

# The failure of reconciliation to address racist and ignorant attitudes in the wider community towards Indigenous peoples

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## Abstract

In this paper, I argue that the 1991-2000 Australian reconciliation process was unsuccessful in addressing the racist and ignorant attitudes held by many in the wider community towards Indigenous peoples and issues. I analyse the education goal of the process and argue that it was not achieved by the conclusion of the process. I also analyse a number of opinion polls conducted throughout the reconciliation process.

## Introduction

During the 1980s, the Hawke Labor Government abandoned commitments to implement policies to address two key Indigenous demands, national land rights and a treaty (Gunstone 2003: 11-13). The Government argued that the failure to implement these policies was due to the unsympathetic and ignorant attitudes in the wider community towards Indigenous peoples and Indigenous issues (Maddox 1989: 15-16; Tickner 1991: 6). It argued that there was a need for a formal reconciliation process to occur in Australia in order to combat these attitudes of many in the wider community (Tickner 2001: 33). The Government also argued that two other significant issues - Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage and Indigenous demands for a treaty - would be addressed by the reconciliation process (Tickner 2001: 33).

In 1991, following widespread consultations, and despite significant Indigenous concerns, (Brennan 1991: 106-107; ABC 1991), the Australian Parliament unanimously passed the *Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act (Cth) 1991* (CAR Act). This Act instituted a formal ten-year process of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. The process was intended to reconcile Indigenous and non-Indigenous people by the end of 2000, in time for the centenary of the Commonwealth of Australia in 2001 (CAR 1994a: 15). The CAR Act also created the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) to promote and guide the reconciliation process. The process had three main goals: educate the wider Australian community about reconciliation and Indigenous issues, foster a national commitment to address Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage and investigate the desirability of developing a document of reconciliation, and if considered desirable, advise on the content of a document. These goals corresponded to the three main issues in

Indigenous Affairs that preceded the reconciliation process – the levels of ignorance and racism amongst the wider community, Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage and Indigenous demands for a treaty.

In this paper, I argue that the reconciliation process was unsuccessful in addressing the levels of racism and ignorance that exist amongst the wider community towards Indigenous peoples and issues. This failure is illustrated by two approaches. First, I analyse the education goal and argue that a number of factors prevented this goal from being realised. Second, I examine several opinion polls conducted throughout the reconciliation process and argue that these polls indicate a significant level of ignorance and hostility amongst the wider community towards Indigenous peoples and issues.

It is important to note that, in this paper, I focus on the effectiveness of the reconciliation process in combating individual racism. There has previously been substantial criticism of the reconciliation process for concentrating on educating individuals and consequently marginalizing the importance of addressing institutional racism (see Roberts 1993: 17-18; Mudrooroo 1995: 229; Mansell 1992: 20; Dodson 1993: 9).

## **The education goal**

There were a number of successful outcomes related to the education goal. CAR produced a wide variety of general, accessible resources that aimed to educate the broad Australian community about reconciliation and Indigenous issues. One of the major resources was the *Learning Circles* project. This project distributed over two thousand kits throughout Australia to numerous church groups, trade unions, community-based organizations and groups of interested people (AAACE 1993a: 4; AAACE 1993b: 2). These kits enabled participants to undertake a self-managing eight-week discussion course that discussed Indigenous cultures, histories, contemporary issues, socio-economic disadvantages and reconciliation (CAR 2000: 62; AAACE 1993a: 9). Another major resource was CAR's quarterly magazine *Walking Together*. This magazine was published throughout the reconciliation process and was the major strategy to communicate with groups and individuals interested in reconciliation (CAR 2000: 23). There were thirty issues published and at its height, *Walking Together* reached a circulation of 75,000 per issue (CAR 2000: 23). Other CAR publications included brochures, leaflets, reports, videos, television and radio promotions and information supplements for magazines and newspapers (CAR 1994a: 25; The Australian 1994).

CAR also developed the *Australians for Reconciliation* program which consulted with the Australian community and encouraged community involvement in reconciliation (CAR 1994a: 18-19; CAR 1995: 2; CAR 2000: 27-28). A number of peace scholars have argued that community involvement is imperative in these types of peace-building processes (see Fitzduff 1999: 98; Gastrow 1999: 108-109; Phillips 2001: 171). Pat Dodson's 'Call to the Nation' at the 1997 Australian Reconciliation Convention, in which he called for a 'People's Movement' for reconciliation (CAR 1997a: 10), significantly boosted this community involvement in the reconciliation process. By the completion of the process in 2000, there were hundreds of small reconciliation groups operating throughout Australia in a variety of settings including workplaces, churches, schools and local government (Nettheim 2000: 63).

The signing of the 'Sorry Books', the displays of the 'Sea of Hands' and the 250,000 people who marched for reconciliation across Sydney Harbour Bridge during Corroboree 2000, are three prominent examples of this broad community involvement in reconciliation (CAR 2000: 60, 64, 83).

However, despite these outcomes, a number of interrelated factors restricted the overall success of the education goal. The impact of these factors ensured that, by the conclusion of the reconciliation process in 2000, the wider community were not sufficiently educated about Indigenous peoples and issues. Consequently, racist and ignorant attitudes towards Indigenous peoples and issues still prevailed amongst many in the wider community.

One factor was the confusion within the wider Australian community over the meaning of 'reconciliation' (Saulwick and Muller 2000: 5-6; Pratt, Elder and Ellis 2000: 7, 9-10; McIntosh 2000: 5). There were several reasons for this confusion. First, the reconciliation process failed to articulate a clear definition of reconciliation beyond broad, non-specific definitions, such as 'building bridges', 'developing partnerships' and 'working together' (Tatz 1998: 1-2; Kelly 1993: 10; Tatz 2000: 75). Second, there were a multitude of differing definitions of reconciliation advocated by various individuals and organizations, that emphasised issues as diverse as Indigenous rights, religion, assimilation, acknowledging history and the need for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to accept the current political situation (see Dodson 2000: 269; McGuinness 2000: 239; Johns and Brunton 1999: 4; Habel 1999: 25-27; and Hide 2001: 283-288). Third, an acrimonious and confusing debate over the comparative importance of practical and symbolic reconciliation occurred following the election of the Howard Government in 1996 (see Howard 2000: 88-90; Pearson 2000: 166; Reynolds 2000: 53-54).

A second factor that restricted the overall success of the education goal was the influence of nationalism upon the reconciliation process. This influence had two significant outcomes. One outcome was that the reconciliation process emphasised the importance of Australia having a single national identity, culture and history. (Moran 1998: 108-109; Gale 2001: 129; Norman 2002: 13). The other outcome was that the reconciliation process largely marginalised several issues that concerned Indigenous people but were not easily accommodated within a nationalist framework, such as sovereignty, land rights, power relationships and a treaty (Pratt, Elder and Ellis 2001: 146; Moran 1998: 111; Reynolds 1992: 4). These outcomes contributed to the education goal not being achieved as the reconciliation process predominantly did not educate the wider Australian community about a broad range of Indigenous issues.

A third factor was that, in developing its education policies and programs, CAR focused predominately on changing the wider community's attitudes towards Indigenous people rather than on increasing the knowledge of Indigenous issues and reconciliation amongst the wider community (Mansell 1992: 20; Kelly 1993: 11; Pratt, Elder and Ellis 2001: 142). Slogans exhorting Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to 'walk together', and be 'united', as well as images of holding hands, were more widespread than programs designed to educate the wider community about the historical, political and moral consequences of the invasion and subsequent policies of massacres and genocide. This emphasis on changing

attitudes rather than on educating the wider community ensured that non-Indigenous people could support reconciliation without “serious self-examination” (Foley 2000: 26; see also Pratt, Elder and Ellis 2000: 3). Further, even CAR’s attempts to change the attitudes of the wider community to Indigenous issues were largely unsuccessful (Markus 2001: 208-214).

A fourth factor was the absence, in many of CAR’s publications, of any discussion, or even mention, of racism. Many of CAR’s publications, as mentioned above, focussed more on slogans than on education. These publications failed to educate about the entrenched levels of individual and institutional racism in Australia. For example, in their booklet, *Unions and Reconciliation*, CAR failed to acknowledge the history of racism within the union movement, such as the union movement’s long standing support for the “White Australia” policy (CAR 1994b: 1; Bennett 1999: 47; Kelly 2001: 54-55, 61). Further, in their booklet, *Sport and Reconciliation*, current day racist sporting practices were trivialised by the statement “discrimination lingers in some isolated pockets” (CAR 1996a: 5). Another example is their booklet, *Service Clubs and Reconciliation*, which did not acknowledge past and current practices of racism by service clubs (CAR 1996b: 2).

A fifth factor was the influence exerted by Commonwealth Governments over CAR and the reconciliation process. As a result of this influence, CAR was reluctant to become involved in political debates. Its educational publications largely contained nationalist sentiments and failed to significantly criticise Governmental policies, even when the policies negatively impacted upon reconciliation. For example, *Walking Together* rarely discussed contentious topics and its articles were predominately written by non-Indigenous people who adhered to a nationalist discourse, did not criticise Government policies and did not mention issues such as sovereignty or a treaty (see CAR 1997a: 16, 19; CAR 1997b: 6-9). Further, as CAR established and facilitated the ‘People’s Movement’, the Government had some influence over this movement through its control of CAR. Thus, prospective marchers for the Reconciliation Bridge walks in 2000 were required to register with a government phone line (Pratt, Elder and Ellis 2000: 6). Also, in 2000, the Labor Opposition accused the Howard Government of influencing CAR commissioned opinion polls (Taylor 2000: 2; Markus 2001: 209).

## **Social surveys**

There were a number of social surveys conducted throughout the reconciliation process that examined the wider community’s attitudes towards Indigenous peoples and issues. These surveys revealed significant ignorance and racism amongst the wider community. Further, although it is difficult to make comparisons between the surveys, due to differing methodologies, the surveys demonstrated that there was minimal attitudinal change throughout the reconciliation decade (Markus 2001: 208). Overall, the surveys illustrated that the reconciliation process was not effective in addressing levels of racism and ignorance.

This initial social research was extended by various follow-up surveys (CA 1994a: 23). In particular, there were two major social research surveys conducted by CAR in 1995-96 and 1999-2000. “These two studies are probably the two most extensive surveys ever conducted of community attitudes towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and issues related to reconciliation” (CAR 2000: 19).

The first survey in 1995-96 consisted of both quantitative and qualitative research. All the participants were non-Indigenous and it involved 43 focus groups and a telephone survey of 1250 people (Johnson 1996: 2-3). This survey showed some positive results for CAR's education program, including an increase in awareness of the reconciliation process from 28 percent in 1991 to 51 percent in 1996, and a rise in the level of support for reconciliation to 83 percent (Johnson 1996: 4).

However, the report indicated some concerns in regard to the level of knowledge of reconciliation and Indigenous issues amongst the wider community. For example, although the report demonstrated an increased awareness of reconciliation since 1991, it also showed that this was attained in 1993 and had plateaued thereafter (Sweeney 1996: ii). Further, the figure of 51 percent awareness of reconciliation in 1996, half way through the formal reconciliation process, highlighted the failure of CAR to widely educate the Australian people about reconciliation. Moreover, whilst the level of support for reconciliation was measured at 83 percent, the comparison with previous results was acknowledged to be problematic due to the differing mode of questioning between this study and previous studies (Sweeney 1996: 11). Although this 1995-96 survey concentrated on attitudes, it also asked several questions of the respondents to gauge their awareness of factual events. The respondent's lack of knowledge of Indigenous issues was highlighted by their responses to these questions. Only a third of respondents knew that Australia was the only former British colony to not negotiate a treaty with the Indigenous people and approximately half of those interviewed were not aware that Indigenous people were only counted in the Census following the 1967 Referendum (Sweeney 1996: 26). Overall, the report acknowledged this ignorance of reconciliation and Indigenous issues, along with the closely related concerns of fear and apathy, were the main barriers to reconciliation (Johnson 1996: 4-5).

