

CREATING HEALTHY COMMUNITIES: A CONVERSATION ABOUT AUSTRALIAN EXPERIENCES



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Editor's Note

Ed Brownfield and Allen Benson spent an afternoon sharing their experiences about working with Aboriginal people in Australia. Ed Brownfield is a native Australian, but not Aboriginal. His work with the Tiwis in the 1970s was in a context he had been familiar with all his life.

Allen Benson is a First Nations Albertan and the CEO of Native Counselling Services of Alberta. His work with Aboriginal Australians, in the 1990s, was in a political and geographic context he had never experienced before.

These two people were able to bridge the gaps of culture, language, and race to empower Australian Aboriginal people to change their lives. It is hoped that reading this conversation will empower other Aboriginal and Indigenous peoples to create their own changes in their political and geographic contexts.

They would both say that they received as much as they gave in the process. They were joined in their comments by Patti LaBoucane, Media Director at Native Counselling Services of Alberta.



EB Well, I believe it is time the community development people and the organization development people talked and shared together. After all we are all interested in whole, healthy communities (organizations).

AB I'm trying to put that in context with Native Counseling. I think that it applies because organizations tend to engage themselves in community development. Also, unhealthy organizations manipulate community development. A healthy organization will bring people along in its growth and it won't take on a superiority complex —like governments have.

EB: All organizations control. All business organizations control. That's the nexus of it: healthy organizations facilitate, dysfunctional organizations manipulate. The single most important shift in managing people in the last 30-40 years, is empowerment. The power is shifting from hierarchic, direct, and absolute control (like residential schools and so on), to the people most affected having control over the outcome of the processes. One of the lessons for me out of the work in Australia is who owns the issues. So the first step when you go into an organization, is the process: gather data, analyse, diagnose, present it to the client. If they don't *own* it, you're not going anywhere. You can't do anything unless they own the issues. If you then look at the reserve, with all the things that go on, the hardest thing a consultant/community development person does is to show the data to the community and then say, "This is you, where do you want to start?" If they don't own that, nothing's going to happen.

There's an ethical process for me [as a consultant], and then there's the dirty filthy rotten interpersonal underworld where because they got the money from the government, who wanted this outcome, therefore we must manipulate the outcome to that. I'm not talking about that.

I think that the community development issue came out of the social work field with a bit of human potential, or something. The work I do comes out of organization behaviour and organization design, those mixes.

AB: We're talking about Aboriginal people. Community development really came from the sharing of knowledge between medicine people, traditionally. Community development came from the process of sharing medicines, sharing knowledge and sharing as families, so that the

communities grew healthy and extended itself. That was true community development, because the very fundamentals of life, food, clothing, families, survival, all of that was an exchange of knowledge to help one community grow so the other community could succeed too. They needed each other. Tribes needed each other, groups needed each other. It's the same thing with Blackfoot and Cree. It wasn't always battles. There were negotiations that went on, there was trade. There were battles, but they needed each other for survival as well. The exchange of culture, ceremony, and medicine needed to happen in order to survive culturally and to maintain health. It's all about developing healthy communities.

EB: I had childhood contact with Aboriginal people and, fortunately, open experience to cross culture before I was too biased — if that can be true for any white man. What happened is an Aboriginal woman approached IBM and said, “We’ve got a number of communities, and we want the organization to assist, to pick a community and assist them.” And since devolution was going on then — this was the late 1970s — and the government was giving municipal authority to the bands, she helped us into a community. It happened to be the Tiwi, who live in northern Australia, and were a bit different as an Aboriginal group. They live on the islands and they had plenty of food. So they had a much more advanced artistic culture than, say, a desert Aboriginal group, where it really is communal survival. But they still had the communal norms of what’s mine is yours, etc. So we picked this community to help and the assumption was that they should have a course from somebody experienced on politics and government and running projects and all that sort of thing. And I said, “Well, just a minute. Before we rush into giving them the standard mini government course, why don’t we go up there and find out what they really need?” So I went up to the islands, which had been run for 120 years as a Catholic mission. And the mission did a pretty good job with that relative to how things went in those days. The single most important thing the mission had twigged to over the years was they closed down in the middle of the dry season, and they sent everybody out into the bush for 3 months. Which meant they kept the traditional medicine, they kept the eating, they kept the traditional food, they kept the Elders, they kept the processes they were used to, nothing was lost. The community came back

healthier after that period of time than they'd been at any other time during the year. Don't forget, tropical living is essentially unhealthy. You get scratched on coral, and it'll fester for months. There are all sorts of issues like beriberi and other nasty stuff, to say nothing of insects and crocodiles that steal the odd child every now and then.

