

Draft Transcript

UTS Zoom event
with Verity Firth, The Hon. Linda Burney MP,
Alison Whittaker and Professor Thalia Anthony

Friday, 26 June 2020

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VERITY FIRTH: Hello, everyone. I am just waiting for the participants. It is still going up, our participant count, so I'll wait until that flattens off a bit and then I'll start proceedings. Thanks for joining us today. (Pause). Gosh, it's still rising. It is great to see so many of you joining us. This is great. I might just begin with some brief housekeeping comments while we wait for people to get online.

So, firstly, I would like to thank you all for joining us for today's event. Of course, I want to begin the session by acknowledging the Gadigal people of the Eora Nation, upon whose ancestral lands our City campus now stands. I would also like to pay respect to the Elders both past and present, acknowledging them as the traditional custodians of knowledge for this land. So thank you.

My name is Verity Firth. I'm the Executive Director of Social Justice and inclusion here at UTS where I lead up the Centre for Social Justice and Inclusion. I'm really excited to be joined here today by Linda Burney, Alison Whittaker and Professor Thalia Anthony, whom I will properly introduce shortly.

We will do a little bit of housekeeping. Firstly, this event is being live captioned, so to view the captions, you need to click on the link in the chat and you will find it at the bottom of your screen in the Zoom control panel. The captions will open up in a separate window. If you have any questions at all during today's event, you can type them into the Q&A box also down there in the Zoom control panel and you can also up-vote questions that others have requested, though please try to keep the question relevant the topic we are discussing here today. I'll have some time later to then put your questions to the panel, so it's a really good opportunity to have your voice heard.

Being an online event, do bear with us if we have any technical issues. We will work to resolve them quickly, but it is not unheard of that there will be technical issues. So cross fingers.

I would like to welcome our panelists here today. The first I'm very excited to have here with us - Linda Burney. She probably needs no introduction. She is currently the Shadow Minister for Families and Social Services and the Shadow Minister for Indigenous Australians. She has been the Federal member for Barton since 2016, following a 13-year career in the New South Wales Parliament. Linda's commitment to indigenous issues spans more than 30 years and includes time as the Director-General of Aboriginal Affairs New

South Wales and in other senior positions in the non-government sector, including with SBS, the New South Wales Anti-Discrimination Board and the New South Wales Board of Studies. Welcome, Linda.

LINDA BURNEY MP: Thank you, Verity.

VERITY FIRTH: Alison Whittaker is a legal researcher with the UTS Jumbunna Institute for Indigenous Education and Research. She's also a poet, penning the award-winning books 'Lemons In The Chicken Wire', released in 2016, and 'Blakwork', released in 2018. Between 2017 and 2018, she was a Fulbright scholar at Harvard Law School, where she was named the Dean's Scholar in Race, Gender and Criminal Law. Welcome, Alison.

ALISON WHITTAKER: Thank you, Verity.

VERITY FIRTH: Professor Thalia Anthony is a Professor with the UTS Law Faculty. She is an expert in criminal law, and procedure and Indigenous people and the law, specialising in Indigenous criminalisation and Indigenous community justice mechanisms. Thalia has provided advice and research to the High Court, the United Nations, the Attorney-General's Indigenous Justice Clearinghouse, as well as to Royal Commissions, parliamentary inquiries, Aboriginal Justice Agreements and coronial inquests. Thalia also regularly writes articles in The Conversation, some of which we will be quoting from today, which I highly recommend that you go and read. Welcome, Thalia.

I'll begin my first question by quoting from one of Thalia's articles. It begins:

"I can't breathe, please! Let me up, please! I can't breathe! I can't breathe!". These words are not the words of George Floyd or Eric Garner. They were not uttered on the streets of Minneapolis or New York. These are the final words of a 26-year-old Dunghutti man who died in a prison in south-eastern Sydney, David Dungay Jr.

Worldwide, the Black Lives Matter protests are at a scale many young people have not experienced before. It's galvanised Australians to join ranks with First Nations people who have been calling out issues around policing and deaths in custody in Australia for decades. But why does it take an instance in America to galvanise the broader public to fight for justice for Aboriginal Australians? And I thought we would start with you, Linda.