The report also illustrated the nationalist views of many of the non-Indigenous respondents. It found that the respondents, when asked what reconciliation meant, had difficulty articulating a clear definition (Sweeney 1996: 1). Further, they often answered with nationalist responses such as "co-existence, harmony, unity (not perpetuating 'them and us'), acceptance, sharing (of both cultures), [and] consultation (between all parties)" (Johnson 1996: 3). These nationalist viewpoints were also illustrated in the respondent's comments concerning a possible document of reconciliation. Finally, in regard to issues of social justice, the respondents seemed to define justice primarily in terms of improving socio-economic conditions with most identifying Indigenous disadvantage in relation to employment and health rather than in relation to land rights (Sweeney 1996: 7).

The second of these two major surveys initiated by CAR was conducted in 1999-2000. This was comprised of three components. The first was a qualitative survey conducted by Saulwick and Muller from December 1999 to January 2000. It involved fourteen focus groups and twenty-three in-depth interviews and investigated respondent's attitudes to both the reconciliation process and to CAR's *Draft Document for Reconciliation* (Saulwick and Muller 2000a: 3). The nationalist views of the respondents to this survey were acknowledged in the survey report when it stated that the respondents had a "willingness to treat Aboriginal Australians like any other Australians provided they are prepared to accept

'our' values and play by 'our' rules ... they have accepted the concept of multiculturalism – one nation, one people" (Saulwick and Muller 2000a: 5). Further, the report highlighted the general ignorance of respondents about the concept of reconciliation. Many respondents saw reconciliation as an Indigenous issue, often confused reconciliation with other issues such as *Mabo* and land rights and were mostly unaware of CAR (Saulwick and Muller 2000a: 5-6). The survey report also found that respondents saw the Draft Document "as divisive, backward-looking, based only on the Aboriginal perspective ... and a high-risk document which would probably be used as the basis for claims for land and monetary compensation" (Newspoll, Saulwick & Muller and Mackay 2000: 37).

The second component was a national quantitative Newspoll survey commissioned by CAR in early 2000. This survey also investigated Australian's attitudes to Indigenous peoples, reconciliation and the *Draft Document for Reconciliation*. It had two stages, telephone interviews with 1300 Australians and follow up telephone interviews, with a sub-set of 280 people from the initial sample, to investigate their views on the Draft Document that had been mailed to them (Newspoll 2000: 4-5). Respondents from the first stage of the survey, who had not read the Draft Document, almost universally stated that all Australians should have equal rights and opportunities (Newspoll 2000: 8). Respondents from the second stage demonstrated similar nationalist and assimilationist views. Although 74 percent responded more positively than negatively towards the document (Newspoll 2000: 12), there were particular sections of the Draft Document that were disliked more than others. "The sections most liked were those that focussed 'on unity, sharing or equality'" (Newspoll, Saulwick & Muller and Hugh Mackay 2000: 35). Those phrases most disliked were "apology" (44 percent against); "acknowledgement of original owners" (39 percent); "colonised without consent" (40 percent); "stop the injustice" (30 percent); and "customary laws" (32 percent) (CAR 2000: 33). Further, many respondents even refused to acknowledge that any Indigenous socio-economic disadvantage exists. The Newspoll survey found that only 41 percent of respondents thought Indigenous people were a disadvantaged group and that 60 percent felt Indigenous people received too much Government assistance (Newspoll 2000: 34).

The final component was conducted by Saulwick and Muller in March and April 2000. It investigated the views of Indigenous peoples concerning both the reconciliation process and the Draft Declaration. CAR acknowledged that this was the first survey to examine Indigenous views on reconciliation (CAR 2000: 19). This is an indictment on CAR for, despite conducting a number of surveys of the broad Australian community, CAR took nine years to record the views of Indigenous peoples. This survey demonstrated the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people's attitudes towards the concept of equality. Whilst surveys addressed to the broad Australian community found much opposition to the "special treatment" of Indigenous people and a preference for a simplistic view of equality that everyone should be treated the same, Indigenous respondents stated the necessity for "special treatment" if they were to attain equality (Saulwick and Muller 2000b: 11). The belief, held by many in the wider community, that all people should be treated exactly the same, is one of the main tenets of 'modern' racism (Bennett 1999: 25). The survey results also identified elements of the Draft Declaration of particular importance to Indigenous people: the apology, acknowledgement of Indigenous people being the original owners,

recognition of customary law and acknowledgement that Australia was “colonised without the consent” of Indigenous people (Saulwick and Muller 2000b: 11, CAR 2000: 35; see also Grattan 2000: 7).

Finally, an on-going survey conducted by Newspoll, which asked respondents to rank public policy issues in order of importance, illustrated that, during the reconciliation process, the wider community did not place Indigenous Affairs highly compared with other issues. Further, the importance placed by respondents on Indigenous Affairs actually declined throughout the reconciliation process. In 1993, the first year of the survey, Indigenous Affairs ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> last (out of 12 issues) with 33 percent of respondents stating that it was ‘very important’ (Markus 2001: 213). In 2000, Indigenous Affairs ranked last (out of 15 issues) with only 30 percent of respondents stating that it was ‘very important’ (Markus 2001: 213). In the nine surveys conducted between these two, Indigenous Affairs ranked last six times, equal-last twice and second-last once, with the percentage of respondents that stated it was ‘very important’ ranging from 20 percent to 37 percent (Markus 2001: 213).

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that a number of interrelated factors - confusion over the meaning of ‘reconciliation’, influence of nationalism, focus on attitudes rather than education, minimal discussion of racism and substantial government influence – have all contributed to the education goal of the reconciliation process not being achieved. This ensured that the process was unable to address the racist and ignorant attitudes held by many in the wider community towards Indigenous peoples and issues. I illustrated these racist and ignorant attitudes through discussing several opinion polls conducted throughout the reconciliation decade.

It is important to identify and analyse these, and other, interrelated factors and their impact on the reconciliation process. By identifying addressing and critiquing these factors, a more substantive reconciliation process might be developed, one that could address both the racist and ignorant attitudes of many in the wider Australian community and those issues that Indigenous peoples were campaigning for before the reconciliation process was implemented – national land rights and a treaty.

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# **‘Ignoring the Elephant in the Room’: Racism in the War on Terror**

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## **Abstract**

This paper examines one of the least discussed aspects of the current War on Terror i.e. how racist inclinations are undoubtedly affecting the dialogue, perception, depiction, interpretation and ultimately the global management of the War on Terror. While some world leaders and political commentators claimed regularly that this conflict is not against Islam, Muslims or Arabs, the continuing discourse in the media, the political-military actions on the ground and the evolving political-theological debate are without doubt informed by a solipsistic, racist worldview which has contributed to the normalisation of Islamophobic views and policies. As the torture scandal of Abu Ghraib has shown, racism runs deep at every level of the conflict and as it stands today, the world is still ignoring the ‘elephant in the room’.

## **Introduction: There is an elephant in the room?**

“Ignoring the Elephant in the room” is not a terribly novel title but it succinctly underlines the essence of this paper, i.e. the exclusion and continuing invisibility of the most virulent aspect of this so-called ‘War on Terror’: racism. The racist bias, perceptions and inclinations of the major actors had undoubtedly affected the dialogue, perception, depiction, interpretation and ultimately the global packaging of this “perpetual war for perpetual peace” (Vidal 2003) with varied impact for the global community.

Racism is not exclusive to any groups of people and like all impulses of human behaviour, we do possess capacities to hold a biased view of the ‘other’. Racism therefore can be remarkably democratic with its formulation, consolidation and cultivation of bias, prejudice, stereotypes and ensuing manifestations both informally and formally. Essentially, all groups have some members, usually the minority, who thrive on a racist perspective and engagement with the rest of the world. Racism can be led by or nudged along by this racist minority if they possess the power to express those racist notions and a willingness to push them to terrible ends. If led by this select minority, the majority usually suffers from either misrepresentation or are accomplices by complicity. Alternatively, the majority at the receiving end of this racism suffers the consequences of the collective tarring with terrifying

results. In this 'War on Terror', the biased perception of the 'other' is clear on both sides. As noted in 'Clash of Fundamentals':

*...what we have experienced is the return of History in a horrific form, with religious symbols playing a part on both sides: 'Allah's revenge', 'God is on Our Side', 'God Bless America'. The 'war against terror' is a clash of fundamentalisms, religious versus imperial. Each side is marked by time-honoured features—a shameless use of disproportional military power by one and a carefully targeted fanaticism by its Other. The two forces are hardly equal. One is a product of despair, the other is an empire, whose ability to go to war is a chilling reminder of its place in the world. Contemporary politics is conducted and presented in the elitist style of intelligence agencies: disinformation, false information, exaggeration of enemy strength and capability, explanation of a TV image with a brazen lie and censorship. The aim is to delude and disarm the citizenry. Everything is either over-simplified or reduced to wearisome incomprehensibility. (Ali 2002)*

However, as a case study on the unprecedented manipulation of racism, vilification and hypocrisy on a global scale, this 'War on Terror' has produced results that are deeply disturbing, not just in its unapologetic and at times shocking expressions, but its apparent success in demonising a group based on contextual application of standards: usually because they are not 'us' and therefore the 'other'. The process of 'othering' someone who is different has assumed global multidimensional reach that has severe implications for international security *and* social justice for the most vulnerable groups of the 'other'. In comparing atrocities committed by all sides, linguistic sleight of hand, media control, disinformation and political-military-economic inducements have assured an institutionalisation in the imbalance of standards of judgement and with that unquestioned acceptance on the vilification of the 'other'. As noted later, with these powers to act judge, jury and executioner, all actions can be used selectively by the powerful to assert either the supposed nobility of one's actions or the moral or religious bankruptcy of the 'other'.

Thus, while "racist patterns of thought" (Rosenstone 1987: 471-472) are pervasive at all levels of society and on all sides, it follows that not all sides in this 'War on Terror' can claim the moral high ground. However, one side can claim it louder, better and more effectively and consequently enforce a 'manufactured truth' that governs all debate and understanding. This can be conducted, and to paraphrase the words of the first President George Bush, regardless of the facts.<sup>34</sup> As noted by Edward Said even before September 2001.

There also seems to have been a strange revival of canonical, though previously discredited, Orientalist ideas about Muslim, generally non-white, people—ideas which have achieved startling prominence at a time when racial or religious misrepresentation of every other cultural group are no longer circulated with such impunity. Malicious generalizations about

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<sup>34</sup> President George H W Bush words: "I will never apologize for the United States of America—I don't care what the facts are". This was in reference to the shooting of an Iranian passenger plane killing 290 passengers. See Apple Jr, R. W., 1988, 'Bush appears in trouble despite two big advantages', *The New York Times*, 4 August.

Islam have become the last acceptable form of denigration of foreign culture in the West: what is said about the Muslim mind, or character, or religion, or culture as a whole cannot be said in mainstream discussion about Africans, Jews, or other Orientals or Asians.” (Said 1997: xi-xii)

Currently, there is a tapping of a rich vein that exposed the latent racism and hypocrisy lurking under the mainstream. Another disturbing aspect of this normalisation of racist discourse is, as asserted before, the lack of awareness that the dialogue *is* racist. As noted by Rayan El-Amine: “Anti-Arabism and Islamophobia are so much a part of the political and cultural discourse on Arabs and Muslims in American society today that most do not even recognize it as racism” (El-Amine 2004). It is not just in the United States, but an increasing global phenomenon marshalled by a hegemonic media trumpeting a ‘One World, One Message’ that serves to distort and confuse the fundamentals of violence, power and aggression.