So I went up and did the check. There were four clan groups. They had a new Aboriginal municipal council with four people from each clan. The education ranged from 0 to 5 years of elementary school. So the priest kindly introduced me along with the Aboriginal woman who started all this. So she came up with me first. One of my lessons is, no matter how much you think you know, even you, Allen, going into a community, you really need that guide or mentor or acceptable person to bring you in. In consulting terms, the entry piece is critical, because you can't be credible if you're not vouched for. And it's no good having a person from IBM vouch for you, it needs to be somebody recognized and accepted in the community. So I sat under the baobab tree each morning and the clan Elders rounded up the people. They came and talked to me and said, "What do you think we ought to do?" And I said, "No, no, no." That's something I learned very fast and still use in work with other Aboriginal groups: I won't tell them anything until we've sat, literally, on the floor and they tell me what they want and I tell them if I think I can. So that's lesson two. You can't go in with a preconceived agenda, which is where I think most governments have been wrong. That's the whole issue of what's happened in the past. That's the white man's burden and the whole process. At the end of the second day, the whole of the final clan came, and they said, "What are you going to tell us?" and I said "No, no, you tell me, and we'll see what develops." One woman leapt to her feet and said, "Okay, I'm your mother, these are your brothers and sisters." With the Tiwi, everything's relationship and you're literally not seen — remember that bit with Aborigines about if someone's had the bone pointed or whatever the words are, they become literally invisible to the community. They die because there's no relationship contact. You remember that about healthy living? You can't really be recognized unless you're a member somehow, and you've got uncles, etc. So then, of course, for the rest of the times I went up and down, I had uncles and aunts who'd tell me this and that.

I came back from there saying, “Look, here’s what they say are the issues they want to deal with.” Housing. Half of them were still living in a concrete square with a corrugated iron roof in it. And I think there was one house on the island which was owned by the MP for the area, but he was never there. And any housing that was built was built by the government, which meant a whole white crew came up at vast expense. Reminds me of the North in Canada. The white crew comes in at vast expense, those guys drink, all the different [diseases], and in the community there’s no work for anyone because they aren’t skilled enough. They build a house that isn’t useful because it’s got all the wrong fittings and it doesn’t match the lifestyle and it’s a waste of bloody money. And they sell the booze and they’re chasing the women and it’s just a bad scene. They wanted hunting party transportation and they wanted child care because we’d gone away from the culture of the older people looking after the children while the younger people went out hunting or gardening or whatever they do.

So I redesigned what we were going to do, and the main intervention then was with the municipal group, the team of 16. It focused around learning enough to help them deal with their own issues in the community. Really I was teaching them to be facilitators, designers, project planners, and take charge of the process. So we did that and we did it experientially. We did some of the stuff in their own language and I determined another lesson — no point in trying to learn the language if you’re going to fail at it. Too many of us know three words in French and then everybody starts talking back at you and you can’t respond. But strangely, when you get embedded in the situation, and I was on my own by then, you know what’s being discussed. Somehow, it’s clear. So I really taught them gathering information in the community, analyzing it, giving it back to the community, problem solving it and so on, helped by my having a family. And that was the “intervention” if you like.

During the follow up visit I found that the Council said to the Church, “We want to redesign the whole housing project.” They designed a house on stilts, because it’s hot weather, on a raised platform. One side is sleeping, one side is cooking and eating and sitting room with an air flow through it [see pg 114 in this issue]. They went down south and got them pre-fabricated, and they drove them up on trucks. They took

them over on a barge and they built 30 houses, or 50 or something in the first 8 months, using their own labour. It was simple and it was pre-designed and pre-packaged. Just a sea change on what had gone on in the past.

So the lessons for me had to do with entry, with being acceptable to the community, with having them own the situation and take charge of it themselves. It gets to the sorts of arguments you hear politically about referendum. Really, the body politic knows, often, the best solution, but we never ask them. We're busy telling them. So there were lessons around that and lessons around process and lessons around how you have to let go of what you know and be sufficiently humble to accept what everybody else knows, for the common good.

I think most of the community development work I see comes out of the sort of social work arena. We ought to get together the community development people and the organization development people because I think there's cross lessons we can share about really giving the communities the opportunity to take charge of their own [health need] development. How's that?

As an aside, in my work we use the term "change agent." What we are trying to do is encourage and implement planned change. There are key ethics in the business. One is to leave your skills behind. So you take some people with you during the work, so that the client can carry on when you are gone. The other is that you do process consulting not expert consulting. Now that's hard to do when you're in a third world environment with an uneducated work force and you are the person from somewhere who they think knows everything.

