

SO WHAT? LECTURE

Dialogue and Nation Building in Contemporary Australia

UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

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Acknowledgements –

Traditional Owners Gardigal people of the Eora Nation

Guests – Sir William Deane

Chancellor.

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At the beginning of the month I was camped on the banks of the Mary River in Western Arnhemland along with one hundred other Aboriginal and Islander peoples who had met to discuss issues related to the use and management of the water resources across Northern Australia. The Mary River as it is known to non Indigenous Australians is on the land of the Limilm Ngari, people who are living on and sustaining their land and waters in the traditions of the forebears while endeavouring to develop a tourism enterprise that is framed around sharing their country with visitors from Australia and other lands from across the sea.

In that country on the edge of Kakadu where the great rivers of the north make their way from the majestic Arnhemland escarpment across vast flood plains and on into the Arafura Sea, Aboriginal people are seeking to play their role in the sustaining of the resources that have been entrusted to them from their fathers and mothers and those before them.

Whether they will be allowed to participate in the future is yet to be seen.

Along with all other Aboriginal people living on Aboriginal titled land in the Northern Territory, the Limilm Ngari are subject to the provisions of the Australian government's Intervention legislation. In the wider context of the intervention Aboriginal people, including the Limilm Ngari are being required to cede control of their residential lands, in the short term, in order to receive services and infrastructure that are the rights of all Australian citizens, land owners or otherwise.

In the longer term they like others of the North stand to lose control of their ancestral lands and waters.

But because Aboriginal society has been confronted with Interventions in many different guises since the time of the arrival of the first convict fleet the traditional owners of the Mary River Country and other Aboriginal people across Australia will survive this latest endeavour by the uninvited, self imposing society that engineers assimilation on our people, The experience of this to date has been to diminish the integrity of our culture and to appropriate our traditional lands and resources.

In the context of Aboriginal people and government interaction assimilation is aimed at achieving the original colonial dream and assertion that Australia was terra nullius – land belonging to no one.

This gloomy forecast is founded upon the experience and models to date of dealing with Aboriginal rights and interests – even legislated ones. It seems that even International declarations are equally meaningless when our Government endorse but decline to sign such declarations.

After 200 years or so we have to question the philosophical underpinnings that form the relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the mainstream of Australia especially via governments.

What I believe is required is the courage and vision to create a new National Framework for Dialogue in this country so that better designed structures for participation, infrastructure and service delivery can be agreed upon to respond to the challenges that change throws up, both from the past and what can be known for the future.

In this context, it is not only the HOW of what has to be done that is deemed significant but the WHY and On WHAT BASIS should policy and strategy be determined for the challenges to the nation and especially that facing the Aboriginal peoples of Northern Australia.

The questions that ultimately need to be asked are;

- ❖ At what point does the dominant society cease to operate as a colonial invader and come to terms with the fact that the Aboriginal and Islander peoples of this land will continue to assert ownership and authority of the lands, rivers and seas of their traditional domain?
- ❖ When will arrogance and superiority give way for good faith negotiations between us over the shared management of the national estate, the equitable distribution of national resources and the full and proper political recognition of the Indigenous peoples as the first peoples of this ancient land – Australia?

So long as the State continues to hide behind the notion of the Crown, the Aboriginal people will not be playing on an even playing field nor will we receive fair and just outcomes. There is far too much National Self Interest that is exclusive of the Aboriginal uniqueness to be otherwise.

Debate or commentary about Aboriginal peoples affairs are too often determined by the Non Aboriginal sector or designed to take place within the mainstream paradigm. Very seldom is the voice from within Aboriginal and Islander society and culture heard.

Until, as a Nation, we reach a different plateau of maturity in our quest for full nationhood we will continue to be diminished as a society and will inevitably repeat the disasters of Intervention, increased public sector domination over Aboriginal lives, continued removal of our children, high incarceration rates and increased destabilisation on our traditional homelands.

This is how assimilation has manifested itself to us for the past two centuries.