## **Global Manifest Destiny: The Return of the White Man’s Burden**

*...for the Iraqi people, my belief is we will, in fact, be greeted as liberators.*

*Dick Cheney*

Though constantly reiterated that this ‘War on Terror’ is led by a hyperpower bent on the spreading an American version of “freedom”, whether the receivers wish it or not, there is the sense of a global Manifest Destiny being played out and with it all the horrors that came with its first invocation in the 1840s. The opening of the American West involved the annihilation of the Native American tribes and the convenient wars with Mexico. All this was justified as some divine mission that blessed the horrors that came with it. To express these horrors or the discordant nature of this enterprise as greed, power and naked racism was to invite the same reaction for those who questioned the attacks in September 2001 as beyond the simple mantra that they “hate our freedoms”.<sup>35</sup>

In a world where more than half the persons on the globe bore the legacy of colonialism and post-war developments have not bought true political-economic independence, this is a world where race and faith still matters. In fact to cite Martin Jacques, this is a world where “race oozes from every pore of humanity” (Jacques 2003). To ignore this is to live in an alternate universe or privileged ignorance because the degree of one’s dignity and survival is affected consciously or subconsciously by how one is perceived by one’s colour, race and religion. As noted by Gore Vidal of his fellow Americans, “there are two subjects that we are never permitted to discuss with any seriousness: race and religion, and how our attitudes toward the first are rooted in the second” (Vidal 2003: 73). To quote President George W Bush’s hero, Winston Churchill, racism is the “soft underbelly of the United States” (Farley 2002); a nation where its Vice-President, the grey eminence, Dick Cheney’s answer to his consistent voting records against anti-apartheid as mere “trivia” (Nichols 2004: 73). Uncomfortable though it seems to admit but there is a “global hierarchy of race” (Jacques 2003) that is

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<sup>35</sup> These conclusions by President George W Bush were asserted and repeated several times by other individuals at regular intervals after September 2001

played out on a daily basis which privileges certain groups and condemns others; the latter usually, for the lack of a better word, “people of colour”.

Not surprisingly therefore is the accompanying marked silence to the obvious racist double standards, the racist political dialogues and the implicit racist messages that had been trumpeted through the evolving but insidious and vacuous lexicon of this ‘War on Terror’ (see Rivers, 2004, Collins & Glover, 2002). In fact since the events of September 2001, to suggest ‘racism’ to any political or economic motives or actions seems almost impolite and even surprising as the seeming consensus, as marshalled by mainstream media and ‘responsible’ politicians, actions are motivated by political realism and heroic patriotism and therefore it is inconceivable that intangibles like ‘racism’ play a part. In fact to suggest any hint of racism would bring charges ranging from a treasonous behaviour, a terrorist sympathiser to an unpatriotic act.

However at the end of 2005, this tactic had produced a perverse form of ‘success’ in the way Islam, Muslims, Arabs and ‘others’ have been equated unquestionably in political discourse, in mainstream media and even in local and personal communication with “terrorism”, “barbarism”, “subhuman” and “satanic”. The rhetoric of this ‘War on Terror’ had become a global incitement to hate, violence and permissible verbal and physical denigration of Islam, Arabs and Muslims: Islamophobia bred on hate, ignorance and complicity.

Racism privileges or discriminates against a group based on the most superficial of criteria but it has the most pernicious quality of resilience and respectability. In this ‘War on Terror’, the reality is the concerted infusion and encouragement of a racist atmosphere at all levels of discourse while maintaining the fiction that racism does not factor at all in spite of discernible evidence. Currently, it is indeed a strange discourse in which new racist ‘standards’ are not only being tested, normalised and institutionalised but gaining global acceptance as ‘truths’ to the detriment of not only the affected community but to our own collective humanity.

The events of September 2001 were concluded by many that the simplistic hypothesis of Samuel Huntington’s “Clash of Civilizations” was finally coming to fore. (Huntington 1996). The fact that the perpetrators were Middle Eastern Muslim men made it all the more accessible for observers to view the offenders as the suspicious ‘other’ and with it a rich historical and religious racist vein of possibilities in which consequent events could be played out (See Ghannoushi 2005). As noted by the immediate pronouncements by Bush of “crusades” and the “axis of evil”, it was easy to conclude that demonising the ‘other’ together with the unapologetic politics of fear, was the most convenient, receptive and productive course especially among the less globally aware. We have indeed traversed a shameful distance during the last four years when Bush saw the need to revise such insensitive term as “crusade” to the recent strident October 2005 jingoistic and threatening declarations of a terrorist network “to establish a radical Islamic empire that spans from Spain to Indonesia” (Reid 2005).

Notwithstanding the fact that this was a speech to shore up faltering confidence and declining ratings, the use of Islam as the all-purpose bogeyman was used unashamedly with the

attending results of cementing further the growing normalisation and institutionalisation of Islamophobia. As *The New York Times* described it, “[I]t is maddening to listen to him describe the perils that Iraq poses while denying that his policies set them in motion” (Anon. 2005d). Bush is not the only person guilty of selective amnesia as evident in the echo chamber of mainstream media, public forums and magisterial conferences. However, living in this “alternate universe” (Gore 2005), is not so much the issue as continuing the distortion on the fundamentals of global politics and international relations.

The scapegoating of Islam, Muslims and the suspicious ‘other’ is actually a tool rather than a singular aim, though its manipulation and the end results feed the racist and imperialistic tendencies of sections of the American people and those similarly inclined. As former Secretary of State, Colin Powell noted in 1991, “I’m running out of demons. I’m running out of villains” (Powell in Stork 1992: 29). September 2001 seemingly resolved the problem for him and the (chicken)hawks in the administration.

Racism in this ‘War on Terror’ is closely linked to a disturbing trend of carving basic universal values as being exclusive to certain cultures, countries and faiths. The end result is that all these forms of racist appropriation subconsciously feed into an age-old tactic: the reductionist explanation for the complex causes of conflict and terrorism to that simplistic and bigoted prism of a “clash of civilizations”. In this civilisation smokescreen, complex and criminal issues of racism, politics, power, violence, greed and scarce resources are reduced to issues of race and religion: the “civilised” world versus the “barbaric” other. As the critics of the illegal invasion of an impoverished Iraq (see Gordon 2002) had continually stated, the invasion was not about freedom, liberty, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), September 11 or the Bush Doctrine of pre-emptive strike: it was, still is and will be about oil, power, in/security and naked aggression with the noxious and familiar ‘civilisation mission’ thrown in by the rightwing religious elements who saw in Iraq as an opportunity to convert the Arabs ‘heathens’ to a more “civilised” faith.

However, to state these arguments even now in certain circles carry with it varying degrees of risks and retributions. Thus even with the stark absence of WMD; the revelations of torture and high civilian deaths; the documentation of faulty intelligence; the questionable ‘reconstruction’ practices; the horrifying use of hostages; the “ghost detainees” in the archipelago of American “gulags” (Amnesty International May 2005); the semi-official approval of expressions of open contempt for Islam through desecration of the Koran, the criminal charges against government officials; the revelations of the Downing Street memo and the recent confirmation of Pentagon paid news in Iraqi newspapers, this invasion is still about “liberty” and “freedom” bestowed by the “civilised” world to the “barbaric” other with a fascinating elasticity to the employment and attribution of the word “civilised” and “freedom” to some allies with questionable human rights record.

In official government discourse among the ‘Coalition of the Willing’ and the echo chamber of mainstream media, denial is in “overdrive” and especially in relation to its pervasive racist element (Solomon 2004a). The on-message is *not* about the world hyperpower consolidating its political-economic security through a classic imperial manifestation of expansion, exploitation and with it solipsistic justification. Crucially, it is also not even about how

racism is employed as a cover to an imperial ambition personified by an American Empire. It is still about “freedom”—American style, American enforced.

The “Empire” term has finally come out of the closet since September 2001 and now being unleashed to the rest of the world as ‘globalisation’ framed by a threat uttered in September 2001 of either “you are with us or against us”. Ignored too is the Bush Doctrine of July 2002 of pre-emptive strike with the singular power of evaluation, judgement and execution in the hands of a people “unable to visualize any world beyond our familiar bars of prejudice and superstition” (Vidal 2003: 73). In international relations jargon, threat perceptions are now undergoing ‘threat reconstruction’ with a highly convenient enemy.

Of course while contrary assertions are articulated in the forum pages of newspapers or weighty journals with left to centre leanings, the global community has been steadily hit by an incessant, ceaseless drumbeat on alleged manifestations, origins and inherent quality of “Islamic terrorism” which in itself is a racist term that has assumed nauseous connotations. As noted by John Pilger with regards to his journalists counterparts: “What makes the difference today is the technology that produces an avalanche of repetitive information, which in the United States has been the source of arguably the most vociferous brainwashing in that country’s history” (Pilger 2003)

As stated earlier, while racism is not the domain of any particular group, the perennial victim seems to be almost always “people of colour” who somehow by virtue of their ‘backward civilisation’ needs the benevolent hand of a “civilised” nation, whose actions if objectively scrutinised are no more civilised than their target’s. And in this case the targets are Islam, Arabs, Muslims or anyone falling under the broad and reprehensible title of being “people of terrorist descent”: a term that seemingly no longer equates terrorism with race or faith but a reductionism that not only denies the ‘other’ a humanistic fundamental identifier but imbues instead an inherent irredeemable quality. This is another act of pernicious dehumanisation with all the unquestioned racist attributions. George Orwell would have been uncomfortably proud of this “civilised” world linguistic dexterity if not for the awful reality of the affected community.

## **Racism and Globalisation: A Symbiotic Relationship**

September 2001 had assumed monumental significance in current political discourse though some critics have argued that this atrocity is no different to the atrocities committed in other parts of the globe on a regular basis. By the fact that it is given such prominence suggests a racist interpretation of the event as somehow the loss of lives here should be valued more than for example the deaths of hundreds of babies daily from malnutrition or the 100,000 civilian deaths in Iraq (Rosenthal 2004, Bosely 2004) since the invasion to bestow upon them American “freedom”. However, in international relations context, the September 2001 event heralded further intensification in the intertwining of the different processes of globalisation, fundamentalism, contestation and imperialism.

Crucially, however this intensification dovetailed with the imperial ambitions of rightwing group of American politicians, bureaucrats and policymakers styled in the pompous title of “Project for the New American Century” with its solipsistic mission and dedication to “a few



fundamental propositions: that American leadership is good both for America and for the world; and that such leadership requires military strength, diplomatic energy and commitment to moral principle” (See <http://www.newamericancentury.org/>) For Bush, “[O]ur nation is the greatest force for good in history” (Bush cited in Johnson 2004: 1). To all this, there is no sense of historical awareness or realistic self-knowledge even in the face of contrary evidence presented for example by Amnesty International which concluded in 1996 “[T]hroughout the world, on any given day, a man, woman or child is likely to be displaced, tortured, killed or “disappeared”, at the hands of governments or armed political groups. More often than not, the United States shares the blame” (cited in Blum 2002: vii). Essentially, breathtaking ignorance on the value of other experiences can only smack of one thing: the profound belief of one’s own superiority and with that an inherent racism towards others.

