

Jessie Street National Women's Library Luncheon

Keynote Address

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Australian Football League

NSW Parliament House Dining Room

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- Board Chair Jozefa Sobski
- Professor Jakelin Troy (performing Acknowledgement of Country).
- The Honourable Pru Goward, MP Minister for Mental Health, Minister for Medical Research, Assistant Minister for Health, Minister for Women, and Minister for the Prevention of Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault
- Senator Claire Moore
- Senator Jenny McAllister
- The Honourable Tamara Smith MP
- Wendy Waller - Mayor of Liverpool

- Friends, volunteers and supporters of Jessie Street Library
- Distinguished guests ladies and gentlemen

There are also some special friends here today who have supported me over recent years and I'd like to acknowledge them too: Ruth McCausland, Jason Glanville, Shannan Dodson, Charlee-Sue Frail, Cait Riminton and Chloe Wighton.

Thanks for inviting me to speak today. I first want to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we're on, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. I offer my respects to their elders, past and present.

I was recently recruited by the AFL to run their inclusiveness programs and social policy development - an extraordinary opportunity I found too compelling to resist. Like any new job - in this case new to me but also previously non-existent - there's a learning curve that looks a lot like a vertical line at the beginning.

In passing - and in keeping with the themes I want to discuss today - I'll just note that I am the third ever female and first ever Indigenous Australian to work in the executive management ranks of the AFL.

And I want to congratulate them. Because it's they who recognised that deficiency and acted to rectify it. And I'm a huge fan of recognition.

This also means I now work in Melbourne - a lot anyway - and live in Adelaide - as much as I can anyway. So lately the prospect of popping up to Sydney for a luncheon would not normally fill me with 'drop everything' excitement. But some time ago when I was invited to address this function I said yes in heartbeat. It was genuinely a 'drop everything' response. It is an honour to be asked to give a speech in recognition and memory of a remarkable woman. I am truly humbled. Thank you so much for having me.

Jessie Street, the woman and the remarkable library that bears her name, are both extremely important and their value to Australian society cannot be overstated. So to be asked to speak about the woman, and in order to support the work and continuance of the library, is a rare honour.

So today I want to say a bit about this remarkable woman and her indelible mark on modern Australia. I'll touch on some other matters too, since I've been heavily involved in an important project of reform myself for the last few years and I use every public forum I can to make clear why it matters so much.

The Ursula K Le Guin quote the Jessie Street library uses as a tagline could not be better chosen. It is perfectly apt: "To keep women's words, women's works, alive and powerful."

In keeping true to that guiding statement of purpose, the library contributes to something even more important - keeping Australian women themselves alive and powerful.

Jessie Street was a feminist. She fought her whole life to improve the lot of women and to win for them access to the same opportunities enjoyed by men.

I realised the significance of this in my own life at the age of 22 when I got a job at the Women's Information Switchboard in Adelaide. It was started in the 70s by Deborah McCulloch, who had been Don Dunstan's women's adviser.

When I got there it was a 12 hours a day, 7 days a week 'information service' for women. What that meant in reality was it was a crisis line mainly used by victims of sexual assault and domestic violence. They needed professional help, counseling, refuges and safe accommodation options but there was frequently very little available for them.

So I talked myself into a job with the Office of the Status of Women to find out why policy priorities didn't adequately address these needs and down the rabbit hole I went. I will point out, that if it weren't for those amazing feminists at the Women's Information Switchboard, I wouldn't be where I am today.

They inspired me to at least try to make a difference and told me I was capable. I think it may be the first time I had ever been told that.

It was directly from that experience that I went on to study and to a whole different course in life. I went to university because I understood I was now a feminist and I wanted to take some control of my circumstances and try to make my own way in the world. Women like Jessie Street are the inspiration for decisions like that.

Jessie Street was a fighter. She was a woman born to comfort and privilege but also that rarest of people, especially in her time, a woman who could not abide injustice and the rampant unfairness she saw all around her in early 20th century Australia.

She never developed that happy capacity to enjoy wealth and polite society by ignoring dire poverty and cruel mistreatment of people in the same city she lived in. And Sydney in 1910 or 1920 was really more of a town. No one was very far from anyone else. The well-heeled genteel Rose Bay was only a few miles from the desperate squalor of workers' slums like Woolloomooloo and Paddington. Not to mention Redfern.

You had to try hard not to see it and she refused. Jessie's gaze was unflinching and she understood the meaning of what she saw. To her it

meant big changes were urgently needed, radical changes, changes in which the comfortable classes had no interest but which decency and modernity just demanded.

I would never describe any woman by her relationships to men, but the degree of Jessie's fierce independence of thought and radical personal departure from the *mores* of class and privilege that defined her age can be appreciated by reflecting on her family.

Jessie Street, we can say with confidence, is the only person in history to have been a daughter-in-law, wife and finally mother to three Chief Justices of the Supreme Court of NSW. That's how 'establishment' she was, how embedded in the educated, wealthy elite of Sydney society.

Or rather, that's how 'establishment' she was expected to be. It's this that makes her tireless activism for social justice, for women, for Indigenous Australians and for international peace all the more special.