AB: Yeah, I think there's a whole bunch of stories and it's difficult to know where to start. My work with the New South Wales government was different than the work I did through Bobby McLeod and Doonooche. The difference there is that it was really helping build capacity for organizations and community and Bobby McLeod wasn't the kind of guy who was looking for just his organization. He wanted to make sure he introduced you to as many people as he could to try and help as many people as possible to have hope first of all. They would say, "Tell us what you're doing in Canada that's different. Tell us what works and what doesn't work." Not just Native Counselling, but how others are surviving and succeeding and how do we approach government? "How do

we sell success? How do we sell prevention? How do we sell ourselves?” So that was that part of it. The part with New South Wales was different. There were a couple of pillars that were key for them. One was, introduce the community visioning process, where we bring factions together in the community and create a common vision. This was supported by the ATSI regional councils who partnered with Aboriginal Affairs. When you get to Australia, you quickly find out that while they want you take on that process and engage other departments and create this process to build capacity in the community, you have all these bureaucrats, senior people, who find every excuse not to make something happen, as opposed to committing themselves to find reasons why things should happen. So all the roadblocks get put up. You’re quick to realize that it’s going to take a long time to make anything happen in the community when you haven’t got a true commitment from the supposed partner (government). That’s one thing. The second is that government then looks at you and says “Okay, how can we use this person to help us with other problems?” The Aboriginal community is saying, “If they want us to participate, then there has to be a meaningful negotiation first of all.” It was important for me to get that process started. Engage the community but build the confidence in the community to be able to put their cards on the table. “We’re not giving up anything without getting something back here for our survival.” So from a cultural point of view, partnership really is a two-way thing.

EB: But that’s how we’ve run our white communities, right? We elect people to make the decisions to impose it on us.

AB: Then, the bank starts pulling out all their banking in rural communities. The rural communities are going to lose out banking opportunities. “Oh well, let’s get Benson here to go and talk to the Aboriginal community about shutting these banks down.” You quickly realize that what you intended to do and what you’re actually doing are two different things. Let’s get them involved in this housing meeting, and let’s get them involved in discussions about social policy indicators which are being developed by the social policy development branch. So what you see happening is that the benefit of all this is the relationship I built with each community that I travelled to. Wilcannia is the first place we can start talking about, Joe Flick taking me to the community, and they say to Joe, “Okay, let’s go meet the people that are going to

say yeah or nay to my work in this community.” So we go to see the old people. So, stop pick up a bag of mints, introduce ourselves, or myself and talk to them, tell them what I’m doing and get their blessing. And then go to political leaders and sit down with them and say “Okay, this is what’s happening, and here’s what I’ve been asked to do, what is it you really want to happen here?” Then you talk to the various factions in the community and get their input and perspective. You’ve got the 3 factions talking with you about how they see their community — their world view. You know you’re not going to move ahead as a community unless you come together. But there is a lot of history, and if you don’t know the history, the abuses, conflict that took place between families, there’s a lot of that. You have to be able to understand even little tidbits of that, and you have to be able to read into the nuances of stories that come out to understand that there’s more to it that you’re not going to ask about.

EB: See the parallels? You have to sit down and listen.

AB: You have to build a relationship. You have to be able to sit at the riverbank or the club or on the street and have a yarn.

EB: Or under the tree and listen, yeah.

AB: Catch a murray cod, hunt a kangaroo, get a few yubbies.

EB: Yeah, and that’s not the culture we’ve all come from in our governmental processes. This is really consultative process and it goes way past finding enough to make a cause to do whatever you’re going to do. I never showed up without a gift, or two packets of cigarettes or whatever else to hand around. That’s not a normal consulting model either, let me tell you.

AB: We can get into some of that, like how do you actually make it happen, you know? So making the contact and taking tobacco to Elders. In this case you take crafts and other gifts to the Elders. That’s what you do. What brought people together was based on the foundation of gathering food. Make sure that the local ladies are paid to cook. They get a couple of boys and go hunting with them and get a wild pig or a ‘roo and you cook it up on the barbie with a couple of wild goats and eggs. We made some curried goat stew and rice. You go yabbing late at night and you cook up a pot late at night, so you can have a big breakfast. You do all these things, but part of it is understanding.

