

Australians All

Justice, Security, a Fair Go

Article

A Return to Government by the People

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An extract from the Order of Australia Association annual oration 2007

In my present role as Special Adviser on Indigenous Affairs to the West Australian government I am probably involved in my greatest challenge so far, dealing as I am with the suffering of a people who demonstrate a widespread alienation, not from the country, but from the nation that embodies the source of their loss of spiritual connection to land and family. There is no amount of rewriting history that can change this – it requires a new spirit of renewal through partnership based on equality and respect.

In the north of Western Australia public servants from Canberra and Perth drift across the landscape, powerless to do anything other than feign concern, while small pockets of police try to keep the lid on communities in despair.

To achieve this spirit of change, the challenge lies in two directions. One is overcoming the widespread ignorance and disengagement among non indigenous Australians, which includes generating an understanding of the importance of this renewal to the future of all of us; and the other is about building trust in a people who have been betrayed on so many occasions up to very recent times, and who have rarely been consulted on policy decisions that determine their fate.

My principal contention is that a large part of this continent is increasingly neglected and, for a significant number of our rural people, governance is weak and intangible. Such is the evolving nature of our Federation under the extant philosophy of market forces that government is receding from the country to what I will describe as pockets of indulgence and indifference in the southeast and southwest corners. I use the word philosophy here, rather than political, and I contend that there is a deep philosophical and spiritual malaise at issue.

Like many of my generation I come from a rural background. When I left Western Australia for the very first time at the beginning of 1958 to go to Duntroon, I was as full of certainty as only a 17 year old can be. I anticipated adventure but never comprehended how full my life was going to become. It was only 12 years after the 1939-45 War and the world was well and truly in the great state of global flux that marked the end of the European ascendancy in Asia, Africa and the Americas. Perhaps we didn't fully understand it at the time, but the world was never going to be the same again. Apart from preparations and training to fight total (and nuclear) war against what seemed, at that time, to be the totalitarian monolith of communism, my military career was, in the main, devoted to the untidy job of tidying up after the European empires as they succumbed to pressure from home to withdraw and stabilise their former colonies. Looking back, most western armies of that time acquired an almost schizophrenic nature as they wrestled with these two priorities. Some never surmounted the changing nature of their role.

From a personal perspective, I learnt about nation building on the job and became heavily engaged in the issues surrounding the processes of building consensus through mediation. I saw the evil and the aftermath of entrenched certainty. By certainty I mean the absolute and intractable conviction that some people have that they are right - something which killed millions of people in the 20th Century, and continues to do so to this day.

I quickly learned that reconciliation is the only foundation of effective human relations and enduring strategy. Indeed, through intense engagement in the field and my work with the United Nations, I recognised the essential role of international organisations, protocols and conventions in providing a framework for mediation and reconciliation and I saw clearly the peril of undermining these institutions out of narrow national and commercial self-interest. I use the word “framework” here to imply that individual creativity and self determination can only flourish if the self interest of tyrants is constrained by the tenets of liberal democracy which are written into those conventions and protocols.

I want to draw on my experience of the last five months looking at ways to increase the participation of Indigenous people in the economic and social development of Western Australia. I am sure you all know something of the statistics that draw us to treating Indigenous Australians as a special case. I won't encumber you with raw data, but the poverty, poor health, lack of participation in the education systems, family violence, infant mortality and alienation of the young is said to be Third World in nature and magnitude.

In fact, I find that it is worse than Third World, and the figures of 90 percent of the jail population above the Tropic of Capricorn in Western Australia being Aboriginal, and 42 percent of the total detainees in the State coming from 3 ½ percent of the population say it all really. I contend that, in any other state in the world, such figures would be seen to constitute a state of civil war – such is the alienation they represent.

Despite the atrocious mortality rates that are experienced by Aboriginal people they are not about to disappear as a cultural and geographic entity. Far from it - Aboriginal fertility rates are well above those for the non-Indigenous community and we are heading for a new era when they will once again be more than half the population in the North - a very much younger and more fertile majority.

Long before we can shift the dynamics of this to a more positive relationship, we can expect the number of young Aboriginals in our prison and social welfare systems to increase markedly – at great cost to our economy and image abroad. We should expect that our moral authority as a middle power broker will be diminished as a result.

“What has brought us to this appalling state?” you might well ask. Some would contend that it is the Aboriginal's fault, subscribing to the view that white involvement has been quite benign, and that the primitive Indigenous systems could not adapt to the superior systems of human relations brought from the wider world. Such people seem to be prepared to accept the family breakdown and high incarceration rates as a consequence of this – believing that the sooner they assimilate and become like us the better. On the other hand, others might reflect on the emerging realisation that European aggression has not simply tipped the balance in a 40,000-year-old system of relationships, but also, in parallel with the destruction of these cultures, destroyed the ecology of an entire continent in less than two and a half centuries.