In the words of Chalmers Johnson, “Imperialism is hard to define but easily recognized” (Johnson 2004: 28). The notion of an American Empire was and still is an uncomfortable description for most Americans since ‘Empire’ and imperialism contradicts the national mythic narrative of the United States as the “shining city on the hill” motivated by supposedly unique American virtues sometimes shorthanded as ‘American Exceptionalism’. Essentially, there is increasing recognition that though the United States may not plant the flag and ‘claim’ or ‘discover’ a country in the name of a monarch, the elements of American foreign policy can be construed to be imperial. This includes employment of its political and economic clout in international negotiations, the support of friendly but at times questionable allies, the growth of forward military installations dotting the globe, the deployment of military forces to assert its national interests and the self-serving declarations of its unimpeachable motives. At this point, it is worth noting the warning by the British historian, Eric Hobsbawm: “Few things are more dangerous than empires pursuing their own interest in the belief that they are doing humanity a favour.” (Hobsbawm cited in *The New Internationalist* October 2004: 7)

Essentially, the business of the United States as Calvin Coolidge states, is still “business” and with it imperialism *and* racism. However, amidst all this imperialistic trappings, what is not recognised or not mentioned is that imperialism or whatever justification is currently being used is heavily laced with the notion of superiority—racial and therefore racist superiority with all its ugly meanings. As noted by David Abernethy, “[I]t was but a short mental leap for people superior in power to infer that they were superior in intellect, morality, and civilization as well. The superiority complex served as a rationalization for colonial rule and, by reducing qualms over the rightness of dominating other people, was empowering in its own right” (Abernethy cited in Johnson 2004: 29). Additionally, this racism is “embedded and shaped by globalisation” in a symbiotic relationship. A. Sivanandan concluded that:

To look at globalisation without relating it to imperialism and therefore racism is not only to regard its penetration into Third World countries as an inevitable extension of trade, and not as a precursor to the regime change that follows in its wake, but to overlook the racist discourse that accompanies it and stirred up by the media, feeds into popular racism (Sivanandan 2004).

## **Abu Ghraib: “Torture Lite” in the ‘right context’**

Dehumanising the enemy by verbal and physical assaults is considered fair practice in war where the murder of a fellow human being upon state orders should be made as efficient as the cause for victory would warrant. However, the solipsistic worldview, intentionally or otherwise, that has framed this ‘War on Terror’ had its first test with the torture ‘scandal’ of Iraqis under American freedom. The crux of the scandal is not so much that how could Americans, a “civilised” people be reduced to behaving as such but rather why should anyone with a modicum of awareness and judgement be surprised or shocked that these extremely cruel behaviour should emerge from American soldiers since these are examples of human behaviour—unless these American soldiers are not humans but really deep down “animals” as they are wont to describe liberally the ‘other’?

Primarily, the word ‘context’ crops up regularly especially in trying to explain the less than civilised behaviour from the “civilised world” but ‘context’ is soothing way of correcting the world as comfortably divided between the ‘good us’ and the ‘evil them’, whatever the evidence. Though it would not be fair to conclude that all Americans concur with the description by rightwing radio talkshow host Rush Limbaugh of Abu Ghraib as college hazing and “fraternity prank” (Anon. 2004a), the popularity of his show and the influence on the public add further to the corrupt hollowness of this ‘War on Terror’. Crucially, it was days after the torture report that major newspapers actually raised the ‘r’ word: the racist imagery, the sexual humiliation, the rapes and murders with torture pictures used as screensavers or exchanged collectibles. At this point, one could not ignore that the ‘otherness’ of the victims must have played a part in the exhibitionist triumphalism of the ‘liberators’.

Norman Solomon was one of the first to comment: “Among the millions of words that have appeared in the U.S. press since late April about abuse and torture at the Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq, one has been notably missing: Racism.” News coverage had been PC-Pentagon Correct where the outlook is “apple pie” egalitarian but as he noted further, “racial biases make the war process easier when people being killed and maimed aren’t white people” (Solomon 2004a). Of course, the immediate reaction of the echo chamber was to maintain the fiction of the “civilised” us versus the “barbaric” them.

It was apparent that these acts of torture or the more sanitised phrase “prisoner abuse” had to be and were explained away in sympathetic and human context of young, scared soldiers with little ‘experience’ in controlling prisoner behaviour or simply as an aberration. Interestingly though the first references to torture poster girl Private Lynndie England included the information that she lives in a trailer park. In this veiled racist reference was the explanation that England, being part of ‘white trailer trash’, was an aberration to the other “civilised” members of the occupation force. Crucially, no alternative sympathetic, humanistic explanations of subjugated Iraqi behaviour in Fallujah or other targeted cities resisting foreign invasion and degrading occupation were forthcoming except that they were just, well, “subhuman”.

Such pervasive double standards are sources of real frustrations not just for Arabs or Muslims but also for all concerned with the perceived debilitating effects of imperialist and state approved acts of violence and torture heavily laced with racist motivations and marked

by proud religious denigration. It is not difficult to imagine how the “civilised” world press would have played the event if the torture roles had been reversed especially as history is littered with evidence of differentiated judgement of events based on race, religion and power.

Significantly, how this “civilised” world managed torture subsequently confirmed a proud and racist approach of holding the line. From George Bush’s “comic apology” (Alam 2004) in which he did not apologise and mangled the pronunciation of Abu Ghraib, to the revelations of more Abu Ghraibs scattered over ‘free Iraq’, to only low-level grunts being punished, to the praising of Donald Rumsfeld as having done an excellent job, to the outright rejection to Amnesty International report of the “gulag of our times” (Amnesty International May 2005) and to the recent revelations of American soldiers exchanging pictures of dead Iraqis as currency to a porn website (Zornick 2005),<sup>36</sup> the Bush administration approach is the confirmation that torture is vital to US security.

In the October 2005 Senate amendment which sought to bar torture against prisoners in US military, Bush threatened to veto any effort to curb the right to torture prisoners. However, the attempt by former Presidential candidate John McCain was not so much on moral grounds as for the practical reason that torture does not always produce good intelligence. Significantly, the proposed amendments do not apply to prisoners in CIA-run prisons at Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan, Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean and in the recently revealed secret prisons or black sites scattered over the globe—an American gulag.

It is not difficult to see how torture is being institutionalised by increasingly imbalanced political-military relations with severe consequences for the nature of democracy (see Johnson 2004). In an administration which sees itself as outside the norm of international law and Geneva Conventions as “quaint” restraints, where the President and Generals in the field spoke incessantly of a divine mission of doing “God’s work” against the Satan that lives in for example Fallujah (White 2005), the torture of the ‘other’: the “sand niggers”, the “towelheads”, the “hajis” seem not only natural but necessary to rid the world of “snakes”, “vipers” and “nests” to make the world safe for democracy *and* hypocrisy. It is this climate of incitement, connivance and tolerance for the intolerable that have brought news of Koran burning, body desecration, sexual humiliation, hunger strikes and even questionable deaths. Torture in the American New World Order is being institutionalised after being road tested in its premier torture site of Guantanamo with its subsequent “extraordinary rendition”, made acceptable as “torture lite” (David 2005) and respectable in the ‘right context’.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> The site is at [nowthatsfuckedup.com](http://nowthatsfuckedup.com) and still accessible in January 2006.

<sup>37</sup> See Dershowitz, A. 2002, *Why terrorism works: Understanding the threat, Responding to the challenge*, Yale University Press, New Haven.

## **Racism in the New World Order: From Normalisation to Institutionalisation**

The normalisation of Islamophobic rhetoric had now moved into official institutionalisation starting with the immediate responses to events of September 2001 within the United States. With the Patriot Act, not only Arabs or American Muslims are subjected to extensive violations of their civil rights though they do suffer the brunt of the responses, other Americans too suffer from the gutting of the Bill of Rights and the unprecedented accumulation of executive power. The 'War on Terror' has evolved to a war with no targets, no timeline except the racking of the fear index at will (Goldberg et.al 2003; Leone et. al 2003). The recent limited extension of the Patriot Act does not indicate any reversal of trend.

However, the global normalisation and institutionalisation of Islamophobic policies ranged from enthusiastic racial profiling, the automatic suspicion and implicit guilt by faith and association, the open-season on expressions of hate for Islam and its institutions and rising respectability for obnoxious Islamophobes. The list continues even with suggestions to the contrary such as the recent works which served to debunk the myths that madrasahs as breeding grounds for terrorism (Bergen & Pandey 2005) or that suicide bombing is a speciality of the Muslim faith (Pape 2005) as they are conveniently ignored or dismissed as unimportant.

Significantly, the British government of Tony Blair did face stiff opposition and was forced to modify severe draconian terrorist laws seeking to lengthen the period of detention without charge, the broad definition of glorifying terrorism and the power to force the closure of houses of worship (read mosques) if deemed to encourage terrorism. As noted by the Muslim Council of Britain (MCB), such broad definitions and the "absence of objective and accepted definitions of terms such as 'radicalisation' and 'extremism'" are themselves biased in favour of the powerful who more often than are motivated by political rather than moral considerations of social justice and overcoming oppression (MCB November 2005). For Muslims and other people concerned with the way this 'War on Terror' is evolving and if history is anything to go, the application of supposedly objective laws are applied selectively by the powerful to the helpless and much of it is coloured by the lens of condescension, contempt, prejudice, fear and ignorance.

As noted by Richard Crouter, there is a lack of "equivalent moral outrage" (Crouter 2005) when Iraqis are killed, or as Karen Armstrong reiterated a point made long ago by Muslim commentators that "the label of Catholic terror was never used about the IRA" (Armstrong 2005), or what does one call the Christian who bombs and assassinates doctors who perform abortions (Farrelly 2003) or the culpability of journalists revelling in such dehumanising propaganda such as "shock and awe", "Mrs. Anthrax" or "collateral damage". As noted by Noam Chomsky: "...anti-Arab racism is rampant. The manifestations are shocking, in elite intellectual circles as well, but arouse little concern because they are considered legitimate: the most extreme form of racism." (*The Independent* 2003).

Within all this linguistic legitimisation of racism, the most reprehensive and institutionalised is "Islamic terrorism" where any attempts to even dissect the meaning of the word "terrorism" had been abandoned in the early months after September 2001. If one concurs

with Noam Chomsky who used the official definition of terrorism by the US Code or Army manual, acts of terrorism would cast a wider net that would surprise some and unfazed not a few (Chomsky 2001: 16). However to even breathe this is done at one's peril let alone to speak of the possible war crimes committed in cities like Fallujah where its encirclement meant Iraqi civilians were literally fish in a barrel as whoever was left in the city was considered as insurgents and therefore fair game: actions reminiscent of Vietnam.

Terrorism is indeed flying a plane full of innocent civilians into a building, the bombing of innocent passengers on a public train but what about bombing innocent civilians cowering in their homes, dropping white phosphorous for an agonising death, placing civilians at the mercy of trigger-happy foreign private "security contractors" and torturing a people whose faith you considered anathema? All these civilians are deemed to have achieved "freedom" even as their deaths are merely termed as "collateral damage" (Safire, 1993, pp. 682-683): undeniably one of the most obscene, racist and hypocritical euphemisms in this war's lexicon. This racist contempt for the 'other' is sometimes coupled with proud declarations by military personnel. General Tommy Franks responded to a question of dead Afghan civilians with "we don't do body counts" (Anon. 2003). A three-star Marine General enthusiastically shared his view of Afghan male citizens as a "hell a lot of fun to shoot them" (Anon. 2005c). Such homicidal inclinations were reported to be greeted by "loud laughter and enthusiastic applause" (White 2005). For the critics of this War on Terror, such views consolidate further the pervasive fear and racist hatred of Arabs and Muslims within the American political-military culture.