For me, I was an Aboriginal person being accepted by my family over there. These people were my family. The McLeods in the south, the Murries and Cobries accepted me. You're part of that community, and this is before anything formal happens. You see you're accepted in the community when the drunken ladies walking down the street call you a black, you know. When they mean it, they're hugging you. When you see that happening, you know that's just part of the normal community and you're now accepted as part of the norm. Now you can start doing some work. Now you can actually start talking about issues with people and challenging people's thinking. You can go to the local golf club and meet and visit and build relationships with both sides of the community, black and white (Gubbos). Even though it's a drinking establishment, it's still a whole social part of reconciliation, drinking or not. For those Aboriginal people who drink, and they do, most of them in those communities, that was a reality. But you're part of a process of bringing people together. The shire councilors come together and see you gathering people in these kinds of settings or having a corroboree like they haven't had for forty-some years in Wilcannia. You bring the Doonooche dancers from down south by Callala Bay and Nowra up there. You set up mikes in the football footie field and you have a feast, bring all this food together and you have the whole community showing up. A couple of drunks disrupting things, some shire councillors there, and a couple of cops there — you get all of these people together in the community. You get the minority, which is white, who represent the governing bodies, sitting there listening to this community actually starting to talk in a meaningful way. You go around the footie field with a microphone getting people engaged in the discussion about what they think should happen in their community and how to improve their way of life.

EB: Acceptance and inclusion and that's not the traditional consultative role. There's a sort of humbling piece in this that a lot of us aren't willing to give up — being the foreign expert. You've got to live there. I think Al said it right. You become family.

AB: Yeah, building the bush tucker farm or bush tucker park, the natural park right on the main street of Wilcannia and if you look on the website about Wilcannia right now, there's an article about Wilcannia, tourists don't feel safe there. So any tourist going through Wilcannia

isn't going to feel safe. Which is actually bull. Wilcannia is a beautiful place with beautiful people who care a lot for the land, their people, and their community. But Wilcannia has a reputation. They built a park, and they put it right on the street corner, and it's a safe park, no alcohol allowed. It's late at night and I'm sitting in my motel room and I get a knock on the door from a couple of guys who are drunk. "Hey brother, want to talk to you." All right, we go sit by the swing and talk and, "We want a park for the drunks." "What do you mean, you want a park for the drunks?" "Well, we want a park for drunks. There's a park there and they won't let us drink there anymore so we can build our own park. We can build toilets and we can take care of it, we can build tables and garbage cans, we'll take care of it, we'll keep it clean. Drunks need a park." The person next to me says, "That's a good idea. Why don't you come to the meeting tomorrow at the park and bring your ideas up and we'll talk about it." "Well, you do it." "No, no, you do it. If you want it, we can make it happen." Once people get the anger out that makes them strong so they can say what they feel and that's the way it is. So they get the community engaged and recognizing that they have a right to something. And the shire councilors that are there, that are opposing anything like that start to hear a different side of community needs. And I think the problem that we see in most communities is that there is a black and white line about funding and government support. And it's this superiority thing that exist within bureaucracies that truly harms community progress.

EB: It's also about the money. Remember you said to me before — if there's a money decision from the councilors, then that will drive everything. So there's no time to listen to anything because the decision's already made and it's a function of how much money there is. We have no money for parks, so bugger you.

AB: Or we don't have money for bussing your kids because you chose to live out in the bush and you chose to live out there and build your sand stone house, or mud brick house, I should say, you chose to do that on your own. Why should we send a bus out there? Water and sewage is across the road from you, but if we connect it to you, that means we're accepting your way of living. So it's all these rules that start to get applied.

EB: That was a Tiwi issue too. They wanted bus transport around the island

because people chose live in different places. And they couldn't get it because of the same reason. So involvement and stories and then having one side hear the other in a different medium.

AB: Well, getting the factions to agree that they have disagreements. And getting them to create a common vision. So each faction individually says, "Here's what we think we need in our community. Here's where we see the community going, here's what we need, here's what we want, here's what we desire. Here's the hope we have for our kids and our grandkids." So starting on the premise that they actually all have a vision, and a hope, a dream for their grandkids, that was the most important thing. Because everyone wants to see something for the future kids, right? Even the young guys. Then, working backwards with each faction, and then going back to each other saying, "Well, here's where you guys all have common visions. You all have common themes, common ideas. So let's only work on these things. Let's forget about working on the things you disagree on. If you have past issues, go shoot each other in the desert, go do whatever you gotta do, but for the sake of the community, all we're going to focus on is the things you've got in common." The community started their own community committee. It was a process of an inter-agency, inter-community meeting that didn't close its doors to anybody. Anybody from the community could come. All the agencies that served the community, we got a directive from the Director General's, they had to attend. They had to participate. But the problem is that when you share things with the community, you get caught up too in the politics. You see that the police are really abusive, you see that the school really isn't that caring. So you say to the community, "No you actually can control the school. You go to the Minister of Education and you can say to them that you want to have the School Board advisory and that you want control of the school in this community." You move away from being the advisor and the facilitator to very much an action mediator. You get caught up in the bullshit and you start to come to their defence, to say "No, no, no, don't let them get away with this." Or some consultant comes in because he's got federal money and he's building all these new houses in the community and he says, "Well, I've got all these compost toilets. We'll stick some worms in there and we'll give you these toilets." Instead of building in-house toilets for them, we're going to give them outhouses and we'll

