

A detail from a painting titled 'Aboriginal Woman and Child in a canoe' (c. 1805). It depicts an Aboriginal woman with dark skin and curly hair, wearing a necklace, sitting in a canoe. She is holding a string in her right hand. A child is visible in the background of the canoe. The background of the painting shows a landscape with hills and a body of water.

“Barangaroo had the  
measure of the invaders”

An Interview with Linda Burney  
Her Vision of the Barangaroo Indigenous Cultural Centre, Labor’s  
Pledge of \$100 million and land and the hand back of Me-Mel  
(Goat Island)

[Double click here for interview](#)

Peter Botsman  
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Aboriginal Woman and Child in a canoe (detail) c. 1805, artists unknown, PXB 513





Linda Burney with the site for the promised \$100 million plus Barangaroo Cultural Centre and Me-Mel (Goat Island) in the background



## “Barangaroo Had the Measure of the Invaders”

An Interview with Linda Burney

March 21, 20015

Linda Burney’s announcement of Labor’s plan to build a \$100 million plus Indigenous Cultural Centre at Barangaroo incorporating the hand back of the eye of the Harbour Me-Mel (Goat Island) on Saturday sent a wave through the NSW election. It was an act of leadership whose reverberations go beyond the NSW State election. The Labor plan is a blue print to guide the city of Sydney, the corporate sector and the gateway of Australia. It has the potential to enliven the whole city and nation by acknowledging our national wrongs and re-harnessing the creative spirit of the land and its first peoples.

The announcement also enlivens Luke Foley’s leadership. Luke Foley says his role models are John Faulkner, Bob Carr and Paul Keating. His announcement with Linda Burney on Saturday 21 March shows that he is indeed in their class. I have been an outspoken critic of the NSW Labor machine, and I was sceptical about Foley’s transition to the leadership. But I guess I had forgotten, and most people had forgotten, that there is a unique wisdom in the NSW Branch of the Australian Labor Party. It was after all the branch of Labor that had come back from extraordinary splits of the early twentieth century to rule the state for 52 years of the 72 years since 1941. Despite all of the recent corruption and the white anting of party democracy that has infamously occurred there is still tribal wisdom within the NSW Labor Party. Maybe the installation of Foley as leader is an example of that once again!

Making Luke Foley leader was a big step for the Labor Centre Unity dominated Catholic machine. Foley, albeit a Catholic, was a left winger. His pathway to power was an unlikely one. Foley following John Faulkner, Anthony Albanese and Damian O’Connor was the Assistant Secretary of the NSW Labor Party. Faulkner gained the post first after the Peter Baldwin bashings in the early 1980s. The left were marginal in NSW and it was a slow grind. In NSW being Assistant Secretary meant inheriting broom closet space at 377 Sussex St. It was very frustrating. I was closest to Damian O’Connor and I felt his frustrations. The old enmities of the party were taken out on the Assistant Secretary every day. By the time Foley came along the qualities of the people who had endured the pain were starting to show out. The left leaders consistently outshone their more privileged and corruptible colleagues of the Right. They were honest, incorruptible, principled. While the NSW Right machine representatives and leaders were mad: Latham and Costa, bad: Eddie Obeid and Co and sad John Della Bosca and Mark Arbib, the Left and Foley seemed to pull the party out of the mire. The Left was not perfect and the years of us against them made it somewhat insular. But the best of the Right and the best of the Left in a way have been forced to come together now.

Since assuming the leadership Foley has grown five inches, partly because he knows he has everyone, Right, Left, Centre behind him. He has gained credibility in a very short frame of time and he



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already seems to have Mike Baird's measure. It may well be that next Saturday there will not be a Victorian or Queensland result but I have a feeling it will be closer than most people think. The passion and instinct and heart has returned with Foley. The party is starting to come together in NSW in ways that I just cannot remember occurring in my thirty years around the Labor Party.

There are good vibrations and this was evidenced above all in the Barangaroo announcement.