Australia along with the rest of the world is embroiled in a struggle for global survival. Centuries of abuse and over exploitation of our resources have damaged, in some cases irreparably, vast eco systems on every continent and countless islands. Our Murray Darling river system is testimony to our lack of diligent stewardship.

Destruction of native forests, pollution of river systems, and clearing of vegetation for unsustainable food production has made much of our globe increasingly uninhabitable.

The unquenchable thirst to pasture sheep and cattle on vast fragile rangelands, the exploitation of oil, gas and minerals to fuel our motor vehicles and feed our industries, our avarice for precious gems and metals are all outcomes of our relentless march to modernity.

While this reality of history has delivered triumphant outcomes for some human kind, for others, who could live in harmony with nature and under its laws, it has spelt disaster or even extinction.

We have lost their insights to survival and are at risk of repeating the same mistake in Australia with the Aboriginal peoples. It has left our planet severely degraded, some scientist say we are at the tipping point of environmental disintegration.

Modern humans can no longer believe themselves disconnected to its legacy with nature.

Perhaps the alarm bells that have been ringing will hopefully force governments and leaders across the globe to respond positively.

Ever so slowly the reality of our dire situation is being acknowledged and steps are being taken to halt the destruction of our planet. We are beginning to consider what

structural changes must occur within nations, industries and communities across the globe so that the planet might begin the long march back from the brink towards sustainable development, where spiritually, environmentally and socially the value of all life is elevated in our human psyche.

Australia is asserting a role for itself in the dialogue of nations to imagine a different future. We have come from being a lonely Kyoto Sceptic to being now a Copenhagen Cheerleader. The task globally is a formidable one but unless we can underpin our global endeavours with a framework for change within our own nation then we will fall at the first hurdle in the journey from global oblivion to long term global sustainability.

If a new National Framework for Dialogue is to be constructed then it will require the labours of all our governments, Institutions and our best minds to be brought to the task.

We must put aside our petty ideologies and differences to focus on an outcome not just for the national good but globally as well.

Dialogue for a new National Framework must take account of the rich diversity that has built up amongst our population since 1788 and must be inclusive of the richness and complexities of all the peoples that make up our diverse society.

This is not about our institutional structures or the popular expressions just assimilating change but being transformed by becoming open to new dynamics arising from a new National Dialogue.

If we revert to the old paradigm of one sector of our society asserting its values over all others then we will fail in our task and the foundations of our future society will be as unstable as the flawed pillars of the British centric Australia of the past.

Our joint custodial duties to our country is a heavy burden for all citizens. Our part in the ongoing nation building endeavour requires that we question our foundations, philosophy and institutions.

It is not the case that all the institutions of our democracy are broken it is rather that some are becoming obsolete and cumbersome in responding to new challenges domestically and globally.

There are a number of areas where I believe we must begin to focus our efforts in coming years.

The cornerstone of the New National Dialogue concerns the whole matter of our Governance and how our 21st Century Nation must adapt itself to the aspirations of all its citizens wherever they choose to live on the continent or overseas.

There should be a consideration of the real legitimacy of our Constitution as a true reflection of our modern nation state.

We must consider whether or not it is representative of the multi dimensional society that we have become since 1901, when a British settler elite society drafted and put forward the rules for the governance of the newly created nation to Westminster England.

Like the South Africans in the post apartheid period we should consider how our Nation will govern itself as we confront our historical failure of recognition and acceptance of the first peoples.

Redefining and restructuring our fundamentals will take time but mobility of population, world citizenship for nationals and loyalties to archaic sovereigns in an age of increasing communication sophistication makes home more virtual than real.

A National Dialogue should consider the nature of the symbols and ceremonies that illustrate to the world the diversity of our peoples, the values that they represent and the hopes and dreams that we have for the future.

The smoking and blessing of the buildings that house our national institutions, the ceremonies giving recognition of traditional owners at parliaments, courts, sporting events and other important occasions are becoming more and more common.

A National Dialogue should negotiate how such ceremonies and symbols of recognition should be formally incorporated into all aspects of public engagement.