put these worms in there. And you're sitting back in the community, thinking, "Well, maybe we don't have a choice here." So you're not arguing with them. Then I sit back and say, "No hang on a minute. Do you use this in your home?" "Well, no." "Have you ever tried it?" "No." "Well, what the hell gives you the right to bring it into our community?" And I start talking like a community member. Sometimes, if you don't do that, what happens is you remove yourself too far from the community. When you say, "What the hell are you doing bring this to my community or our community," the community jumps on board real quick because they've accepted you. They feel your passion, they recognize that you are caught up in their issues. It just happens. You're part of that community. So you might be a visitor in the community, but by them accepting you as part of them you have to come to their defense. Because if you don't and later on they complain about it or do something or you say something, they're going to crack at you and say, "Well, why didn't you tell us? Why didn't you help us here? We felt we had to do this."

EB: So it is empowerment. It's having the community recognize that they own responsibility for things. It is being part of the community. And it's also knowing who to confront, when. The dilemma is doing all that and staying objective.

PL: I think too, they expect you because you're part of the community now, they expect you to use your expertise. And if you didn't, in the time it was important, they would feel like you let them down. But in instances where they have the expertise, they expect you to keep your mouth shut and not act like you know it all. That's part of the reciprocity.

AB: You sit back and let it happen. And it's like health. The hospital and the community were clashing steady. Far West Aboriginal Health were getting tired of this. So they said, "All right, you control the bulk of the dollars, you're running your own health services, why don't we merge with the community mainstream health and insist that because you're bringing in part of the money that you should have an equal number of members on the hospital board." What a wonderful idea. They started this dialogue, they formed this hospital board and they built the new hospital. Well, they didn't build, they added on to the hospital. But with the help of Aboriginal money. Now the Aboriginal people have a say in the hospital, they made a commitment to put aside so

much money for Aboriginal nursing. So they sent people off for training and community health nurses and Far West Health Services still runs health services jointly. It was Aboriginal health money. Instead of having their own community health, you know how Aboriginal people have their own health offices, they merged together and Far West Services runs that.

EB: Such a simple solution, you wonder why we don't do it more often. And you're right, these sort of imposed boundaries we've inherited, like so and so runs the hospital,

Just after I got to Canada, I joined a consulting firm and they were approached by the Indian and Northern Affairs director in BC who said we've got a problem, because we give funds to communities for infrastructure development and community facility development, but there's a sea change between coastal communities and inland communities. So it's time we talked about it and we're not sure how to do it. So they asked the consulting firm to do it and they promptly rang me in Edmonton and said, "Quick, we understand you know something about Aborigines, come and help us design it." This is on Thursday, it starts on Monday. DIAND thought they were going to do it themselves and they panicked. So I said, "Okay I'll come in on Sunday, we'll redesign, you can do the photocopying on Monday morning and we'll start on Monday afternoon." And we had all the band chiefs from BC in one room. Plus the hereditary chiefs, of course, came along. So I designed it for a whole community meeting. Anyone from the community that wanted to come could come and the Indian and Northern Affairs guys got a briefing from me on Monday morning about what their role would be in this week.