Essentially, in the global hierarchy of race, some groups hold others to standards they do not ascribe to themselves and this hypocrisy is accepted, normalised and being institutionalised. To condemn openly these racist double standards is regarded by some as not only heresy but an uppity challenge to the global hierarchy of race which is not spoken of but recognised and practiced by almost everyone.

In this unequal judgement of accountability lies the awful representation: the unequal horrors of war. John Kerry's breathtakingly solipsistic assertion that Americans "have borne 90 percent of the casualties in Iraq" (Klein 2004) echoes a previous notorious comment by former Secretary of State, Madeline Albright that the "price" of half a million dead Iraqi children due to economic sanctions was "worth it" to contain Saddam Hussein (Pilger 2002: 63-64). 100,000 dead Iraqis are inconsequential as they do not count and effectively dehumanises further the Iraqi people. The dead are also presumably what Donald Rumsfeld flipantly calls part of the "untidy" business of war (Whitaker 2003, Loughlin 2003). But what if those half a million dead babies or 100,000 casualties had been for example, white, blond and English-speaking? It's conceivable that the global mainstream media response would be something along a 'barbaric genocide' and *not* a "price" that was "worth it".

Undoubtedly, there is growing global acceptance that certain lopsidedness in the equation is acceptable. Thus while Muslims are called upon to denounce selected atrocities, they aren't called upon to condemn atrocities committed upon their community. These underlying connotations are that somehow Muslims and Islam do not share basic universal values on the abhorrence of wanton violence. To press for instant condemnation of every act of violence done by rogue elements in the name of Islam while leaders of the "civilised" world are not

called upon to condemn the war's atrocities reinforced the normalisation and institutionalisation of racist standards which we all presumed to have waned since the post-war Winds of Change era. Ultimately, this unequal public relations exercise has the potential to perpetuate further the negative and simplistic understanding of Islam and its adherents.

## **Conclusion: There will always be elephants (?)**

The 'othering' and dehumanising of Muslims devalues Muslim lives and erodes our sense of collective humanity. The mounting civilian casualties did not register the seismic kind of reaction that it should and in the process somehow makes it acceptable and even appropriate: a situation that would not be tolerated in a different universe. In the words of Wole Soyinka, "even in death, where all victims are surely considered equal, some continue to die more equally than others" (Soyinka 2004).

George W. Bush concluded in a joint meeting of Congress after September 2001 that America's enemies "hate our freedoms, our freedom of religion, our freedom of speech, our freedom to vote and assemble and disagree with each other". The September 2004 Department of Defense report concluded otherwise: "Muslims do not "hate our freedom", but rather they hate our policies...when American public diplomacy talks about bringing democracy to Islamic societies, this is seen as no more than self-serving hypocrisy" (US Department of Defense 2004: 36. See also Shanker 2004). In spite of Dick Cheney's contention that "from the standpoint of the Iraqi people, my belief is we will, in fact, be greeted as liberators" (Cheney, 2003), events since then had produced none of these illusions but instead reinforced further racist suspicion, mounting hatred, hysterical fear and murderous intent from all sides.

Amidst the avalanche of racist discourse and the revelations of the deplorable behaviour in the path to war, lonely voices are heard from the left wing of the political spectrum. Critics such as Robert Fisk articulated this in reference to the historical legacy left by colonial masters and the normalisation of the simplistic equation of "good" and "evil": "...we have long ago lost our moral compass...Just look at ourselves in the mirror and we will see the most frightening text of all" (Fisk 2005). His conclusion recalls Mahatma Gandhi's semi-facetious answer to a question on his view of Western civilisation. "Civilisation" according to the Mahatma would be a "good idea" for the West. Other contrary voices included former President Jimmy Carter who as very early in the Iraq invasion termed the attack as an "unjust war" (Carter 2003). He continues his opposition with a recent assertion that the United States "bomb, strafe and send missiles against their people even though our security's not directly threatened" (Anon. 2005e).

A travesty however is the equation of the war to the American civil rights movement as asserted by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice recently (Russell 2005). There is nothing in the foreign subjugation and violent death inflicted on the Iraqi people that qualifies as promoting civil or human rights. This is solipsism and racism at its most obscene made worse by the fact that Martin Luther King when finding himself in the midst of a similar war had the courage to call the Vietnam War for what it was: a racist war on the people and country of Vietnam. Rice's analogy was not only the usual political spin of a deteriorating

situation but an insult to all those who suffered and are suffering and those who resisted and are still resisting an unjust world based on institutionalised racism.

Finally in contemplating the racist features of the so-called 'War on Terror', we need to note Charles, Baron De Montesquieu's words: "An empire founded by war has to maintain itself by war" and if this is the feature of this Brave New World, then the unequal horrors and costs of war will continue for the most vulnerable 'other' groups of the moment or for any new 'other' waiting to be anointed and packaged as the "barbaric" 'other'.

The challenge for our collective humanity is not whether as an individual we are racist or not racist while lamenting our seeming inability to affect the larger than life issues of politics and war. However, as noted by Beverley Tatum, it is not a question of whether we are racist or not racist but whether we are "actively anti-racist" (Tatum in *Understanding Race* 1999). In this racist 'War on Terror' where the 'r' word is criminally ignored, the need to be actively anti-racist has never been more imperative. A painful reminder on the urgency of this exhortation is in the face of the dead: of civilian casualties in all parts of the globe and not to selected "civilised" people and places. As written by Terry Tempest Williams (Hamill 2004: 226)

*The erosion of voice is the build up of war  
Silence no longer supports prayers  
but lives inside the open mouths of the dead.*

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# Global positioning: racism and the politics of location

Response to the Keynote Address  
by Professor Floya Anthia

*Boundaries of 'race' and ethnicity  
and questions about cultural belongings*

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This response will highlight some of the key implications of Floya's address and attempt to spell out how they can assist us in analysing and combating racism in all its forms in Australia today. In particular I will try to show how we need to, in Floya's terms, move beyond identity or category politics to a politics of location, situation and context.

The impact of globalisation, of the collapse of the super-power counterweight of the Soviet Union, of rapidly increasing population flows arising from political, economic and environmental pressures, and the apparent increase in inter-communal violence and so-called terrorism, have all combined to foster new ways of racialising minority groups. Of particular importance has been the increasing salience of religious and ethnic markers in denoting both the outsider group and the reasons for their exclusion.

While Islamophobia is the archetypal manifestation in Australia, Britain and many other Western nations, it is incredibly important that we don't get sucked into the belief that those people who identify as (or those regarded by others as being) Muslim form some kind of homogenous, coherent or even socially meaningful collectivity. The constant blurring and slippage between Muslim, and "of middle eastern appearance", and Arabic-speaking should alert us to the crudity of such aggregations (HREOC, 2004; Poynting et al, 2005). Even more so when we realise that many of those who see themselves as Muslim don't go to the mosque and are not strictly observant of many of the particular religious and cultural expectations that may apply to others in their family or community.

This probably obvious point reinforces several key points in Floya's paper:

- The blurring of racial differentiations regarded as biological or genetic with ethnic, religious and even lifestyle otherness based on cultural beliefs and practices
- The fluidity, opportunism and hydra-like properties of racism once indicated by differentiating between old and new racism but now attending more to the

essentialised nature of racist discourse than to the specific (and often contextual) form of their expression. That is, it is the fixed, absolutist and homogenising basis of their linkage of social behaviours and moral worth to a racialised identity that defines racism, not its reliance on hierarchical, biological "races". Conversely, non-racist thinking and anti-racist actions require us to treat cultures as dynamic, emergent and often contradictory rather than fixed and coherent.

- Thirdly, we must simultaneously attend to the multilayered and shifting forms of our individual and collective identities. This means in particular but not exhaustively, having regard to our gender, class, age, impairment, sexuality, place of residence or perhaps now our "global positioning", in combination with our racial or ethnic categorisations. As we will see this demands more than just invoking a litany of different labels to which we assign ourselves or are assigned. As Floya strongly argues, we need to move beyond identity to examine location and placement, context, meaning and practice (2002b: 494-495).

This multiple and contextual approach to identities is critical both intellectually and practically, given the almost overwhelming tendencies of the state on the one hand, and of social and political mobilisations on the other, to privilege one axis of differentiation over all others. Customers, target groups, constituencies and risk categories (whatever the discourse employed) all tend to be exclusively defined as for example, South Sea Islanders, or Sudanese refugees, or Indigenous Australians, or Muslims. Other agencies and processes identify, assess, service, surveil, and control other categories based on their gender, sexuality, homelessness, criminal activities, health or body issues. In many institutions, equity means gender and occasionally disability, multiculturalism means CALD but not including Indigenous, Indigenous is fraught with requirements to obtain community endorsement of ancestry and self-identification, and class means postcode or is disregarded altogether.

In order to obtain recognition (and funding) from the state as well as provide political messages in forms that are acceptable to and communicable via mass media, political struggle drives many groups into single-issue and identity-based forms that reproduce the essentialising and racialising effects of state construction of population categories. This often results in grossly unequal access to resources and highlights the problem Floya flags: Who constitutes community or group membership? Who defines and polices the boundaries? Who can speak for the community?? Who are able to speak and be heard within it? The Howard Government's recent selection of an Islamic Reference Group demonstrates these problems, including the apparent over-representation of elderly, conservative, patriarchal and foreign-born persons. Similar questions face the National Indigenous Council appointed to replace the elected representative body, ATSIC.

Where multiple axes of identity are acknowledged, they are often calculated as cumulative as in poor, working-class, black, women, and a pensioner. Much more rarely recognised are the often-contradictory effects of ethnicity, education, age, sexuality and mobility.

One attempt to address this problem has been the concept of gender and race intersectionality as adopted by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission for the 2001 World

Conference on Racism (HREOC, 2001). While an advance on ungendered consideration of racial differentiation, such an approach uncritically retains the socially constructed categories of gender and race as meaningful classificatory and explanatory tools. Repeatedly we see the experiences and responses of marginalized and oppressed people being explained in terms of their sex, their culture, their dislocation, their character. In the process the fundamental political and structural underpinnings of domination are obscured or denied and the shared nature of relative powerlessness and subordination are ignored. As Floya notes, this is not merely a theoretical shortcoming. It results in bad policy, poorly targeted programs and jeopardizes coalition activism.

The fundamental break with such category-based discourse and thinking is to see racism and other forms of social exclusion and subordination as power relationships (Hollinsworth, 2006: 52-77). That is our emphasis is on the structures and processes of domination and subordination, of resistance and accommodation, not on possessive characteristics of individuals or groups. This non-essentialised approach can cope with, and in fact encourage, dynamic and unpredictable social and cultural change. It can acknowledge diversity within categories as well as between them, and recognize the many shared and interlocking needs and aspirations of diverse populations (Meekosha and Pettman, 1991).

Arguably this recognition of power relationships and locations rather than inherent group qualities via the concept of translocational positionality is the most important contribution of Floya's recent work (Anthias, 2002a, 2002b and 2005). Notions of identity and belonging have been very popular both within the academe and in what is often called identity politics (Hollinsworth, 2006: 69-75). Yet even when the multifaceted and fractured nature of identities is recognized, we often remain wedded to a belief in identity as "a possessive property of individuals rather than a process" (Anthias, 2002b: 495).

Translocational positionality (or the politics of location) reminds us of those processes and the ways in which our subjectivities are formed within multiplicities and contradictions of placement and relationships structured by many forces including categorization in terms of race and ethnicity, religion, gender, age and class. Our sense of belongingness and otherness emerges from our engagement with these often-unstable relationships and locations. These experiences and the stories they generate are often biographical rather than group-based, and include as many shared (but not identical) experiences as those that are marked by difference or exclusivity. By refusing to reduce these localized and historically specific contexts to the sum of their essentialised components we can avoid being trapped within ever-diminishing spheres of identity-based awareness and agency.

