

2024 Peter Cullen Trust Water Symposium

Panel Presentation – Kiara Johnson (2023)

Thursday 23 May, 2024
Old Parliament House, Canberra

Acknowledgement of Country

If its not with us, its not for us.

How many of you, when having a glass of water or a cup of tea, think about the water your drink? How many of you have experienced ongoing boiled water alerts and notices from the Department of Health?

How many of us in this room have economically benefited from the poverty, the significant gaps in life expectancy, quality of life and health outcomes, incarceration rates, the economic disparity of First Nations people?

All of us, is the answer.

What have we contributed? What legacy have we left the community with? Have we inspired and empowered?

Are you actively listening, codesigning and empowering rather than consulting our God forbid not at all, and adding to huge pile of desktop research analysis on the problem that you already well and truly know exists.

Do you truly understand or seek to understand, our Aboriginal culture, obligations, family structures, communication methods, and the deeply entrenched structural and institutional racism that exists in our society.

For over forty years we have researched, scribed, and published millions of words, presented, talked a lot, spent millions, if not billions, on trying to solve the remote and regional water supply problem.

Ignorance is no longer acceptable, a lack of accountability and collaborative Government and Industry action is poisoning our children, creating significant impacts on fundamental human right breaches, **like access to clean drinking water.**

In 1985, the then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, the Hon. Clyde Holding MP, called for a public enquiry into Aboriginal Homeland Centres. The Committee was asked by the Minister to enquire into and report on "The social and economic circumstances

of Aboriginal people living in communities and homelands, and the development of policies and programs to meet their future needs.”

The enquiry lasted for 2 years and in March 1987, the then House Standing Committee on Aboriginal Affairs tabled its report referred to as the Blanchard Report. The report made 58 recommendations with the clear intention of improving the economic security and viability of communities and homelands and increasing the level of services available to residents.

These 58 recommendations remain so relevant today with so very little progress achieved in almost 40 years!

Still today, in 2024, First Nations communities are experiencing significant challenges in relation to the supply of adequate and safe drinking water. Over 500 communities lack consistent water quality testing. People in those remote regions are supplied with water that contains levels of uranium, arsenic, fluoride, nitrate, manganese, iron, and microbial contamination that exceed the thresholds set by the Australian Drinking Water Guidelines.

Governments and Industry must hold itself accountable for the lack of action, the talk feasts... all while families are forced to decide between the disconnection of culture, poor health and housing outcomes or allowing their children to drink that water.

Would you allow your children to drink that water?

Awful to imagine, I know, and each and everyone of you in this room, have an obligation, and responsibility to change this reality for approx. 350,000 remote first nations people.

I am privileged to be here today, in speaking with you all.

My name is Kiara Johnson, I am Aboriginal woman from regional South Australia, I am the owner and founder of two businesses: KSJ Consulting and Platinum Civil Construction Group. Both entities are 100% Aboriginal female owned businesses.

Our objective is to revolutionize the lives of Aboriginal Australians. Our mission is action-oriented, aiming for tangible results that enhance lives and transform communities. We create economic opportunities, jobs, and career pathways for Aboriginal Australians through relentless advocacy and collaboration.

Our vision bridges health, social, spiritual, and economic disparities, paving a brighter, inclusive future. Driving parity in health, housing and economic outcomes for First Nations people, is critical to **closing the gap**.

I was born into a system of racism and sexism, I confronted adversity head-on. My path was not paved with accolades, intergenerational wealth, bureaucratic and political networks and connections. It was marked by determination and an unyielding spirit. Breaking through the confines of prejudice, my life's work is dedicated to dismantling these barriers and enjoying the fundamental human rights of things simply like 'clean water' and to simply involved and heard.

I strive to inspire and mentor Aboriginal women, children, and emerging leaders, sharing my knowledge to nurture the next generation. I hope that my contributions will elevate opportunities for change for years to come.

I seek to redefine corporate and social responsibility through environmental, ethical, philanthropic, and economic commitments. I recognize the urgent need to protect our planet and lead by example in addressing climate change.

As a leader, I am focused on creating positive change, spearheading initiatives like diversity, ethical business practices, and sustainability. These efforts have already benefited the environment, created economic opportunities, and fostered social impact.

My journey symbolizes resilience and empowerment against systemic discrimination.

It's a call to challenge norms and create long-term opportunities. Together we can change this narrative, we can ensure open doors for generations to come.

And like the theme of this coming Reconciliation Week, its now or never.