LINDA BURNEY MP: Thank you, Verity. Hello, Thalia and Alison. And like Verity - and hello to the many people that have joined us today. And, like

Verity, I join in recognising that UTS is on the land of the Gadigal people. I am in downtown sunny Kogarah at my electorate office, which is the land of the Bidjigal people, also of the Eora Nation. The question posed - and thank you, Thalia, for the work that you have done, giving us that perspective about David Dungay, and I noticed his mother, brother and sister played a big role in the Black Lives Matter protest. I think their generosity and grace is a lesson to us all but also their persistence in wanting to know what happened to their son and their brother.

The question on why does it take something in America to galvanise Australia is something I cannot answer, except I think that what has happened in America is that the death of George Floyd, the public nature of it, the fact that we all saw that murder for what it was in realtime, I also think that America is just a land where inequity is so obvious and it seemed to me that the death of George Floyd was more like the straw that broke the camel's back than the catalyst for what really took place. There was a lot of previous deaths. Police violence and brutality was pretty much out of control. I think it's difficult for us in Australia to understand the American Constitution. I think it's Article 2 that is about the right to bear arms. For me, it really is in Australia a remarkable movement perhaps in solidarity with the Floyd family and Americans but it is really about what is terribly unfinished business in this country, the fact that we had the Royal Commission, and I remember it really well, between '87 and '91 in Australia, investigating 99 deaths, no convictions, and since then they - Thalia may know the correct number but over 340 deaths since '91. Some of them very recent, including last November and the two shocking deaths from clear neglect and police violence in WA of women, the death of a woman in Victoria, which should never have happened. So it seems to me that people have seized the moment, and I think what is really interesting about Australia is that it's been so many young people. I am older than all of you and I remember very well the Vietnam moratoriums as a young teenager and the civil rights movements around protesting the Bicentennial and, of course, the end of the reconciliation process.

But what has taken place in Australia is about seizing the moment, in my view, and I am not so worried about what the catalyst is. I think the concern is about what it will deliver and that it doesn't just go off into the distance like the issues around racism that we saw in 2005 and again last year with Adam Goodes. I am not sure that answers the question, Verity, except to say that we have seen a movement across the globe, and Australia has a particular reason to be part of that movement.

VERITY FIRTH: Yes. Alison, do you have anything you want to add to that?

Why has this happened?

ALISON WHITTAKER: Yes, I have been around long enough now, which is actually not that long at all, to remember a very similar conversation happening around 2014 with the death of Michael Brown, the kind of launch of the Black Lives Matter movement, and articulating these very legitimate and foundational racial grievances. The tension that existed between the burgeoning social movement being taken up quite seriously in Australia, and Mob who have been here pushing for justice for their loved ones for such a long time, who found it difficult to achieve more justice if they could not somehow relate their loved one to that movement or somehow generate media attention for that. That's a really foundational problem where it's easy for us to point - I say "us"; it is easy for white Australia to point at America and say, "That's really terrible; what's happening over there could never happen over here" and, as a result, only become attentive to the kind of police violence that happens in the US. But part of that also disguises the very, very serious foundational problem of policing in this country and its attention towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. As a result, it kind of can make us - sorry, make Australia look really blameless in its violence.

From my perspective as a legal researcher, there's also an ancillary problem, kind of related to what Linda was speaking about, in that visibility through the sharing of footage on social media of these murders really brings home the brutality of them, whereas here families have to fight quite hard to release the footage of the death of their loved one, as we have seen a really, really long fight with the family of David Dungay Jr, and similar to the struggle of the family of Ms Dhu, to get footage of her death released. The social movement from the US is about how important it is to make this violence visible, but at the same time it's also an indignity that no family should have to endure. These are not easy choices to make. Obviously, it's a really, really wide, complicated racial problem that's only going to be addressed once we actually tackle colonisation. But that's two aspects of it, in my view, that explain why it is much easier for us to see what is happening in the US and respond to it, rather than actually deal with difficult questions happening here.

VERITY FIRTH: Thalia?

