

# LOST CONVERSATIONS

*Finding new ways for black and white  
Australians to lead together*

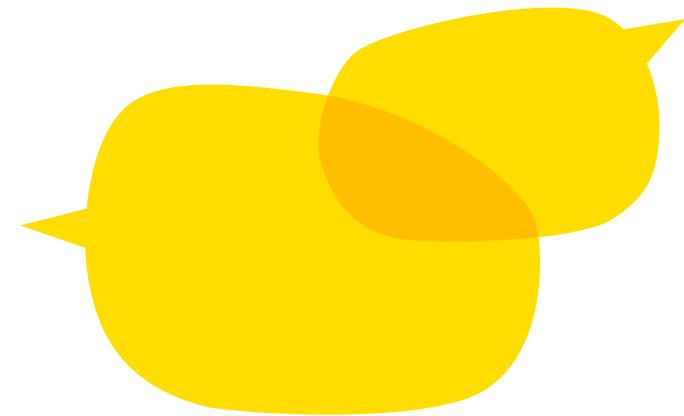


GEOFF AIGNER · CHERYL GODWELL · JANE MARTIN  
GRANT PAULSON · JOHN RAWNSLEY · KIM ROBERTSON  
LIZ SKELTON · LIBBY VARCOE · MARK YETTICA-PAULSON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ROSS CARNSEW

# LOST CONVERSATIONS

*Finding new ways for black and white  
Australians to lead together*



## LOST CONVERSATIONS

By Geoff Aigner, Cheryl Godwell, Jane Martin,  
Grant Paulson, John Rawnsley, Kim Robertson,  
Liz Skelton, Libby Varcoe, Mark Yettica-Paulson

First published in Australia 2014



Lost Conversations is licensed under a Creative  
Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-  
NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

The moral rights of the authors have been  
asserted in accordance with the Copyright  
Amendment (Moral Rights) Act 2000.

ISBN 978-0-9942092-0-7

Illustrations by Ross Carnsew

Designed by Mike Rossi

Printed by JA Wales

GEOFF AIGNER · CHERYL GODWELL · JANE MARTIN  
GRANT PAULSON · JOHN RAWNSLEY · KIM ROBERTSON  
LIZ SKELTON · LIBBY VARCOE · MARK YETTICA-PAULSON

ILLUSTRATIONS BY ROSS CARNSEW

“The authors of *Lost Conversations* show great courage by putting their perspectives on leadership out there. I hope their courage enables other Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to believe in, aspire to, and demand a more honourable Australian future for all of us to share.”

*Dr Chris Sarra, Founder and Chair, Stronger Smarter Institute*

“*Lost Conversations* is a book that Australia needs. Some of the most exceptional leaders I know of have presented what I would call distilled wisdom—insights at once visionary and practical, that grow from the authentic experience of leading and from deep reflection. This is a book that avoids shortcuts and simplistic solutions. But it cracks apart many of our assumptions, upsets pessimism and reframes hard questions. I know *Lost Conversations* will inspire and guide new leaders now and in the years ahead.”

*Tim Costello, CEO, World Vision Australia*

“*Lost Conversations* deals with the important issue of communication between black and white at an individual level. I hope that these stories are a forerunner to another set of conversations that are required in a post-Mabo Australia—the critical conversations between those who represent the black collectives, which are the holders of the world’s oldest living cultures, and the dominant society.”

*The Hon Frederick Michael Chaney, AO, Board Member, Reconciliation Australia; Former Deputy Chair, Australian Native Title Tribunal; 2014 Senior Australian of the Year*

“Anyone engaged in inter-cultural work with black and white Australians will recognise the many truths in this little book, which details the many ways we have allowed our most important national conversations to get ‘lost’. The results are challenging, sometimes discomfiting, but ultimately exciting—because they open a new space for conversations to make real progress in this space.”

*Associate Professor Sarah Maddison, author; ARC Future Fellow, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, UNSW*

“... illuminates how unequal power relations manifest in people’s everyday reality and exposes the effects of racial inequality. For this reason alone, those who are committed to achieving racial harmony in this country should regard *Lost Conversations* as a must-read.”

*Professor Steven Larkin, Pro Vice-Chancellor Indigenous Leadership, and Director, Australian Centre for Indigenous Knowledges & Education, Charles Darwin University*

“Encapsulates the challenge of ‘working with’ rather than ‘working for’ and establishes a narrative to help us all do better—every part of our community has a role to play.”

*Dr Helen Szoke, Chief Executive, Oxfam Australia*

“A compelling exploration of personal and systemic power, risk and vulnerability and a highly engaging read.”

*Simon Sheikh, Founder, Future Super; former National Director, GetUp!*

“... a very easy and thought-provoking read by a group of writers with diverse experience who offer us testing ideas and insights ... For anyone who is interested in getting an appreciation of some of the challenges, the issues and the relationships that exist in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs, I encourage you to have a read of *Lost Conversations* with an open mind and from the perspective of wanting to learn and understand.”

*Dr Tom Calma, AO, Chancellor, University of Canberra;  
Chair, Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre*

“People listen to music, but they hear noise. As Chris Sarra says, it is ‘time for a new dance’—a dance between all Australians where voices will be listened to, not just heard. It is time we moved to a place where we can listen to each other’s voices rather than just hear them.

*Jeremy Donovan, internationally renowned didgeridoo player,  
spokesperson and CEO, GenerationOne*

“The history of Australia’s relationship with its First Nation peoples ranges from dark silences to fine words. We need richer conversations to create constructive change. *Lost Conversations* invites us to play our role in a new, more engaging and difficult conversation by considering our power and personal histories, and by finding new ways to listen.”

*Simon Terry, Change Agent & Partner,  
Change Agents Worldwide LLC*

“With its fresh examination of ideas of power coupled with personal testimonies, *Lost Conversations* shows how, with honest dialogue, mutually respected solutions can be achieved. It challenges us to acknowledge our limitations and work together on a new understanding.”

*Clover Moore, Lord Mayor, City of Sydney*

“An empowering, relieving and challenging exploration of power in black/white relations that offers great hope for our shared future. A ‘must read’ for all Australians navigating the important and complex work of reconciliation.”

*Rosie Southwood, Manager, Aboriginal Affairs, Wesfarmers*

“The authors are to be congratulated for challenging and suggesting an effective way to shift the status quo. *Lost Conversations* calls on us to show a new form of courage in the discussions we need to have.”

*Lisa Chung, Chairman, The Benevolent Society*

“... raises critical questions and insights that have long concerned us on how to open dialogue between our First Nation peoples and other Australians. Whatever your political views, if you are concerned with how to better understand, relate and develop meaningful communication about the future of our country, you will find much to provoke both thought and emotion in this book.”

*Elmarie Gebler, Owner & Director, Fortis One*

---

# CONTENTS

PREFACE 02

INTRODUCTION 09

STARTING (OR RESTARTING)  
THE CONVERSATION 21

POWER: A REAL LOST  
CONVERSATION 29

WHY IS POWER SO DIFFICULT  
TO UNDERSTAND AND OWN? 40

RECOGNISING WHEN  
POWER IS OUT OF BEAT 48

THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF NOT  
WORKING WELL WITH POWER 66

TURNING 'LOST' CONVERSATIONS  
INTO 'NEW' CONVERSATIONS 73

FROM THE AUTHORS 81

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 91

# P PREFACE

*Our most common way of talking is telling: asserting the truth about the way things are and must be, not allowing that there might be other truths and possibilities. And our most common way of listening is not listening: listening only to our own talking, not to others.*

*Adam Kahane<sup>1</sup>*

If, as Australians, we are committed to righting the wrongs of our shared history; if, as individuals, we are committed to an equitable tomorrow for every child born in the 'lucky country'; then we need to find ways to open up the dialogue between our First Nations peoples and all Australians. As a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, we believe our country is ready to move beyond the all-too-familiar rhetoric. It is time to have the difficult conversations with each other that can lead to real change and to a new, more authentic national identity. One which capitalises on our differences, rather than ignores them.

---

1. Kahane, A., *Solving Tough Problems: An Open Way of Talking, Listening, and Creating New Realities*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, 2004.

Some progress has been made and there are already good examples of this happening around the country. These range from individuals working on developing good relationships; grass-roots, community-level and regional community development initiatives; and projects where our shared concern for the environment is emerging through constructive land-management partnerships. The success of some Reconciliation Action Plan strategies, where corporate leaders have been brave enough to establish organisational cultures that recognise the importance of Indigenous ways of knowing, also demonstrates a willingness to move forward together. You may have experienced, or perhaps have been part of, such change processes already. But there is still more to be done.

Many black and white Australians feel voiceless and powerless, uninvited or blocked from putting a progressive conversation for change on the national agenda. While long overdue, the time has come, the invitation is here and all we need is you. *Lost Conversations* does not claim to offer a suite of quick fixes or easy answers. We are, however, proposing that now is the time that we open our minds, hearts and ears to new ways of listening, speaking and hearing across differences.

*Lost Conversations* aims to ignite the energy that's needed to enact change for a better Australia. We invite Australians to work towards crossing the 'cultural' and 'power' divide. We want to grow our individual and collective strength. We want to challenge the 'norms' and the 'status quo'—where too many Indigenous people continue to suffer unacceptably low standards of health, education and life-expectancy. A place that is rife with discrimination, disproportionate incarceration rates and the devaluing of our unique Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures. Despite decades of rhetoric and endless policies and interventions, we continue to struggle in this conversation. Truckloads of goodwill have made little difference. We hope that *Lost Conversations* will

shift us forward, prompt awareness, reconnect our dreams and move us into action.

## WHO ARE WE AND WHAT IS THIS DOCUMENT?

The creators of this work are black and white Australians. We come from different parts of the country and represent diverse opinions and lived experiences. We are not representative of the whole black and white experience. However, we do have first-hand knowledge of what happens when black and white Australians come together to try to work on change.

Most of us originally joined forces as part of a leadership program called *Headland*. The program was delivered by Social Leadership Australia (SLA), a specialist leadership centre at The Benevolent Society. *Headland* was conceived as a co-created leadership initiative to support emerging Indigenous leaders. At the end of the program we developed a set of working hypotheses on what positively or negatively impacted the program's success. The authors of this document continued to explore the outcomes with SLA.

*Lost Conversations* is the result of what we collectively learned, not only through *Headland*, but also from our broader experiences of working in inter-cultural environments, and through a two year development and writing process facilitated by SLA. It is about the relationship between us here and now. It is not a thesis or an historical account, a script or a sermon, and it does not propose to have all the answers. It is however an attempt to build a dialogue between black and white Australians on how to work together, based on our own shared learnings. We don't know all the steps forward, but we can share some wisdom on how to avoid the all-too-familiar pitfalls that take us backwards.

One thing we do know is that black and white Australia cannot transform our communities and our nation as separate cultures, working as we have to date. New conversations are needed between us – wherever we are: boardrooms, universities, meeting rooms in Canberra, cities, and in rural or remote communities.

In *Lost Conversations* we share our experiences through stories that trace our personal journeys with vulnerability and power. These stories are by no means perfect or complete but they represent some important areas of our collective learning together across culture that we hope will resonate with you. We have also included quotes and thoughts about our first-hand experiences. For some, reading these may mean understanding that you are not alone. For others it will put words around the dynamics you may have experienced and didn't understand. If you hold a leadership role, it may give you some ideas around how to exercise your power in other ways. The more we realise that we are repeating the same habits, patterns and roles, the more freedom we have in trying something new.

## USE OF LANGUAGE AND DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

During the process of writing *Lost Conversations* we had many discussions about language. We realised how the expressions or terms we use have the power to either unite or polarise us. This is reflective of what happens daily in Australian life when the way something is said can either reinforce the norm or open up the conversation to invite in something different.

To support the purpose of *Lost Conversations* we would like to define some of the terms we've used. Many of these are common terms but they come with the legacy of many experiences and a heavy weight of cultural bias. So let's be clear.