What is more apposite, given that we cannot go back and change the past, is the fact that a large part of this continent is no longer governed at all. Over the last three or four decades, possibly as a consequence of market forces, we have seen a steady withdrawal of the presence of both the public and private sector from the remote regions of the continent. In part, the Whitlam era commitment to Indigenous self-determination through the establishment of Indigenous corporations began this process for Aboriginal people. Despite the fact that it was done with the best intent, it didn't work and couldn't work once state governments made the choice to step away from their responsibility and let the Federal Government assume the role of running this from Canberra. No attempt was made to engage local government – even though it is at the local level where the consequences of neglect have their greatest impact.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Commission (ATSIC), established in 1989, saw the Federal Government itself attempt to step away from this responsibility by funding a body with considerable powers that would oversee the development of Indigenous services and participation in the economy. Although it was adjudged to have some successes, ATSIC

didn't work either, and, as we know, after cutting its funding and its options considerably, the Howard Government finally abolished the Commission in 2004.

Now no one is responsible.

This might seem an odd statement to some because we read and hear almost every day some statement about Ministers addressing some disaster or human tragedy in Indigenous communities. The issues of responsibility for overcoming Indigenous disadvantage are discussed in Premier's conferences with the Prime Minister, and bilateral agreements are made on the nature of cooperation and the division of responsibilities.

Such discussions are necessary because, by and large, the Federal Government has got the money and the states have got the problem of trying to create communities that work – particularly in those regions where most of our national wealth is now generated. Initiatives are carried out in response to some social disaster that involves a report and some imperative to be seen to do something. The Gordon enquiry into family violence and child abuse in Western Australia is a case in point – it has seen the recent establishment of multi-function police stations in places where there was literally no law and no government to protect the people. There are similar responses by the Federal Government to violence in places like Wadeye and by the Queensland Government to Palm Island outbreaks. Shared responsibility agreements are invoked requiring Aboriginal people to accept forms of social responsibility in exchange for the funding of projects and services.

These initiatives most often involve cameo performances by politicians rather than strategic leadership, and amount to treating the symptoms rather than the causes of dysfunction. The problems refuse to go away and people constantly ask why we spend all this money with no results. Increasingly, the more diffuse dimensions of Aboriginal violence and suicide in regional and urban centres brings the issues into the lives of non Indigenous people and their communities, and destabilises the environment in which they want to do business.

Rather than accept the fact that these problems demand genuine engagement by elected leaders, there is now an attempt by governments to pass the responsibility to the private sector through job training and enhancement schemes and an attempt to also involve them in social development of communities. While they are prepared to go along with this enhanced social responsibility to a point, businesses quickly recognise that building social capital draws them into non-core areas that will not be appreciated by shareholders. They understand that the State must take responsibility and lead on these matters. Businesses cannot fill the vacuum for governance in the regions.

Just in case you think this lack of regional governance that I speak of here is simply about Indigenous issues let me address a related but far more important issue that I have touched on before – a subject of great contemporary significance – the environment and the destruction of the ecology of our distinctive biodiversity.

In recent days the combined issues of global warming and water have begun to impact on the politics of this nation. Clearly, our political leaders are reading the polls and assessing that the electorate is increasingly concerned about the lack of water, constant and widespread fires, rising temperatures and other extremes of weather. The rain is falling but not consistently in areas where the people live and make their living.

Out in the bush of course, the erosion of the environment has been going on for years. Western Australia has a rising salt problem about the size of France – a problem that has accelerated ever since they cut down all the trees to plant wheat. In the event that rainfall in the wheat belt returned to former levels the salt could be expected to rise faster and be more widespread. The outback is full of imported vermin of all types: camels, donkeys, goats, pigs, starlings, foxes, rabbits, cats, feral dogs, wild cattle and horses, cane toads and weeds; you name it and it is all flourishing out there at the expense Australian flora and fauna.

Despite the valiant efforts of the pastoralists, many of whom are now more dependant on the goats than they would care to admit, the countryside is increasingly untended and uncared for. State land management agencies are undermanned and under funded for a growing liability and Aboriginal Lands Trust agencies are barely funded at all to look after tracts of land larger than most European nations. Natural Resource Management agencies are full of impassioned people but have very few resources for the rapidly expanding tasks as the environment erodes.

This is a “cop out” in anyone’s terms. No one is actually responsible, even though we acknowledge the problems by giving some agencies impossible tasks while attempting to encourage non government agencies to rise to the occasion. In Western Australia at least, there is no effective regional government structure to develop and sustain a strategy. Local governments are too small and ineffective to look after anything but themselves, having few sources of revenue anyway and being almost totally dependent on handouts from the federal level. This is compounded by the “Fly in - Fly out” philosophy of the mining companies that sees few people actually making a commitment to the mining zones.