THALIA ANTHONY: Thank you to both Alison and Linda. All I want to contribute really is to say not "Why not?" But "Why not before?". Why didn't especially white or particularly white Australians come forward when David Dungay Jr died screaming "I can't breathe"? Why didn't they come forward when Auntie Tanya Day was picked up sleeping on a train carriage and that

night effectively killed in a police station? Why didn't they come forward when we saw the shooting of Ms Clarke or Kumanjaya Walker? There is a real silence - I know Alison has spoken about this - and that silence goes to the highest levels. We saw with these deaths in custody, hundreds and hundreds in recent years. Not one comment from a Prime Minister, not one expression of shame, and I think it's really problematic that now, as inadequate as it is, the Prime Minister is finally speaking and it related to the death in custody of someone in the United States, and so we can't rely on the goodwill of politicians. We have to demand that they respond. We have to do that collectively and we have to, I think, speak out to almost deafen the silence that we have come to accept because we like to be comfortable in our perception that we live in this bubble but it does not exist upon layers and centuries of oppression, exploitation and violence of First Nations people. So I think, yes, now we have to start rewriting the narratives and mobilising but we have to accept that there's a lot of work to be done.

VERITY FIRTH: Yes. That's a really perfect segue into the next question I wanted to talk about. So your question around: why not before, and all of you have actually talked about this idea of the - it's the lack of capacity for most non-Indigenous Australians to actually deal with the history of Australia, and in a recent radio interview - I am sure everybody knows this; it's now famous - Scott Morrison commented about the George Floyd murder, saying "As upsetting and terrible as the murder that took place, and it is shocking, I just think to myself how wonderful a country is Australia". So there's the Prime Minister's opinion. Then in a later interview, he said, "There was no slavery in Australia" and he followed that up by saying, "I've always said we have to be honest about our history". So that level of denial about the real history of Australia's invasion and colonisation is pretty spectacular but it's actually not that unusual. Thalia, I'll go to you first because you have written about this. Can you talk to us about the history of slavery in Australia?

THALIA ANTHONY: Yes, and just to also add to that, we saw this very overt denial of history as far as it concerned First Nations people and colonisation with John Howard and the so-called culture wars. We are seeing it, including on the attack on universities, which I am sure we will discuss later, but in terms of slavery, these were very widespread practices that spanned over a century in Australia and affected up to 200,000 people.

Just to clarify, slavery is a practice where the employer not only owns the labour but owns the person's whole being. So they control their movements, their relationships, their money, their children, and this effectively happened in Australia from the early 19th century in terms of Aboriginal and Torres Strait

Islander people in the pearling industry, where they were kidnapped and brought into this industry to work as slaves. It happened to up to 70,000 Melanesian people brought to Australia to work in the canefields, and then this practice took on new proportions in the pastoral industry up until the mid-20th century. In this industry, which was hugely profitable, tens of thousands of Aboriginal people were brought in from very young ages to work on stations and to live on the stations under the control of the pastoralist. Often the police would be involved in recruiting Aboriginal workers, Aboriginal families, and that recruitment could be very violent. Yet Aboriginal people were hugely skilled. They took a lot of pride in their work and they had a really strong work ethic. This counters so many stereotypes that we now hear, and I think that legacy and that contribution was really valuable to our entire economy and to where our nation is today. We not only stole their land; we stole labour, we stole their lives, and we profit from this. Aboriginal people in the main did not receive wages, did not receive cash wages. They lived in humpies, they received meagre rations to live off, and so they have enduring poverty because they were not paid, and they continue - I mean, I was speaking to (name) and Warlpiri people who worked on some of these stations a few years back and they continue to talk about this injustice and they continue to fight for their stolen wages. So I think it's really important we both remember and acknowledge this history of slavery, but equally important is that we do something to ensure that there's reparations and justice and truth telling.

VERITY FIRTH: So, Linda, that's my next question, which is: what can we do as citizens, all of us, to force a greater acceptance and acknowledgment of our Nation's history? And what can we do to start --

LINDA BURNEY MP: Thank you, Thalia, for that amazing answer. I think that you saw a grudging kind of apology from the Prime Minister that maybe he had got it wrong, but that was after a fair bit of criticism.

VERITY FIRTH: That is very generous of you, Linda!