It is no longer good enough to have Aboriginal Art on the walls of our places of importance – the Spirit of the land coming through that Art must be allowed to shape and mould us going forward.

Australia's land tenure systems are based on 18th and 19th century values and ideologies when colonial governments equated land occupancy with development based on pasturing sheep and cattle on vast tracts of land far too fragile to sustain them or exploiting scant water resources for food production – always to the exclusion of the interests of the traditional land owners.

The international effort to address Global Warming and Climate Change will in the future demand that Nations begin to manage and use their natural assets in a more considered way than they have in the past and Indigenous people must be allowed to participate in the planning and decision making in relation to these resources as had been our right and responsibility prior to 1788.

A National Dialogue should engage Indigenous, Government, environmental, agricultural, scientific and pastoral interests in negotiating how our land, water and sea resources can be effectively managed, sustained and equitably shared in the future.

The recent controversy over the management and access to the Wild Rivers of Cape York to the exclusion of the consent of the Traditional Owners and the resistance by tourism operators and politicians to respect the cultural responsibilities of the Anangu of Uluru and Kuta Tjuta to ban climbers to the top of this most sacred of sites are indicative of the exclusion of Native peoples from the negotiation about the future use of lands and waters in this country.

Climate change, Global Warming and Food Security are not simply about developing alternative energy sources, finding ways of burying CO₂ in cavities in the earth or the development of super seeds that double yields while using miniscule amounts of water.

These might be a useful start but they in themselves are never going to deliver long term structural change – economic, social or environmental in Australia or anywhere else on the globe. Human ways of doing things has to also change.

Development and distribution of natural resources must involve processes of negotiation and consent with Indigenous peoples.

On the Mary River two weeks ago Aboriginal and Islander experts on land and water management sat at the table as equals with CSIRO and other scientist to discuss and plan for future engagement on matters of water management and sustainability across Northern Australia. We are all conscious of the damage done in other parts of Australia and want to ensure there is something more than “best endeavours” by Governments and “best practice” undertakings of corporations.

We require regional empowerment as part of good governance of our regions and resources, especially water.

This must be the model for the future and such engagement must be formalised within our governance structures and not confined to the whim of only those agencies of society who have recognised that without such input from Indigenous peoples the future management of our natural resources will be incomplete, at risk, and open to abuse.

As a consequence of industrial development post the Second World War we have seen the movement of young people from the bush to the city marking rural decline and the use of Fly in Fly Out strategies by mining Companies since the 1980's all impacting on the demographics of the bush.

As a result Indigenous Australians have found themselves standing alongside a group of almost equally politically excluded Australians; those living in the Northern half of the Nation who are non Indigenous but who have chosen to contribute to the future of the Nation by working for the development and sustaining of our deserts, our northern coastal regions and the pastoral regions of the Northern Territory, Western and South Australia and Queensland.

Recent amalgamations of Shires in Queensland and the creation of local government entities in the Northern Territory has seen the erosion of Aboriginal peoples capacity, in those regions, to have a say in the management of their communities to the same extent that they had hitherto enjoyed.

People in remote Australia, covering most of our continental land mass have found themselves more than ever subject to the decision making processes and priorities of governments authority in southern cities, far removed from the reality of the lives of those in the bush.

It is a paradox that greater access to communications, roads and transport has for many Australians meant a diminishment of political power rather than an enhanced capacity to engage and contribute to regional governance.

This situation needs to be rectified.

A cursory glance at the Aboriginal peoples living in the urban and more advanced parts of Australia tell us that they have not benefitted exceptionally because of their location or the richness of opportunity that surrounds them as well.

The Dialogue for a New National Framework will begin to open the discussion on how the North of the Continent might be developed in a meaningful and productive way so that the experiences and the lessons of the past might form the basis for the creation of a Northern Regional Development Authority.

Such an Authority must allow for regional participation with government and industry. Its function would be to preserve our great remaining wilderness regions, provide the basis for the first elements of the New Green Economy, the creation of renewable energy sources, the development of sustainable low impact tourism, assist to identify carbon abatement project opportunities and promote the production from traditional food and medicine sources.

