

A woman of the Wiradjuri



A profile by
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In a dusty rural schoolroom a 15-year-old girl is telling her careers teacher that she wants to leave school and be like her friends. The teacher advises against it and argues she has greater potential than that: "You could even become a barrister," she says.

The child wonders what on earth a barrister could be and still wants to leave school. Her family don't mess about with semantics ... She stays at school.

A few months ago, on July 1, the girl addresses the Teachers Federation Conference at Bathurst and says:

"I wish to acknowledge that we are gathered here today on the land of the Gadigal people of the Eora nation. I pay my respects and remind us of our shared inheritance and heritage.

"I want to speak with you today about unfinished business. Reconciliation is like the tide. Some days it comes crashing with awesome power and a sense that all around will be swept up in it.

At other times, the tide is low, the beach swept clean and you feel that everything will have to start over.

"I am of the Wiradjuri nation. Wiradjuri territory spreads across the heart of this State like a fan. It sweeps across the catchments of the Lachlan, Macquarie and the Murrumbidgee Rivers. In the language of the Wiradjuri these three rivers are called Galari, Wambuul and Marrambidya.

"I am of the Marrambidya Wiradjuri."

She is Linda Burney, Dip Ed, D.Ed, MP and NSW Minister for Fair Trading under whose jurisdiction our institute operates. She became the state's first aboriginal MP on March 23, 2003.

"I've lived a big life," she says. "I'm resilient and I'm determined. I learnt to read very young and have had a real thirst for knowledge ever since. I'm not religious but I am deeply spiritual.

"My great-grandfather, Walter Burney was a drover and a WWI digger. I'm not one of the stolen generation, I am the daughter of an aboriginal father and a white mother who died without telling me who my father was."

In her maiden speech Linda told the NSW Legislative Assembly:



"I did not grow up knowing my Aboriginal family. I met my father, Noddy Ingram, in 1984. His first words to me were: 'I hope I don't disappoint you.' I have now met 10 brothers and sisters. We grew up 40 minutes apart. That was the power of racism and denial in the fifties.

"I was raised by my old aunt and uncle, Nina and Billy Laing. They were brother and sister. These old people gave me the ground on which I stand today--the values of honesty, loyalty and respect.

"Education is what equals us out whether you are from Canterbury Boys High School, Penrith High School or the Kings School. It is education that can bring about equity of outcomes. Many people have asked: 'What got you into this place?' It is simple: I could read."

If the young Linda Burney liked reading she was also a keen debater.

At Leeton High School where she won a scholarship to Mitchell College of Advanced Education (now Charles Sturt University-Mitchell) in Bathurst. In 1979 she became the first aboriginal girl to graduate.

"I returned in 2003 to get an honorary doctorate," she says. "It was one of the most special days of my life."

Today she is also Minister for Youth, and Volunteers as well as for Fair Trading, her main portfolio. Her department has a staff of 1900 people in 25 regional

offices "Fair trading is about the balance between rights and responsibilities," she says. "I've spent my life trying to find a balance between culture and a wide range of issues.

"I have a very collaborative approach to policy and planning. One thing I learnt is that you can never think you're the font of all knowledge. You have to rely on and trust people who know more. My role is exactly that: Being able to understand that 'Minister' doesn't mean knowing more.

"Part of Fair Trading's brief is the Consumer, Trades, and Tenancy Tribunal whose job is to supervise mediation to reach a solution where each party gets something."

Current departmental issues involving conveyancers include:

1. The professional indemnity issue. "The department is doing some serious checking of the new chum on the block."
2. Education and the Institute. "There is a definite move towards a nationally recognised competency program. Some want a formal qualification, others say they've been doing it all their life and that should be enough. Because of my education background I do believe in recognition of prior learning but there are issues to be resolved."
3. Licensing. The Act is due for a statutory revision in July 2008. In NSW every Act gets reviewed every five years. "Work has already begun

on that and the sequence of events is:

- Consultation with the profession
- Draft of new act
- Draft goes to Cabinet
- Another round of consultation."