Linda Burney symbolises all these good things about the new NSW Labor Party. In one move with her announcement of the \$100 million plus Barangaroo Cultural Centre she has done Sydney, New South Wales and Australia a monumentally important service. This was an inspired act of leadership that creates a momentum that will not diminish. It is tempting to see analogies between Burney herself and Barangaroo. As Burney says “Barangaroo had the measure of the invaders”. Burney has the measure of the modern, mainstream corporate and governmental world. In the interview and in her advocacy Burney has given meaning to a name that most Sydney-siders have seen on cranes but cannot relate to. For the corporate sector Burney is a god-send for a project that has also been engulfed in controversy and mishaps.

The interview I did with Burney after the release of “Labor's Plan for a World Class Indigenous Cultural Centre at Barangaroo” sizzles with passion and vision. Luke Foley and Paul Keating have their hands all over this. They worked together to return the eye My-Mal (Goat Island) of the harbour back to the Indigenous people of Sydney. But it is one thing to return land and it is another to return something more, a spirit of place and people. Burney, a Wiradjuri woman, taken away from her family at birth, embodies a returning spirit. Like Barangaroo she has had to endure and see great pain and to bridge impossible divides. When her biography comes out, it will create a renewed interest and respect for this Aboriginal leader who has the same grace and style that Faith Bandler made famous. In her style and grace Burney has endured much and achieved immense things.

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Coming from Burney these words were not just believable but I could feel her vision coming into being as she spoke. Like Barangaroo herself Burney is a strong, compassionate, fearless Indigenous leader. She has overcome the greatest obstacles in life. When she spoke in the kitchen of her Marrickville home I could feel the goose bumps rising as if she really was channeling the spirit of Barangaroo. I could feel new life coming to Sydney, new



truth, new purpose, new feeling.

Something was being swept away. Even in Sydney the most urbanised of all Australian environments, Aboriginal people – the Cadigal (Port Jackson (Sydney Harbour), from inner South Head to Darling Harbour Colebee's clan) the Cameragal (probably Barangaroo's clan from the north shore of Port Jackson centred on Manly), the Wallumedegal (north shore of the Parramatta River including the city of Ryde, from the intersection of the Lane Cove River and west to Parramatta) the Wangal (Bennelong's clan - south shore of the Parramatta River, including Concord, from Me-Mel (Goat Island) around the Balmain Peninsula and west almost to Parramatta) and the Burramatagal (the city of Parramatta) – have never given way. Their sacred places are still there in the midst of the concrete, glass and towers of babble. Barangaroo's voice has never been lost. When knowledge of these things becomes more treasured the land will open up and let us see again what is appropriate development and what is not. The shape and contours of the land can tell us so much about what architecture can be and cannot be.

I get the feeling that the well known misfortunes of the Barangaroo development have occurred because the spirit of place has not been, until now, truly understood or acknowledged. The usual white fella cursory gestures to Aboriginal names, places and people occurs and then the machine moves on. Corporate consultants and architects do not have a proper concept of what Aboriginal life, spirit and sacred knowledge is all about. They do not have a concept of clans and lands and places. They lose the possibilities and magic.. they lose the chance to really see the landscape...

Good leadership, visionary leadership flies over the stumbling, bumbling intentions of small and narrow minded people. This is the model of the great Labor leaders of the past, it is the mark of the chartists, syndicalists and freedom fighters ejected from Ireland, Wales, Scotland and greater Britain that gave us our defining national character. It is no accident that this visionary leadership foundation links up with Aboriginal Australia. There was a genocide in Ireland and in the countryside of the Industrial Revolution that etched in the survivors a compassion and ability to see into the hearts of those who were similarly oppressed and suppressed. Foley and Burney seem to have re-kindled the flames, given hope of new possibilities, a new relationship, a new leadership that Sydney, NSW and Australia so badly needs at this time.

[To hear the interview click here or paste this url into your internet browser:](https://soundcloud.com/kangaroova/barangaroo-an-interview-with-linda-burney) <https://soundcloud.com/kangaroova/barangaroo-an-interview-with-linda-burney>