We can resist the core objective of current government efforts to create fear and division in Australia and internationally through the so-called War on Terror and associated moves to redefine social cohesion as uniformity and submissiveness in return for protection.

In the past five years we have seen a staggering erosion of civil and human rights in this country with widespread administrative detention (and in some cases deportation) of asylum seekers including children, long-term residents with criminal convictions, citizens who were ill not illegal, and peaceful protesters (Nicholson, 2005). Legislation has been passed for

detention without charge including of associated non-suspects, for preventive detention, for 5 years imprisonment for publishing the fact of such a detention, and sweeping powers under sedition provisions. At the same time, Indigenous affairs has been radically overhauled to remove representative bodies, to defund specialist programs and to replace Indigenous rights with responsibilities to be determined by mainstream government agencies or their Indigenous “partners” (Arabena, 2005; Bradfield, 2005; Rowse, 2005).

Alongside fundamental changes to industrial relations and long-standing welfare provisions and arrangements, this radical government agenda seeks to redefine government/citizen relations in terms of a privatized yet supposedly mutual responsibility. The state and fellow citizens are increasingly regarded as having no genuine connection with those living among us who fail to meet mainstream expectations of gratitude, compliance and productivity.

As Floya describes, this appeal to a highly partisan notion of social cohesion can draw a “line in the suburbs” just as delineating as the “line in the sea” (Perera, 2002) of border protection. This strategy explicitly denies any racist intent by claiming “We” are under attack and that it relates to what we “hold dear” and “stand for” and is not based on any old-fashioned notions of racial inferiority. Again the vision of Us as embattled, threatened, and hard done by is twinned with potent imaginings of Others whose religion, values, envy, inability to assimilate, and unwillingness to remain unnoticed constitute incalculable dangers. Governments invoke a “clear and present danger” as grounds to strip away centuries of legal protection from arbitrary detention even though the official threat warning remains “Medium” as it has since 9/11 (Nicholson, 2005: 21). Identities and senses of belonging that are based on rigid, exclusive characteristics offer little guidance as to how we might form alliances and work together to defend fundamental freedoms even if they provide emotional security in the face of abuse and fear.

As Suvendrini Perera reminds us:

... multiethnic, multiracial societies are not geared towards *unavoidable* conflict. For that to happen active choices must be made; one set of options adopted over another; certain things said or not said; positions actively staked out; exclusions and inclusions clearly demarcated. ... alongside the stream of racism, exclusion and violence there also always exists the possibility of dissent and opposition; of critiquing the racial claims and myths of our society; of challenging the stereotypes that would exclude certain groups from full citizenship in the public sphere (2002: 6).

While the past decade has seen significant increases in both official and popular expressions of intolerance and hostility to minority groups, we have options and can influence the options of others. Together we can renounce the whole apparatus of categorising people on the basis of racial, ethnic or cultural assignment, and reaffirm that we all seek fundamental human rights and protections especially in the sense of being acknowledged as “fully human” (Gaita, 2002). Instead of liberal multiculturalism and cultural relativism under the guise of tolerance and the celebration of diversity, we need to vigorously argue and act in defence of social justice and human rights including the right to question and reject cultural or social expectations.



For me this means that:

While the work of collaborating across and within our various differences is often painful and frustrating, the alternative is to invoke righteous but reductionist speaking positions which undermine our capacity to listen and to act. The need is to move on from such speaking positions to the politics of address [or in Floya's terms, of location] in all their elusiveness and mutability (Hollinsworth, 1995: 97).

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# Aboriginalising Racism – Regional Experiences of Racism between Aboriginal Groups

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## Abstract

Dialogues regarding racism often focus on the racism experienced across different groups; however, little discussion confronts the issue of racism within cultural groups, in particular amongst Aboriginal groups. This paper will provide an exploration of personal experiences and anecdotal observations that will construct an understanding of racism from within an Aboriginal perspective; these experiences will highlight a level of discrimination imposed on some Aboriginal people through a perceived lack of 'culture' and how this contributes to community dysfunction.

For many Aboriginal people, experiencing racism from other Aboriginal people is not a new issue, nor is it unique. The impact that this type of racism can have on individuals is pervasive and is a contributing factor to community dysfunction. Anecdotal observations and personal experiences reveal this type of racism as insidious and enduring in some Aboriginal communities which undermine potential progress.

Manifestations of this dynamic can be assorted and wide ranging, however they all appear to result in similar outcomes which generally involve the withholding of access to perceived benefits or privileges, questioning of Aboriginal identity, personal and professional attacks in the workplace and the questioning of motives for working with Aboriginal people which can lead to disassociation with one's family based on a perceived lack of cultural attributes.

Aboriginal identity was firstly de-constructed with the arrival of Europeans, and then re-constructed through the creation of one homogenous label, 'Aboriginal', to describe the many diverse societies at that time. It was then further constructed by the various policies introduced by the Australian states to control and handle the Aboriginal problem per se. It would appear that since the arrival of the Europeans, Aboriginal identity has been in a process of change and this construction has not been controlled by Aboriginal people. Even today, Aboriginal identity has been constructed by external governing agencies which has helped create a culture of the 'haves' and the 'have nots'.

Defining Aboriginal identity is reliant on a complex matrix of experiences, environment, history and story; it is constructed (Brady 2000), dynamic and not fixed. As Hall, cited in Hollinsworth, (1998 p. 66), reminds us:

identity is always incomplete or in the process of formation. Its construction and definition work on the basis of identification and differentiation; that is, by demarcating that which one is, from that which one is not.

For many Aboriginal people, their identity has longed been constructed through a dialogue that often emphasises that which they are not, that is, they have been advised that if one is Aboriginal then they have certain attributes and not others. In the near future, this may become more difficult as Aboriginality, as a constructed identity, might not be consistent with the person's social identity on a daily basis (Gray & Tsfaghiorghis cited in Rowse 2002), implying that who an individual is as an Aboriginal person may not reflect how they present in some circumstances.

Aboriginal identity will always be in a process of construction and for some groups, over time, this will become less dependent on physical characteristics of skin colour and physiognomy, with the demarcating lines between who is Aboriginal and who is not becoming less clear. Some Aboriginal people, in particular those with fair skin, face continual identity issues and often experience racism from both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous societies, for many Australians:

seem to think that it is the racial characteristics, skin colour and "blood", which makes an Aborigine. To these people, the darker a person's skin is, the more Aboriginal they are. When this sort of thinking predominates, as it so often does, many Aboriginal people start finding themselves robbed of their Aboriginality. People tell them that they are only half or a quarter Aboriginal, or a "part Aborigine". (Christie, 1986, p.37 – 40)

Consistently, Aboriginal people with fair skin are questioned about how much "Aboriginal blood" they have, and this creates doubts about their identity; it also has the ability to rob an individual of parts of their history, therefore de-humanising and reducing them to individual parts, not a whole person.

Indigenous Australians are the only group in Australia that have been required to prove their identity in order to access certain rights or benefits. The government definition states that:

An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander is someone who

- is of Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander descent; and
- identifies as an Australian Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander; and
- is accepted as such by the community in which s/he lives or has lived. (Brady, 2000, p. 274)

The definition is itself inherently racist, and although an improvement on previous historical processes for identifying Aboriginal people, has created a range of issues for individuals and communities. Significantly, Aboriginal people are mandated to have an organisation or group assess their identity (the last criterion), and this presents various issues related to power, acceptance and perceived identity/ancestry.

Aboriginal people were never one homogenous group and did not share a single philosophy, religion or culture. This is evident today in the many diverse representations of Aboriginal groups, and impacts the dynamics of Indigenous politics in communities and the many diverse appearances of Aboriginal people. However, a common perception amongst the majority of Australians is that the darker your skin, the more you know about your culture. For some Aboriginal people the colour of their skin does not indicate connection to their Indigenous culture and often does not reflect the background of that person. Even geographical location is not a clear indicator of Aboriginal culture, as an Aboriginal person from an urban background can also have strong connections with and knowledge of their Aboriginal culture.

In some cases, the colour of one's skin may be contributed by 'other' cultures in their ancestry. As such, skin colour is possibly the most complex identifier of identity for Aboriginal people, as it can create confusion and misconstruction about one's identity. For some, if a person does not have the skin colour then they are not 'real black'; for others it is not as important as the person's 'culture'. Unfortunately, the complexity of this issue is tied up with the diverse understandings of Aboriginal culture and the Australian Government's official definition of who an Aboriginal person is; this presents major issues for fair-skinned Aboriginal people claiming indigenous identity because often skin colour is the most acceptable 'proof' of identity.

Historically, skin colour has been strategically utilised by government officials to separate Aboriginal children from their families, for having lighter skin was viewed as somehow having more capacity to be assimilated into White society. Brady (2000) writes that skin colour was the only relationship identifiable by White society, and that the "degree of blackness had some supposed correlation with intelligence or other qualities that were seen as a prerequisite for 'training into civilisation'" (p. 274); from this an unconscious implication could then be extrapolated suggesting that those children who were too dark to be removed had more Aboriginal culture, making it difficult for them to be assimilated into White society. Conceivably, the issues some Aboriginal communities are experiencing in relation to contemporary Aboriginal identity could be a residual consequence of the assimilation policies and is a contributing factor to the complex relationship of skin colour generated within some Aboriginal groups.

## **Racial Language**

Racial attitudes are primarily communicated by language and there are a number of terms that Aboriginal people use against each other. Terms like 'coconut', 'upper-class black' and 'Johnny-come-lately black' are often used to denigrate another Aboriginal person and to eradicate that person's identity. While there may possibly be deeper meanings to the terms used, of which the historical inferences of the words are significant, contemporary usage of words like these underpin attempts to sabotage and undermine a person's respect and acceptability in a community, and they work to marginalise some Aboriginal people. It is also important to recognise that sometimes this language is used amongst Aboriginal people in a teasing, bonding way but its more common usage is to aggressively remove identity from

individuals. The impact of removing identity results in many individuals feeling demoralised and devalued, not only as Aboriginal people but as individuals.

## **Diminishing humanity: Attacking Identity**

Boundaries we might identify between racial types, are constructed in our imaginations. We learn to notice particular differences, which have been regarded as important, and to disregard the overlap between groups, and the variations within groups seen as foreign or other. (Hollinsworth, 1998, p. 31)

Amongst Aboriginal people, attacking an individual's identity is often achieved by emphasising difference, thus creating 'in-groups' and 'out-groups' in communities. If you are part of the in-group, with acceptable attributes and qualities, then you are allowed access into certain areas and groups within a community, and perhaps most importantly have access to information. If you are perceived as 'other' and therefore in the 'out-group', it is difficult to gain access and acceptability in a community, and to be part of the information sharing networks essential to progress in Aboriginal communities. Being part of the in-group, is like having a 'cultural passport', granted to you based upon your family connections, or through being viewed as having the right amount of 'colour' and therefore 'culture' and therefore acceptability.

'Colour' is one way of signifying difference and is achieved by focusing on physical traits; the colour of skin, eyes, hair. Also, by focusing on a lack of 'traditional' cultural traits; such as being unable to hunt, dance or speak language appears to be another way of emphasising difference, therefore emphasising lack of Aboriginality. It is the highly visible, and often exotic, cultural traits that Aboriginal people are assessed on, leaving little room for the 'invisible', such as, spiritual and emotional experiences related to a person's Aboriginal heritage which are not visible to others. There are a number of experiences, rituals and understandings that Aboriginal people may have that affirm their own culture; these may not be visible nor might they be considered 'traditional'. How do you explain the spiritual connections that an individual may have that are not commonly shared but they know, inherently, that what they have experienced is their 'dreaming'?