**Power and love:** Our definitions of power and love come from the work of Adam Kahane who draws on the writings of philosopher Paul Tillich. Tillich defines power and love as this:

*Power is the drive of everything living to realize itself, with increasing intensity and extensity.*

*Love is the drive towards unity of the separated.*<sup>2</sup>

This means we are not just talking about power in the narrow sense of authority delivered through politics, management, personal rank, celebrity, position or wealth. To us power can also be a universal drive to achieve your objectives and realise yourself as an individual or as a community.

When we speak of love, we are not thinking of romantic love, but the urge towards connecting to community and linking to others. Love in this context can also be interchanged with compassion.

*True compassion is not just an emotional response but a firm commitment founded on reason. Therefore, a truly compassionate attitude towards others does not change even if they behave negatively.*

*The Dalai Lama*<sup>3</sup>

**Black and white:** We have decided to mostly use the terms 'black' and 'white' when referring to Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Because of the uneasy history of relationships between Australia's 'white' colonists and our 'black' Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, these terms may be confronting to some

readers. In writing this document, we acknowledge the complexity and tension inherent in using these words. However we also believe that any words we choose could be considered controversial. For example there are many who do not identify with the terms 'Indigenous' or 'non-Indigenous'. 'Aboriginal' does not acknowledge our Torres Strait Islander people and communities. When we use the term 'black' we are referring to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia. The term is used respectfully, without prejudice and is descriptive of a person's identity rather than their skin colour. When we use the term 'white' we are referring to all non-Aboriginal and non-Torres Strait Islander Australians. We acknowledge and appreciate the work being done by many individuals of diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds and are by no means excluding or devaluing their contributions to Indigenous affairs or the possibilities posed by *Lost Conversations*, which is focused on being purposefully inclusive.

**Inter-cultural:** Inter-cultural describes the collaborative space where black and white Australians are working together towards change and progress. This could be any setting in any part of the country—official or informal.

**Leadership:** We define leadership as the use of power, formal or informal, to help systems understand and solve their own problems. It is not something we have, but something we do.

**Rank:** Rank refers to the differences of power that occur between individuals. It is, in our view, neither good nor bad in itself. However it is useful when it is acknowledged and used well. It often feels unfair that some are born with more rank than others. For example, women have historically experienced, and continue to experience, lower rank in some settings. But identifying rank allows the individual and the collective to focus on how it can be used for benefit.

---

2. Kahane, A., *Power and Love: A Theory and Practice of Social Change*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, 2010.

3. Gyatso, T., *Compassion and the individual*. Wisdom Publications, Somerville, MA, 1991.



With all of this in mind, we understand that these terms, or the way we have described things, may still be jolting for many readers, or may sit uneasily with you. We cannot apologise for that reality. This is the precarious place we are entering through our work as we try to create purposeful change and discover new opportunities to do things differently. In doing so, we draw on the words of one of the most impactful leaders of our time, Nelson Mandela.

*We are extricating ourselves from a system that insulted our common humanity by dividing us from one another on the basis of race and setting us against each other as oppressed and oppressor. That system committed a crime against humanity.*

*Nelson Mandela*<sup>4</sup>

We trust that you, the reader, will take these definitions and explanations into consideration as you read, interpret and hopefully engage with this document, and understand that it invites new conversations for change.

---

4. Mandela, N., 'Statement by President Mandela on receiving the report of the TRC' (Truth & Reconciliation Commission, which investigated apartheid-era atrocities), 29 October 1998. African National Congress [www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=3072](http://www.anc.org.za/show.php?id=3072).

## INTRODUCTION

*This is about power—I reiterate, it comes from inside of us... nobody gives it to us.*

*Dr Chris Sarra*<sup>5</sup>

For more than 22 decades we have heard, seen and felt the tectonic plates of black and white Australia press against each other. We've listened to the now-famous speeches, heard about reconciliation, experienced Parliament's Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples, and National Sorry Days. We've been disturbed and divided, heard far too many promises and witnessed too many shortfalls.

On each occasion we've held our breath waiting, watching with hope and anticipation, only to be followed by despair when it failed, or did not go as far as expected. While some things have changed, most remains the same.

For example, Closing the Gap, an ongoing commitment by successive Australian governments, (despite some successes)

---

5. Sarra, C., 'On Indigenous Education', Lunchbox/Soapbox talk at The Wheeler Centre, 11 July 2013. The Wheeler Centre [wheelercentre.com/videos/video/lunchbox-soapbox-chris-sarra-on-indigenous-education/](http://wheelercentre.com/videos/video/lunchbox-soapbox-chris-sarra-on-indigenous-education/)

has made little difference with its many shortfalls, failings and the limited success of extraordinary expenditure, and targeting of infrastructure and resources.

We believe that Australia is on the precipice of a shift in how black and white Australians experience each other and how we use our respective power and authority. But there is a danger that when this shift occurs—and inevitably it will—if we have not dared to have the difficult conversations (or are not prepared to) then black and white Australia is destined to break under the pressure and keep rolling over the top of each other.

Without authentic and sustainable change we will keep failing to really know, understand and embrace each other. Worse still, we will lose the opportunity to collaborate for the changes that the majority of Australians want—changes that may offer the potential of a shared national identity and a collective purpose.

## TIME FOR A NEW DANCE

Black and white Australians have successfully worked together before to create change. The work of a legislative reform committee, who by 1965 became known as the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI), and the efforts of The Freedom Bus Ride leading up to the 1967 referendum, paved the way for the resounding ‘yes’ vote to remove discriminatory elements from the Australian Constitution. Grassroots advocacy, petition writing and bus trips to show city dwellers what was happening to Aboriginal people in coastal and regional NSW towns, were rare glimpses of what can happen when black and white leaders work together.

Today, many people are still seeking better ways to work together and make progress. Australians long for improved human rights, living standards, health, education, employment,



and representation for Indigenous people. We want more mutual respect, more shared understanding and more connections across culture, both black and white.

However, in the years since 1967 Australians have learned—far beyond anything else—that good intentions are not enough. Good intentions don’t improve the lives of Indigenous Australians nor do they improve how we live and work together across cultures.

## SO WHAT KIND OF LEADERSHIP WILL ENSURE REAL CHANGE?

Australians mercilessly scrutinise and critique both black and white leaders. We hold both high and low expectations simultaneously. We get excited about new innovative programs but secretly suspect they might fail. We see conflicting motivating forces,

uncover hidden agendas, and become suspicious of competing interests. Without a change in how we typically work and lead together, we will continue to encounter limited chances of success.

*There comes a time in the life of every nation, when it must put right the injustices of the past. A time to say 'no more' to exclusion and prejudice. A time for us to be our better selves. Such a moment beckons now. Ever louder grows the call.*

*Tanya Hosch<sup>6</sup>*

We cannot respond to this call without improving our individual and collective skills to listen and talk in very different ways. We need new conversations that don't get lost in rhetoric, good intentions and feel-good statements. We need the very conversations we often don't dare to have, and are too fearful to start.

We often talk about what black or white Australia want from each other, but rarely do we talk about how we work together to achieve it. Going beyond the rhetoric involves collaborative work that requires each of us to be vulnerable, more authentic and to challenge each other in new ways.

## WHAT THE CURRENT 'DANCE FLOOR' LOOKS LIKE

Black and white Australians have been dancing around each other, and occasionally together, since we first met. To help describe the current state of play in inter-cultural work, as we see it, we would like to use a dance floor as a metaphor.

6. Hosch, T., 'Recognition: Why It's Right', address to the National Press Club, 13 February 2013. Recognise [www.recognise.org.au/wp-content/uploads/shared/uploads/custom/489c2b031191954f50c4.pdf](http://www.recognise.org.au/wp-content/uploads/shared/uploads/custom/489c2b031191954f50c4.pdf)



Twirling around to the music are many black and white Australians who are working hard to make progress. They're advocates, working tirelessly in community organisations, government or in the private sector. Some are academics, some are policy makers

and others are activists. Quite often these people know the dance and are familiar with the other dancers. They dance carefully and tentatively, trying not to stand on each other's toes, but often the dancers are out of step with no one willing or skilled enough to take the lead. They have hope and energy but often feel isolated, overworked and frustrated. Many have given up and are cynical that anything will ever change so will only dance with those they know and feel safe with. In this environment it can be hard to hold hope, to learn new ways and find partners who don't burn out.

On the balcony are other black and white Australians who also want things to change—either for themselves, or for their families and communities. They too feel frustrated. Some are angry, some feel guilty and others are just outright confused. They watch the more experienced dancers and want to join in, but they have been warned by others of the dangers of getting too close, or are worried about the pressure involved. While the balcony gives them a good perspective of what's happening below, they sense there is a certain way that things should be done, even though the dances don't seem to work.

Meanwhile, outside the dancehall there are those who know that there's a dance going on. They hear the music occasionally. Sometimes the music sounds strange and other times it sounds familiar. But they wonder what it has to do with their day-to-day reality. Some are curious and feel hopeful that things can get better. But others are tired, fearful, demoralised, or contemptuous of the current dance. There is also a growing number who are just plain disinterested or apathetic to Indigenous affairs.

Then there are the bouncers. While the black and white dancers are figuring out how to dance together, there are black and white bouncers who act as the gate keepers. They block admission to the dance, set the price and quite often choose the music. They appear powerful.

## DANGER ON THE DANCE FLOOR

***As an Aboriginal person working with white Australians you get accustomed to certain behaviours and dynamics. You learn to expect and then accept that people on both sides can express their opinion along a spectrum—from being romantically supportive to aggressively resistant. Somewhere in the middle there will be disinterest and denial. As a result you begin expecting a progression similar to this: you start being fully supported, then mistrusted, followed by being completely de-authorized as expectations fail to be met, and then worst of all, we are often de-legitimised as not being 'black enough' to engage communities, and not 'white enough' to engage with the dominant system/construct. I can see now that white Australians also face similar difficulties in this space.***

In our experience, when black and white Australians come together we often enter a precarious space that requires courage, stamina and a high degree of self-awareness. It is an environment



that can be tense, historically tainted and culturally unsafe. It can be a place of covert and overt attack, a place where those who step up are quickly shot down. It is a place where we struggle to hold our power, rank and authority. Alternative ways, ideas and approaches can feel impossible. Many of us make mistakes and can easily lose face, faith and confidence. We can both feel powerless and incompetent. Hurt, anger, fear, frustration and despair are endemic.

So how can we create a more productive, sustainable dance? A dance of which we can all be proud? A dance that we choreograph ourselves, where we define our own moves rather than copying the moves that rarely seem to work and have failed to work for decades?

## FINDING A NEW BEAT

In our relatively short time together, black and white Australians have talked a lot about how we can try to fix things. But rarely have we talked about what it would mean to find more useful ways of working together. How can we find sustainable and productive ways of working beyond just one project (wondering if it will succeed or fail) at a time?

This way of working would need to move beyond:

- aspirations and motivations to 'fix' Indigenous Australia that are driven by fear, guilt, anger, haste, personal pride and looking good;
- dynamics that are unsustainable (personally or systemically), exhausting, despairing and degenerative; and
- outcomes or progress that are short-lived, benefit few and inevitably maintain the status quo.

During our time working together on this project, we as writers came to see how inauthentic our ways of working together

to create change could be. In our own experience we witnessed behaviour in our group where authenticity was held back for fear of saying the wrong thing, being shamed or embarrassed, wanting to avoid conflict, or by hiding behind roles. Inauthentic interactions occurred not only between black and white Australians, but also between black and black, and white and white.

In our collaboration we experienced, learnt from and continue to learn about what it takes to authentically work together. That is, to be genuine with each other and embrace precisely who we are, including our respective colour, culture and power.



## IT'S TIME TO INVENT A NEW DANCE

We believe there could be another dance. But it is one where we need to create new steps together. This dance complements the strengths and capacity of all dancers and is one that can be shared, learnt and taught. It is a new dance that redefines black and white Australia's notion of together and results in a much more open and honest conversation. It embraces our individual and collective potential to lead, to be led and to hold both black and white together.

From our own experience, a sense of togetherness emerged by being authentic and honest about our ideas, thoughts and feelings, accepting of each other's shortcomings and vulnerabilities, showing support for individual and collective strengths, and being clear about our shared goal to create a different, more equitable Australia. Togetherness created a buffer zone that helped us challenge each other with respect. This led us to new places and new ways of looking at and understanding the dynamics that have shaped black and white relations—and how it can be changed.

