

Investing in the next generation of Aboriginal women leaders

An interview with Karen Milward - 8 October 2020



Connection Matters Radio (CMR): On the 18th of August this year, the state government announced that it was working with Aboriginal women from across the state to design what it calls a culturally safe and community led leadership program for future Aboriginal women leaders. On that same day, the inaugural meeting was held of the Aboriginal Women's Leadership Advisory Group, attended by eight female Aboriginal leaders, including Dr. Esme Bamblett, Jill Gallagher, Leanne Miller, and a host of others. Leading the program is Yorta Yorta woman, Karen Milward, and she joins me today on Connection Matters Radio. Karen, welcome back to the program.

Karen: Thank you, Charles. Pleasure.

CMR: Karen, let's start off by gaining an understanding of what government and community expects to achieve with this program in the longterm.

Karen: Well, Aboriginal women are currently underrepresented in leadership roles in Victoria so this is the main thing that we're trying to actually address. We want more Aboriginal women to be in leadership and decision-making roles in Victoria, nationally, wherever they choose to go. We want that opportunity to be available to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women in Victoria.

We're running a series of meetings online because of COVID and we're going to explore issues that Aboriginal women are

facing in leadership roles or what is actually the challenge for Aboriginal women to actually be leaders. There are not enough programs? Are there not enough opportunities? Does the workplace not allow you to participate in those things? That's what we want to explore.

Then we want to put a really effective, wibzang Aboriginal women's leadership program together. We've actually got until close to the end of next year to develop it so we've got lots of time, which is great.

CMR: What about funding?

Karen: Funding for the actual program, we've got money through the Office for Women at the Department of Premier and Cabinet. They're funding the whole process.

Then we're actually going to have a co-design process in March next year, where we'll identify 15 Aboriginal women who we think might be interested to actually co-design the program with us, based on the consultations that undertake.

CMR: Now, when you're talking about Aboriginal women leaders, I assume that you're talking right across the broad spectrum of government, corporate, and community.

Karen: Absolutely. My challenge is encouraging your everyday person who would like to aspire to do other things to

actually get involved. Not thinking it's just for the usual suspects.

CMR: In building up the program itself, and you've mentioned that you have a goal to develop that by the end of 2021, is that right?

Karen: That's right.

CMR: You're going to need to do a significant amount of work in community consultation. It's obviously going to be tough given coronavirus restrictions. That's the first challenge. Do you believe that there are lessons to be learned and heeded from community consultations undertaken previously by organisations such as the Treaty Advancement Commission, the First Peoples Assembly of Victoria, and PricewaterhouseCoopers Indigenous Consulting?

Karen: Yes, absolutely. I think it's a challenge doing a consultation via Zoom on the screen because we were intending to actually go out regionally, face-to-face, because that's the way you do things in community. So it's a bit of a challenge to do that, but we basically got two sessions in each of the regional areas and then four sessions for Metro, and we've got a couple of Saturday sessions for Metro in there as well, just to cater for people who are working and can't make other sessions. We've also got some specialists targeted consultations as well. So we're looking at talking to Aboriginal women in business, talking to Aboriginal women who are CEOs of community controlled organisations. The peak bodies, we're doing a separate consultation, and also with the Koorie Youth Council.

CMR: Karen, do you see opportunities to partner or liaise at least with the nine Victorian universities given that right across the broad spectrum of tertiary learning in this state, there are more and more considerations being given to get our young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, male and female, into their courses and graduating?

Karen: Yes, absolutely. I think we'll be talking to universities as well because they

might have some programs and there might be some elements of a program they're delivering that could be utilised in the program we develop. We want to look at all avenues and we want to have guest speakers as part of the program. The universities might be able to identify who those key players are too. There might be some young Aboriginal women that they want to target to be part of the program.

CMR: Once developed, do you envisage the program to be ongoing or just for one set of future women leaders?

Karen: Well, we have to pilot the program so that will be the final thing that we do, but it will be up to the advisory group to actually, I guess, lobby government to continue that on and to offer it at different times in a year.

CMR: You mentioned before and we've restated that you intend to have the program developed by the end of next year. When do you expect the pilot program to commence?

Karen: We will commence to the pilot program either November or December next year.

CMR: How long do you envisage the program actually going for?

Karen: Well, that's the big thing. That's one of the questions that we're asking. Is it a two-day, three-day, five-day, a monthly program? What is it? What does it look like? We want to do something different, a bit more outside the normal general programs that are delivered in the leadership space. I'm quite excited actually to see what people actually come up with.

CMR: Off the top of your head, what were some of the key points that were brought up in that inaugural meeting held by the advisory group on the 18th of August?

Karen: Making sure that we give the opportunity for all women who want to participate, that they actually get to participate. We're very open. I'm working with others and the three of us are very flexible, so if we get to a point where we think that we're missing certain things from people, then we're very flexible to talk to people about making sure that those things are included.

But I think the other key thing is having people involved in the program that are very inspiring and coming from a strengths-based approach rather than a deficit approach for Aboriginal women. But we might have non-

Aboriginal speakers. Someone who was suggested was Julia Gillard. We're leaving it open, basically to what people think should be included.

CMR: Karen, the consultations are taking place through October and November, and we'll provide a link to the schedule of those on the Connection Matters Radio website. Karen, what are you hoping to achieve through these consultations?

Karen: We're hoping that Aboriginal women that we consult with will actually give us the core components to put the Victorian Aboriginal Women's Leadership Program together. That'll be the curriculum. That'll be identifying key speakers, the types of topics we should be covering. Determining how long the program should be, so whether it be two, three, five days or a series of modules delivered over a year.

It could look very, very different to standard programs that are delivered. I'm quite excited to actually get those ideas from people that we talk to.

CMR: Karen, when do you expect the first consultations to take place?

Karen: Our first consultation will be held for the Loddon Mallee region on the 15th of October at 9:30.

CMR: That will be via Zoom?

Karen: Yes, that will be via Zoom.

CMR: People can register for that where?

Karen: Through the link, the Eventbrite link. I'll send it to you, Charles, to put up on the site.

We will put it up on our website and of course share across all our social media channels as well. How many subsequent consultations do you have planned at this stage or do you expect to conduct?

We have two consultations targeting each of the regional areas and then we have four Metro consultations as well, and then we've got a six targeted consultations.

CMR: After the consultations, what's the next step?

Karen: The next step is that we have to compile the report from all the consultations. Then we meet with the Aboriginal advisory group to get feedback on what people think. Then we start compiling questions for the co-

design process. Then we invite women to participate in co-designing with us, and that will be a five-day intensive, basically.

CMR: Karen, I see the need to catch up with you several times over the next 18 months to gauge the progress of the program and wishing you and the advisory team all the best in the work towards this. We'll speak again soon.

Karen: Oh, you're very welcome, Charles. Pleasure.

If Aboriginal women have any questions, they can just contact me through my email or on my phone on 0407 867 863.

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