LINDA BURNEY MP: Look, I have spent, as you know, Verity, my entire life almost in the pursuit of truth telling and I just think that we have got to recognise that we're not at the beginning of that journey, that your two girls will grow up and come through an education system that tells the truth. They go to a school that has great cultural practices and so forth. I can't remember in the last two years - and I have been to hundreds of schools, where the flag is not flying, where there's not an Acknowledgment of Country at the beginning of assembly. Now, they might seem like symbolic things but they are important things, and symbols I think are very important on how a nation

reflects itself.

It just stuns me in the last two days that we have seen this discussion about the NSW Government's thought on revamping the curriculum. Aboriginal Studies and Aboriginal Perspectives for years 11 and 12 are being an elective - I can say this because I was part of it. I think a lot of it has been wound back but I think universities have - and Jumbunna does an amazing job - have a really important role in educating truth to all of its graduates, and in particular its education graduates, and giving teachers the confidence to be able to go out into schools and have a crack at truth. But essentially - and I'll finish on this point - if you look at the political debate at the moment on where things are at in terms of the Uluru Statement, and the fact that Ken Wyatt's three advisory groups on a way forward have been expressly told they're not to deal with the Uluru Statement. I know that because I have seen the terms of reference. One of those wonderful off-the-back-of-the-truck experiences. So it seems to me that the third element of the Uluru Statement was about our national process of truth telling, and that is so powerful in terms of what has been said about de-colonisation, about knowing what the actual truth of this country is. It seems to me to be a very important thing to pursue. We can all do that as citizens through our local members, through writing to the Prime Minister, through writing to the Minister, but also demonstrating in the work that you all do that this is what academics and professors and people writing more scholarly papers than I - that is a very important thing.

VERITY FIRTH: Alison, do you have anything to add to that?

ALISON WHITTAKER: Yes, a brief reflection that there is a big focus in this space on truth and knowledge deficits as a way to move forward. That's a really important first step, but if we go through this process of acknowledging slavery as a practice here and as a foundational practice of Australia as a colony, and then do nothing about it, then that is not only a wasted opportunity. It's its own kind of violence and betrayal. The knowledge should drive us to do something. Often, as people in universities, we are kind of told to pursue the truth and to pursue knowledge to a particular thing, and we can become obsessed with that as the end goal and forget that is actually the start, and that should include redress schemes for stolen wages but it should also include a really broadened conversation around recreations, which universities in the United States are beginning to take seriously as well.

VERITY FIRTH: Actually, I might use that as a good link to one of the questions I was going to ask around exactly that, the transformative power of education. So we always talk about the transformative power of education as

a great equaliser, a great liberator, that simply producing the facts will make the justice happen. But our own academics have highlighted that just because they have a PhD or just because they're a Professor, that doesn't actually exclude them from being followed by security guards in supermarkets, right? So what role can educational institutions play to make a real change and how do universities own up to their own colonial practices? There's a lot of stuff around the culture of universities that's pretty elitist and pretty colonial in outlook, including the ideas around the sorts of things we teach in the curriculum. So who wants to have a first bang at that? Why don't you go, Alison? What do you think about that?

ALISON WHITTAKER: Sure. If we had the answer, I think we would all be out of a job. Universities are not uniquely colonial institutions but they have an enormous amount of influence not only in the way people are educated, in the case of teachers who are educated to go on to educate other people, but uniquely in producing knowledge that goes out to industry and to the community.

The very unsexy and disappointing - I am sure for academics watching - is that we can't research our way out of that hole. What has to happen is the reversal of the relationship where we give up our designation as experts. For me, even Mob in the academy have to do this as time. And work on resources for the community instead and to be able to think about how universities can be useful in terms of the knowledge that we produce, the resources that we have, but also the ends that we put them towards can be something that is a really powerful way of going forward, and principally that's through relationships. If you want to de-colonise as an institution, especially with the really entrenched racist history of universities on this continent, then you can't lead this research by yourself. It may mean that people like Thalia and I become redundant in the process but, ultimately, I kind of - I have to say I think that's not necessarily a bad thing. We want to do institutional change, and that's what is so unglamorous about this work, that it stops being about what individuals can do by themselves and becomes about the transformation that we can do together with a little bit of humility and also with a willingness to shake up everything that we think we know from this education system.

VERITY FIRTH: Love that answer, Alison. That's brilliant. Thalia, do you have some points you want to add?