*Lost Conversations* seeks to bring greater insight, ownership and skill in the use of our black and white power in the Australian context. Our hope is that the days of denying our individual and collective power, rank and authority are numbered.

We invite you to be part of it.

“

*Maybe 20 years ago,  
we started the conversation...  
I think the Mabo case and  
the Redfern speech set the  
possibility for conversation  
in the Australian psyche.  
But somewhere along the  
line, it all got lost.*

”

# 1

## STARTING (OR RESTARTING) THE CONVERSATION

When we attempt to understand something (or admit that we don't) we can learn new and revealing things. For black and white Australians to enter into a new conversation, we need to collectively develop an honest understanding of how we got here, where can we go from here and how can it be achieved. We need to ask ourselves, how can we each use our respective power for shared growth and transformation?

---

### WHAT POWER?

From our first breath human beings depend on power. We rely on the power of someone else to feed, to protect and to guide us. The way that our first authority figures use their power can mean the difference between life and death. And it's not just about survival. The nature of society is determined by how authority figures in our families, communities and organisations exercise power. Is the authority caring or neglectful? Is it short-sighted or thinking of the future? Does the authority protect and support their community, or do they leave everyone to fend for themselves? Every day we read about the use and misuse of power and its effect at many different levels.

At an individual level power is important too. It is a primal need. Without personal power, our survival is in jeopardy. Human beings are almost always interacting with, building and negotiating the power between us. We do this both at an individual and systemic level.



As writers we individually and collectively learned that:

1. Accepting and using power is often difficult across culture. The word power in itself is provocative.
2. When white and black leaders work together they can use their respective cultural power and authority in a negative way—to block progress rather than aid it—with ‘white power’ coming from the mainstream and ‘black power’ coming from both culture and being in the margin. This usually happens without awareness.
3. White Australia stereotypically holds more formal power than black Australia—which many white Australians are blind to. This is the power that comes from institutional, systemic and structural dominance. An unintended and unacknowledged part of working together is that black leaders inevitably have to wake white people up to their power—which is often taken for granted.
4. An unexplored and counterintuitive part of working together is that white leaders also have to wake black leaders up to the value, depth and relevance of their informal power. This is the power that comes from survival, from knowledge of community and culture, and from history and a sense of intrinsic connection to family, and this land.

### THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN FORMAL AND INFORMAL POWER

These insights have a common theme—power: the use of power, the appreciation of power, the ownership of power, the neglect of



power, and the clout that power has when combined with love.

Power, as we commonly understand it, often sits in formal structures and is connected to positions of rank and authority—for example, a person's level of employment or education, being a boss, bureaucrat, minister etc. The positions we hold give us access to certain power, resources and privileges. A boss may enjoy access to the board, a bureaucrat may play a role in policy changes that impact people's daily lives, and the leader of a country has access to other leaders of countries. However, this kind of power will only get us so far.

Indigenous Australians have been denied access to the most formal types of power in Australia for many generations. Subsequently we underestimate the impact, presence and significance of non-formal power—a form of power that is often felt rather than seen. Use of non-formal power is most obvious in our deep connection to meaning, purpose and culture. This kind of power comes from both psychological and spiritual domains. It manifests as a form of personal power and presence. It is acquired as a result of experience, and a depth of understanding and inter-connection.

*Many Australians don't know how to think themselves into the country, the land. They find it hard to think with the land. We Aboriginal people find it hard to think without the land.*

*Patrick Dodson*<sup>7</sup>

Informal power is among many gifts offered by Indigenous Australia—a power that comes from continuity and survival, one which links Australia to the past and a history that holds 'spiritual rank' at an international level. It is also what many white Australians

---

7. Dodson, P., *Reconciliation: at the crossroads: address to the National Press Club, April 1996*. Australian Government Publishing Service [for] Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1996 (available at [www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au/doc/dodson\\_1.pdf](http://www.multiculturalaustralia.edu.au/doc/dodson_1.pdf))

describe as a deficit which they feel most starkly in inter-cultural work. That is, not having that sense of belonging and connection.

Informal power can bring in what is often lacking to those holding formal positions of power—authenticity, depth and connection. But appreciating it as an informal presence is not enough. Australia needs Indigenous leaders in formal positions of power. Black and white leaders need to know that the ancient, authentic 'non-formal' power of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples enhances and deepens the exercise of power in most contexts, particularly in formal structures and hierarchies.

Black leaders bring strengths to Australian leadership, that are often unrecognised, undervalued and ignored i.e.:

- As the oldest continuous culture we hold a long-term perspective about the future and sustainability of Australia;
- We are resilient—we are survivors who have endured many different forms of adversity;
- The value of our connection to country is increasingly important in a world that is looking for both spiritual worth and ways to live sustainably into the future. This is particularly poignant in a world facing serious environmental problems. There are already some examples of white organisations working with Aboriginal people to care for the land by combining new and ancient ways; and
- In our striving to improve the lives of the most disadvantaged, we are often interested in, and capable of, advocating and working to improve the plight of all people.

## GRANT'S STORY

Often in inter-cultural work, change agents stumble across power they didn't know they have or were unwilling to admit. Grant's story brings this discovery to life and testifies to the power that comes from love. He highlights how conflict and difficulty can be an expression of love, and that it is important to create room for sparks to fly for better outcomes.

*A new learning for me is that others perceive me as more powerful and authoritative than I personally experience. During the writing of Lost Conversations I have come to realise that my words and ideas hold weight and influence. I have always thought of myself as part of the mob. However when I speak from conviction and insight, or convey an idea with power and love, I notice that the dynamic of the conversation changes—people stop and listen—I command an audience.*

*During this project I began noticing people were reluctant to push against me. In some instances the conversation simply died after I spoke. At first I thought they were holding back, I thought people were avoiding my ideas, but instead they were reflecting on them. What I later discovered is that others feel I have a 'spiritual authority'. This is not just personality, vocation, academic or family background, but a combination of many things that are present in my leadership style and presence. What a disconcerting discovery!*

*I say disconcerting because of my internal resistance to being a strong voice even when in my sphere of influence. Knowledge of power is one thing but using power wisely, effectively and with respect is another, particularly with our own mob and elders. I now see my power as protective*

*against corruption, misuse or abuse. Knowing about my power as an Aboriginal man means I can and do actively choose to have a positive impact.*

*Embedding real change takes time. It takes time to develop the capacity to have the tough conversations. It demands flexibility to see diverse perspectives and hear all voices while under fire. Real change in the relationship between black and white will take much time. If conflict gets hot, both well-meaning black and white leaders retreat to their 'status quo'. Leaders from the community sector grab at grassroots ideals, public sector people retreat to process, academics default to models and corporate leaders look for action. These can bring about dramatic collisions in entities pursuing outcomes for black and white Australia.*

*Systemic change facilitated by both black and white leadership in the Australian context requires us to suspend initial judgment. We have to resist the temptation to retreat back to what's 'safe' and find a willingness to look for creative options born from diversity. We are birthing the wisdom of a shared black and white perspective: a new way. We need to sit longer in the uncomfortable place preceding change.*

*The dissenting voice is someone from whom we can learn so much. But dissent is disconcerting. I am interested in the wisdom in the 'no' but I noticed I am more comfortable when the dissenting voice is white. There has not been a lot of room for dissent between black fellas. Society, the media and other black fellas demand that we have a unified front and a harmonious existence. If we don't it is perceived as weakness and that makes us vulnerable to attack.*

*As a younger person I had a low tolerance for conflict. I was afraid of the potential volatility. I now look for the creativity and learning in conflict. I am more open and patient. The inter-generational trauma from conflict between black*

*and white Australia means that it can lead to explosive and destructive interactions. It takes skill to manage conflict. Today I am more able to appreciate its energy. The voice of dissent is a teacher—from black and white Australia. It doesn't help if sympathetic white Australia simply colludes with us and our sense of powerlessness—we need everyone to argue with us so we can create something new.*

*A reliance on unity can stifle diversity. I know now that my spiritual power and authority can be transformative here. I can keep us in the heat safely.*



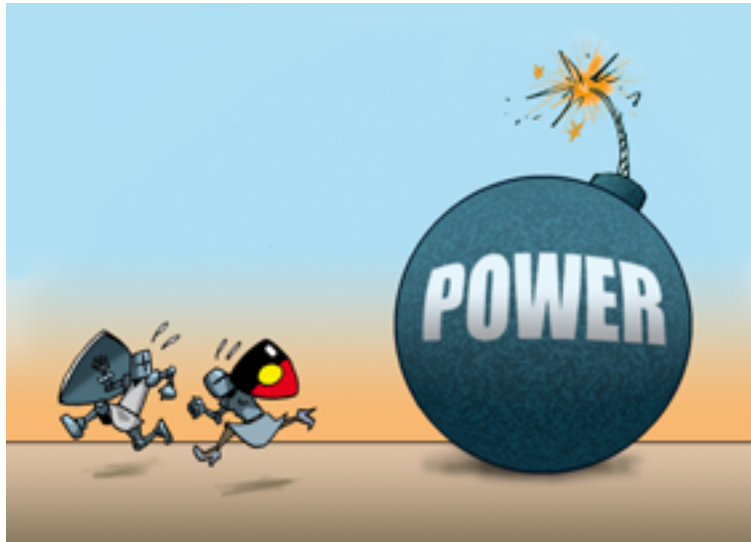
## **POWER: A REAL LOST CONVERSATION**

It is not easy talking about power in Australia. The word 'power' triggers many responses. Few of them are positive and more often than not, power is mistaken for:

- control
- authority
- domination and/or
- assimilation to a dominant view/system
- inequitable distribution of benefits.

As Australians we struggle to use power both consciously and effectively. This impacts how we work together, regardless of our colour and rank. We are often fearful and uncertain about the power that others have. As a result, we unintentionally undermine our potential to collectively use our own power to benefit all. But doing this could create an opportunity to be a gift to each other, rather than a threat.

Our experience of power and powerlessness (carved in long-standing rhythms and cycles of history) affects how we engage and react to each other. In our individual and collective experience, these are the lost conversations around power that we have seen:



- A tendency to revert to our individual cultural biases and norms when we are fearful or uncertain. For example, white leaders often deal with conflict or discomfort through silence or in private with each other, while black leaders often call things as they see them, in public and at a high cost. Black leaders may call things ‘culturally inappropriate’ when things get hot—similarly stopping the conversation. These can be signs that we are unsure of our personal power.
- An unwillingness to see our individual and collective power. For example, many leaders describe feeling powerless in inter-cultural settings. They see ‘the other side’ as holding all the cards (while the other side feels the same in return). White Australians tend to underestimate their formal power and feel lacking in non-formal power (see table). Similarly, black Australians’ poor history with formal power in white Australia has created an understandably conflicted

<b>Positional rank</b>	Rank that comes from a position within a specific system. For example manager, CEO, minister, team captain or teacher.
<b>Social (or unearned) rank</b>	Rank that we are born with or into. For example race, gender, sexuality, education, lack of physical disability, culture, religion, marital status.
<b>Psychological rank</b>	Rank that comes from life experience. For example self-understanding and awareness, being loved and loving, feeling valued, having survived suffering and feeling stronger for it.
<b>Spiritual rank</b>	Rank that comes from being connected to something greater. For example, feeling or having something to offer the world and using it; having a spiritual practice; having faced significant loss, failure or trauma and survived; having a ‘calling’.