First, we sat down and explained the parameters to the whole meeting. Then we put them into groups of Indian Affairs guys who were mostly engineers and people like that. They had never actually met an Aboriginal, by the way. We put the community chiefs and a couple of their board members or whatever it was, their infrastructure man or whoever ran the sewage plant or whatever. We had them in four main groups. Two did inland communities and two did coastal. And we got all the materials they needed for the charts — paper and pens and everything else — and they built their desired model of a community together with the DIAND guys. I had a long deep space right around

the side of the ballroom — we had a whole ballroom in Vancouver — reserved for community seating. Uncles and brothers and mothers and cousins and children and everything else came on in there. We had pop laid on and food, for the reasons you talked about, and coffee and everything else, and it went like a dream. They all walked out the door saying, “This is wonderful. We’ve never really heard the stories before.” It’s written up at DIAND Vancouver. To my knowledge, Indian and Northern Affairs have never repeated that process. Ever. So now, I talk to an Inuit fellow, they asked me to westernize him. He’s going to be the manager at Norman Wells for a big northern company up there and I spent some time with him. And the same thing’s going on up there. There’s never been any collaboration between the community and the very authorities that are supposed to provide and guide and so on. So the communities think they’ve got no bloody choices. The government’s telling them what to do. And all it needs is, God spare us, time to sit down and listen and say, “What’s the shared vision?”

AB: Have some dialogue.

EB: Yes. The fact is, a lot of those guys want to help, but they really believe they’re helping when they tell you what you need. Like toilets with worms in them. They think that’s going to be the solution — only because they’ve never sat down and listened and heard the story.

AB: They’re bringing their paradigm to a community and it’s a completely strange community, without going in there with an open mind. They’re coming in there saying, “This is what we think is good for the Indians and the Aboriginals.” It’s all canned answers.

EB: That’s the other piece of the paradigm — an assumption about level of understanding. And you’re right.

AB: It’s systemic racism and it’s there and it’s real. These people, as you said, engineers and others who have never met an Indian, are experts because they give advice in their departments on issues that they don’t even know about. The Indian Agent is alive and well.

EB: Especially up North.

AB: And in Australia. The getting rid of ATSIC. Just recently, they shut ATSIC down. Was that because Aboriginal people were fighting for rights and the reversal of injustices or what?

EB: What’s that name mean?

AB: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. They shut it down.

EB: Even after the success it had?

AB: What they did, by shutting ATSIC down, is they basically – well, ATSIC wasn't right, anyway – but what they said to the Aboriginal leaders was, "We'll show you control." Commissioners start getting a little bit of autonomy and trying to exercise some self-sufficiency there and some self-determination, so what government does is they shut them down because they're your bread and butter. They pay the commissioners who are the Aboriginal leaders. It's like if Indian Affairs came to the chiefs and councils and said, "We're cutting your money off today." Because it was a commission, it was controlled by the minister so the commissioners were appointed by the prime minister and the minister. By shutting them down, they effectively only left land councils in play. Land councils are legislated by each state to manage properties for Aboriginal people. And investments. So health, education, justice, all of those issues got dropped. There's no voice for them. So the ATSIC commissioners, who are elected by the community (and I don't know this for a fact, but this is what I am hearing), some Aboriginal commissioners probably dropped or reduced their role. "We're not getting funding, so we'll drop our role." Instead of saying, "We're the elected body. We don't have any money but we're still going to push our mandates and our plans and we're going to go lobbying in Canberra, and we're going to set up a tent embassy like they set up in 1970 and challenged the Australian government, and we're going to go back there and we're going to fight for our individual and collective right to govern." By pulling the purse strings, you demonstrate to the non-Aboriginal community of Australia that this is all money driven. They're not political leaders trying to drive an agenda for Aboriginal self-determination because as soon as we pull the money, they shut down their offices.

PL: However, if John Howard wasn't paid to be Prime Minister,

AB: He wouldn't volunteer to be there either. So the health of the Aboriginal community in Australia is probably more at risk now than it was when I first came in. The Aboriginal culture and way of living, the connection to the land has been interfered with so much by settlement. Now, you've set up these political structures and these resources to be able to help manage government, Aboriginal government. When you pull the rug from underneath them, now they have nothing to manage those

agendas. So I see a higher rate of kids dropping out of school, the whole issue of leadership and role models, infant health, respiratory diseases that are a serious problem over there, alcohol and drug abuse, diabetes, all of these things, we're going to see increases. Because there's nobody now, really, to manage change.

EB: You see the thing that Al's bringing in, which is another whole piece to it, is you may go in to deal with a community, but in the end, you also have to deal (and this is an organization development model) with all these other external factors that influence the community, and upon which the community has influence. We call this an open systems design in organization design.

You need to make sense of this whole external piece as well, which is part of the change agent's role. When I left the Tiwi project, the last thing I did was sit down with the council and the priest of the mission and the local government guy who had come over from Darwin, and talked about how far the community had come and what things needed to carry on. Then I went back to Darwin and briefed the bishop, because he had huge influence on the mission and the settlement and that was where the funding came from. Those sorts of hierarchies get very nervous if they think they're losing control. You have to demonstrate to them that they're doing a good thing, everything's fine, they're not going to break the rules, and it will be win/win in the end. Losing control is not the same thing as control being lost. They're afraid that if they're not controlling it, then there will be no control. So Al's talking about this other whole piece around here as well.