It is often easier to attack someone's identity when they don't have dark skin, to challenge an urban Aboriginal and decide that they are not Aboriginal; "how can you be Aboriginal, you're whiter than me" is a comment often heard by many fair-skinned Aborigines and once again they have to 'prove' their Aboriginal identity. How many other 'cultures' are asked to prove they are who they say they are?

## **Community Acceptance**

One dimension of the prejudice within Aboriginal groups relates to the fragmentation of identity experienced by some Aboriginal people; Audre Lorde illustrated this (cited in Hollinsworth 1998, p. 63):

...I find I am constantly being encouraged to pluck out some one

aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing or denying the other parts of myself. But this is a destructive and fragmenting way to live...

Customarily, people with both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous history are defined by one aspect of their whole identity, that which is acceptable to the situation they are moving within, or, as Hollinsworth (1998) suggests, what “aspects of our identities are foregrounded depends on the circumstances” (p. 62). This applies to both Aboriginal and non-Indigenous societies as often only one identity is acceptable in either group, and does have serious implications personally and professionally for individuals as you are made to feel less than ‘whole’, a fragmented person where the individual identities have more value than the whole.

Another facet of the prejudice experienced within Aboriginal groups is to de-value an individual’s lifestyle choice which can create significant barriers for communities moving forward. For most Aboriginal people, obtaining employment or a tertiary degree is a decision motivated by the desire to improve their lifestyle and that of their family. It also represents a way they can work with their community to help progress it. In some instances, choosing to acquire a degree, or a ‘good’ job, ends up being an un-rewarded achievement. Yes, they get the degree and most end up with good quality employment, but often they risk losing their community’s acceptance of them; their efforts often result in not obtaining work in their own community for they are perceived as being ‘too white’ and therefore not ‘black’ anymore. This is somewhat distressing and is easily a significant contributor to lack of community progress, for if Aboriginal people from regional and rural communities are leaving their community to obtain education or employment and not returning because of lack of acceptance, it means a loss of labour, knowledge and skills for communities and results in increasing intervention by government agencies to fill gaps in communities.

## **Power in Aboriginal Society**

Acts of racism are connected to acts of power; the power in racism is in the act of withholding rights or access to benefits; in some Aboriginal societies, it is also related to the power of having knowledge and sometimes the power of having ‘traditional culture’, or ‘cultural capital’. No offence is meant to any person who knows their traditional culture as this type of power has more to do with the perception that Aboriginal people with dark skin automatically have the legitimate cultural knowledge to comment or give advice about Aboriginal issues. There is power in having dark skin that is not often recognised, and it lies in the ability for such Aboriginal people to talk about their ‘culture’ and have it accepted as legitimate and therefore applied to ALL Aboriginal people. In effect, they have become ‘culture experts’ and in communities they are the people who are consulted on ALL things Aboriginal, when in fact, further exploration and consultation with other community members could identify they are not recognised by the community as having the legitimacy to speak on behalf of all members of that community. Who then are the legitimate speakers for Aboriginal people?

Too often, the decision to legitimise voices of Aboriginal communities is assumed by non-Indigenous people, which creates tension in communities and essentially undermines future

progress. Jason Glanville, in an article in October's *Reconciliation News*, titled 'Agree to Disagree' (p. 4), writes that

...at the national level, certainly since the demise of ATSIC and probably before that, we've had a problem where non-Indigenous bureaucrats and reporters are too often telling us who our leaders are and too often creating conflict where there doesn't need to be any.

This conflict on the national scale, in my observations and experiences, is a reflection of what is occurring at the local level. If several individuals located within the community are recognised as key stakeholders and are usually targeted by departments and organisations to provide ALL knowledge and expertise on ALL Aboriginal people and groups, could it be possible that something is being missed?

At the national level, there are many Aboriginal leaders who are recognised and valued for their input into progressing Aboriginal communities; however, there is much dissension amongst them in regards as to who has the legitimacy to make decisions about all Aboriginal people. This is based upon the contention that what one person advises cannot be applied as being right for ALL Aboriginal people. As Glanville reminds us:

...what works in culture and practice on one side of the country, or in one community, doesn't necessarily make sense in other parts of the country... We have to stop having our blues on the front page of the newspaper and letting people draw us into damaging public debates. These debates are constructed to suit other people's agendas, not ours. (Glanville, 2005, p. 4)

While this may not be racist, per se, there are elements of racism that are entwined within Aboriginal politics, whether at the local or national level. This is not something that will be resolved by the appointment of a National Indigenous group, as this seems to exacerbate the political, racial, historical, and cultural dynamics that are continually evolving within Aboriginal communities, which nationally is a reflection on what is occurring at the community level. However, if Aboriginal communities are distracted by the politics of history and continual fights over who is and who is not Aboriginal, which fuels community dis-harmony, whose agenda is being promulgated?

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# **Conflict, Moral Panics and Curfews: The Unchanging Reporting of Indigenous Affairs in the WA Press**

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## **Abstract**

Although it has been empirically demonstrated that the vast majority of assaults and drug and alcohol-related violence in Northbridge are perpetrated by white males aged between 18 and 35, the WA press applauded the introduction of a curfew that applies to young people aged 18 and under. The overwhelming majority of children affected are Aboriginal; two-thirds are girls.

This paper presents the findings of interviews undertaken among WA print media professionals in August 2005, designed to identify the influences that lead mainstream media to disproportionately focus on the alleged criminal activity of Indigenous youth.

## **Introduction**

Having cut my teeth as a journalist many moons ago and through my subsequent work on 'the dark side' of public affairs, I did not believe that the business of political communication and the strategic use of news could hold any more surprises. I was mistaken. In June 2003, I was not only very surprised, but deeply puzzled. This is why:

As is typical of capital cities around the world, Perth's premier entertainment district – Northbridge – is also its crime hot spot. According to UWA's Crime Research Centre, the vast majority (77%) of assaults and drug and alcohol-related violence in Northbridge are perpetrated by white males aged between 18 and 35.

Two years ago, a curfew was introduced in Northbridge, which is targeted at young people aged under 18. It prohibits unsupervised children aged 13 to 15 from being in Northbridge after 10pm and has signalled a "hard-line approach" by Police to other teenagers engaged in anti-social behaviour or under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.

While the policy officially applies to all young people, according to Mission Australia's figures, 75-85% of those picked up under the curfew are Aboriginal; two-thirds are girls.

## The WA press and the Northbridge curfew

Notwithstanding the empirical evidence regarding the profile of the perpetrators of crime in Northbridge, the WA press overwhelmingly applauded the introduction of the curfew *as a means of making Northbridge safer*.

Further, the WA press failed to report the fact that the curfew policy, which was introduced amid much media fanfare, was in actuality devoid of any substance. It did not provide the Police with any new powers that they did not already enjoy under the Child Welfare Act. Neither did it provide any additional resources to the organisations working on the ground.

It is my contention that the curfew was, in fact, a classic case of the ‘Emperor’s new clothes’, a strategy stitched together to appease a majority public opinion who, according to the media professionals I interviewed for this project, simply do not want to share public space with Aboriginal people.

One of the main reporters on Northbridge said that the agenda at *The West Australian* was that “something had to be done” about Aboriginal young people in the precinct. Consequently, the curfew - according to one of its chief architects - was introduced precisely because, “It (was) what the pundits wanted to hear.” This is borne out by public opinion polls, which have consistently shown overwhelming support for, and very high recognition of the curfew policy.

One leading columnist with *The West Australian* explains it simply:

“It’s unsettling for white middle class Australians to take their families to Northbridge and be confronted by Aboriginal youth.”

A senior colleague adds:

“The issue of Aboriginal kids (is) the most pivotal issue with regard to Northbridge. ...Even if that’s not a real fundamental cause of problems, but people think it is, that still affects the public debate.”

Leading to the conclusion, as drawn by *The West Australian*’s former State Political Editor, that:

“Rightly or wrongly, Northbridge is always going to come down in the media or in the public mind to Indigenous kids.”

All the media professionals interviewed for this project, including those who wrote explicitly in support of the curfew, claimed they knew that the curfew was simply a re-packaging of existing policy. They wrote their articles, therefore, in the knowledge that they were effectively pandering to the perceived prejudices of their readership. As the Chief of Staff at *The Sunday Times* noted:

“The paper supported the curfew because it was popular (among the public), not because it had any merit necessarily.”

## Methodology

Such discourse led me to explore, through academic research, the dynamic of media/public relations and its impact on government policy. My research has focused on the WA print media’s coverage of the curfew, namely *The West Australian* (the State’s only daily newspaper) and *The Sunday Times*, as these enjoy the largest readerships in Western Australia. Part of my PhD research has involved a content analysis of press articles as well as interviews with all the print journalists who wrote about the curfew, together with the Editor of *The Sunday Times* and the two most recent editors of *The West Australian*. (Only the current editor of *The West Australian* declined to participate in this project. Fortunately, he took over the reins of the newspaper after the introduction of the curfew policy so his input was not vital.)

This paper provides a snapshot of my key findings. It begins with the external influences on the reporting of Indigenous affairs: starting with the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody’s recommendations to media. It goes on to consider the political backdrop and the public mood against which the curfew was introduced. It then examines the internal influences, namely the key news processes and practices, which determine how a story is selected, how it is framed and what sources are used, and the individual values and experience of the Editors and reporters involved. I will argue that these external and internal influences encourage the WA press to focus disproportionately on the alleged criminal activity of Indigenous youth in Northbridge. As far as possible, I let the journalists speak for themselves.

## RCIADIC recommendations

My starting point was to determine what impact, if any, the media-related recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (RCIADIC) have had on news organisations since they were presented in 1991.



This cartoon, which depicts dark-skinned youths fighting in the streets of Northbridge in January 2001, is an example of precisely the type of negative stereotyping that the RCIADIC recommendations were designed to address more than 10 years ago.

I discovered that only a minority of journalists interviewed were even aware of the RCIADIC recommendations. Notwithstanding this, there were mixed views as to their impact. The assessment of one leading columnist with *The Sunday Times*, is the most compelling:

“I think there has been a real change in the flagrant mention of people’s race in crime stories and that kind of thing. You don’t usually find ‘An Aboriginal man was convicted of rape’ in the first para as you used to... But I don’t know that (they have) made a great deal of difference to tell you the truth.”

There was, however, a unanimous view that the same principles should apply to all reporting. According to one former Editor of *The West Australian*:

“My view of all reporting, across every group, any person, whether they’re the Premier or the pauper, is to be informed, to be accurate and to be fair.”

It was also believed by another Editor that guidelines such as those presented by RCIADIC smacked of political correctness:

“Reporters on this newspaper will report the way we want to report, not in the way you want to report. And a lot of the stuff that comes out of government is just politically correct crap, anyway.”

His immediate successor as Editor of *The West Australian* shared the view that the RCIADIC recommendations were about “political correctness”:

“It would be moral cowardice to bow and scrape to the political correctness that says you can’t report this because you know it’s just going to damage the public perception of these people.”

## **No direction given**

Despite the recognised challenges in reporting on the Indigenous community, no direction is given to journalists in this area. Neither *The West Australian* nor *The Sunday Times* provide training and no house protocols are in operation. As one Editor commented:

“We would think the checks and balances, and the knowledge within the office and the guidelines for our operations *per se* should lead us to a reasonable outcome, regardless of race, colour or creed.”

