washington, DC each winter. Approximately 600-800 tribal leaders gather to meet with senior Administration officials and members of Congress.

Our conferences also include a Youth Commission, specifically designed to prepare the next generation for their important leadership roles for Indian Country in the coming years. We host an array of skill-building activities for the youth and they interact with many of the same speakers who address the General Assembly.

Our Values

In all of these settings, our work is guided by a set of values that have been developed through our history. On the slides, you'll see the 10 values that guide our work. I want to take a moment to focus on four of them.

Policy innovation: success in Indian Country depends on effective partnerships with federal, tribal, state, and local governments but that policy is only effective when our people are involved in and empowered by the process.

Consensus: from our very earliest days, NCAI has been an institution that seeks broad consensus to move a national agenda. There may be some issues where we don't agree, but it is critical for us to work together to define the priorities where we can agree and work effectively together.

Partnership: we work with the operating assumption that Indian Country is stronger when we act together. Everyone has a role to play and something to contribute to the overarching goal of progress in our tribal communities; we don't seek to be exclusive, we seek to coordinate and unite our efforts so we can be more effective.

Nonpartisanship: we emphasize strong working relationships with both parties. We have worked successfully with Presidents who are Democrats and Republicans and we have worked effectively with House and Senate leadership from both parties. Our success must not – and cannot – be determined by which party holds the reins of government at that time.

Our Programs and Campaigns

In the 1960s, NCAI launched the NCAI Fund, a nonprofit entity focused on programs that complement the more focused advocacy efforts of the Congress. It is the NCAI Fund that serves as home to a number of our programs.

NCAI Policy Research Center

One example of our programs is the NCAI Policy Research Center. We launched the Center eight years ago to provide research and analysis to support tribal policymaking at the local, state, regional, and national level. The vision of the Center is to “support Indian Country in shaping its own future.” Key activities of the Policy Center include:

Our data clearinghouse – an effort to organize data in order to best support tribal policymaking. Our clearinghouse work includes our ongoing Indian Country Counts initiative that works with the federal government and other partners to inform tribal leaders about the importance of the Census and improve the quality of data collected.

Capacity building efforts – work with Native scholars and tribal leaders to build bridges between research and policy. Two examples of this work include our annual Tribal Leader/Scholar Forum and our research curriculum, “Research that Benefits Tribal Communities”

Think tanks – our term for private policy forums where we can have the kind of conversations that are politically difficult but critical to the future of our communities. We have discussed issues like tribal membership criteria, tribal tax policy, etc.

Native Vote

Since our very first meeting, NCAI has been a place where tribal leaders have developed strategies to empower Native voters. In a number of key elections, the Native Vote has played a decisive role in electing candidates – both defeating opponents of tribes and ensuring friends of Indian Country are re-elected.

The 2010 election was a great example of the impact of the Native vote. The 30 seat majority enjoyed by Republicans in the US House of Representatives is explained almost entirely by the switch of 30 seats with high Native population from Democrat to Republican. In the US Senate, Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski won a historic write-in campaign thanks in large part to the support of Alaska Native voters who understood the importance of having Lisa as our champion in Congress.

Understanding and exercising this political power is critical to our value of non-partisanship and important to the ongoing success of our work. Our Native Vote

campaign includes a robust communications infrastructure with website, Facebook and Twitter; we also provide get out the vote support for grassroots organizations and encourage our member tribes to take specific steps to ensure their members exercise their political power.

Partnership for Tribal Governance

We are also increasing and formalizing our efforts to assist tribes to strengthen their capacity to govern. We are identifying the resources available to support tribal government capacity building and facilitating partnerships with regional tribal and other Native NGOs to work together. At our three meetings, in regional venues and through technology, we are providing specific tribal leader training sessions and technical assistance in many areas.

This work, our Partnership for Tribal Governance, grew out of 10 consultation meetings NCAI held throughout the country with Native leaders and other community members. The meetings were funded by a large national foundation who wanted to know why their investments in Indigenous community development had not been as successful as they had hoped. In a sense, this work helped us define the American version of “Closing the Gap” indicators that mattered to Indigenous communities.

Four themes emerged from the consultations and they were all about effective governance. The first theme was governing systems reform – building strong institutions that are a good cultural match. The second theme was leadership development – investing in the capacity of today’s leaders and building the pipeline of future leaders for our communities. Citizen engagement was the third theme, related closely to leadership development. How do we build effective linkages between leaders and citizens? How do we bring citizens along with efforts to improve communities?

The fourth theme may be most informative to conversations here – public education and media outreach. We can win the battles on those first three and lose the war if expedient political decisions or media controversies undermine the strength of our communities.

This theme is also an important acknowledgement that “Closing the Gap” is a two-way proposition. Indigenous peoples have valuable assets to offer. There is a gap in worldviews where we have a great deal to offer. As the international economy melts down, we are the nations that have managed our resources with a view to providing for the seventh generation. As the world is threatened by climate change, we possess the skills and experience in environmental management that can respond to the crisis of our generation.

As part of the Partnership for Tribal Governance we have invested deeply in coordinating media engagement and public education efforts to equip tribal leaders to be successful. In the past month we have launched a national communications network to formalize what we have been doing. The network is called the National Tribal Communicators & Public Information Officers Network and provides support to communications professionals and those performing public relations work in Indian Country.

