



Western Australian Curriculum

Humanities and Social Sciences: History

Pinjarra Apology Curriculum Project

Full Interview Video | Transcript

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His Excellency the Honourable Chris Dawson AC APM

Governor of Western Australia

&

Mrs Darrilyn Dawson

for

Pinjarra Apology Curriculum Project

Full Interview Video

TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWER

0.01 – So, first question, Governor. Initially, can you explain what the role of the Governor is and what you do?

GOVERNOR CHRIS DAWSON AC APM: Governor of Western Australia

The role of the State Governor is to really administer the executive elements of the state — in the sense that I chair the Executive Council of Government.

I don't make government decisions.

What I do is administer the constitutional part of the way that the state is administered. That means when a government is to be formed, I issue writs for an election.

I ask the Electoral Commissioner to conduct an election. Once a result comes back from the community and they register their votes, the votes are counted, I then make a decision on whether there is a sufficient decision based out of the election and whether a government can be formed.

I then invite whichever party has sufficient votes as to whether they would form or could form a government, and provided that takes place, then I appoint a government. So, I swear in the Premier, the Cabinet, and indeed open Parliament – and that is the important constitutional work to actually form government.

So, basically, I don't participate in the everyday running of the government, but I have an important step away from the politics, and, then, that way our democracy is formed.

On the day-to-day business of government, that is run up at Parliament House, and the process from there is once debates have been had in Parliament, for instance, and they want to either form new legislation or amend existing legislation, those sorts of decisions run through both houses of Parliament. Then any legislation in the form of bills will come to me, and I then get briefed by the Executive Council of Government, which I chair.

That's all the key decisions that a cabinet will make, whether it be through senior appointments, the forming of departments, or the acquittal of monies in the form of what they call supply, and I then do the constitutional work to ensure that it's all done according to the way Western Australian law is applied.

The second part of my job is ceremonial, and that is where I will confer honours and awards for people. They can range from a member of the community who may be volunteering to help the good of the community, and, or they may be doing wonderful scientific research, through to people that do brave deeds and I can honour them on behalf of all West Australians.

And in that way, that ceremonial element also continues through to important events, such as Anzac Day, Remembrance Day, significant moments in our history in which I can, as the head of state, I'm representing the King, and in that sense I can confer awards once it's been through all the normal processes. And I do that basically on behalf of all West Australians to thank them for their service in whatever form they're deserving.

The other part of the role, and I do that together with my wife, we are co-patrons of over 100 different organisations, or we call them patronages, and that way we can advocate, we can encourage, we can support in a practical sense of these community groups. Many of them are volunteer groups, or there may be some that have both government and charitable support from the community, and they're often those individuals and those groups that do wonderful work within the community. So, it's really a three-part role, and my wife and I share a lot of that community work together.

INTERVIEWER

04.30 – And how would you compare what you do today, your role today, with what the role of the Governor used to be, going back to the very early governors of the state?

GOVERNOR CHRIS DAWSON AC APM: Governor of Western Australia

So, the first white settlement in Western Australia was in 1826 at Albany, as we now know it.

It was called Frederickstown, or King George Settlement, and in experience, that was actually part of the then colony of New South Wales. And that has been the first instance where white settlement came. Of course, we had Aboriginal Australians that had been here for thousands of years.

So, in terms of governors, the first governor appointed to Western Australia, it was then a British colonial, you might call it, outpost —formed in Perth in 1829 on what was then known as the Swan River Settlement. And the first — in fact, he was a lieutenant governor at the time —James Stirling, later to be knighted Sir James Stirling, who became the first governor proper.

And since that time, it was really under British colonial rule, and it was a near autocracy. There was no elected form of government. Politicians and parties hadn't yet been formed. And there was an executive council put in place in about 1832.

But again, it was really an administration under the authority, really, of the British government. And, while it was literally on the other side of the world, it could not be described as a representative form of government. So, the governor then had a very clear administrative role in administering law and order, in securing sufficient supplies and money.

In fact, James Stirling went back to London for two years — between 1832 to 1834 — because the then colony was not actually operating very well at all.

They were running out of money. The settlers that had come in here didn't have sufficient supply. And, so, when he returned in 1834, there was a bit more support provided by the British

government. And, in that sense, between then, really up until 1901, it was a British colonial settlement.

So, since 1901, there have been many other governors appointed. I'm the 34th governor since Stirling's appointment. And the role of the Governor today is very different. It is really acting with the advice of the elected government of the day, and I explained earlier how that's formed.