THALIA ANTHONY: Yes, it's funny what Alison says about us becoming redundant. Sometimes when I feel starry eyed, I start planning my career when there's justice and I have decided I'm going to be a school teacher when

I don't need to be calling out racism in my career. So I think we have to be realistic that universities are built on ideologies and reproducing those ideologies that feed into the system of elites, the system that enables people to be oppressed in hierarchies. We have to take responsibility that we produce these ideologies, that we produce graduates that go into corporations, that go into institutions that cause harm. As long as there's deaths in custody, as long as there is racist police violence, as long as there is the stealing of children, we have to accept that we're not doing enough, that our institution, that our universities, need to do more. We can never pat ourselves on the back and say that we are doing this right while all of that exists in society.

Having said that, I really do have to give a shout-out to the work of Jumbunna and UTS in supporting Jumbunna's work. It really is I think a leading example in how they work in a space of self-determination. They work with communities. They work with First Nations families. They work on the frontline of protests. **And I think that that's where you see the barriers being broken down, especially between the academy and the ivory tower and communities. It makes me really grateful to be at a place where that work happens, but it doesn't happen easily. I know Jumbunna has come under criticism for that work and they have stood strong in face of that criticism.**

I just want to bring it back to the point I made earlier about the reinvigoration of the culture wars. I feel like with this new funding model for higher education, and what I see as an attack on the humanities, and especially the critical humanities, there is going to be, I think, a re-silencing of some of these issues that we have been speaking about today.

The Government has made it pretty clear in its denialist approach, and I think this funding model is going to make it harder for the humanities to speak up. I don't think that will be any excuse for them not taking a stand, but the message is definitely there, and we absolutely have to resist these proposed changes to higher education.

VERITY FIRTH: I agree. They keep telling us they want complex skills and critical thinking skills and what better to teach that than Arts degrees and Social Science degrees and the things that actually teach people to question.

Linda, you're not at a university. What would you do? Or you can just answer the general conversation.

LINDA BURNEY MP: I just think it is really useful. I'm kind of in awe of panel members, just how incredibly sophisticated everyone is. I remember, Verity,

when the only Aboriginal education program - and I think it was like the late '70s, early '80s - was the AEA program, the Aboriginal education assistance program, at Sydney University. I remember the first program in the university, apart from that, was a thing called the AREP program, the Aboriginal Rural Education Program, at the University of Western Sydney. They were just ground-breaking in producing Aboriginal people to work in schools across New South Wales. Now, every single university in the country has an Aboriginal education program of some sort. So let's not think that there hasn't been extraordinary movement and extraordinary gains and where we are now is a result of work that began back in the late '70s, early '80s, but I do think both Alison and Thalia are correct. Essentially, some of the issues that beset people back then are still around. You think: how the hell is that the case? It's this issue of de-colonisation, the issue of institutional racism, structural racism, which is really what I see much of the discussion about now. But I know what it's like to have kids and have them come home and say that they got strip-searched or they had to spread eagle on a bloody railway station because they're black and they happened to be in the wrong place at the time the cops were around. So we still have got those issues. I think that Australia is a deeply racist place, and the problem is that we have not faced up to it very well. We're being made to face up to it now because of the work of people like Thalia and Alison and yourself. You know, there are still so many people that have never met an Aboriginal person, and kids do get followed in supermarkets and H&M and wherever you go and even - I have even experienced in the last 12 months people getting served in shops before I do, even though I was clearly at the front of the line. These things still happen and you've got to ask: how can it possibly be?

Can I just finish up on this story. So I went back to my 150th school anniversary a few years ago. I was looking pretty flash, as a Cabinet Minister. And it was a small country town and one of the - he would have been an older kid at the school I was at. He is probably - he would have been in his 60s. He still thought it was OK to say to me, "The day you were born was the darkest day in this town's history". And I was so shocked, I just - I couldn't even respond. I just stood up and walked away. So I am not sure what that all means, except to say there is still, as Alison said, so much work to do and I feel really encouraged by people working in the university sector now, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, in saying that, "This is over; we're going to change it".