Our International Work

Our work in the international arena has grown substantially in the past few years. Some of that is explained by our newly opened Embassy of Tribal Nations.

We opened the Embassy in 2009. It grew from a long-time vision of NCAI's elected leaders who expressed a desire to establish a permanent homebase for tribal leaders in Washington, DC. It was important to the tribes that this building be located on Embassy row and designated as an Embassy because it is a very easy way for us, in the very name of our space, to consistently emphasize the importance of the nation-to-nation relationship between tribes and the federal government.

Indian Country really got behind this vision. We had tribes making large financial commitments to support the purchase of the building. And we had community members from throughout the country making commitments, in amounts they could afford, to support the Embassy. In my home state, we had Alaska Native ladies giving up one bingo night a week to make a contribution to the Embassy.

After a number of years of fundraising and searching for the right space we landed on our Embassy, just a block from other embassies – including the Australian Embassy! We opened the building in November 2009 and welcomed representatives of over 20 Embassies in DC – Ambassadors and their staff, in addition to a dozen members of Congress, many members of the Administration, and friends from throughout Indian Country, and elsewhere.

You can see on the slides some images from our Embassy opening. We frequently host international Indigenous delegations at the Embassy and have even hosted senior officials from the United Nations.

Beyond the Embassy, NCAI participates in negotiation processes in international forums and maintains partnerships at the international level as an important tool to protect the human rights of Indigenous peoples.

The importance of international collaboration was highlighted in December 2010 when President Obama announced the US decision to support the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples. International agreements like the Declaration

provide a framework that allows us to collaborate and hold our governments accountable, even when they are not supportive of our policy goals. The Declaration gives us a yardstick to measure their performance.

Our closest international partnership is with the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) in Canada. This coming weekend, the NCAI Board will hold a joint meeting with the AFN Board. Later in the month, we are co-hosting an energy summit with AFN.

This collaboration is built on decades of work, since at least the mid-1970s, to engage with our Indigenous brothers and sisters around the world. In 1976 NCAI first opened relations with the National Indian Brotherhood (of Canada) and represented US tribes in the formation of the World Council of Indigenous Peoples.

I sincerely hope that this meeting today is the beginning of a partnership between Indigenous peoples in Australia and the tribes of the United States.

CONCLUSION

So what does all this mean for you, here in Australia in 2011?

I hope you'll take three lessons away from my remarks this morning:

First, *Institutions launched at difficult times can and do succeed.*

NCAI was founded in a context where Native people were under attack from many sides. In the shadow of the termination era where the federal government was taking a unilateral approach to terminate tribes and change the policy context for Native people, our founders realized, perhaps for the first time, that there are some things that we as Native nations can *only* do together

I know that this is a difficult time in Australia. There are exciting opportunities but daunting challenges, and even some doubts about this institution itself.

Let me be very clear. A voice for Indigenous peoples is not an optional extra. A strong institution that can unify Indigenous communities and hold governments accountable is a critical component of meaningful self-determination.

So while some in this room might see problems, I see the promise that has been proven by the almost 70 year history of the National Congress of American Indians. Like us, your National Congress can survive, thrive and have a meaningful impact at the local, national, and international level.

Second, *Indigenous communities can be successful when we're in charge.*

Tribes have proven our capacity to manage programs more effectively than the federal government. It's time for governments – in Australia, the United States, and around the world – to work with Indigenous communities through meaningful consultation, define policy parameters, and empower those communities to manage and deliver services in ways that meet their needs.

Let's be clear – free, prior and informed consent is what we mean when we say consultation. It's not just a chat over a cup of tea once decisions have already been made in Washington or Canberra.

It's stunning to me when governments – and the broader non-Indigenous community – expresses shock that some Indigenous people act like people who have lost hope when they face government policies that seek to tear every shred of hope for the future away from them.

Amidst the many challenges Indigenous peoples face, here and in the United States, it can be easy to lose sight of the fact that governance – Indigenous institutions that are credible and strong voices for our people – are at the very foundation of other goals we share. Do you want to improve education outcomes? We need Indigenous people in charge. Do you want better public safety? We need Indigenous cops on the beat and Indigenous caseworkers working with our families.

Third, *Indigenous peoples offer strength to the world.*

On the brink of this new era – in my country and yours – I trust you feel the same hope and optimism that we as Indian leaders see for the future. This hope comes from the vision for a better, more prosperous future that was passed down by our ancestors over tens of thousands of years.

Indigenous peoples offer fresh and bold solutions to the world's most pressing problems. While leaders in Canberra and Washington fight over solutions to the deficit, we come together as leaders committed to the importance of a unified Indigenous institution that will meet the diverse needs of our communities.

As governments at the federal, state, and local level, search for new revenue streams, Native nations stand on the brink of a new economic revolution leading to sustainable prosperity.

And we can do this together, led by our cultures and people, dedicated to the stewardship and management of our resources, ensuring that what has been provided to us by the creator will be sustained for seven generations, and beyond.

Thank you again for the privilege to speak at this historic meeting. I look forward to a deepening partnership with the National Congress and trust the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples will take the steps necessary to become the strong and respected voice for Indigenous peoples that Australia's first peoples have been waiting for. We look forward to supporting you on this important journey.

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