

Dr Chris Sarra quotes

Relational Sovereignty in a Modern Australia 2026

[Stronger Smarter Together – Stronger Smarter](#)

***Relational sovereignty** is not about who dominates whom. It is about the quality of the relationships we choose to cultivate. It insists on dignity, contribution and mutual respect. It rejects both resentment and naivety. It asks not ‘Who looks like us?’ but ‘How do we stand with one another at a higher standard?’*

A confident and principled nation doesn’t narrow the circle of belonging to feel secure. It raises expectations of others and seeks to embrace others at a higher standard. It insists on contribution. It expects mutual respect. It refuses to define itself by fear.

When we honour and embrace the humanity of others, especially those who are different; we do not lose ourselves, we become the best version of ourselves.

General

*We didn’t go to Cherbourg to give the children a sense of being Strong and Smart...
that was inside them already.*

That sense of being Strong and Smart resides in every Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander child.

Speech to Australian Senate 2015

[Chris Sarra's 'Delivering Beyond Indigenous Policy Rhetoric' Lecture: full text and key quotes | SBS NITV](#)

There are three things we can do:-

- 1. Acknowledge, embrace and celebrate the humanity of Indigenous Australians;*
- 2. Bring us policy approaches that nurture hope and optimism rather than entrench despair;*
- 3. Do things with us, not to us!*

When we honour and embrace the humanity of others, especially those who are different; we do not lose ourselves, we become the best version of ourselves.

In fast thinking on Indigenous affairs we often hear things like ‘We’ve tried everything and nothing has worked’ when actually we haven’t tried everything, and we certainly haven’t seriously tried a high expectations relationships policy approach.

You can bring policy approaches to bash us and bash us and bash us.... Or you can bring policy approaches that offer hope, and a sense of pride, and a feeling that we can trust and walk with you into what I would call a stronger smarter, more honourable future, where your emancipation is bound up in mine.

Do things with us, not to us!

High expectations rhetoric is meaningless without high-expectations relationships.

If politicians and other people operate from a philosophical basis that acknowledges and embraces the humanity of Indigenous Australians, there is scope for policy approaches and programs to nurture hope and optimism rather than entrench despair.

*My greatest intellectual insight of the last two years, I think, is understanding the profound difference between high expectations ‘of’ Aboriginal people versus the notion of high expectations ‘with’ Aboriginal people; high expectations rhetoric versus a high expectations **relationship**.*

We as Aboriginal people want to be on a journey with you. This journey however, must be one that enables us to be the best that ‘we’ want to be, not a journey in which we are forced to be who ‘you’ want us to be.

If however we start the relationship in which our strengths and humanity are acknowledged and embraced, and we are convinced of an authentic sense of hope for all, then our hearts can truly beat closely together

NAIDOC Person of the Year 2016

[NAIDOC award highlights passion for helping kids realise their stronger smarter potential | Indigenous](#)

[NAIDOC 2016: Professor Chris Sarra receives Person of the Year Award | SBS NITV](#)

[Chris Sarra: 'We are stronger than we believe and smarter than we know', NAIDOC Person of the Year - 2016 — Speakola](#)

We are stronger than we believe. And smarter than we know.

The schools we create must be places that Aboriginal children and parents can connect with. They must be places in which it is OK to dream great things. They must be places that say to children, 'I believe in you'

We keep doing what we do because it works. In ten years I have worked with over two thousand community leaders in more than five hundred schools across Australia. The work is hard but we are delivering results effectively and efficiently and Indigenous students are succeeding and have a stronger, smarter future."

Sarra, C (2018). Celebrating difference: Transcending contamination with humanity. Griffith Review 60: First Things First.

[Celebrating difference - Griffith Review](#)

Embracing the humanity of Aboriginal Australians, and the positive mediation of our sense of being Aboriginal, will enable white Australia to understand and share all that is superb and exceptional about us. With this sharing, their connection to country significantly deepens then from two hundred and thirty years to sixty-five thousand years. With a deeper, more respectful and authentic relationship we can transcend any challenge we face together.

Such people think policy success lies in making Aboriginal Australians just like everybody else without truly understanding that we actually can be the same, and at the same time we can be magnificently different. The policy intent here has always been about taking Aboriginal Australians from surviving to complying. We must instead plot a course that takes us from surviving to thriving.

NITV interview 2017

['I can't control the whole school, but I can control the culture of my classroom' | SBS NITV](#)

Dr Chris Sarra talks to The Point's Karla Grant about the challenges of working in remote communities and lifting educational standards.

If I'm a principal of a school and I've got kids who are not turning up to my school or our school, then I've failed. I think the only way that we can have a chance at addressing some of those challenges is to stop being victims to the complexities of that circumstance and put a mirror up and say ok let's think about the things that we control, let's think about the things that we're accountable for, let's think about the things that we get paid to do here, and let's set about influencing those things.

We have to be mindful of the things that we control and as a school teacher I may not have control over the whole school culture, but I can control the culture of my classroom and the relationships with children that exist within it.

The ultimate answer is to be in a relationship, a high-expectations relationship with children and with their community.

NITV 2015

[Communities are taking initiative to boost Indigenous education rates | SBS NITV](#)

We have to make our classrooms and our schools meaningful and we have to kind of get kids to understand and communities and parents to understand that school is a place where we would go where we can get some kind of worthwhile learning outcomes.

The Guardian 2015

The Guardian [We must look to our humanity to solve the crisis of Indigenous incarceration | Chris Sarra | The Guardian](#)

If programs are designed in a way that acknowledge and embrace our humanity and culture, then the people involved in those programs necessarily must do the same. With this kind of policy, programs, people alignment, sustainable transformation can be achieved.

The central ingredient to a high expectations relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia is one's ability to acknowledge and embrace the humanity of others.

It provides the fundamental basis upon which we are challenged at a policy level, at a programs level, and at a people level.

Book chapter 2012

Sarra, C. (2012). Reflections of an Aboriginal school principal on leading change in an Aboriginal school: Australia. In Wrigley, T., Thomson, P., & Lingard, R. (Eds). *Changing Schools: Alternative Ways to Make a World of Difference*. Routledge: Oxon.

Many headteachers pride themselves in the rhetoric of ‘All kids are the same in our school!’ This rhetoric sounds so right, yet creates a binary that can undermine the wellbeing and esteem of those students who are obviously ‘different’. The binary suggests that ‘mainstream’ or ‘same’ is good inside the school gate, and diversity should be ignored. It is like saying to children who are culturally different, ‘Leave your cultural identity at the gate because it has no relevance here!’

Book chapter 2010

Sarra, C (2010). **Stronger Smarter Approaches to Indigenous Leadership in Australia**. In: Snyder, I.& Nieuwenhuysen, J. *Closing the Gap in Education? Improving Outcomes in Southern World Societies*. Monash University Publishing.

It is a fundamental human right of our children to have an education that makes them stronger, in a way that enables them to develop a rich and positive sense of their own cultural identity; and smarter, in a way that enables them to participate in a modern society as any other Australian would. If schools only seek to make Indigenous children smart, without developing any positive sense of cultural identity, then we do little more than assimilate them into the mainstream. In this circumstance we all lose.

Griffith Review 2006

Sarra, C. (2006). **Armed for success**. In: Griffith Review Edition 11 – Getting Smart: The battle for ideas in education. [Armed for success - Griffith Review](#)

All schools should play a part in getting Aboriginal children to reflect positively on their identity so that being Aboriginal is seen as something truly great. The reality, if we do nothing, is that the society we live in will imply that they are inferior, and the greatest tragedy is that many Indigenous youth will believe this.