In 1956 she became Australia's representative in the Anti-Slavery Society in London. She'd been there for six years, pretty much ever since her husband, Sir Kenneth, was appointed Chief Justice. I will come back to her there in London, in 1956, presently.

Reconciling the position of Chief Justice with Jessie's well known social and political views must have been painfully difficult at the polite society end of post-war Sydney.

After all, in 1943 she had stood as the ALP candidate for the famous federal seat of Wentworth – and nearly won it!

She had another crack at Parliament in 46 but was soon called to higher duties.

She took herself off to London, away from the bunyip aristocracy. It seems Sydney then was a place where you just could not be the wife of the state's senior judge and maintain your public profile as a campaigner for social and economic fairness.

We can suppose the expectation was that you would quietly abandon your 'causes', learn to ignore the flagrant injustice all around you and perhaps take up charity work and tea parties. So she left.

In earlier visits to London with her parents in her early 20s, she volunteered at a centre that cared for young women who had been arrested as prostitutes.

Injustice made her angry, it fired her up. It drove her across the globe. Most importantly, it called her to action. She set about fighting it, campaigning against it.

Unfairness in general attracted her ire, but two strands in particular electrified her campaigning zeal: the institutionalised discrimination directed at women and the marginalisation, neglect and impoverishment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

As a Torres Strait Islander woman myself, you can see that she is a woman after my own reforming heart.

Jessie understood and embodied what I have learned is crucial to successful movements for social justice: relationships. That to forge positive social change - and particularly constitutional change - you need to connect with others, including understanding what they value and what makes them tick, to convince them to come along with you towards that bigger goal.

Sometimes that requires challenging people, confronting them about our true history and their complicity in a status quo that has dispossessed and disenfranchised Indigenous peoples. And sometimes that requires appealing to their best selves, flattering their generosity and their influence.

But at all times it requires making sure that your ego does not trump the social change that you are seeking. That you do not get so caught up in the importance of your own voice that you cannot listen, that you cannot be humble, cannot be adaptable, cannot learn along the way.

Consensus rather than conceit, is crucial.

The focus required to change the constitution - the dedication, the personal sacrifices, the time away from family, the ability to withstand misdirected anger and criticism - this focus must not be so single-minded that you stop understanding that true social change is not about one individual.

Jessie understood this. She stepped up and dedicated herself to fighting injustice, but she did so as a collaborator.

And this is her lesson and her legacy to us.

It is still overwhelmingly women that I see undertaking this kind of leadership every day in Australia. This is the work that is all too often unseen, undervalued, and taken for granted in our communities.

This is the tireless work by women that goes on in neighbourhoods, in

schools, in workplaces, in social movements, in parliaments. And it is these relationships, these connections, this trust that is built which are the bricks and mortar of our democracy."

Now back to Jessie Street

Jessie understood that Indigenous Australians had suffered a double calamity. In pre-European Australia they lived from the country, the land and waters - for 40 or 50 millennia. They cared for it, managed it, knew it intimately and in return it gave them a good living. Then it was taken.

So they had nothing. Modern Australia made no provision for people who depended completely on their land for survival and whose land was now comprehensively stolen. It's worse than that. Modern Australian didn't acknowledge they existed.

During Jessie's formative years in the early nineteen hundreds - something critical was happening in the story of Australia.

The British colonies that had established their various, pretty tenuous toe-holds on this continent starting less than 120 years earlier, came together to forge a nation.

They would write an Australian constitution, petition the 'mother country' back in London to pass it as an Act of the British Parliament and establish our Commonwealth Parliament and the nation of Australia as we know it today. These are dramatic events in the life of a 12 year old girl who was raised in a 19th Century colony. She now lived in a State called NSW, in a nation called Australia.

While those who lived best in this new Commonwealth - like her own family - might have found plenty to be excited and optimistic about in the newly minted nation, as Jessie matured and learned and understood her world, she found plenty not to like about it, plenty that needed fixing.

Jumping forward, we earlier left her in London in 1956, ensconced with the Anti-Slavery Society. That body at the time was seriously considering bringing a case before the United Nations regarding the egregious neglect of human rights in the treatment of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians.

They sent Jessie back to Australia to compile the required information.

A decade earlier, Jessie was the only woman in the Australian delegation to the United Nations Conference on International Organisation in San Fransisco. There she was instrumental in have the word 'sex' inserted into

the line 'without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion' all through the Charter of the United Nations. Until Jessie and some other formidable woman got involved, it hadn't occurred to the blokes to include that.

It was her task investigating the treatment of Indigenous Australians that put her in touch with people who would inspire her next crusade. She already knew Faith Bandler from the peace movement and through her she met Pearl Gibbs in Sydney. She met Shirley Andrews from Victoria and through her Charles Duguid from South Australia, and Mary Bennett, Don McLeod and John Clements from Western Australia as well as many others across the country.

What you had there was a movement, a powerful force for change. They drew up plans for a national Aboriginal affairs body. Jessie became convinced that one of its most urgent priorities must be to campaign to amend the Australian Constitution to give the Commonwealth powers to make laws to rectify the entrenched injustice.

