

TRANSCRIPT

Subject: Neville Bonner Memorial Scholarship

Date: Thursday 28 May 2003
Parliament House, Canberra

MINISTER, Dr Brendan Nelson

(Welcome). Of course the first thing we do is recognise and remember the Ngunnawal. Upon whose involuntary sacrifices not only has this Parliament but indeed the economic and social development of Canberra been built.

We have seen Stan's tribute to Neville and this photograph I received (inaudible) for referring to it often, but I am unapologetic about that. This photograph and another sits very prominently, in fact, most prominently inside my office to remind me every single day of what is really important in Education and Science and Training.

As we heard, and Ken, no-one in this room knows better than Ken of course, that Neville was born 81 years ago on Eucabar Island under a palm tree. His mother was an Ungarra woman and his father was of Anglo-Celtic background who absconded not long after Neville's birth. He was born on that island of course, because Aboriginal people were not allowed in town after dark, at the mouth of Tweed River there in northern New South Wales. He was born into poverty that - with the possible exception of one or two people in this room - that most of us could not even begin to imagine. An adversity that fortunately we hope the next generation including Aboriginal people will certainly not have to face. As Stan said he spent barely a day at a school in Lismore and his mother had made a uniform for him from rags and he only survived a day or so because non Aboriginal people revolted against the idea of an Aboriginal boy being at the school. He then spent six months (inaudible) with volunteers who were trying to give him some rudimentary education. Shortly after that his mother died, and Neville would later say that his grandmother, Ida, had an enormous impact on his life because I think when he was almost 14, Ken, she said to him - that he would need to go to school and in one year at Beau Desert High School he did three academic years in one year. Neville had said that his grandmother had said to him - "Neville, if you learn to read and write and communicate well and treat other people with decency and courtesy, it will take you a long way."

It did through scrub filling and being a stockman and a bridge carpenter and of course, the administrator at Palm Island where I think Ken was born, to the Federal Parliament and when he stood for Senate selection in 1971, he said - "my qualities and my experience I offer to the people of Australia," he said "I don't pretend that they're of an outstanding nature," he said, but I can say that in my experience of this world there are two qualities in which we are in greater need - human compassion and understanding. When asked by Robin Hughes in 1992 to nominate what he thought was his greatest achievement he said - that it was that he was there. He said they no longer spoke of (inaudible) or blacks, they spoke instead of Aboriginal people.

The 20th Century produced some outstanding Australians and I think amongst them, I think one of the finest, is Neville Bonner and I think his most enduring legacy at least for me is not only to remind me of the power of education to overcome enormous adversity and to create a future of hopeful confidence but it was ultimately to remind us that the greatest of human virtues is strength of character. One of my colleagues when we put on a tribute dinner to Neville shortly after his death and the Prime Minister came and spoke - quite rightly in very glowing terms of Neville's life. The Prime Minister made the observation that he crossed the floor 23 times and one of my colleagues said, if I crossed the floor 23 times, do you think a future Prime Minister will come and speak nicely about me.

Again he was a man who stood up for the things in which he believed. This year, Nicole Forshaw is the recipient of the Neville Bonner Memorial Scholarship Award. It was established by the Government three years ago with \$400,000 from the Higher Education Innovation Programme, the Pfizer Corporation committed another \$30,000 and Nicole will be studying at the University of Western Sydney in communications, design and media. She will be looking at the different way, as I

understand it – and I am sure Nicole will speak to us in a moment about it – about the ways in which Indigenous and non Indigenous people present Indigenous Art in its various forms, but also the intersection between Anthropology and Indigenous contemporary culture. For those of you who know me, you will know that not only am I a great fan of Neville Bonner, I am also a great fan of Slim Dusty and Slim of course has had a long standing affection for Aboriginal people and has written and performed quite a number of songs to him. In fact, one of the songs which he performed at the tribute dinner, Ken, of course, was "Bonner" which was on Slim's last album – "Travelling Still Always Will". I was invited along to the launch of the CD and actually got up on stage and sung "Bonner" with Slim and Joy. Apart from meeting Neville that was one of the highlights of my life. I was roaming around the country being the Minister for Education, ruffling feathers about higher education, I get off a plane in Wagga and the first bloke I meet said – hey you are the guy who was singing with Slim Dusty on the TV last night. But in that intersection between Anthropology and Aboriginal culture it is worth remembering that only 39 years ago, in 1964, Joe Daley wrote a song for Slim entitled "Jackie" and Slim subsequently changed the name to "Trumby" and the language is not what we would use now. The song essentially is Trumby was a very proud Aboriginal stockman and he was promoted to be the head ringer and during the drought Trumby went out to drove the cattle and he couldn't read or write and the song tells the story of Trumby returning to he homestead and the stockman had been out poisoning the water holes because of the foxes and Trumby could not read the sign that said that the water was poisoned and he died and Slim almost 40 years ago asked the rhetorical question why is it with all the progress that we have made as a society, should a man die simply because he cannot read or write?

Our challenge and our reason why we are doing this award and why it is so important, and why we are doing things in higher education for Indigenous participation, Indigenous Higher Education Advisory Council, with new awards, with five scholarships for Indigenous staff, also with a \$10m increase for the Indigenous support fund over three years and a range of initiatives to improve participation for Indigenous people – is that we should never forget what this is all about. In the end it is all about the fact that an Aboriginal baby born today still only has a one in three chance of seeing age of 65. That Aboriginal Year 12 completion though it has increased from 30% from 1997 is still only 38%. Half that of the non Indigenous population. That Aboriginal people have incarceration rates 16 times higher than the rest of the country. That life expectancies equate to India, Guyana, Haiti and Papua New Guinea – 15 to 20 years less. That one in four Aboriginal children cannot pass the basic Year 3 reading test and four out of ten cannot pass a basic Year 5 reading test and as you know in the Pilbara, Kimberley, parts of the Cape and almost all of the Northern Territory, it is as low as two percent.

That is our fundamental challenge and today in presenting this award to Nicole, what we are doing, is not only commemorating a remarkable life but also giving help to, and I have only just met Nicole, but she is someone who you would take an instant liking. Nicole I suppose in a sense seeing that montage of Neville's life you probably think that the entire Aboriginal educational fraternity is looking upon you too. I can assure you that they are but only in a supportive way and will do everything that we possibly can during your Honours year and thank you very much for being a recipient. There are only 101 Aboriginal people doing Honours courses in Australian higher education and Nicole has been chosen from all of those to receive the award this year. Congratulations and thank you again to all of you for being here and being a part of it.