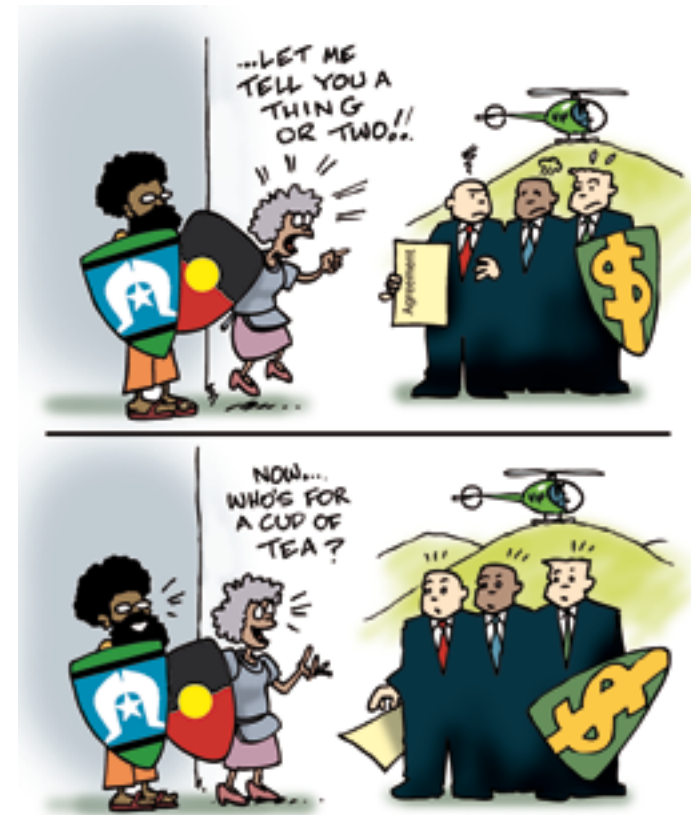
Source: Adapted from Mindell, A., *Sitting in the Fire: Large group transformation using Conflict & Diversity*, Lao Tse Press, 1995.

relationship with formal power—being both dependent on it and resentful of it. This often results in an undervaluing of the informal power we have from culture, country and survival, and/or a tentativeness in seeking formal power too. These can be signs that we might be fearful of owning our respective power.

- A difficulty to look to the future not just the present. For example, it is rare for black and white leaders to talk about sustainable inter-generational solutions instead of reverting back to the immediate or looming crises. This may be a sign that we don't believe our power can have a lasting impact or effect.
- An inability to deal with adversity and conflict in a productive way. For example, many leaders in inter-cultural settings feel isolated and burnt-out in their roles. This is a possible sign that we are unable to use the power we have to protect ourselves and others.
- An inability to be generous and empower each other. For example, many leaders often live in fear of being 'taken out' in their work and usually take themselves out in advance by stepping back or away. This is a sign that we are fearful of giving our power to others and consequently rendering ourselves powerless.

It is our lack of understanding and incompetence in using power well that makes the conversation stall. This is a great loss for Australia because it misses the untapped innovation that comes from working with 'the other' rather than just doing business with ourselves. We get stuck within the same systems, the same constructs and ultimately achieve the same outcomes and results.

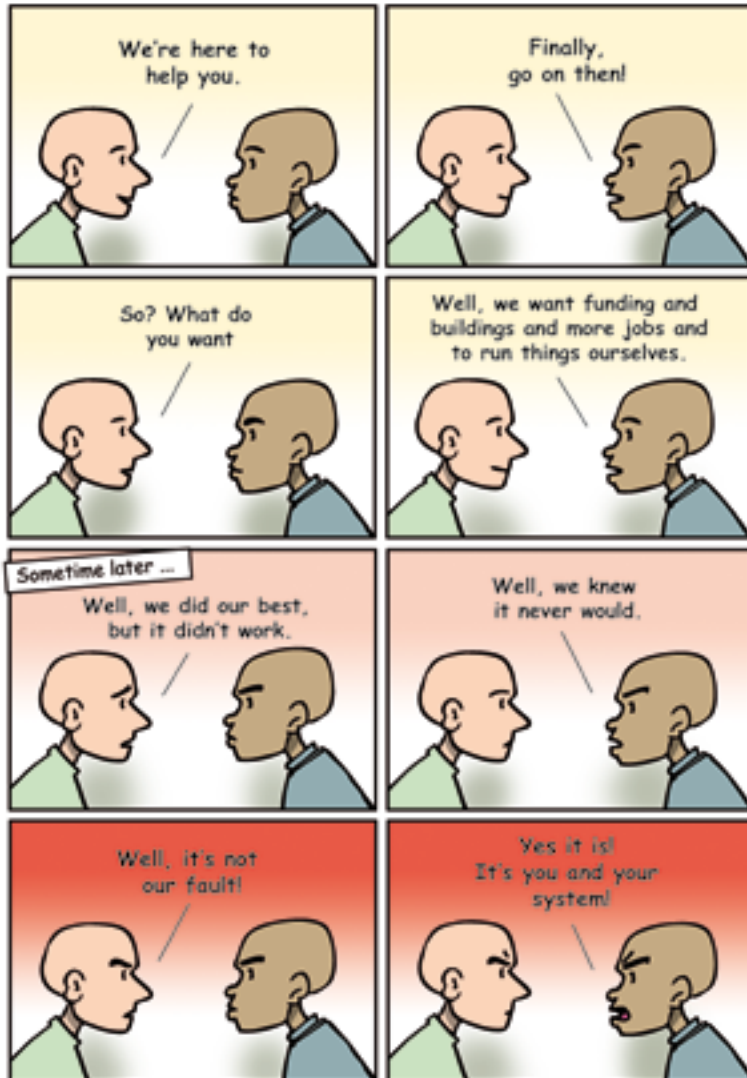
There are also dangers in not being aware and more direct about the need to consciously exercise power. As long as power continues to be transacted in the shadows, it is open to misuse and abuse. Denying the importance of power leaves it open to neglect, and neglect is often worse than abuse. It is easier to note the signs and respond to abuse than it is to identify and address the legacy of neglect.



## RECOGNISING FAMILIAR PATTERNS

Unfortunately, benefiting others is not necessarily seen as the point and obligation of power in Australia—with good historical reasons. Consequently, a call to power tends to fall flat as it's seen as a means for perpetuating the same old inequalities. It is no wonder then that power is often seen by black Australia as a solely white construct.

The following conversation characterises how power and authority is often exercised in the black–white Australian context.



While certainly over-simplified, this caricature demonstrates a familiar dance to many who have worked in and around Indigenous affairs. The position is stuck and the cycle is familiar. The arguments on both sides seem fruitless and futile. Neither party is fully understanding their power, acknowledging it, or using it well.

**WHAT IS OFTEN UNDERESTIMATED  
AND MISUNDERSTOOD IS THAT  
BOTH POSITIONS ARE  
INDEPENDENTLY POWERFUL**

White Australia lacks an understanding and ownership of the power that comes from being part of the mainstream through race, education and being 'in the system'. Indigenous Australia lacks an understanding of the power gained from cultural heritage and resilient life as Indigenous Australians.

We both carry a legacy that limits our imagination and courage to respectively own our power. While we may secretly desire and covet power, we simultaneously hold a reluctance to appear powerful. We often struggle to work with power overtly let alone in partnership and collaboration with others.

This dynamic is not only present across black and white Australia but also within black and white Australia. We project our desires and conflicting emotions about power onto political figures and towards those in leadership roles or positions. The Australian way is characterised by powerlessness in the face of authority. We love complaining about authority while at the same time enjoying the benefits we get from those in power. It is more acceptable to identify as a victim of the misuse and abuse of power and to persecute the bearers of power, than to offer our power to influence change. Notionally, we all too often want the comfort of having someone to protect us, while simultaneously resenting the fact

that we need and desire protection.

*Being both dependent yet mistrustful of authority is a challenging paradox for those seeking to use power responsibly. We face citizens and employees who are sceptical at best and at worst distrustful and fearful, whilst expecting to be looked after. We simultaneously want authority to protect and provide for us whilst we show our disdain for it. Our authority is both called for and de-authorised and we often de-authorise ourselves before someone else does.*

*When the role of authority has such a history, it's no wonder we struggle under its weight. We can become both dependent on the approval of those we are trying to lead and sub-consciously colluding with a rebellion against the role.*

*Geoff Aigner & Liz Skelton<sup>8</sup>*

## BUT WE NEED EACH OTHER TO HOLD OUR INDIVIDUAL POWER

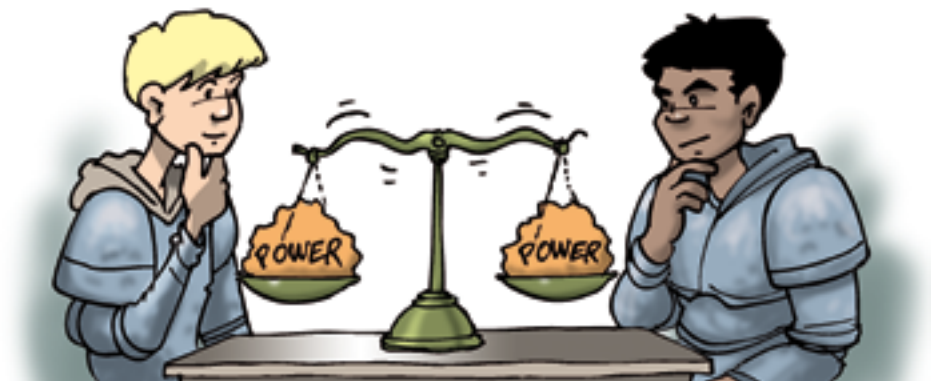
It is difficult to hold power, particularly in inter-cultural work. Our passions and best intentions blind us to our misuse and abuse of power. Even when progress is made, we prefer to recall the missed opportunities and failures as they support our story of authority as the problem. This leaves us feeling immobilised and powerless. Paradoxically this can feel like a far safer place to be.

This dilemma points to perhaps one of the most important implications of our denial of power—namely, that we fail to realise the value in embracing Australia's many cultures. We do in fact

8. Aigner, G. & Skelton, L., *The Australian Leadership Paradox: What it takes to lead in the lucky country*. Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 2013.

need each other's formal and informal power to achieve change. Otherwise we will continue to misdirect our efforts because we misunderstand how we can be mutually beneficial to each other. What is needed is a mobilisation of our combined power across cultures. If we think of the formal/non-formal power as scales, we would therefore need to get more Indigenous people (with 'informal power') into formal positions and more non-Indigenous people who are in formal positions, to increase their 'informal power'.

It is a common and misplaced fantasy to think systems, ideologies and institutions fix things. They are no different to a circuit board—no system, ideology or institution is brought to life until we add power. We saw this transformation in our own work together. When we stopped spectating and started participating, it felt like everyone woke up and was present. It required each of us to authorise ourselves. To say 'yes I am here and I am part of this wherever it is going'. It felt like all the lights went on and when the sparks flew (which they inevitably did), and we were still able to continue, we knew we were making progress.



## GEOFF'S STORY

Geoff's story shows the importance of not stepping away from power—particularly when there is an expectation to give it up or back down. He also discovers the paradoxical dynamic of what can happen when we show our vulnerability. Formal leaders usually avoid showing any vulnerability to eliminate the risk of losing their power or appearing to be 'weak'. But by making ourselves vulnerable we can gain more rank - particularly when it is done in a way that simultaneously stands up for the power and authority of the role.

*My big learning in Lost Conversations is not to try and hide or be afraid of my power. I am more confident about standing in and using my rank and less inhibited by being 'politically correct' in the shared black and white workspace. I am much more prepared to have difficult conversations, particularly when there are disparities in rank. It is not possible to have these conversations if I am unaware of my rank or hiding my power. This practice has yielded benefits beyond my imagination.*

*My interactions with Indigenous people have been held back in the past because I was wary of saying something stupid or exposing my power. So I withdrew and avoided interacting.*

*Rather than holding myself back because I'm afraid to offend, I now bring myself into the conversation and tolerate some of the whacks I inevitably get (at least to start with). I found it is surprising and then usually relieving to realise Indigenous people's willingness to work with white people who do not try to forfeit their power and their authority roles.*

*In making myself vulnerable, I am better able to see my*

*blind spots, habits and default roles. I have seen that I can afford to be vulnerable and in fact that it helps me in my work with Indigenous Australians. Something I thought wasn't possible—for example, admitting that I sometimes don't know what to do but that I remain committed to continue to work alongside my Indigenous colleagues regardless.*

*I have also learnt to distinguish between personal and professional vulnerability. Showing personal vulnerability is quite different from abdicating professional responsibility. This abdication happens too often with white leaders including me. This means I can own my power in a way that doesn't reproduce what we are afraid of—abuse by the whites with mainstream power.*

*I still find it difficult to respond to blanket critics and overwhelming negativity. I am learning that actually the critic from within, and my own anxieties, and doubt are usually signals that we are on the cusp of something interesting and new. For example, I have learnt to not try and 'fix' awkward moments for a group working together. Instead I now use my power to keep the attention on the difficulty and see it as 'our'—not one culture's—problem.*





## WHY IS POWER SO DIFFICULT TO UNDERSTAND AND OWN?

How come power has such a bad rap in Australia? To answer this we need to look at our collective history since white settlement. Being abused, neglected over-protected or deceived by power rightly makes one cautious. It also makes one hesitant to relate to or claim power. What if we become like those who abused their position and hurt us?