INTERVIEWER

07.40 – In 1834, the first governor, as we now know, went down to Pinjarra on a punitive trip because of things that had been happening in the colony. Briefly describe how you came to know about that incident, and what you thought of it when you ... when you first heard about it.

GOVERNOR CHRIS DAWSON AC APM: Governor of Western Australia

Well, I'd known of the matter in Pinjarra, which has been variously described between a skirmish, as Stirling described it, a battle, which has been a common descriptor.

And then there have been a number of people, particularly led by our traditional owners, the Aboriginal people, and some academics and historians who have in more recent times described it as a massacre. Now, most Western Australians, I put, would've heard of something that occurred down at Pinjarra, but it has been described in different ways.

I wanted to understand what was the truth of this matter, and I, in fact, asked researchers to do further work, so I could better understand what had taken place.

Once that research was conducted, it really affirmed to me what my initial thoughts were. This was not, as was described by Stirling, as a skirmish. We know that there had been, in fact, tragedies on both the Aboriginal side and indeed white settlement.

People had been killed in early, what some may describe as frontier incidents or battles, where there had been reprisal attacks, where both Aboriginal people and some white people had been killed or injured. Often it was a dispute over land, over the killing of native animals for food, or indeed settlers' livestock which had been also killed for food. And those disputes at times then resulted in violence.

However, the matter at Pinjarra was different. Different in the sense that I was aware that Governor Stirling had led an armed party of 25, and they comprised of people with military experience and policing experience. They were all armed, bar one person out of the 25, who happened to be the Surveyor General.

And I was aware that there had been some disputation on how many people had actually been killed. As a former police commissioner, I was aware that this was in fact part of a party led by a captain, later described as a superintendent of the Mounted Police, who had been injured at Pinjarra and died some days later.

Another soldier had been injured. But I was also aware a greater number of men, women, and — we now know — children had also been killed and/or injured in that. And there's always been a dispute over how many.

That concerned me because it was not sufficiently well understood across the community.

So, I wanted to, really, firmly establish, as much as I could, what exactly had happened, because Stirling had said 15 men had been killed on the Aboriginal group. And the tribe there, known as the Bindjareb Noongar people, were a group that had come under attention of settlers, and Stirling had no doubt been, and there is no doubt about this, lobbied by settlers to say, 'This tribe is causing too much trouble, and they need to get sorted out.'

Remembering that Governor Stirling had only just returned from two years in London in August 1834. By October, he had planned to take these 25 men in an armed party down there. It took him two days to ride on horseback down there, and he encountered the group who were camped on what is now known as the Murray River in Pinjarra.

But the dispute has always been: was this an occurrence that just happened? Was it planned? How many people were killed? And where, if any, was there any fault?

So, I was not satisfied that, in fact, the truth had actually been very clearly established. There were opposing views, both at an academic level and at a community level, where there was a lack of certainty on exactly what went on.

I'd also been approached by a number of Aboriginal people, including Aboriginal academics, who had said, 'Governor, do you intend to do anything about this?' Well, in fact, I had — because I'd already commissioned a researcher, and a number of my staff at Government House, to in fact go and look at any primary source information from state archives.

So, that took place. Once the research had been conducted, and we had tremendous assistance from the State Records Office, I was invited to look at original primary source documents, and I'm talking about handwritten documents by both Governor Stirling and the Surveyor General, John Septimus Roe.

Once I'd personally read those documents, it became, to me, abundantly clear that, one, this was planned by Governor Stirling himself; two, personally led by the Governor; and three, that this was no skirmish.

And I came to the very firm view it was also not a battle. Because 25 men, 24 of whom were well-armed with muskets, had come up upon the Bindjareb Noongar people, who had their weapons with them in the form of spears and shields.

But when that confrontation took place, in the words written down by both John Septimus Roe, the only unarmed member, who actually had kept a field book in which he wrote contemporaneous notes — and having had the research completed and then personally read them myself, made it abundantly clear in his description that the tribe of Bindjareb people had been surrounded from three sides and then had moved into the water of the Murray River and had been trapped and surrounded there. And in the words that I read, that were written by people there at that scene, were surrounded for over an hour while the shooting took place.

That, to be candid, made it quite clear to me that this was no skirmish and no battle. This was a massacre, and the truth needed to be told.

And so it, for me, was an unequivocal choice to ensure that the grievances, that I believe were justified, by the Aboriginal people was that the truth had not been made abundantly clear that, in fact, it was a massacre, and it should be described as such.

What followed from there was that I felt it also very important, as it was then a colonial administration under a governor, if anyone should try and make amends and speak about this, it really should be someone holding the office of governor.