AB: It was important for Aboriginal people in communities to get on local shires. That was a big thing. So we did a lot of that. Making sure that they had Aboriginal representation on shires because they had a powerful vote population — and getting people out to vote. Then they had Aboriginal people on shire councils. That was a big step. Then the police had to meet with communities.

EB: Yes, the police issue is interesting, isn't it?

AB: Yes, so then you have community accountability there. And then the school boards — making sure that the schools are looking at Aboriginal issues from an Aboriginal community perspective. Not, "Well, parents don't come here, so they're not interested and committed in their kid." No, they don't come here because you don't welcome them. They don't

- come here because they're intimidated. They have low education, low self-esteem, they've been beaten by you, the principals and the teachers when they were in schools, so they come to an institution that they fear.
- EB: Just by walking in the door, because it is an institution and it brings back all the memories.
- AB: How many of us, when we are pulled over by a police officer, get scared? It doesn't matter what your confidence level is.
- EB: One theory is that it's all education – understanding the community, all the authorities that affect it, this side understanding that side, these people understanding each other and the other side. There has to be a genuine exchange to understand, to even get close to having any understanding about needs and purpose.
- AB: Connecting at a human level. When I look at traditional things, and I still say that it goes back to those traditional behaviours, you exchange food, you exchange knowledge, you exchange culture, you exchange some level of spiritual awareness. When you do that, you're building a relationship. And when you build that relationship, based on that respect, you're going into a community and you're treating people with respect. Then you can start engaging at another level. If you come in there as the guy who is controlling the purse strings and I'm going to have a dialogue with you because I have to consult because we were told that we have to talk to the community, you get a different kind of relationship.
- EB: Tell me, did the old boys take you out into the bush and surprise you a few times?
- AB: Oh yeah.
- EB: There's another whole curious piece to this, of course, that Al's touching on and that's this deeply spiritual level which is more present in day to day Aboriginal living than it is in our own. You mentioned the corroboree. Depending on the circumstances, that's pretty rare. Then you're deep into that ethos of the community at that spiritual level. It's easier for me to do that with an Aboriginal community because it's around all the time. You go to a business organization, and you start to talk about the spirit of the community and its history and culture and ethos and tradition and ritual and norms of behaviour – that sort

of thing. You try to sort that stuff out and everybody shies away. They don't think it applies to a business community. In fact, it applies to all human endeavor. Unless there's vision and hope and mystery and ritual, nothing happens. And our rituals, sad to say, are increasingly limited. There's all this hype about achievement and it misses the point that there's a spiritual growth piece here that enlarges, grows your perception and your understanding. I've got a family in northern Australia that's as close to me as any people I've ever known and I haven't seen them for 30 years. But I think about them almost every day. It's that piece that's just beautiful, and maybe one of the saving graces of our whole human society. We're throwing it away because we're not listening to our brothers and sisters in the Aboriginal community. They could tell us a hell of a lot about how to live, taking all of that into account. And it's more than just living well on the land or sustainable development. It's got to do with human potential and human happiness and human satisfaction and just humanity. I think we miss that in our busy lives.

AB: I have a letter, actually, from a guy from a community in Australia, talking about a committee we struck in the community. He said some really significant things about "This is my vision of where the community is at." He's not Aboriginal, he married into the Aboriginal community. He's very much seen by everybody as the guy in the community who writes the proposals. They all look to him and he's taken to the community both physically and mentally. He's well entrenched there.

EB: So when you talk about vision, let's say something about that. In organization development terms we talk about a vision for the community or the business or whatever, and we use all sorts of ways of doing it. I do it by asking people to dream and talk about it and picture it and image it and draw it. Then we share it all together in a sort of big picture. What do you do when you're visioning in these areas?