With so much focus on Fair Trading one might think her other portfolios insignificant. Volunteering, for example. Doesn't that look after itself?

"Volunteering can't all be spontaneous," she says. "Take it out of society and society will collapse. Think Meals on Wheels, Surf Lifesaving, and our response to the tsunami.

"In NSW there are 1.75 million volunteers and the State's volunteer effort is some 273 million hours-a-year. At \$15 an hour it's worth more than \$4 billion. That's a sack of money!"

So there you have it: Glass ceilings shattered all over the place, a pinnacle career.

What were the milestones along the way? In her Bathurst address to the teachers she said:

"I have often recounted my own experience as a 13-year-old schoolgirl sitting in a classroom being taught that my people were savages and the closest example to Stone Age man living today. I felt ashamed and embarrassed.

"I vividly recall wanting to turn into a piece of paper and slip quietly through the crack in the floor.

"Why is it such effort and care has been taken to betray, blur and deny the truth?"

"I have often used the analogy that growing up as an aboriginal child looking into the mirror of our country was difficult and alienating. Your reflection was at best distorted and at worst non-existent."

Her career pathway was that she became a teacher, then an education officer, then a consultant to the NSW Department of Education, then executive officer of the NSW Aboriginal Education Consultants Group when she was only 27. In 1998 she was appointed deputy director-general of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and became its director general before being elected as MP for Canterbury in 2003.

"Along the way I had a couple of kids and all that sort of stuff," she says. "I had good friends and my kids went to a great school but I had to be incredibly organised and good at managing my time.

"Canterbury is the most fantastically interesting, generous place you can imagine. It's home to 140 nationalities so very culturally diverse.

"It's like cutting through a layer cake, it shows the way Australia was built. Canterbury has about 600 aborigines and midden sites along the Cook River are evidence of our being the first people.

"Then come all the layers of European and Asian migration. Older Anglos have lived there for generations, then came the Snowy workers - the Italians and Yugoslavs - when they settled in town; then the Greeks and Lebanese, and more recently the Vietnamese and Middle Eastern arrivals.

"The very newest layer comes from North Africa, Sierra Leone, and Eritrea. All chased away from their homes by terror but I don't find that depressing, I find it inspiring.

"One learns to be a philosopher by listening to people. I find it very grounding. I'm a Bulldogs fan of course."

Her maiden speech to parliament summed up her relationship to her electorate:

"To the rainbow people of Canterbury, I have made two promises. First, that I will work hard and, second, that I will always do my best."

Even if you live big, every life has its poignant moments you don't escape. Her partner, Rick Farley - a distinguished former head of the Farmers Federation of Australia, died last year after suffering a stroke. In a bizarre accident he was killed when he fell out of his wheelchair.

At the time she described him as a brave, foresighted Australian who saw issues clearly, was an architect of the first Native Title Act and broker of the land agreement between Aborigines, cattlemen and conservationists in Cape York.

"Rick put decency and honesty before everything else," she said. "Farley was the love of my life."

And meeting her father after all these years and the brothers and sisters she didn't know she had? - "There's a difference in aboriginal society about reunions because families are such extended structures. You always have a place in your kinship's structure and I'm an empathetic person."

Where next for Linda? What now, Ms Minister? In that speech back in July she told her audience:

"In 2005, the median age at death of Aboriginal men ranged from 42 to 54 years while the median age at death for Aboriginal women ranged from 48 to 66 years. This year, I turned 50 - am I already a dead woman walking?"

If she is, there's no sign of it so far although in a recent speech she told her audience: "I have worked in Aboriginal Affairs for a very long time. Twenty-six years in fact. So don't be too impressed by the fact my hair is still black. I have a deep and meaningful relationship with my hairdresser."

For her photographic session Linda dressed in black; today she is head to foot in white and a large pearl necklace rests on glowing bronze skin. At 50 she looks unlined, youthful yet mature. In that speech to the teachers she quoted some advice by Nelson Mandela. It applies as much to the conveyancing profession as it might to her career. It says:

"When the water starts boiling, it is foolish to turn off the heat." ▲



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