This was no longer a matter that I believed should be led by an elected political figure, such as the Premier or relevant ministers. Because the state of Western Australia was not formed until some 66 years later. This was under British rule, led by a governor, so it should be, in fact, a matter that the governor needed to address.

I did inform King Charles III about what my intentions were, and then there was another process that had to follow. Despite my intention, I needed to make sure this was done the right way.

INTERVIEWER

18.13 – Mrs Dawson, you've been a teacher and an educator for almost your entire professional career. What did you know about the Battle of Pinjarra — skirmish, massacre — in Pinjarra?

DARRILYN DAWSON: *Teacher, principal and educator*

Virtually nothing. I was actually brought up in an area where lots of the Noongar children — I went to school with lots of Noongar students and children. They were just friends that I played with at school. I had no idea about any of this, and I'm only learning more about it now. I had heard as a young adult about it, probably when I was at university, and it was described then about it being a skirmish, but never were any of the details available as far as I was aware.

INTERVIEWER

19.08 – And so, even though you'd been around Noongar families as a young lady, and then obviously came into contact with Noongar families as a teacher and an educator, and then a principal, did it surprise you that this incident and the details around it were not more widely known and taught about?

MRS DAWSON: *Teacher, principal and educator*

It did surprise me because it's critical, especially in Western Australia. It's an example of something that happened, and I as a teacher, and as you mentioned, a principal, thought it would be something that we would've learnt, and it could've been part of our shared history, which could've actually been addressed and discussed and could've been part of reconciliation a lot earlier.

INTERVIEWER

19.57 – Governor, did you have any doubts or second thoughts when you were considering what you should do in terms of an apology?

GOVERNOR CHRIS DAWSON AC APM: *Governor of Western Australia*

Look, I reflected on this a long time. I thought it needed, for me personally, deep consideration because, one, I was aware, having lived in both the country and the city, worked for now 50 years amongst the West Australian community, and having both lived and worked with Aboriginal people as well, I was aware of the need to tread very carefully through this, accepting that you can't always get consensus.

But at the same time, if I arrived at a particular point personally, it was not for me to then go on this course to individually try and work my way through this.

While I had arrived at a particular point of getting much better primary source information, I felt it most important that I needed to actually understand from Aboriginal people themselves. And I also felt that I should not be, both in a figurative sense or a real sense, ride a horse down to Pinjarra and try and correct a wrong. I needed to do this in a culturally safe and appropriate way.

So, in fact, aide-de-camp, my senior aide-de-camp, who works full time with me, is an Aboriginal man. He's the first Aboriginal person in some 196 years to actually be appointed to work at Government House. And I asked him, as an Aboriginal man, to lead some discussions, and he advised me that he would only do so with the advice and the authority of Aboriginal elders. And they needed to talk to the traditional owners at Pinjarra.

And so, we ensured that first, this was done by Aboriginal people in an appropriately cultural way. Once that dialogue had occurred and I was advised that the traditional owners in fact wanted me to go down and speak with them, then and only then was it proper for me to then approach the Pinjarra Aboriginal people and say to the Bindjareb mob: 'Thank you for the invitation. I feel ready to talk to you.'

And that took over some five or six months of very careful dialogue, and culturally safe way to do that, at both a senior Aboriginal eldership — and that discussion took place with the traditional owners of the Bindjareb Noongar people. And once the Bindjareb people said to me, 'Come down, please,' then and only then was I prepared to go down there and speak with them.

INTERVIEWER

23.43 – How did you decide on what words you were going to use in the actual apology itself?

GOVERNOR CHRIS DAWSON AC APM: Governor of Western Australia

This was probably one of the reasons why it did take some careful judgment. I've been in law enforcement for 46 years. I'm used to working with primary evidence. Things such as hearsay or third-hand or opinions — for me, mean little.

They're certainly not totally irrelevant to listen to. But having been through the exacting responsibility of putting evidence before a court of law, I wanted to ensure that the primary sources were the ones, that is, eyewitnesses, other persons.

Now, the challenge has always been on something that's happened nearly 200 years ago, where on one part, on the Noongar people. part, their strength in storytelling and in oral tradition was the way, in fact, of passing on their knowledge, and continues to be a very important strength.

At the same time, in the way that courts of law, for instance, or indeed the broader community, be it at education levels and throughout the community, the written documentation, of course, gives weight to people that have been there and actually can describe exactly what they saw, and it's recorded.

That was, for me, vitally important to ensure that I didn't put my own inflection onto this. I'd formed a view, but that view was one that had to take in a very broad set of information.