In general the relationship between black and white Australia today would be difficult to describe as purposefully abusive (apart from some notable exceptions where the power imbalance and abuse continues in far more sophisticated and institution-alised forms). Instead, Australia's current dilemma is its neglect of power and avoidance of using power because we are afraid of inadvertently replicating and sustaining the abuse.

### THE BLACK LEGACY

Black Australia bears the consequence of this legacy in a visceral and physical way. We are struggling to 'close the gap'. One of the main contributors to these devastating realities is that Australia's colonial roots are based in systemically dispossessing,

disempowering and stripping (de-authorising) black Australia's authority. As recently as the 1970s, black Australia continued to suffer the institutionalised sting of colonialism and assimilationist practices in what most considered to be a burgeoning and blossoming Australia and Australian identity. While Australia has to some extent evolved, the legacy of inter-generational abuse and the consequent trauma is still present and remains unresolved.

While many in white Australia may think that this has nothing to do with them – 'it wasn't me who did that' – it does not change or diminish the size of the impact on the here and now. Misuse of white power has done indeterminable damage to black Australia's sense of self and self-worth. Even when black Australians have 'successfully' assimilated to the white way, Indigenous people are often attacked and systematically de-authorised by accusations of being too white or not really black at all.

*The discomfort I've felt working in the black and white space has been around how to be a leader. Not knowing what was allowed, what wasn't, would I get it wrong, then what would happen? This feeling of judgement comes from both sides, an expectation that you have to get it right. The impact of that was I self-censored, held back, didn't challenge and got struck down by the 'white politeness'. Which was a cop out, it meant I colluded with the 'stuckness' and didn't bring out my instincts. It allowed me to stay in the safety of not getting something wrong or offending someone.*

***Being an Indigenous leader is a 24/7 experience and comes with enormous community expectations and responsibilities. People look towards you to provide authority but their own past traumas and associations about how authority has been used can be projected onto you. Expectations are high and unbalanced. As noted before, this creates a double standard as we are dependent on authority but simultaneously hate it too. This translates into a 'sit down/stand up' dilemma where leaders are called upon to stand up and do something ('take the mantle bro') but then told to sit down again.***

***As an Indigenous person when your power starts to move up it's difficult to own and value. You're up yourself, you're too black, too white, too shiny, too mainstream or too radical. All the while you're struggling with an inner voice that's saying just 'sit down and shut up'.***

It is deeply painful for black Australia to see the historically based system of measuring blackness used to bring people down in contemporary times. These measures of blackness endemic within our own mob are often as destructive to our sense of belonging, culture and identity as those dished out by others.

This approach of cutting down anyone who dares to rise above powerlessness, complaint or collusion plagues both black and white Australia. We all fall prey to the tendency to attack

the power we see in others and deny the power we individually possess. Sadly, the impact of this tendency is to put any chance of progress in the 'too hard basket'. Instead of a shared sense of duty to challenge and reallocate power, things become too difficult and get left for later.

## THE WHITE LEGACY

White Australia is also not immune to the narrative of powerlessness. While we may have been beneficiaries of colonial power, structures and systems, we have done so within a paradigm of powerlessness. As the subject of an imperial power, Australia was placed in a long-running less 'rankful' role as a colony. Power is similarly difficult to own for white Australians. We did little to earn our 'mainstream rank'—a lot of which comes from skin colour and culture. As a consequence we either quickly get de-authorised as a 'tall poppy' or we de-authorise ourselves (even more so in inter-cultural work). This sets us up for a particular experience of victimhood as whites, like it does for black Australians. White Australians feel equally powerless to the plight of Indigenous Australia and what power we can and can't use to achieve change. The impact is not only systemic but also personal. Not holding our own power makes it hard to learn from others' power—we miss learning how Indigenous Australians hold power. As a consequence we rely upon more familiar constructs and more shallow interpretations of what it means to be powerful and use power well.

***We certainly don't argue with Indigenous Australians.***

***For white people, the idea of owning our own power is difficult—especially if you're one of the 'guilty' white people.***

***I've worked with Indigenous groups where I felt powerless, while they were feeling, 'hey, you've got all the power [get over it]'. Rather than say 'well I'm not sure of how to go forward' and name my incompetence, my default position was actually to hold that mainstream even more—because that's where I have power and it's all I've got.***

## THE SHARED LEGACY

The resulting impact is the ease with which black and white Australians collude in our sense of powerlessness—that we are all equally powerless to the 'system' and history, and that all we can do is blame the nameless, faceless government, policies, programs and initiatives, or some other part of the system. It is a shared dynamic. It breeds contempt and creates incompetence with exercising power. Not knowing what else to do, we end up in an unproductive competition for victimhood.

## CHERYL'S STORY

Cheryl's story raises awareness of the limitations and liberations of cultural identity in an Australian context. While cultural identity is enormously empowering for many Indigenous people, it is complex and multi-faceted. During the project Cheryl experimented with holding her diverse identity in different ways and assessing what parts of her identity influenced, drove and pre-determined her assumptions, desires and motivations.

*It goes without saying that Headland and Lost Conversations coincided with, and contributed towards, an important and unforgettable period in my life. A period where a series of unique opportunities gave me the time and space to have the very conversations (most of us wouldn't normally dare to have) with a group of like-minded friends, peers and even complete strangers.*

*While I generally consider that the topic of black and white identity within the Australian context receives far too much air time, the notions and drivers of identity have always intrigued me—especially as someone who never quite fit 'the mould'.*

*Growing up in South East Queensland in the 1980s thrust me towards my first ever 'identity crisis' at a far younger age than I would have ever liked or expected. As any young child would, I wore my heart and soul on my sleeve to deliver my first Year 5 presentation on Aboriginal Australia to classmates and teachers, sharing stories of my ancestors, my people and my mob. After countless nights of researching, writing and developing my presentation (well before computers, printers, the Internet and PowerPoint!), the rousing applause and admiration I quietly hoped for was*

*replaced with instantaneous and unrelenting racist bullying and abuse that lasted weeks, months and even years.*

*In that single event, and many others throughout my life, I learned that being black in Queensland, let alone Australia, was something I should be ashamed of. Regardless that I looked and lived just like every other Australian, I had somehow become too black to be white and even worse still, too white to be black.*

*While it is undeniable that identity and the complexities of individual identities (i.e. gender, sex, race, class, social, cultural and spiritual to name a few) are invaluable in helping us to achieve a sense of belonging and knowing where we fit in the world, the inherent assumptions, boundaries and barriers that lay within identities are far less exposed or explored. In fact, after years of internalising the agony and angst of my genetic culture-clash, it wasn't until my late 20s that I stopped trying to equalise the many parts of my identity. I started to beg the question of the power and purpose of those who tried to check, weigh, balance and measure their own expectations of identity against mine or others.*

*Lost Conversations not only created an environment where I could test my thoughts on identity with other black and white Australians, it equally enabled me to learn how to hold each and every facet of my identity in such a way that I could embrace the tough conversations that challenge the depth and breadth of assumptions we make of ourselves and of others—usually quite unconsciously.*

*In the intercultural work space I am able to experiment with openly sharing what motivates me and encourage others to explore their personal, professional and institutional drivers. Why are we meeting? What are we trying to achieve? What is likely to happen as a result of our policy,*

*position and perspective? What will be the outcome, impact and effect? While it may sound obvious, I have noticed how rarely these purpose-driven conversations actually happen and this is what I now bring to my work and role. I have the power and capacity to facilitate these kinds of complex, awkward and difficult conversations with others because I am no longer afraid of avoiding them myself.*

# 4

## RECOGNISING WHEN POWER IS OUT OF BEAT

Good use of power can fuel positive change. Yet the fear and trepidation of using power can skew even the best intent and behaviour. In writing *Lost Conversations* we observed, time and time again, that distorted behaviours were happening among us as a group. You may be familiar with these behaviours. They are a microcosm of the rhythm, dance and choreography that persists in many inter-cultural collaborations across Australia. We call these the symptoms of being incongruent with our power.

**in•con•gru•ent** (/in kəNGgro o nt/) adjective:  
out of keeping, out of place, absurd.

### SYMPTOM 1: OTHERS ARE DENIED THEIR POWER

What happens when a black or white Australian decides to use their power in inter-cultural work? Usually, an advanced version of the tall poppy syndrome: someone sticks their head up and gets it chopped off. The act of owning power is generally unappreciated and generates a reaction both individually and

collectively. Attempts to own and use power reflect poorly on the rest of us who secretly or openly abandon, or neglect, the power that we have. In response, we bring the culprit back down to size and back into line with the status quo.

Many change agents in inter-cultural work talk about how quickly they stumble when they come up against previously unseen criteria of their authority and legitimacy to lead. Both cultures are scrutinised along different, but parallel lines. For example, black leaders know they will be interrogated and penalised depending on where they come from (i.e. being from the city is not so good, remote is best and Northern or Central Australia holds more cultural authenticity than the south).

For many this critique is powerful. It can eventually become internalised and can then become even louder than the external attacks. It can grow into a voice inside our head that says 'sit down and shut-up' or 'are you black enough'?

*I call it the black measure... it doesn't matter how many blacks you meet, or who you meet, the first thing they do is pull out the black measure to see just how black you are. Do you walk, talk and act black? Do you know your culture, where you're from and any lore/language?*

White change agents can also be heavily scrutinised. What credentials do you have to enter this field? What is your claim to authority and authenticity? Who do you know and who are you aligned to?

*We (as a white organisation) get pretty quickly challenged, mostly by other whites. 'What do you know about this topic? Your organisation is mainstream.' Or 'what makes you think you're an expert on Indigenous work? We've been doing this for years.'*

Curiously and tellingly, some of the authorisation that happened among us as group members, ended up with some of the white members being anointed as 'part-black'. While half in jest this was a vital clue to how difficult some of the measures are and how there will always be some measure against which we all don't stack up.

It is impossible to be fully culturally competent in every context. This is particularly the case when the measurement criteria we are all using comes from our history to dispossess, de-authorise and exclude, rather than to engage, authorise and include. This can quickly lead to what our group jokingly called the rise of the black and white 'mafias'. The mafias determine the chosen few who make it in (those worthy of being authorised), and who gets denied access. The mafias maintain the perception that power is select and limited and must thereby be kept within a tight circle.

When we're unsure of our power, we don't like coming up against others who seem to be more certain of their own power. We try to drag them down rather than support them. Or, if they pass enough of our criteria, we 'make them' one of ours—meaning that they are now on the inside with us.

An unintended consequence of the mafia is that it ends up with almost everyone being de-authorised as it works from a deficit mentality of power. Instead of developing more transparent, collaborative and collective power and leadership, we are left to fight over the scraps. We lose the opportunity to embrace newcomers, new ideas and new solutions.



### **The Mafia**

One of the theories about the etymology of the word mafia is that it comes from the Arabic slang word 'marfud' which means rejected. Similar to the origins of the Sicilian mafia, there is a need to seek protection and security from other sources when authority is not working well in a system. The mafia protects and helps the insiders (who are really outsiders to the dominant system and status quo).

## LIZ'S STORY

Liz's story teaches us a lot about the value of self-care, holding authority and how we can show we care by being detached at times. It also highlights that, thanks to our cultural lens, we will inevitably be blind at times. This means we need to both hold our power and be open to being wrong.

