

These women have our support

From the Redfern Aboriginal Women's Alliance

WE fully support the women at the centre of the Billy Gordon saga to have a voice and speak up with their allegations of domestic violence against the Queensland MP. (Billy Gordon is the newly elected north Queensland MP who has been accused of domestic violence.)

Given their allegations, we believe it's time to speak up about speaking up about violence against women and children.

Comments criticising Billy Gordon's two ex-partners' decision to come forward disregarded the women's duress to speak up about an alleged crime. And yet many in our community know the depressing fact that most cases of

intimate partner violence go unreported to police.

Women reporting domestic violence in our community face an onerous process – overshadowed by enduring reproach and reprisals from family, friends and community that very few Aboriginal women relish – and many choose not to. In effect, when faced with the dilemma, anybody who cannot vouch personally as a direct witness to violence would sooner shut down her voice than his.

Consider, then, the decision for these women. To raise their allegations at any time meant speaking up against a charming Aboriginal man rising to political influence, powerfully connected, wrapped in the enchantment of the-boy-from-the-bush-made-good, popular voice of the people

and a warrior of the cause.

The repercussive danger that allegations of domestic abuse reinforce the 'all black men are bashers' stereotype is ever-present, as some commentators have pointed out. But in the words of experienced Aboriginal community campaigner on domestic violence and co-founder of 'Blackout Violence' Dixie Link-Gordon (no relation), "We're not standing beside them holding up their fist for social justice when they use the other to pound women down."

Recently returned from the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women Beijing+20 (2015) in New York City, Ms Link-Gordon says, "Indigenous women throughout the world are still the most vulnerable. Speaking up is

hard for these women."

In February, the Queensland Domestic Violence Taskforce handed down its report, *Not Now, Not Ever*, with the finding that "Culture and attitudes affect the ability of victims to report violence and seek help, and influence the willingness of the community to hold perpetrators to account".

The United Nations Multi-country Study on Men and Violence conducted throughout the Asia-Pacific found that many people, including women, "prescribed to the dominant social norms that legitimise inequality and the use of violence against women".

The taskforce's key message is "ultimately cultural change needs to come from individuals and the community directly". The *Not Now,*

Not Ever report was said to have motivated one of the women from Billy Gordon's past to come forward with her allegations.

Empowerment of women is imperative to changing social norms and breaking the culture of silence. Noel Pearson's opining that Gordon was "thrown under a very brutal bus" illuminates the innate difficulty in this.

RAWA does not condemn Billy Gordon for behaviours that earned him his criminal record as a juvenile, and we note nor did Queensland Premier Anastacia Palacyszuk. The Premier dismissed him because "he was completely and utterly dishonest" to her. As the old adage goes, it's not the act itself, it's the cover up that will do you in. There's a

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Why a treaty is vital

By NATALIE CROMB

WHEN I was asked to speak at the forum First Nations Women Speak for Treaty held at Redfern Community Centre, I considered the questions that are usually pondered: what, why, how?

I realised that the discussion surrounding a treaty, for me, is inherently frustrating. The frustration faced was due to the fact there are so many obstacles to a treaty from the lack of awareness of non-Indigenous Australians as to what a treaty is and why on earth Indigenous people would want one; the political factions (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) competing between treaty or constitutional recognition as if it is a one-or-the-other dilemma; and, ultimately, the political machinations of how a treaty would be put together functionally to ensure maximum support of the Indigenous people and the government.

Despite many attempts to rewrite and sanitise history, we know that, under English law at the time of Governor Phillip's claim, there were three legal regimes under which a colony could be acquired:

1. Settlement – where territory is uninhabited and the 'settlers' brought English law with them;

2. Conquest – where territory was inhabited and the native laws survived provided they weren't discordant with laws of the Crown; or

3. Cession – where the territory was inhabited and the sovereignty was ceded to the Crown and the applicable law would be determined by agreement; but in the absence of any agreed changes, local law would continue to apply.

The prevailing legal doctrine is that Australia was acquired through settlement, despite the presence of an Indigenous population because the English common law contained a definition of 'uninhabited lands' that considered lands uninhabited if they contained peoples 'uncivilised' by the 18th century English norms.

Ultimately, through the doctrine of terra nullius, Indigenous people were subverted as savages and this was integrated into the Australian Constitution, which was drafted on the premise of Indigenous people being so inferior as to not garner a mention and considered to be a fading race in any event.