And I decided that when I did have to make a public statement, one, it would be at the invitation of the Aboriginal people, but two, I would stick verbatim to the words and the descriptions by people that were there at the time, as opposed to a historical context which can be of use, but they were

not eyewitnesses. And opinions can be formed, but the best evidence is always for those that are at the scene.

INTERVIEWER

26.28 – What did it feel like to be standing on that country and to say those words, and to hear the reaction that you got from them?

GOVERNOR CHRIS DAWSON AC APM: Governor of Western Australia

I was careful to ensure that the words that were said were, one, the truth. Two, I was and remain well aware that that can be a very confronting situation for all parties involved. One, loss of lives and tragedies always bring with them emotion, both from victims, both from perpetrators, from anyone connected with a tragedy.

But being in such an historical context, I was also well aware of the office that I'm privileged to occupy as governor, that this is no slight statement. This is an important, I call it waypoint, in our history, and it's a shared history.

One where I felt it critically important that I do not inflect my own views, but I simply go there on the right cultural invitation and, when invited so, that I speak the truth as we found it.

And that truth needs to be told to ensure that, as all West Australians, as all Australians, that one we're better informed, as my wife has already said, and I was the same. I didn't have all that information to make my mind up before. But I had now arrived at a point where it was abundantly clear to me, and I felt it a need, in fact, a duty and an obligation, to ensure that Western Australians, and indeed the broader Australians, understand what happened here.

Why? Not just as a recording of an historical fact, but we all know that this term reconciliation means different things to different people.

I think the ordinary, reasoned Australian, whether you are an Aboriginal Australian or a non-Aboriginal Australian, they want to make a decision based on facts, and they want to understand why.

For me, this was not making a statement to say, 'Sorry, this was wrong, and I apologise as a governor for the actions of a predecessor.'

Some can contest that and say, 'Well, what utility is that?' Well, I think it's critically important that, in fact, if I'm able to make some headway as a governor, then that is a very important — again, I describe it as a waypoint. I can't tie a ribbon around a historical tragedy and say, 'Well, the governor of today has gone down and said sorry.' That is not reconciliation in its complete form. It's an important step.

I can't put a ribbon around a 200-year-old tragedy and say, 'Well, let's just park that there, and say we are a different country now, and we move on.' I think for Australians to move together, we need to actually understand, appreciate the full perspectives, and then we continue to share our shared history and move forward.

INTERVIEWER

30.18 – Mrs. Dawson, give us some of your reflections and memories of the reaction on the day and the days after to the Governor’s speech at Pinjarra. What was the overriding feeling that you got talking to people about that?

MRS DAWSON: Teacher, principal and educator

It was a very powerful response. There were fellow principals who came because they were principals of local schools there, and their first impression was this information had to be shared with the schools and the children in Western Australia in particular, and particularly to get this information into the classrooms of the children as young as possible, because that's where you break the cycles and the continual trauma, et cetera.

That's where you can get children growing up with a new normal of this information and how they can work together with everybody to make Western Australia a better place with an understanding and a common understanding of our history.

INTERVIEWER

31.27 – There were local school children present to hear the Governor's apology, and there also, the younger family members of the traditional owners, one of whom actually stood at the Governor's knee while he was delivering the apology. [Mrs Dawson: Exactly] What did, as I say, as a person who has dedicated their lives to education, how did that make you feel?

MRS DAWSON: Teacher, principal and educator

That was fantastic because it showed an example of people working together, moving forward, and accepting each other, and I think that was a wonderful example right the way through.

INTERVIEWER

32.02 – So, Governor, you touched on it, but what do you think the fact of this apology happening will mean going forward into the future — short term and medium term, I suppose — in terms of what it means to the Pinjarra mob, but also to reconciliation more widely in Western Australia?

GOVERNOR CHRIS DAWSON AC APM: Governor of Western Australia

Well, words alone won't reconcile harms of the past. It has to be backed up by a course of action in which we can work together.

One practical and symbolic way of doing that was that I had, in my time of reflection here at Government House, walked the gardens and walked around a very old olive tree planted in 1835 by Governor Stirling — you know, a year after this massacre.

And the more I considered what to say, and when to say it, and how to say it, I thought, ‘Well, what then? What could take place from there?’ And it dawned on me that an olive branch, of course, is an international sign of peace. Why would I not then provide an olive branch?

Better than that, I saw little olive trees propagated from the olive seed itself growing. Why would we not then offer a living tree as a symbolic gesture of reconciliation? And the poignancy and irony of this was that this living olive tree had grown from, propagated from, the original olive tree planted by Governor Stirling, who led this party to Pinjarra.