The oft-cited quote from Faith Bandler many of you will know, but it always bears repeating. She said Jessie phoned her late one night in 1956 saying "You can't get anywhere without a change in the Constitution and you can't get that without a referendum. You'll need a

petition with 100,000 signatures. We'd better start at once." It was her signature approach.

These are the people who comprised the movement that campaigned and persuaded and organised for more than another decade to achieve that rarest and most difficult goal in Australian politics - a successful referendum to change the Constitution.

Not just successful, the most successful ever, with more than 90% of electors voting to include Indigenous Australians in census counts and allow the Commonwealth to make laws for their benefit.

I said earlier I would cover some more contemporary matters too.

For over the past four years I've been fully immersed in another campaign for a successful YES vote to change the Constitution. The changes we seek are simple to grasp.

The Constitution drafted and promulgated all those years ago when Jessie Street was young, virtually ignores the existence of Indigenous Australians. It is full of detail about currency and taxing powers and import duties and lighthouses while ignoring the oldest continuous human cultures on earth and the people who owned and occupied the country for maybe 50,000 years.

The **120 year** people drew up and documented a new nation that simply did not include the **50,000 year** people. Their document also contains provisions that allow for discrimination based on race. Both these facts about our Constitution need to be fixed. We hold these truths to be self-evident.

RECOGNISE has campaigned to build public support to do just that and has had remarkable success. Like Jessie's 100,000 signatures, we've amassed close to 300,000 Australians who've registered their details on the Recognise website to express their support. The research shows awareness of the issue growing rapidly and, even better, as awareness grows, support only solidifies.

All significant political parties support the campaign. It should be a lay-down *misère*.

What could stand in its way? There are a few members of the conservative commentariat who try to pretend that simply recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, our mind-boggling history here and profound connection to this country, will somehow magically create two classes of citizen. It's nonsense but you've got to expect a bit of that.

That line of thinking could never defeat the popular support for this idea. If you want evidence of that, tune in tomorrow and watch the much anticipated

documentary in which Andrew Bolt debates this question with Linda Burney. I haven't seen it obviously, but I think I know which of those two will prevail in that discussion.

No, the thing that could defeat this is the fallacy that this change is not worth making unless a list of other reforms are won simultaneously.

Just recently this notion has emerged that Constitutional Indigenous recognition and dealing with the racial discrimination is somehow a poor substitute for, or even a barrier to, other goals like treaties and or other broader political, social, cultural or economic aspirations.

I can't remember another case where such unreasonable demands were placed on such a reasonable proposition. It's like: "Do you want workplace safety laws?". "No! Not without a 35 hour week and extra sick leave. Without that we may as well be killed at work."

If you ask me, are you, Tanya Hosch, in favour of a treaty or treaties between Australian governments and Indigenous Australians such as exist in New Zealand and many other countries?, I'll say "Hell yes".

The RECOGNISE campaign is zero impediment to that. Arguably if it succeeds its popular good-will, can roll on and form the groundwork for all kinds of other reforms.

If you ask me, would Jessie Street have been in favour of such treaties?, I'd say "I would bet my house on it". Would she also have supported the RECOGNISE campaign? Well, in the late 1950s she actually drafted a Constitutional amendment to remove discrimination. It was her amendments that eventually found favour in the 1967 referendum.

But would Jessie have accepted that 1967 and the years of campaigning that led to it were not worth doing because they didn't also deliver a treaty? I find it hard to believe she would not.

Jessie Street was a woman capable of fighting many battles and conducting many campaigns in all directions, often simultaneously. They all shared the theme of making the world a more peaceful, equitable and humane place but they were quite disparate struggles.

She was a hockey enthusiast at uni and became great champion for women's sport. That's while campaigning for child and mother endowment payments, women's rights to continue working after marriage, sex education, sexual

health services, the first industrial award for nurses and a hundred other things besides.

When the 1936 Olympic team was announced, it included one woman. Jessie immediately launched a campaign to select more women.

I mentioned earlier, I now work for the AFL. Recently I attended a function in Darwin where they named the Northern Territory team of the century. Of the squad of 22 so honoured, four were non-Indigenous.

These are tough men, some getting on in years, some who have already left us. When their names were recognised in that roll of football honour, many wept openly. Some said they felt it was the first time in their lives they'd been really recognised for anything.

Recognition - that's how powerful and important it is.

I want to finish on this point about Constitutional referenda themselves. They are fiendishly hard to carry and you only get one shot.

If Australia as a nation cannot come together on this now, there is every likelihood our descendants in another 100 years will still be reading the same document with its racially discriminatory sections and, as Tony Abbott

memorably put it, its “echoing silence” on an eternity of Indigenous Australian history.

They might rightly look back at us and shake their heads in shame.

Gathering the overwhelming popular support to carry a referendum enacting the goals of RECOGNISE, five decades after the 67 reforms in which Jessie Street was so instrumental, can be just that - a unifying, nation-building, modernising triumph we can all take pride in.

Thank you.