*The first thing that jumps out from my learning during this project, working across cultures, is the importance of knowing what I am bringing in with me and acknowledging my own resources. That meant recognising my authority, rank and power. I quickly realised that I could not work as I usually did. Holding my authority was difficult but when I stepped into my authority, rank and power there was a palpable sense of relief for everyone involved.*

*Developing and modelling leadership in inter-cultural work requires seemingly contradictory functions. While I'm required to hold my role and authority, simultaneously I'm required to acknowledge that my cultural lens limits my awareness. My fear is that the more publicly I acknowledge this the more vulnerable I am and more likely I am potentially targeted. Eventually my fear has dissipated as I became more secure in knowing my limitations and knowing that I can hold my role despite my fears.*

*While working with an inter-cultural group in Central Australia recently, there was a lot of heat, tears and conflict between an Indigenous woman and a white man. It was difficult, but when I facilitated the group to be able to allow that the conflict to occur it was transformative. People were able to own their own power and reach a new place of understanding. Here I needed to both recognise my own limits and own my power. That was hard. Nothing can happen in these transactions if I abdicate my role.*

*Interestingly, being in a role of authority has triggered an accusation that there are so many other white facilitators who can better do this work, who are more culturally competent. I realised that this 'cutting down' wasn't just happening to Indigenous leaders but also to white leaders working in the Indigenous field – and in particular came from my white colleagues and crew. The experience gave me a good deal of compassion for what happens to black leaders and allowed me to use it as a case in point: 'hey look at me I don't know everything, I will get it wrong at times and that's the reality of what you have to work with—so now what are we going to do?'*

*Developing and modelling leadership requires me to be cognisant of my purpose, to maintain clarity regarding my role and its inherent boundaries. Previously I threw myself into the fray perhaps with too much openness and often found myself taking blame for way more than belonged to me. I then realised that this is not helpful to me or the group because it is too easy for them, often letting others off the hook. I can see why I am being targeted and that helps me not fall into the victim role. Sometimes I have to draw a line in the sand about what works for the group and what works for me. These days it has to work for me as well as others, and looking after myself means I can look after others. I am required to own my part and facilitate others to similarly own theirs.*

*The theme of authenticity comes to mind here. My authenticity is important. The work has required me to bring forward more of who I am rather than who I think I should be. I am softer, lighter and bringing in my humour into more of my work these days. I speak more personally in my work, more than I would have ever done a few years back and I share stuff about the adaptive challenges of my life as a way of modelling the realities of leadership.*

## SYMPTOM 2: THE FANTASY LEADER

Another common symptom of power being out of beat in the inter-cultural workspace, is that when someone does manage to jump through enough hoops to be 'made' they can find themselves becoming 'anointed'. This can lead to a rapid and sometimes confounding rise (which is inevitably followed by an eventual fall). Inter-cultural work has no official organisational chart. Without one it is tempting to have someone to go to who can represent all of Indigenous Australia, or help whites navigate the Indigenous world. We call this the fantasy leader.

Mainstream organisations (corporates, government and community organisations) routinely try to navigate and pre-empt the inevitable uncertainty of inter-cultural work by finding and authorising one person to speak on behalf of black Australia. Typically a sole Indigenous person becomes a member of an all-too-often entirely white group. They become under considerable pressure to 'handle' all Indigenous matters. Watch how everyone turns to, checks in with, and seeks advice from the chosen one. 'What do you think about this issue?' The pressure is immense—and so is the fantasy.

***During the Headland experience the role of 'captain' was created as a tool to provide more effective engagement between the black participants and the white facilitators. It was decided that I should occupy the role. In hindsight, the captain role was a clear example of the fantasy leader at play. It was a collective collusion that took us towards an inevitable failure in working well together.***

There are many examples from around Australia of Indigenous leaders who get loaded up with everyone's expectations. Simultaneously, revered and reviled they become an easy lightning rod for both hope and despair in Indigenous affairs. It is a heavy weight to carry so many hopes, fears and disillusiones. Needless to say, it makes it difficult to separate the role and the person, especially when they themselves also become hypnotised by the fantasy. Systems 'dream up' leaders who are expected to single-handedly turn the dysfunctional system around. This makes it impossible to admit mistakes, and maintain any freedom.

The fantasy leader plays an important role when power is hard to own. Fantasy leaders take on all the power and responsibility that all the other parties involved do not want to own. This is initially relieving for everyone else. It is also seductive for the person who is being elevated. And it doesn't just happen to Indigenous leaders. White leaders also get seduced into fantasy roles. Australian political and community life is littered with white leaders who have been seduced into roles of 'fixing Indigenous issues', with little legacy.

Eventually the fantasy is always eventually revealed for what it is—an illusion. No single person can carry such weight forever. This type of pressure is not mentally, physically, socially or emotionally sustainable in the long-term. Nor is it healthy for the rest of the system to abdicate itself of any role or responsibility.

*From my point of view I'd say that the communities that have been the most successful have been small, one extended family or a group of extended families very closely related, and they've been run by benign dictators. And when the benign dictator dies, things fall apart. That's what I'd say. So there are plenty of communities that have gone through exceptionally good periods when things worked really well, but so much of that depends on the personalities involved.*



*When the personalities aren't there, they tend to collapse, so they go through cycles.*

*David Price*<sup>9</sup>

When one person gets anointed it can soon become a punishment. This is often called 'performance punishment'—that is, 'you did that well, so here's something else to do'. The temptation to create fantasy leaders is ever present and real, as is the temptation for black and also white leaders in the Australian inter-cultural workspace to aspire to and become fantasy leaders ourselves.

The rise of the fantasy leader continues at a time when there is a palpable concern about a lack of effective black and white leadership in the Indigenous space. This signals that leadership requires a new definition and the historic system of leadership anointment requires a new approach. How can leadership and power be woken, supported and embraced in more than the select few?



9. Bullock, C., 'Bess Price: Welcome to My World', interview with Bess Nungarrayi Price and David Price for Background Briefing, 1 May 2011. ABC Radio National at [www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/backgroundbriefing/bess-price-welcome-to-my-world/2949706#transcript](http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/backgroundbriefing/bess-price-welcome-to-my-world/2949706#transcript)

## MARK'S STORY

Mark's story highlights the importance of being aware that we need to play different roles and to choose which one best suits relevant situations and needs – even if that may not be what everyone says they want from you. We learnt from Mark the importance of being congruent, humble and authentic to who we are.

*During this project I have had to navigate my way through high power and low moments where I have had to be either a lot more or a lot less powerful. I have needed to move across different roles and positions of authority. Paradoxically, this requires owning my power instead of acting powerless. I have learnt different ways to lead in complex situations, especially when peers may want to keep me in the status quo of a particular role rather than see me step up or conversely step back. I have had to practise moving fluidly through these positions as they change from day to day, even moment to moment.*

*The idea that I should do something about every Indigenous Australian injustice has been with me for 20 years. I now have the focus to choose to come in when needed. I may choose to step back or to step forward. It depends on the context. It's about how I can be most effective. I am still learning to explain that as I go, and to communicate more about what I am doing and why.*

*A lot of my work uses sport as a medium for change. I support young people who are not good at school to be good footballers. Or I support those young ones who are good academically but feel bad because they are not good at sport. There is a lot of competition about who can run the fastest, jump the highest and it's important for the young*

ones to appreciate diversity and difference.

*I sit in a strange position because of my rank: spiritually, academically and physically (because I am not a small person). I can see how important it is to understand and use my power well in this work. I can offer a different sort of masculinity and male role model. My rank benefits the young ones so they can test, try, reflect on how they went and learn. That they can start to understand the different roles we need to hold and how to think about them in a new way.*

*It is not just leadership theory that suggests I stay flexible in my role/s. My spiritual values tell me it is good for me. I am there for the football and for the motivational talks. I am also there for the conversations about spirit and identity—and each of these things requires a heightened self-awareness. One minute I am ‘uncle’ because of the grey in my hair and the next minute I am the water boy. I have become aware that through a certain process, be it age, power, authority or rank, everyone now wants a piece of me. I am still learning to choose what will be the most useful thing to do and role to play. My people know what needs to happen and they are ready for change.*

### SYMPTOM 3: THE ‘CULTURE CARD’

There are many ways to resist change and they are usually outside of our awareness. Complaining, nit-picking, avoidance and denial are all signs of resistance—so too are open threats, challenges and distractions. Human beings don't resist change for the sake of it. We resist change for fear of the loss associated with the cost and consequence of change.

Some forms of resistance are harder and more sensitive to reveal than others. The use of racial cultural norms to resist change is similar to how ‘culture’ can also be used as a means of resistance, for example in the workplace. In a job we might be told ‘that’s just how we do things here’. But while some workplace cultures can be powerful, they are not as powerful as culture that’s associated with race and spirituality. You can choose to leave an organisation, but even if they could, people rarely choose to leave their racial and spiritual identity.

In inter-cultural work, conflict and difficulty is usually not culturally appropriate or safe. As a result, conflict moves to the sidelines. More often than not, white Australia also moves to the sidelines to observe the tensions of black Australia and hopes for a single, united and harmonious resolve: ‘if only they could all get along and tell us what they want!’ Simultaneously white Australia projects its discomfort with the conflict and its need and aspirations onto the margins—‘you black fellas’. This is how the mainstream defends itself in cultural settings—black change agents often complain of having to ‘go softly’ or to be careful of generating more heat than white systems can handle for fear of being seen as ‘too passionate’, ‘out of control’, ‘too sensitive’, and ‘too difficult to engage’.

Similarly, black systems also find ways of using culture to defend themselves against the use of power. White change

agents often find themselves being called ‘culturally inappropriate’, ineffective and as having no authority in a black space. Those that are warned and challenged generally do not enquire as to why or how something is culturally inappropriate for fear of being politically incorrect, offensive, or looking incompetent.

***Once when I built up the courage to ask how I was being inappropriate I couldn't get an answer—but I could see that people were starting to get uncomfortable. It took me a few experiences to see that the accusation of being culturally inappropriate was often a good way of getting outsiders to back off and/or to collude in resisting change. So instead of backing off (which is what I wanted to do) I had to lean in and enquire. Although hard, it was extremely rewarding. All of a sudden we started talking about what was really happening. And we started to really work with other—respecting each other's needs.***

Let's face it: black and white cultures don't really understand each other very well, so making an accusation of ‘cultural inappropriateness’ is an easy blow to land. As a result it's a great way to challenge formal power—white or black. Treating an accusation of cultural inappropriateness as a power issue rather than a

culture issue allows us to begin the real work of negotiating and navigating power. The opportunity is to use it as a cue to gently enquire—to understand the other more deeply and to begin to own and share both the formal and informal power.

#### **SYMPTOM 4: THE KILLER CRITIC**

The critic represents a more overt form of resistance. Real or imagined, it is felt acutely by both black and white leaders. The critic has many voices and is steeped in history: ‘this will never work’, ‘the system is hopeless’, ‘you don't know what you are doing’, ‘you don't represent us’, ‘we tried that before and it didn't work’ and ‘what do you know anyway?’

These sorts of criticisms typically stop us in our tracks especially when they continue to play out inside our heads. They can also be compounded by negative internal feelings that may stem from the memory of critical authoritative figures, or experiences of institutional racism, from our past. This all creates a potent blend of negativity and the feeling of being silenced.

When the critical voice gains power it can quickly shut things down, even when that was not the intended outcome. In intercultural work, this critical voice plagues us, especially when we are attempting difficult work. It holds us back. It's the ultimate authority that says we will be worthless and vulnerable to attack if we put ourselves out there.

However, we should not dismiss the critical voice too quickly as it can also be a potential ally who may have valuable information for our own improvement and can even help to move things forward. If we can take the critical information, search for opportunities to respond, and refine our own response, the critical voice can work to our collective benefit.



To work well together we need to train the critic (internal or external) to deliver their information without annihilating us. Ignoring, blocking it out or pacifying it may work temporarily but the critic inevitably returns. Ultimately the killer critic fears change (as many of us do). Its role is to undermine aspiration and return everyone to business as usual. If we turn it around, and make it an ally, it can aid progress and reveal glimpses of aspiration. This comes back to having awareness of using our formal and non-formal power to acknowledge and embrace the familiar roles we play. And having the courage and skill to continue the move forward, taking with us the wisdom that the critic may have handed us. We can't escape critics, but we can make them useful.