Despite many of these regions having the potential to continue to be the main source of the nation’s wealth, very little of the national return is given over to nurturing and developing these places for the long term. Even the major regional centres of the mineral boom are becoming dysfunctional as a result of the economic distortion brought about by too few resources being invested in social infrastructure.

The states blame the Federal Government for this and the Federal Government blames the states for squandering the handouts they give them. In the north of Western Australia public servants from Canberra and Perth drift across the landscape, powerless to do anything other than feign concern, while small pockets of police try to keep the lid on communities in despair.

I know that this is a depressing picture that I paint of the “Lucky Country”, and some might choose to include me with those who have a “black armband” view of the country and its history. But my experience is that most of our people, by choice or ignorance, share very limited horizons on these matters, failing to recognise the perils of not nurturing the whole continent.

What I have been describing to you is an emptying out of Australia – the creation of a true “terra nullius” – an uninhabited place where anyone has a right to make their way. We should not need any lessons on the implications of this, having once used “terra nullius” as imperative to deprive the Aboriginal people of the land they had occupied for thousands of years.

In fact, when the Europeans came, the Aboriginal people occupied the entire continent in a way that eludes us today. They moved constantly within their dreamtime boundaries, nurturing the land as the source of their physical and spiritual nourishment and singing their entire experience into the genetic memory – knowing who and where they were in time and space.

Quite recently I was introduced to the rock art on the Burrup Peninsula. There is a tendency for people to think of this as a few primitive scratchings on some rocks getting in the way of the development of modern industry. There are in fact, tens of thousand of engravings of all sizes in granite that have lasted up to 20,000 years and represent a culture that was sustained for all that time from the Ice Age to the present day. I found myself in what could only be an Ice Age temple surrounded by engravings of men and fauna of all varieties, including many types of thylacine and other extinct Australian mammals. Clearly the thylacine was the predator most in competition with man during this period as both struggled to survive when the sea was far out beyond the horizon and the winters were very cold.

Now, I was staggered by the magnitude and antiquity of this Australian heritage – I think there is nothing that matches it in the world. Neolithic engravings in granite are clearly very

enduring and they may even be there long after we are gone – that is unless someone decides to cut it up and sell it to strangers.

Further north on the Kimberley coast and interior we have the elegant Bradshaw paintings that are 15-16,000 years old and clearly represent the transition of another Ice Age culture as the river valleys flooded with rising sea levels. Painted over the top of many of these are examples of the more recent Wadjina culture that includes, among its dreamtime connections, both flood and resurrection stories.

My point in telling you this is to suggest that there is very little awareness of this great cultural connection to the past and that it is, in fact, we non Indigenous people who are increasingly alienated from the land. Rather, we are huddled around the estuarine regions of the South East and the South West like aliens ready to jump off to some faraway planet when the land turns against us. Because of the way our democracy is constructed we allow – probably force is a better word - our politicians to focus away from the interior. Instead of embracing and nurturing the living cultures that connect us to country we succumb instead to the notion that the sooner the original inhabitants become like us the better off we will all be.

In conclusion, let me say that I don't claim any special knowledge in these matters, even though I have been privileged over time to travel deep into our country and talk to people whose lives have been thrown into despair by this erosion of respect and responsibility. I also have some passing familiarity with the security problems associated with a vast and empty frontier. One thing I do understand however is that nowhere else in the world is such an absurdity compounded everyday as in Australia where we attempt to govern this vast and complex country from ministerial offices and bureaucracies in places like Canberra or Perth.

Attempts to enhance this sort of centralised control over new areas of responsibility appear almost daily on the grounds of both efficiency and accountability, despite the obvious failures of strategic leadership in many more areas than those I have identified to you today.

Such centralisation must be doomed to failure. Our founding fathers knew this and attempted to balance our constitutional laws so that the people and the regions in which they lived would remain actively engaged in the processes of determining their destinies.

At this time the battle has the appearance of being lost as the regions come to terms with the fact that there is little priority given to their long term strategic development in a climate where your ability to pay is determined by short term financial gain. Because of this, and despite the seeming prosperity of our country, there is much anxiety and suffering out in the empty places beyond where most of us live.

How much is reconciliation with our land and unity with our people worth? Anyone who is concerned about the long term future of Australia will know the answer to this question. Where to find the gold of faith and hope that these values represent, is a question that challenges us all. I believe we must start by joining Aboriginal Australians in reclaiming the land and renewing our commitment to the principles of federation by encouraging daring, responsible and compassionate government back into the regions.