VERITY FIRTH: I'm now going to go to some of the audience questions because there are so many good ones. So let's get into it. So people can - as I said before, if you want to ask a question, go to the Q&A box, but you can

also up-vote people's questions. I'll ask the ones at the top of the list. The first is from Chelsea Honeysett. What role does the media play in keeping Australians informed? Often we hear of cases in the US but local media neglects to report on cases of abuse to Aboriginal people. Who wants to have a first go at this one? I'll ask you, Linda, because you have to deal with the media all the time. Then I'll pass over to the others. What do you reckon about the role of the media?

LINDA BURNEY MP: There was a time when the National Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation ran, for want of a better term, programs for the very senior A grade media people where they would take them out to Brewarrina or somewhere for two days and it was an immersion. I think there was a time when the senior people in the media - and when I say "senior", I don't mean old; I mean the serious journalist, actually understood - I don't think there's anything like that anymore. And I think the media is under enormous pressure. Quite often the media will just - you give them a press release and they just don't have the time to do anything except go off that press release. But I do also think that the media ownership in Australia is so concentrated and so bloody right wing that sometimes you just feel like pulling your hair out.

The other thing that annoys me with the media in Australia is that they've got their couple of Aboriginal people they will go to for comment all the time and you think there are just so many other people you should be talking to. They say "Well, tell us who they are" and we give them lists but they don't use them. Thalia, for example. So I also think that we should celebrate the indigenous media that's come along as well, but the media is under the pump and it is very difficult. I am really pissed off that the media do not pursue the issues that Ms Honeysett has identified and that's injustice in this country.

VERITY FIRTH: Alison and Thalia?

ALISON WHITTAKER: I wanted to add two points. One is the real need to --

LINDA BURNEY MP: You have frozen?

ALISON WHITTAKER: Can anyone else hear me?

VERITY FIRTH: Yes, we can.

ALISON WHITTAKER: The need to resource black media in this country, that have institutional support for the kind of stories that we want to be telling, in

addition to supporting black journalists in mainstream media organisations. There's a two-pronged approach that needs to happen there. And the other thing - there's a conversation article that I wrote recently that might be useful for - sorry, I don't know whoever asked this question, but there are a number of, I guess, legal systems in place that incentivise silence on deaths in custody in particular, that will - are not themselves the fundamental problem but do definitely impact what families are able to do in terms of their advocacy, and go some way in just illustrating the vast institutional complicity of deaths in custody on this continent. It is in some ways - the silence is enshrined.

VERITY FIRTH: I think we have lost Linda but we will try to get her back. Thalia, you talk about the media too.

THALIA ANTHONY: I just want to add that it is absolutely a situation of silence, but we also need to, I think, understand that the media actively defend police and actively demonise Aboriginal people, especially young Aboriginal boys. There have been studies that show that the media often reproduce verbatim press releases coming from police forces and police unions, and so they're giving the police pretty much a blank cheque to represent their side as they like. By contrast, we consistently see stories - you know, in Sydney, but you go into other places like the Northern Territory and WA, where kids are named and shamed, Aboriginal kids, and so it creates this culture where Aboriginal kids are treated as a problem, are treated as a risk, and that feeds into police violence being legitimised against them and kids being tortured in custody.

So I think the media is absolutely complicit in this violence. I want to say by contrast, though - I'll just keep speaking a bit longer; I am hoping Linda will come back - but I just want to say by contrast that we have a role on social media to really rewrite these stories. I want to acknowledge there has been a strong presence of black tiles coming from the United States, but I want to acknowledge the work of First Nations families in running campaigns around say their names and our responsibility to support those campaigns, and they also manifest in campaigns like justice for Dungay or justice for Ms Dhu. That campaign around saying their name is really important in humanising those people who have been lost, who have been killed by this system. So we need to start supporting the rewriting of stories and the recharacterising of lives to really say that they do matter.

I just want to say, while I get the chance, that we also need to promote the resistance. To give a plug to an upcoming Black Lives Matter rally, and First Nations deaths in custody rally, on Sunday, 5 July at 1 o'clock at the Domain.

This is where our voice can be powerful in resisting that dominant oligarchy of media if we actually turn up. So just to repeat, it's on 5 July at the Domain at 1 o'clock. I think we're forcing the media to listen to our voices if we show up. We can't be ignored anymore.