AB: The first is getting some understanding and agreement about the rules, whatever those might be, and they vary. The second is getting people to start talking about what they value the most. In their community or in an organization or family. If their values are this and who they're working for or representing have values that are different and not overshadowing these then they are too far apart. There's a divorce going to happen. I talk about that in our organization with our staff. Our values

are this and if one person's values are way over here, then that person doesn't belong. That's part of the organization's core values. So I think the core values are really important and I talk about them from the connection to whatever the connections are. Usually in the community they'll talk about them more from the cultural perspective. Once that's done, just start getting people then to say, "Okay, now how do we get these people or this community or organization or whatever it is to the point where the vision of these values is being expressed across this whole community?" You want to start seeing things like, here in this community, "We want to see kids fed, so that when they're going to school they're not starving. They're not starving outside a local business begging for food or money." That's a really significant statement and it leads you into a whole range of things. So you let them just take it wherever they want. Before you know it, you're into employment, you're into parenting skills, you're into addictions treatment and just all kinds of things come out of that one thing. "What do we hope for our community?" We hope that kids don't starve, that they don't have to beg when they go to school. And then you go on and on. We want to make sure that everybody gets proper housing. What does that mean? So we start talking about housing that's appropriate to the family and the community. And we start talking about what that means in terms of the community's commitment to the individual's and family's commitment to housing. Then what are the problems about it, well we now address those problems. You're now going to take this housing need and idea and vision to government who is going to sit back and say, "We've given you all this money and look at how we built you brand new houses and they're battered up and beat up." "Well, you didn't build the houses we wanted." Community didn't have the say.

EB: That was exactly the issue in northern Australia. Finally, they built their own design which turned out to be a tenth the price of the white man's brick house. I worry about that with the Inuit.

AB: A big kitchen with lots of table and chairs and room for visitors. That's what people want. No walls between the kitchen and the sitting area.

EB: It's value based, like everything. Even in companies, it's still difficult to talk about values and to ask people express them or talk about them and to understand the connection between deep-held beliefs and behaviour. Everybody will focus on the behaviour, but they won't very

much talk about values. As religious belief has disappeared out of the society these days it's getting even harder to talk about values because there's no common base of understanding. So Aboriginals ought to be able to talk about that better than white people.

AB: I think it's in the words you use. What's important to you? What do you believe in? What do you value?

EB: What do you want for your children?

AB: Those values come out. You go into any community or even into an organization and say what do you value, but if you start talking about what do you want for yourself, what do you want from this organization? What do you think this organization is about? You can start creating all of this information. But if you ask people what are your values, what values do you hold...

EB: That's another hard piece of the job, translating the wordage to fit the environment you're in, which you must have found even in the Canadian vs. Australian experience. There's a different set of wordage. I get constantly amazed, after years and years, I occasionally still use a word that doesn't even fit Canadian wordage. And of course if you can't fit the language, even minimally, then you still look like you can't be family because you can't even bloody well talk the way we do. Of course in Australia, it's easy — you just swear a lot.

AB: And watch what happens. I remember going into a community where you have all these young guys that said, "Gubbas this, gubbas that" — gubbas are white people. I'm new to that community, but they all welcomed me and invited me and one of them had a vision about me. So I said, "I can't be a part of this. I'm not going to work with this community if you're going to sit there and attack the white culture, which also represents part of my mixed Aboriginal heritage." They had just been talking about the young people — "They have to get past their hate and anger." — so it gave me a license to say something. I said, "You know, you have to respect your past as well. There's no full blood in this room, and if there is, I'd really argue it. If we're going to talk about doing something to work for the community here, you have to get past this. Because by continuing to attack these people that are here to work with you, whether they have good intentions or not, they're still here, representing an institution that's supposed to be working with you. So you've got to find a way." One young guy got up, "Well you're

not speaking on behalf of our communities.” One commissioner got up — the same community at different meetings — and said the same thing. And both times, the Elders stopped and said, “Actually yes, he’s here because we invited him to speak.” So you have to be able to speak only at the right time. You think you’re going to say something and you don’t have a license to say it, boy, you’re in big trouble. Knowing that you don’t know very much.

EB: All cultures are racist and they all stereotype each other. It is unfortunately the human condition. But it becomes critically important when you’re trying to do community development. You’ve got to drop all that stuff or you get back to that other stereotype, the white man’s burden.

Finally one of the differences, I think, between the Aboriginal Australian culture vs. the culture here – is that there’s more deeper, longer, older dreamtime than here. But I don’t want to say that too quickly.

PL: Ours is just really hidden. For the Crees, there are specific rituals that must be undertaken to know it. They would not be allowed to give you a part of it. So there’s rules and regulations and the way that its managed that the oral historians – if you wanted to hear the stories, you would have to go through ceremonies and sit for 4 days and 4 nights non-stop and listen to it. They can’t start it and stop it. It’s, and you have to be committed to learning it. So oral historian is a job in the culture and you take it on very seriously and you go through a lifetime of ritual and ceremony to maintain it. You become it.

Alberta’s the only province in the country that has Métis settlements. And a Métis settlement agreement.