Terra nullius was a deliberate social construction designed to enable settlement, parcel of land at a time, to enable expansion of colonial settlements and to do so without any compensation to the lawful owners.

The illegality of the actions of the Crown was clear even as far back as 1832, when



Natalie Cromb, middle, at the First Nations Women Speak for Treaty event in Redfern with Amala Groom, left, and Brenda Croft, right. Picture: Sabine Kacha

George Robinson, who became the Chief Protector of Aborigines at Port Phillip, wrote: *I am at a loss to conceive by what tenure we hold this country, for it does not appear to be that we either hold it by conquest or by right of purchase.*

This is not new to Indigenous people. We know that this country was not 'settled'. We know that sovereignty was not ceded.

It is this disparity of understanding between what we know and what white Australia is told happened that we need to overcome.

This is a critical point to the success or failure of any cause – the truth and the wide acceptance of truth as fact. The average Australian simply does not know about the fight for equality and rights that the Indigenous people have been waging for 227 years.

They don't know that Indigenous people were the subjects of forced and violent dispersals from their cultural lands; they were the victims of massacres and murders; rapes and retributory attacks to any resistance; there were genocidal policies based on pseudoscience of Indigenous inferiority; there were sinister attempts to murder countless Indigenous people when the introduced diseases weren't killing enough to the white man's liking and there was a pervasive mindset of the Indigenous people being sub-human.

Some Australians may recall the 1967 Referendum and all of the hope and positivity surrounding the concept of equality in the lead up to the vote and think that following

this purportedly momentous event in Australian history that the Aboriginal people then had the equality they fought for.

We know that is not the case, however. There are many generations – especially the younger – that are simply not taught about the history of this nation, that are not taught about the Indigenous culture beyond boomerangs and spears; they do not know that statistically we have the highest Indigenous incarceration rate compared to non-Indigenous people in the world; they do not know of our appalling mortality rates; they do not know about the welfare indicators that demonstrate Indigenous people are the lowest on the socio-economic pyramid.

This is not an indictment on the Australians who do not know. This is an indictment on the education system and those who draft the curriculum that perpetuates the ignorance that pervades our country. And it is an indictment on mainstream media for failing to report on the real issues, on the brave men and women agitating for the very thing that Australia hangs its hat on: a fair go!

A fair go cannot be achieved without a treaty.

A treaty would be the basis upon which the sovereign Indigenous people of Australia and the Government could negotiate the terms of rights to land, minerals and resources and the self-governing of communities. It would be a binding agreement that would have sanctions that would deter breaches of the terms of the treaty.

Getting a treaty is not going to be easy because it is the least palatable option for

governments because it holds them to a set of obligations that they ordinarily would not live up to.

A treaty is essential because 227 years after colonisation we remain at the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid; because after 227 years children are still being removed arbitrarily from Aboriginal families; because after 227 years racism remains rife in society and none more so than against Aboriginal people; because after 227 years we are still being subjected to cruel punishments including water being switched off, communities being closed, and being forced into work programs that provide less than the minimum wage and then having to buy groceries in government-run shops that charge \$6 for a kilo of flour.

To arbitrarily decide the fate of our people without our consultation and agreement will always be met with resistance.

And for those who champion the Recognise campaign and its intent to change the Constitution to recognise Indigenous people, I say: We have the benefit of hindsight and know that constitutional recognition will not change the mortality or incarceration rates of our people. It will not stop the removal of children or turn the water back on in remote communities.

Constitutional change is symbolic, it is not a cure-all. A treaty is vital to the future of this nation. But again, it is not a cure-all.

A treaty is the first meaningful step in ensuring that there is engagement of all in the success of its outcomes. It will leave Indigenous people empowered and part of something positive in history, as opposed to disillusioned and disappointed at the millions of broken promises and setbacks we have suffered over the last 227 years.

The two critical elements to bridging the cultural divide, in my mind, are empathy and education. People need to learn about Indigenous history and culture and do so with an open mind and pure heart. Once they know and truly understand and consider the impact such devastation would have on their lives, their wellbeing, their resolve to fight another day – only then will we really be able to have a meaningful discussion about what it is going to take to heal hurts and have hope for a future our ancestors would be proud of.

A treaty is the insurance policy we need that we can hold government accountable for their actions so real gains can be made for the Indigenous people of Australia.

Natalie Cromb belongs to the Gamilaraay nation and spoke at the First Nations Women Speak for Treaty forum, held at the Redfern Community Centre last month.