## KIM'S STORY

In Kim's story we find a key to changing practice in inter-cultural settings—the importance of not assuming that the other has all the power, or that conflict will irreparably destroy our relationships. Conflict is an opportunity to create new options and a deeper more 'real' and tested relationship. Kim learned that it is possible to hold conflict when we have a higher purpose. With that purpose in mind we are better able to own our own power to use conflict well.

*I learnt many things through working on Lost Conversations. A big learning came from my experience of conflict.*

*In one incident conflict (around a difference of opinion about what to do with the Lost Conversations project) escalated so quickly I didn't know what was happening. I felt very strongly about not moving from my position and my colleague felt the same about hers. This was new territory for me. I don't usually engage with conflict so openly. I usually hold it inside or become complicit (in the moment) to avoid conflict. Sometimes it means walking away from the situation, place or person. With the conflict in question I could neither walk away nor resolve it. But it did not end the conversation and that is really important to me. I found we continued to work on the matter because we were both committed to a bigger purpose. We shared a sense of healing Indigenous wounds and opening the door to a new national identity. This purpose is bigger than any of us as individuals no matter what conflicts might emerge.*

*I was fearful about that particular conflict because I did not want to lose the relationship we'd built or threaten the project itself. I realised that we had made significant*

*intellectual and emotional investments throughout our journey of working together and this in itself was too valuable to lose.*

*When the conflict occurred I saw that we'd not made enough of an effort to examine our different assumptions—particularly about differences of power between us as black Australians. If I am unconsciously ascribing power to the other it means in my head that I have none. So I feel I can't do anything. I began to see that it is not so much about the other person. It is about my perception of them and this tendency to ascribe more or all of my power to them. I can now see how this holds me back and that on this occasion I held my position because it was important to me. It was really hard to do but I have learnt so much from doing so. And of course, I survived. I did not lose my personal or professional relationship, we didn't destroy each other or the project and it is now easier for me to hold a powerful position in other areas of my work.*

*I also learnt that in working with the same people over time we are likely to get stuck in our respective roles. We need to more regularly re-evaluate our assumptions and the role we sit in—this is the key feature of productive leadership. It relies upon role fluidity—or we get stuck in the same old predictable scripts. It relies on reassessing what we need to give and take or we end up in unproductive conflict with no way forward.*

*I am now integrating this understanding of role and power into my personal practice. I recently had the opportunity to apply this approach again in a very real way. There are times when I have to step up into certain leadership roles within family or community settings. I have been doing that for a while, but I was not aware why it had been so uncomfortable to pick up the mantle and visibly*

*take up the leadership role. I now realise it was because I was unconsciously fearing being cut down (the killer critic). I now have a deeper appreciation of the risks of not stepping up, when we have the capacity to do so.*



## THE LONG-TERM IMPACT OF NOT WORKING WELL WITH POWER

*The river is the river and the sea is the sea. Saltwater and fresh, two separate domains. Each has its own complex patterns, origins, stories. Even though they come together they will always exist in their own right. My hopes for reconciliation are like that.*

*Patrick Dodson<sup>10</sup>*

Denying others their power, building up fantasy leaders to solve all our problems and misusing the culture card are symptomatic of not using power well, or not knowing how to share it within or across culture. While this has an immediate impact of stifling, discouraging or taking out agents of change, it also has a longer term systemic impact.

When we are afraid of our power and defer it to others or get sucked into taking on other people's power, it is easy to turn into a caricature. We create crusaders who have to carry the message and work on behalf of all of us. This positions the majority of Australia in another caricature of being helpless victims and passengers.

---

10. Dodson, P., Op.Cit

Many white Australians with good intentions are characterised by not knowing what to do. Their incompetence is immobilising, particularly as the mainstream system generally is familiar and beneficial to them. Many black Australians disconnect from their power and potential in favour of maintaining the status quo. This is often expressed as resistance to dominant systems, anger and helplessness.

This scenario is familiar, predictable and unproductive: white Australia exercises its entitlement to say, 'well I really would like to help but don't know how' and black Australia says, 'the system is racially prejudiced and we will always be oppressed by it'. This means we don't have to do the most frightening thing of all: to see and use our respective power to achieve productive conflict—the basis of innovation.

Caricatures are, by their nature, polarised. They are dramatisations of our best and worst selves. There is nothing wrong with difference. Indeed, we would argue that Australia has a tremendous opportunity to be innovative because of our internal differences. The challenge with polarities is when we as individuals get stuck in our respective corners. Conflict and disagreement is not used to create something new—it is used to create stronger walls.

In Australia we see polarised attitudes to 'the other'. Most notably from the white side, it seems easier to either feel sorry for black Australia or to completely dismiss them according to a negative social stereotype. Placing black Australia into a caricature is easier than having to deal with their complexity and to accept the consequences of past actions.

Similarly, it is difficult for black Australia to sympathise with white Australia's ignorance and incompetence, particularly when that ignorance and incompetence exists within a dominant racially based power system. Caricatures maintain our assimilationist past.

Fear of power and difference creates predictable caricatures. We end up taking sides and get stuck in roles that try to assimilate

the minority into a dominant construct or view. Instead of dealing with conflict we try to colonise the other with our beliefs, ideals and values. Changing the dance and the caricatures of our past means owning our powerlessness and being vulnerable to working in more authentic ways with each other outside of the status quo.

Changing the dance means adding love to a new appreciation of the value and use of power. It is what keeps power purposeful and ethical. What if we were to approach every interaction across culture with a feeling of love, compassion and appreciation, rather than fear, obligation or distrust?

## LIBBY'S STORY

Libby's story teaches us about the place of vulnerability in inter-cultural work, particularly on the white side of the equation. It shows how hard it is to be both vulnerable and still acknowledge our part in the problem. Doing this requires a shift from 'rescuer' or 'sympathiser' to 'collaborator' and 'partner'. It means combining power and vulnerability that can be troubling for whites working in the inter-cultural space as we have to move out of the paternalistic moral high-ground of feeling sorry for the other, to a less stable position of uncertainty and conflict.

*I came into this project as an adviser—a white expert thrust upon the group with little warning or notice. The Indigenous members knew nothing about me and as I sat there on the first morning 'thanking' them for inviting me to be a part of Lost Conversations, I soon realised there had been no such invitation.*

*On the second morning, a group member told the following story about attending a community meeting with her mother and aunties about their stolen wages:*

I went to a meeting recently with my mum about stolen wages. There was yet another non-Indigenous researcher in the room and the information hadn't been shared properly about his purpose and who he was. He just walked into the room and started asking about a sensitive topic. We inhaled deeply. You can't just walk in and say 'Hi, I'm John Smith, let's talk about your post-traumatic stress.' The saddest thing for me is that I saw the tiredness in the old people's eyes.

*The parallels between my position in the room and the culturally incompetent white researcher were not wasted on me. Here I was, the well-intentioned, educated white professional who had walked in, hiding behind a job title, expecting Aboriginal people to give me all the information I needed to do my job.*

*I became emotional and blurted out that I was sorry for expecting the Indigenous people in the room to include me in their project. There had been no introduction or discussion about it and they all sat respectfully nodding at my own admissions.*

*On the other hand, the white people in the room (one of whom was my employer) reacted in a completely different way. One looked really annoyed and said nothing, the other mumbled a few words alluding to her own incompetence and I very much felt like I had done the wrong thing. For weeks after I felt anger at my white peers for their lack of support, but also felt that I had acted unprofessionally and that I probably deserved it.*

*Months later that day was revisited by the group. It was acknowledged that the white people in the room had abandoned each other on the assumption that the Indigenous members of the group didn't need or want to see white people being vulnerable or incompetent:*

We take conflict out of the room all the time. We wanted Libby to take it out of the room last time—it's boring and inappropriate to watch white people not handle what's happening in the moment. But I acknowledge, that's actually part of everyone's journey. White Australians can't deal with conflict. Indigenous people come in and argue but that's

unsafe for us—we are polite or we do it in the corridors. We don't argue directly with each other. It's a very English, reserved type of approach. Think about the work places we go into. It's not okay to argue.

*Another said:*

Yes, we hide behind roles as white people so as to feel more comfortable. I did that to you Libby. We left you out on a rock. What you did felt self-indulgent. I've been really conscious about sitting here [talking about it] and the sense that we don't have the right to do that.

*I think something shifted within the group dynamic that possibly may never have been revealed if the white members of the group had done what our instincts told us to do—either talk about this in private or not at all. One of the Indigenous group members said:*

I don't mean to minimise your pain, but this is the work to me—white people dealing with it (conflict) more openly.

*Another Indigenous group member said:*

You guys have always had this sense of control and power, rank and authority. This interaction is interesting because it's the most authentic you have ever been. It shows me I can work with you because you're real people: your stories, when you felt powerless, when you know you have no authority. When you're impervious to that stuff, there's a sense



of inequity—that it's overly focused on us. This is about your part of the mess —not just you feeling sorry for us or on our behalf. I want to acknowledge that it's brave that you now know you are part of the problem and that is a much better basis from which to have the conversation.

*My experience has made me realise that in the black and white workspace we needn't have to comfort each other for feeling bad on another's behalf. And instead of retreating when emotions get high and the conversations get tough, we can make great gains when we work through that and stay.*

## 6 TURNING 'LOST' CONVERSATIONS INTO 'NEW' CONVERSATIONS

*I can't help but think about the real life examples where we have worked across difference. Our elders were successfully able to walk in two worlds. I think about this as a way to encourage working on this. For example, my Grandfather was born and raised on a church mission where he was not allowed to practice culture. But his family ensured he maintained his connection to culture and he was initiated on the quiet. He was highly competent at navigating the white system to his and his community's advantage and did so in a formal leadership role, whilst staying true to his responsibilities as a traditional knowledge-holder. In powerfully though tactfully challenging white power, he modelled leadership in a difficult era. Such strong and dignified role models inspire me to want to skill-up and find solutions 'across the divide'.*

What is required to take action in a different way? That is, to practise leadership and use our power across cultures differently? Of course there is no step-by-step guide to improving inter-cultural practice. Black and white cultures are not homogenous; contexts are not the same. Every one of us is individually different with unique skills, areas of development and blind spots. We all face different challenges.

*Lost Conversations* is intended to ignite your willingness to explore and promote new ways of working together across culture. The insights we have shared through our personal stories offer some examples of how we have navigated our way through different situations, but we also encourage you to explore your own ways of working together across culture. In conclusion, we leave you some ideas to consider when starting your own dialogues about how things might be done or said differently.

## RECOGNISE WHAT IT TAKES TO WORK TOGETHER AUTHENTICALLY

Australia's shared history is dominated by white Australia 'doing to' and 'doing for' black Australia. It's time to acknowledge that we both have the skills, competence and courage to 'do things with' each other, without wearing each other down. But 'doing with' is more than just awareness, understanding or tolerance of each other—it's a deeper shared awareness and practice that requires all of us to:

- **See the interconnectivity between power and love**  
Using power well also means being open to love and genuinely wanting others to succeed where we personally might have failed. It helps us keep our eyes on the greater

good and understand the connection between what we do as individuals and as communities, and the creation of a national identity that we can honestly feel good about.

- **Own and accept our formal and informal power**  
Individually we need to recognise what we bring—including a willingness to help each other, own our respective rank, instead of colluding in powerlessness. We need to more effectively utilise different mixes of formal and informal power—individually, culturally and collectively.
- **See the power in the other**  
White people's social and positional power, like black people's cultural, psychological and spiritual power, are gifts to collaborative work—rather than threats. It requires generosity to let go of certainty. We need to be open to new notions of identity and to talk about the resistance to sharing power that may come up for fear of change and loss.
- **Find new roles**  
We need to find and navigate new roles other than victim, saviour, perpetrator and protector. There are more useful roles in the challenge for change (the learner, the teacher, the elder and the facilitator, for example) which encourage the power of growth in others. Being a bit more fluid helps us be more responsive to the changing environments in which we work and breaks patterns of predictability that are flawed and unworkable.
- **Understand that it is possible to hold power and powerlessness together**  
We are all vulnerable in different contexts and this can be a strength. Vulnerability can be an asset and an innovator of

change. The reality is that to some extent we are all incompetent in inter-cultural work.