These industries of the Green Economy are not incompatible with existing mining or food production industries but we have the opportunity to plan for the inevitable development of Northern Australia so that we enhance our economy, provide meaningful employment for our children, allow for the growth and development of the Indigenous peoples along with the sustaining of our culture and the management of our traditional estates.

Our Prime Minister, Mr Rudd often speaks about turning a new page or a new chapter in the National narrative. The Dialogue for a New National Framework must not be simply about a new page but the next book in a trilogy of human endeavour on this Continent.

The first book relates to the occupation and use of this land by the Aboriginal people where the creation story began and the laws, languages and customs of Aboriginal people and the land prevailed.

The second book is about the colonial engagement and the two centuries of dispute and conflict between our peoples, occupation and alienation for the natives and economic windfall at the expense of the environment and the native peoples for the colonial society.

The third book must be about social, economic and environmental sustainability of the Continent where Australians address the challenges of the global world, develop and create new economies based on sound environmental practices.

It must be a tale of Regional reconstruction where the unsustainable urban sprawl gives away to new green industries based in regional centres where the standards of health service and education are equal for all Australians. Where living in the bush is an advantage not an impediment to our opportunity.

Where the exploitation of our natural resources is done in a sustainable manner where the arrival of a mine in a region does not herald generations of social upheaval and disintegration for the people whose homes and communities sit alongside the mineral development.

It must be where we take pride in the vitality and strength of the Aboriginal cultural and spiritual realities.

Where the continents first peoples are involved in all aspects of the negotiation of the nation's future, our rights and responsibilities are enshrined in the laws of the land and our ceremonies celebrated in the nations institutions.

At The Indigenous Policy Dialogue and Research Unit of the School of Arts and Social Sciences launched by Sir William Deane here at the University of New South Wales today we will be focussing on the support for The Australian Dialogue and the construction of a new national framework. A process initiated by General John Sanderson and myself and supported by many likeminded Australians which aims to develop a new philosophical underpinning to guide the development of a just relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australia as we map our way forward around some of the challenges I have raised tonight.

The Dialogue recognises that the failure to weave the Indigenous story into the nation's political and social fabric has affected Indigenous people's participation in Australian society.

It seeks to create a narrative of Australia based on the principles of co-design and integration, seeking to develop a national framework around inclusiveness to shape future government policy.

The Australian Dialogue is about a shift in paradigm and practice.

The process of dialogue will allow us to move beyond hierarchical, technical solutions to a place where genuine compassion and communal intelligence can generate real change. It will draw on conversations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous leaders and opinion makers, business, universities, non government organisations and government bodies, at both a regional and national level.

The Indigenous Policy and Dialogue Research Unit will provide underpinning research and intellectual support to this endeavour.

There are times in the history of every nation when they are forced to confront the truth of their histories. When they must consider the mistakes and successes of their endeavours, celebrate their achievements and reflect on their failures as well as determine new directions.

The opportunity for such a moment of reflection is with us in Australia at this particular time.

But while the need for a New National Dialogue is urgent we must be mindful of the need for haste not speed so all can be engaged and all can commit constructively.

It might pay to remember the words of Luther Standing Bear the Oglala Sioux Chief when he spoke of Dialogue in the way of the Lakota;

"Conversation was never begun at once, nor in a hurried manner. No one was quick with a question, no matter how important, and no one was pressed for an answer.

A pause giving time for thought was the truly courteous way of beginning and conducting a conversation"

Silence was meaningful with the Lakota and his granting a space of silence to the speech-maker and his own moment of silence before talking was done in the practice of true politeness and regard for the rule that thought comes before speech.

Australia is not the first nation to have to confront the truth of their colonial past and to deal with that legacy. As every nation that has had the courage and commitment

to embark on such a journey has found often the milestones on the journey of healing and justice can be challenging and confronting.

But embark on the journey we must and there will be times when the journey will seem too difficult but perhaps when those moments occur and principled compromise appears a bridge too far then if we have invested in developing a new National Dialogue we will find our way beyond the morass that today we only view dimly.

Kulia