I was then really overwhelmed by the response of the Bindjareb Noongar people, who in reciprocity said, 'Well, we will give you a jarrah tree — a local Australian tree.' And so we exchanged trees, and we will be planting them. The eucalyptus jarrah tree will be planted next to the olive tree here at Government House in Perth, and the olive tree will be planted at Pinjarra.

You can say, 'Well, they're symbols. They're symbols of what?' Well, the beauty of this symbolism is that the European tree's, in fact, it's described as a Europa olive tree. It's a European olive. And I come from European stock.

My forebears arrived here in 1830, just before this happened. And in our history, as a white Australian, this olive tree that will be planted in Pinjarra and the one that's growing here, the roots go down into the same Australian soil. They get watered by the same rain clouds over Western Australia. They share the same sunlight as our eucalyptus trees.

So, the symbolism of actually having a native Australian eucalyptus jarrah tree, received from our First Nations Bindjareb Aboriginal people, to grow side by side with a European olive tree is, in fact, a dual symbol of reconciliation. We live together. We're sharing the same soil together.

We can grow together, and we can strengthen as these trees grow, as roots grow in the ground. They're both magnificent species of trees that grow for hundreds and hundreds of years. Indeed, some thousands.

As they grow, I believe this is a really pragmatic and also visible symbol of how we can, with both Aboriginal people and non-Aboriginal Australians, grow together and keep going forward together with our shared history.

INTERVIEWER

36.46 – And finally, Governor, what, when you think back to those many hours and days and months you spent pondering this — do you have, you obviously have no regrets or compunction about having done it, despite some people saying that the apology wasn't welcome?

GOVERNOR CHRIS DAWSON AC APM: Governor of Western Australia

These matters always bring up emotion. I think whenever there is a tragedy, perspectives are formed. Sometimes they're not formed fully.

I think this process has given me confidence that if we listen more than talk, that we understand with all the information that we can glean from these circumstances, that helps us all as Australians to actually both understand the perspectives of the past but also the present.

It is a matter that I feel is so important for us as a nation and us as a state, that if we step through this the right way, with respect, and what I received in bounds of experience now, where I have listened carefully to the grievances that have been brought forward and understood that until, in fact, we listen and we respect our shared history, we will not fully develop as a nation that shares both a wonderful historical past, some — clearly — troubles that have occurred since white settlement has done.

But white people of Australia share a country with our Aboriginal Australians, and if we are going to further mature and grow as a nation, we must accept, as a nation, this shared history is one that we can strengthen each other, as opposed to pull each other apart.

And I think we are seeing around the world where this is not the only place where a colonial form of government and settlement has really collided into an indigenous culture, and Australia is not unique in this.

But we can be a shining example of where we respectfully acknowledge that what's happened in the past is now an opportunity for us to go together and strengthen our nation as a shared country — in what I believe strongly is the most wonderful country in the world. And we can, and will, I believe, get better by this process, where we can better understand where we come from respectfully and how we can move forward purposefully.

INTERVIEWER

40.05 – Finally, Mrs. Dawson — to anyone, to people, in classrooms, both learning there and teaching there, what would your message be about this process and what we can learn from it?

MRS DAWSON: Teacher, principal and educator

I think it's a complicated process because having been in a classroom, it is very difficult — because people who have no understanding of this would not want to make a mistake. So, therefore, it's easier sometimes to ignore it completely and don't mention it.

So, I think understanding of this, and a discussion in the community with the authority and the permission of the people from Pinjarra, I think it's a really good start to set a precedent of how these things can be incorporated into the curriculum that we have.

Not to add more and make it more complicated, but to actually have information and some things in there that classroom teachers can learn about, and they can share that, so that the children then have that information when they move forward.

GOVERNOR CHRIS DAWSON AC APM: Governor of Western Australia

I can't help but add my last comment. We shouldn't be scared of our history. We should be well-informed, understand it. How then can we not move forward in a better way, as opposed to, 'It's too difficult to talk about, I don't understand it.'

There's an opportunity here to say, 'Look, our past is an historical fact. Let's now better understand that there's better ways of doing things, as opposed to bringing two parties together.' Unless we do that in a shared way, the finger-pointing and the arguments will continue.

And this is a way in which we can actually say: 'That should not have happened. This is what happened, but this is how we can move forward.'

I'm better informed now that I understood than before this process started. It helps me understand why there has been grievances in the past and how we can, in a purposeful way, move forward together saying, 'Let's actually ensure that this doesn't happen again.'

The outcome for me, and I hope this is shared by others, is that I am now much better informed, having gone through this process, that I can then move forward, and we can have a shared history that's well understood.