- **Accept that conflict is inevitable and necessary for growth**

To stick at the work through periods of change and uncertainty we need to be clear on our purpose and appreciate our respective power and powerlessness. By building on our tolerance for conflict we have more options in how we negotiate and manage it when it inevitably arises.

- **Look after ourselves and each other**

It is tempting to try to be everything to everyone. Working in inter-cultural work can be a draining and debilitating experience for black and white change agents. We need to lead, to be led and to grow our resilience together.

- **Value our cultures and histories**

Valuing both our own and other cultures is healthy. It helps us recognise each other's power and potential. When we embrace the depth and diversity of black and white Australia we realise our full potential for change.

- **Realise that tensions will always be there**

Tapping into personal power to work across historical, cultural and socio-political divides will always be complex. There will inevitably be ongoing tensions and challenges, for example where traditional cultural values may stop you from trying new roles or define set relationships, or where past or recent trauma impacts on an individual's capacity to be vulnerable. These moments require respect and acceptance that there will always be difficult moments ahead, but that we can learn from the ones we've already faced.

- **We do have the power to change**

All of these suggestions require a new relationship to power, connecting it with love and finding a new way of acknowledging it in each other and new measures that may not have been tried and tested before. It means using power more consciously, instead of denying it or avoiding it in both ourselves and others. If we deny that we have the power to change we will simply maintain the status quo and secure our role as victims when that inevitable shift in the relationship between black and white Australians arrives.

We believe that *Lost Conversations* is a start.

## JOHN'S STORY

John's story shows that seeing the bigger picture brings resilience. He makes the connection between a deeper understanding of context and its impact on our resilience. Many times in difficult work we can get stuck in our view or faction—and that happened to us as a group too. By getting out of our narrow view, off the dance floor and onto the 'balcony' we can see when and where we can utilise ourselves and not take things so personally. It is inspiring for others to see that one can lead in a resilient way and in a different role—not as an advocate, defender or protestor, but as a facilitator of change.

*Through this inter-cultural process as learners, collaborators and writers I have learned to listen to everyone's views a little differently. I now see how important it is to understand context and how much context carries history and perspective. There are reasons behind our different views which I wasn't seeing before and this has improved my resilience—I can see it's not just about me—there are bigger forces at play and I don't take it so personally.*

*Systemic progress relies on understanding what is happening on all fronts, especially psychologically. Power tends to corrupt and I can see many corrupt parts of dominant systems. I try not to get caught up in it whilst at the same time keeping the system accountable. This of course, can be risky. Systems are inherently structured in such a way that if you try and keep them accountable, systemic forces clamp down on you in an effort to reinforce and maintain the status quo.*

*It is in my character to hang in there and I have been further encouraged by the resilience of others. I am grateful*

*for this because we (as a group) have challenged each other. Resilience is important for families, for one's self and one's work. Increasing my resilience has helped me to operate a lot better wherever I encounter conflict. Learning about leadership has been about learning to weather 'getting attacked'. Many people stay away because of this fear. The fear of attack is almost as bad as when it actually happens and I now have a better understanding of why people resort to attack.*

*My resilience has allowed me to hang in there, to see hope and many more points of leverage.*

*What I have started to do differently is to simultaneously hold multiple things: perspectives, allies and actions or projects. I am better at managing time and holding the space more consciously. While there is still so much more to do, I am finding value and meaning in balancing my own needs while being true to my purpose and facilitating others to succeed.*



*People attempt love as climbers attempt Everest; they scramble along, and end by camping in the foothills, or half-way up, wherever their compromises leave them. Some get high enough to see the view, which we know is magnificent, for we have all glimpsed it in our dreams.*

A.C.Grayling<sup>11</sup>

—  
**THE END**

## FROM THE AUTHORS

*Lost Conversations* aims to ignite the energy that's needed to enact change for a better Australia and build a dialogue between black and white Australians on how to work together.

This book is available free of charge in PDF format from [www.lostconversations.org.au](http://www.lostconversations.org.au). We encourage you to read it, share it, talk about it and maybe even argue about it. Join our conversation or start your own.

We hope *Lost Conversations* will shift us all forward, prompt awareness, reconnect our dreams and move us into action. If you'd like to talk to us, email [lostconversations@gmail.com](mailto:lostconversations@gmail.com).

---

11. Grayling, A.C., *The Meaning of Things: Applying Philosophy to Life*. Weidenfeld & Nicholson, London, 2001.



## **Geoff Aigner**

Geoff Aigner is an author, educator, consultant and Director of Social Leadership Australia at The Benevolent Society. He is a second generation Australian whose family immigrated from Germany and Egypt. Geoff's first book, *Leadership Beyond Good Intentions: what it takes to really make a difference*, was published by Allen & Unwin in 2011. His second book, *The Australian Leadership Paradox: what it takes to lead in the lucky country*, co-authored with Liz Skelton, was also published by Allen & Unwin in 2013. As Director of Social Leadership Australia, Geoff is responsible for providing strategic direction for the centre in its mission to create better leadership for a better Australia.



## **Cheryl Godwell**

A direct descendant of the Kokoberra people in far north Queensland, Cheryl is an Aboriginal woman born in Mount Isa, Queensland. Graduating from the Queensland University of Technology with a Bachelor of Social Science (majoring in Human Services), Cheryl relocated to Canberra in the late 1990s where she spent over 13 years working for the Commonwealth Government. As a manager of Indigenous and non-Indigenous policies, programs and initiatives, Cheryl continues to pursue her interests in social policy and sustainable community development. She is Manager of Charles Darwin University's Away From Base (AFB) funding program targeting improved rural and remote Indigenous engagement in VET and Higher Education studies.



## **Jane Martin**

Dr Jane Martin is a facilitator, educator and consultant for Social Leadership Australia. Of Dutch and Irish descent, many of her ancestors were sent to Australia as convicts, deported for fighting poverty and political oppression. In this spirit Jane is passionate about working for social justice. This started with developing services for women and young people and more recently she has worked in services for survivors of mental ill-health. Jane is a graduate of Process Oriented Psychology. Founded by Dr Arnold Mindell this is a form of depth psychology dedicated to social justice through 'deep democracy' which she utilised in facilitating *Lost Conversations*.



## **Grant Paulson**

Grant Paulson is a Birri-Gubba/ Bundjalung man also of Scottish and Ni-Vanuatu heritage. A husband and father to four, he holds the role of Faith and Development Advisor at World Vision Australia. Grant was previously Group Manager at Reconciliation Australia where he advised leading organisations on implementing effective Reconciliation Action Plans in the workplace. He was a participant in Social Leadership Australia's *Headland* initiative and is currently working on a thesis on spirituality and social change.



## **John Rawnsley**

John Rawnsley is a Larrakia/Anmatjerre man who was born in Darwin. A solicitor with the North Australian Aboriginal Justice Agency in the Top End of the Northern Territory, he provides legal advice and casework for people involved with the correctional and juvenile justice systems. John is involved with the Larrakia Development Corporation and is on the board of the Aboriginal Areas Protection Authority, an independent statutory organisation established under the *Aboriginal Sacred Sites Act 1989* that is responsible for overseeing the protection of Aboriginal sacred sites on land and sea across the NT. John has extensive experience in government and as a parliamentary and ministerial advisor. In 2009, he was the deputy Mayor of Alice Springs.



## **Kim Robertson**

Kim is a proud descendant of the Thanakwithi, Waanyi and Wik peoples of Cape York in Far North Queensland, and has English ancestry through her father. Kim has dedicated over 20 years to Indigenous community development, largely within the public service (including regional management roles in Far North Queensland and the Kimberley region of Western Australia). In 2009, she moved to the higher education sector as Executive Policy Officer for the inaugural Office of Indigenous Leadership at Charles Darwin University where she assisted in the development of the Australian Centre for Indigenous Knowledges and Education. Kim holds a BA in Social Science (JCU) and an MA in Indigenous Social Policy (UTS). She continues to work in Indigenous higher education and is pursuing a passion for the visual arts and the role of culture in Indigenous leadership practice.





## **Liz Skelton**

Liz has been working for the past 20 years to create positive social change by leading social justice organisations in Australia and the UK. Liz is a social change and leadership practitioner, author, thought leader, consultant and teacher of systemic social change. Formerly Principal Consultant of Social Leadership Australia, Liz led extensive adaptive initiatives in the business, government and not-for-profit sectors on a range of complex issues including homelessness, Indigenous leadership and business/community engagement. Liz was born in England, but grew up in Scotland, and has travelled, lived and worked in many different countries before becoming an Australian citizen. She is co-author, with Geoff Aigner, of *The Australian Leadership Paradox: what it takes to lead in the lucky country* (Allen & Unwin, 2013) and was previously General Manager of Streetwize Communications developing initiatives with young people and Indigenous communities on social, legal and health issues in Australia.



## **Libby Varcoe**

Libby Varcoe is a freelance writer and editor. Her family immigrated to Australia in the mid-1800s from County Meath in Ireland and Cornwall in Britain. She was raised on the ancestral territory of the Eora people. Libby has worked with many government and corporate organisations. She worked for Streetwize Communications as a consultant scriptwriter and researcher working on social justice, health and legal projects targeting disadvantaged young people. In this role she travelled to Indigenous communities across NSW to consult with Aboriginal youth groups and community workers and worked creatively with Indigenous writers and artists. Libby holds a BA in Social Science majoring in journalism, and a Masters of Professional Writing, both from UTS.



## **Mark Yettica-Paulson**

Mark is an Indigenous man from the South East Queensland and North East NSW regions. He is the founder and director of The Yettica Group which specialises in facilitating Indigenous leadership and assisting groups to work better as Indigenous and other Australians. Mark has many years' experience in leadership management consulting, community education, leadership training, church and community organising and youth work. He held the role of CEO for the Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre and has helped many leading organisations develop Reconciliation Action Plans. In 2009 Mark was recognised by *The Australian* as being one of the top 100 emerging leaders in Australia. In 2011 he won 'Best Public Speaker in Australia' on the ABC's Strictly Speaking program.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

We would like to thank the following people who supported us in many ways before and during the writing of *Lost Conversations*: Bill and Heather Webster; Reconciliation Australia; National Congress of Australia First Peoples; Australian Indigenous Leadership Centre; Larissa Behrendt; Tanya Hosch; Danny Gilbert; Steve Hawkins; Tim Gartrell; Associate Professor Sarah Maddison; Dr Steven Larkin; Narelle Thomas and Lorraine Brown from the Coomaditchie United Aboriginal Corporation; those who travelled with us on the *Headland* journey; the staff at Social Leadership Australia and The Benevolent Society; and our partners, families and friends.

---

***“The authors show great courage ... I hope their courage enables other Australians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to believe in, aspire to, and demand a more honourable Australian future for all of us to share.”***

*Dr Chris Sarra*

---

***“[T]hose who are committed to achieving racial harmony in this country should regard Lost Conversations as a must-read.”***

*Professor Steven Larkin*

---

***“This is a book that avoids shortcuts and simplistic solutions. But it cracks apart many of our assumptions, upsets pessimism and reframes hard questions. I know Lost Conversations will inspire and guide new leaders now and in the years ahead.”***

*Tim Costello*

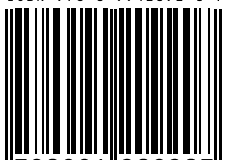
## **IT'S TIME FOR A GAME-CHANGER IN HOW BLACK AND WHITE AUSTRALIANS RELATE.**

The creators of this work are black and white Australians. We come from different parts of the country and represent diverse opinions and lived experiences. We are not representative of the whole black and white experience. However, we do have first-hand knowledge of what happens when black and white Australians come together to try to work on change.

The difficulties we have in coming together—to talk, to work, to lead change—are core to our challenge to reconcile, as a country. But if we want to shift the status quo, if we want to lead change on entrenched Indigenous disadvantage, we don't need another program, initiative or money to try and 'fix' the problem. We need to start having a different conversation.

[www.lostconversations.org.au](http://www.lostconversations.org.au)

ISBN 978-0-9942092-0-7



9 780994 209207 >