VERITY FIRTH: And that leads well - I can see that we have Linda's box back. So I am assuming she will emerge back on to the screen soon, but your final words actually feed nicely into a question from Patty Gibson around, can the panel comment on the importance of protest movements for winning justice, both in individual cases and of course from broader reform? Also, do you have any comment on the use of the COVID threat by politicians and media commentators to criticise recent protests and justify repression of future protests? So, Alison, what do you think?

ALISON WHITTAKER: Yes, so protests are the very reason that we're having this conversation, and we have to give them their due respect, I think. They have been on this continent, concentrated on organising by families and by communities. They have done everything possible in their power under great hostility to create safe conditions in which families in particular could be heard in terms of seeking justice for their loved ones. That is the very reason that conversations like this open up. That is where the boundary pushing is. This is just one expression of the movement that's happening but it's not foundational. It's about bringing people along to that broader movement that's actually been driven by the families. That has its own cogent demands that are often ignored unless they protest. I was thinking especially, families who have lost loved ones inside launched a campaign. That was routinely ignored more or less by the recipients of that open letter, but also to some extent by the media, which is quite frustrating. So protest is one tool to get those voices out there. It is certainly not the only tool. So far it's been the one most effective.

VERITY FIRTH: Linda, we have you back. So you have arrived just in time --

LINDA BURNEY MP: Ran out of data, can you believe it!

VERITY FIRTH: The question we are talking about now is the importance of protest movements for winning justice, both in terms of individual cases as well as broader reform. So what do you think about the importance and effectiveness of protest movements?

LINDA BURNEY MP: Do you mean on the street?

VERITY FIRTH: On the street I assume is what we are talking about and linked to that is the use of COVID and whether or not the COVID controversy during the Black Lives Matter protest and how that was used to criticise recent protests.

LINDA BURNEY MP: I love a good protest. I think it's very powerful. Just seeing over the weekend - here we go. Ready? Sorry, folks. Can you see me?

VERITY FIRTH: We can't see you. We briefly saw Mark. Now we can see you.

LINDA BURNEY MP: Here I am. The protests I think are really powerful for two reasons. There's the physical demonstration but they're also really important for the people that participate to understand that there is broad support, that there are many fellow travellers, for whatever the issue is, and in particular with Black Lives Matter and what has flown out of that has been so powerful, and you just look across the world to see how it's been - it's changing things, it's changing curriculum, it's changing practice, it's changing physical space and it would not have happened had there not been - none of those things would have happened had there not been the physical demonstration that we have seen. I think Thalia was talking about also the capacity for social media to generate change as well.

Look, I'll just make a brief comment about the COVID stuff. Obviously, as someone in a very public position like myself, there is the very difficult decision of either to participate in the protest or to participate in a different way by speaking about them importantly, but also following what the social rules were around COVID at the time, but I do think the likes of Andrew Laming and some other politicians blaming the rallies on an increase in COVID is absolutely without justification, without evidence, and reprehensible.

VERITY FIRTH: So we've got a question about curriculum, which I want to ask, but I also really want to ask - we have time to ask them both because there's also a question around whether writing to politicians actually has any impact, which I thought would be a good one to ask Linda. The first question that has got more votes is: is the panel satisfied with the current primary and secondary school curriculum in regards to Indigenous culture? And does it accurately reflect on the history of colonisation? Linda, why don't you take this first and then I'll go to you, Alison.

LINDA BURNEY MP: The real answer is that I don't know. I have lost contact with really what is in the curriculum. I know what used to be there. And I do lots of work with lots of high school students about their year 12 Aboriginal

studies projects, which they all seem to leave until very late but I can't talk! So, Verity, I don't think I'm qualified to answer it, except it would seem to me from public comment recently that there is simply - it is simply not meeting what it should be in terms of young people graduating knowing the truth and being proud of the whole story of Australia. I can only go on the young people I know and they are pretty cool and I am absolutely thrilled with the strength of identity of young indigenous people. But in terms of the curriculum, I just don't think I am close enough to it anymore.

VERITY FIRTH: Alison and Thalia? Alison, do you have a view?

ALISON WHITTAKER: I have a disappointing answer, in that broadly I think the answer is that we're not satisfied, but because I'm not a teacher, I actually can't get into the specifics of it. My mother, Linda, is one of the former AEAs who went on through the AREP program to become teachers. So I do see that there is really a long-term hope that teachers can continue to push in curriculum but also beyond curriculum --

LINDA BURNEY MP: What is your mum's name?

ALISON WHITTAKER: -- with the knowledge that their students need. She has my surname. I'll put it in the chat afterwards. So in some sense, a small glimmer of institutional hope that Aboriginal teachers are carrying. I just hope it's met by the curriculum that's behind them.

VERITY FIRTH: Thalia?

THALIA ANTHONY: I'm going to speak both as the parent of two young primary school children but also as the university lecturer who receives students coming from high school. And I can just say that it's hugely inadequate. I feel like there's good teaching if you do one of the dedicated subjects, but otherwise, it is very much sidelined, and while there are increasing attempts to teach some Aboriginal history, there is a much greater emphasis still on histories of colonisation and on the stories of people associated with colonisation, and I think it's much more normalised than someone doing I guess - and Alison has actually done this type of survey in law - than just looking at the curricula. It's also the types of books that we prescribe in our English teaching. It's how we teach science. It's all these Western norms that pervaded primary and high school teaching that are very subtle but very powerful and it takes a lot of undoing and I don't think we do it well enough but we're absolutely on an agenda to improve how we teach it in law, but it does take a lot of undoing of these assumptions when students do

come to university, and sometimes by that stage, it's too little too late. So we need to start in schools. We also need to start in early childhood education because students are - I mean, children are sponges at that age between 0 and 5 and this is a huge ideological commitment that we must make. I have to say when we talk about protests and when we talk about justice, all these things are linked. Education is intimately linked with colonial powers and the process of de-colonisation. Justice in custody or how we preserve sacred sites, all these dots are connected and I think that, like I said before, if one thing is not working, if one thing is oppressive, everything is oppressive. So no-one is immune in this system.

VERITY FIRTH: That's a really good answer. We only have three more minutes so I'm just going to quickly ask a question. Does writing to politicians actually have any real impact? I think it does if there's --

LINDA BURNEY MP: It does, absolutely.

VERITY FIRTH: If there's enough of the letters.

LINDA BURNEY MP: It does. I tell you what, if you get 10 letters about the same thing, you take notice of it.

VERITY FIRTH: The thing I would say to people is, if it's just a standard form or an email form, that's exactly the same, that has less impact than an actual personally-written letter or a personally-written email, so remember that. Put it into your own words.

LINDA BURNEY MP: I can tell you, someone will read it, and if anything comes in on my private email, I absolutely read everything. So it does make a difference.

VERITY FIRTH: There you go. So I'm just going to say, a final question, two minutes left. How optimistic is the panel about the emergence of these BLM movements and the movements that we're seeing building now, do you think we're beginning to see the catalyst for real recognition or reform or are you optimistic or pessimistic about this moment in history? Linda?

LINDA BURNEY MP: I'm optimistic.

VERITY FIRTH: Alison?

ALISON WHITTAKER: I'm an academic when it comes to this stuff but the

difficulty with optimism is sometimes it can let us off the hook. This movement will keep rolling on if we push it. We can't have this vague, abstract hope in it. We have to turn this moment that's happening right now into meaningful, radical transformative change.

VERITY FIRTH: Thalia?

THALIA ANTHONY: Yes, absolutely. We can be optimists but not as bystander optimists. We need to use our agency and bring people with us. Like I said, it's important to reflect on the rallies that have passed but it's also just, if not more, important to come to the ones that lie ahead, including on the 5th of July.

VERITY FIRTH: In the Domain. Well, thank you so much to the panel. It was just a really wonderful talk with three pretty inspirational women. So thank you so much for being a part of today. One of the things that UTS is still, despite COVID and despite all of the challenges hitting universities at the moment, UTS is still absolutely committed to the building of our Indigenous Residential College, which is going to be a first for Australian higher education. It's a college dedicated to Indigenous excellence in education and Indigenous students coming to live on campus and educate. So thank you very much for joining us today. I personally do feel optimistic but I think you're right. I think optimism also needs to be combined with activism. Thank you everybody for joining us and we will see you soon. Cheers.