## Political indifference

At the same time, there was a general feeling among interviewees that since the Howard Government came to power, Aboriginal affairs have been off the agenda, the general public are not interested and that this has been reflected in media reporting.

*The West Australian* no longer has a full-time Indigenous affairs round. *The Sunday Times* did not have one at all during the period under review.

“There was definitely a much greater engagement between Aboriginals and white Australia at the time (I was a reporter). I look back now and see that the nature of that engagement has changed quite dramatically over the last decade. I think some people’s awareness has gone backwards.” (Former Chief of Staff, *The West Australian*)

Newspapers reflect rather than shape the community mood

The Editors of both papers indicated that *The West Australian* and *The Sunday Times* seek to reflect the mood of the community. This is described generally as right-wing, conservative, Middle Australia.

“Hopefully you take a position that you think the majority of your readership would support because you don’t want to be continually taking positions that most of your readers don’t support because you’d get yourself in some strife in the end because they’re going to stop reading you!” (Editor, *The Sunday Times*)

One leading columnist with *The West Australian* spoke of the backlash he encounters from readers whenever he’s written an article sympathetic to the Indigenous community:

“Every time I write an Aboriginal story or one that is sympathetic to Aboriginal issues, I get letters saying I’m a bleeding heart, I’m a do gooder, all those sorts of things. And that’s the readership, unfortunately, and the readership is a reflection of the people out there, so maybe the paper is just a reflection of the general prejudices in our society.”

The curfew was introduced therefore against a background of, at best, political indifference and, at worst, public antipathy.

## News processes and practices support stereotyping

The processes and practices involved in making the news were also found to support the criminalisation of Indigenous youth. Against the routine story selection criteria and practices most frequently cited in the interviews, it was clear that the curfew would always have excited media attention, regardless of its lack of relevance in addressing crime in Northbridge. These criteria included:

*Crime: No.1 news staple*

“Policing is the no.1 news staple in Perth and Perth is pretty obsessed with police news coverage as far as other places go.” (Police round reporter, *The West Australian*)

Not only is crime the main news staple, but, according to WA Police Service statistics, Perth has the highest level of ‘perceived fear’ of any Australian capital city. The media respond to this accordingly.

“What (the readers) are most worried about and, consistently every poll shows, is safety. And it’s not just the actual crime, it’s the fear of crime. And the perception of Northbridge is not very good.” (Police round reporter, *The West Australian*)

## **Does it affect Western Australians?**

“At the end of the day you’ve still got to report an issue that’s affecting West Australians because that’s what your job is, and ... if it’s negative, well unfortunately it’s negative.” (Former Chief of Staff, *The West Australian*)

## **Is it controversial?**

A curfew is necessarily controversial and given that the media coverage particularly focused on children aged 7 or 8 being out in Northbridge after dark, it was particularly so. (In fact, since the curfew’s introduction only three children that age have ever been picked up.)

## **Is it ‘sexy’?**

“You know what the issue is that’s going to get people engaged...The first question would be that’s a good story not, what are the consequences?” (Columnist, *The West Australian*)

## **Bad news sells**

According to one former Editor of *The West Australian*:

“Positive news doesn’t sell, unless it’s Princess Diana’s wedding or whatever.”

He told me how one Saturday he’d put a positive story on the front page (about a girl donating her kidney to her sister) and that sales dropped 10,000. This, he said, was a “salutary lesson”.

Or, as *The West Australian*’s former State Political Editor pointed out:

“You don’t put pictures of Aboriginals on the front page, unless it’s dole bludgering Aboriginals.”

## Editing of stories

The angle of a story can also be changed after it is submitted.

“You don’t have any control over the headlines, or how the story runs, sometimes the story appears in the paper and it’s got a different headline and a different focus than you intended it to have.” (Senior reporter, *The West Australian*)

## Common sense reporting

The prevalence of ‘common sense reporting’ also means that prejudices remain unchallenged.

“One thing the media is very bad at describing is the grey because it’s too easy for journalists to put in a black or a white answer, but when you try to get down to complexities and understand the background behind issues you find there aren’t easy answers.” (Former Editor, *The West Australian*)

## Time pressures

And, finally, one of the most important routines of all: the deadline. I was surprised when interviewing one of *The West Australian’s* chief columnists, who was very critical of the curfew during our discussions. I was surprised because his column had applauded the curfew. While he was at a loss to explain it, it is probable that time pressures came into play.

“One of the things that everyone has fallen prey to is the pressure of time, trying to keep pace with all those demands and trying to do things in a measured way while still getting tomorrow’s paper out. That’s a huge challenge for everyone because resources are not getting any better.” (Former Chief of Staff, *The West Australian*)

## The personalities

In addition to news routines, there are also a number of variables, notably the personalities of the Editors and the reporters that necessarily play a pivotal role in determining story selection and framing.

Karen Brown, who won a Walkley Award 10 years ago for her reporting of Indigenous affairs, attributes her achievements to her Editor at the time, Paul Murray.

The current Editor of *The West Australian* is not believed to share this commitment to the reporting of Indigenous affairs.

The selection of stories will necessarily reflect the interests of the Editor and/or the individual reporters. As one senior media professional commented:

“As a general rule, in most newsrooms, particularly print news rooms you look to the personalities that sit around the news table on any given day and, scarily subjective as that sounds, I actually think that that’s the reality.”



There are of course numerous other factors that come into play – and too many to mention in this short presentation - but those most frequently cited include:

- Personal interest – For example, Northbridge became a community safety issue only because the reporter with the police round happened to have a particular interest in the entertainment district;
- Initiative and drive – Which will determine the effort a reporter is prepared to make in digging for stories and looking for alternative sources or viewpoints
- Level of analytical skills/political nous – Which will determine whether or not the reporter is going to question or challenge received wisdom
- Personal ambition – Indigenous affairs is not a round that is seen to further any young reporter's career prospects. Those who choose to do such reporting do so on the basis of their own personal values and experience.
- Network of contacts/sources – These of course play a key role in story selection and this is most apparent when we look at the primary source of the Northbridge 'story'.

## **The Northbridge business lobby**

The business community was considered to be much more attractive as a source than the Indigenous community. This because the Northbridge business community understands how the media work; they provide talent, good grabs, and respect deadlines.

The business community is a powerful and vocal lobby group that has had a vested interest in attributing the problems in Northbridge to Aboriginal youth. The concerns of the business community were frequently cited by journalists to explain why "something had to be done".

One of the major causes of crime in Northbridge resides with the liquor licensing laws, but this subject would have minimal news appeal.

“If you go to the Northbridge business association and they say a couple of really boring things about liquor licensing and what we reckon the real problem is these kids who are running amok and why aren't their parents looking after them, then that's the line that going to go. I wish it was more complex and smarter than that, but I don't think it is.” (Columnist, *The Sunday Times*)

## **Challenges in reporting on Indigenous affairs**

The Indigenous community, on the other hand, is considered difficult to access:

“They're not very accessible these days. It's very hard to get to a lot of the spokespeople... there really isn't anyone out there who is effectively out to make sure their voice is heard, they're just not proactive in the debate.” (Former Editor, *The West Australian*)

The Indigenous community are also believed to be wary of the media...

“There is a long-running distrust between the media and the Aboriginal community; because of stories about dole bludgers and all that sort of stuff which is always out there. The Aboriginal community is very wary of the media.” (Senior reporter, *The West Australian*)

and not so media savvy...

*“They just didn’t realise that just because a bad story’s written one day doesn’t mean that the journalist has a personal vendetta against anyone, it’s just the way the media works... you get your good stories, and your bad stories.”*(Police round reporter, *The West Australian*)

Other difficulties identified by interviewees in the reporting of Indigenous affairs included:

- Lack of interest in Indigenous stories
- All the stories are seen to be negative
- Indigenous issues are complex
- Not enough time for Indigenous stories
- “Vast cultural gap”

“I wonder how many Australians go through life without having any real contact with Aboriginal people at all. How many people would ever have had Aborigines in their homes? If all you’ve seen are drunks and drug addicts, you’d say, well that’s Aboriginal people.” (Columnist, *The West Australian*)

## Conclusion

When we consider just the few issues raised here, it is clear that there is very little incentive to encourage media to change or rethink its approach to Indigenous affairs. Far from being cause for surprise, therefore, the media’s coverage of the Northbridge curfew and its focus on Indigenous youth as the primary cause of crime in Northbridge was, in fact, entirely predictable.

Lest I run the risk of falling foul of stereotyping myself, in this case of the media, I must stress that one cannot judge a newspaper on isolated stories but must do so on the basis of its overall record. Both WA newspapers have, to varying degrees depending on their Editors, sought to provide balanced reporting of Indigenous affairs and each newspaper did publish alternative views on the curfew (although none exposed the Emperor’s new clothes or the non-existence of any new policy).

Most important, there are many parties, outside of the media industry, who are influential in determining what constitutes the news.

The challenge is to find a circuit breaker to stop the cycle of negative stereotyping of the Indigenous community in the WA press. And that is the primary purpose of my research, but is beyond the scope of today’s presentation.

Until we break the cycle, the place of Aboriginal people in society will remain unresolved; white people will get scared wherever there are groups of Aboriginal people; we will continue to be incapable of seeing the uniqueness of Aboriginal culture and way of life; and we will continue to try to criminalise it.

# Obstinate ignorance - The glad game and the blame game in languages education in Australia

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## Abstract

The last decade has seen a retreat in Australia's commitment to the study of other languages. Australian university students routinely study international business, politics, law, art and music without studying a related language. In Europe this would be unthinkable. Post-Hansen and post-Howard, in the midst of complex security concerns and debates, different others are most often represented as a threat. The Howard government abandoned the "Asia literacy" push and cut NALSAS funding. Failing to provide a model of positive engagement produces a trickle down effect on the media and the whole society. Languages teachers maintain that persistent study of other codes and modes of thought and living brings joy, fulfillment, useful knowledge, skills, self-awareness and being "other-interested" instead of purely self-interested. Obstinate ignorance is dangerous, an act of disrespect and passive racism.

*Most of us know in our hearts that spending more money on technological surveillance or on squads of gunmen is not really going to make us safer. Understanding our own peoples, as well as those of our region and our globe, is much more likely to do that.* Professor Iain McCalman, Making Culture Bloom, National Press Club Telstra Address, 16 June 2004

In a profession typified by persistent failure to achieve its stated goals (Rae, 2003), Australian languages teachers can play two games. First, like the film character Pollyanna, they "play the glad game", that is, maintain heroic optimism. Another reaction is to "play the blame game", to name those responsible for the failure. In this article we examine both options towards mainstream apathy about languages education and what this means for Australian education and society.

Language teachers believe that to learn another language is to reach out to others, to show respect and intellectual curiosity for the world views, cultures, belief systems and life practices of different others (e.g. Kramsch, 1993). It shows an other-interestedness to the extent of wanting to imitate and interact in their code-for-their-experience. Languages teachers believe culture shock and language shock are good for us, liberating us from parochialism. Going through the effort, the cognitive discomfort of foreign language learning (FLL), along with the joy, success and fulfilment, makes us more understanding, appreciative and critically aware, of ourselves and others. The optimistic outlook is that

competence in a foreign language makes us better informed, and more empowered linguistically in any field we choose to apply our language skills, such as journalism, aid work, diplomacy, business, indeed any field of life or work, whether in our country of origin or elsewhere.

The foreign language teaching (FLT)– or Languages Other Than English (LOTE) as it is often referred to in Australia - profession asserts that overseas travel and mixing with people of different and diverse ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds, in no way diminishes our Australianness or identity (Mueller, 2003). Interest in languages makes one all the more eager to learn the basics and decipher signs wherever we go, to know about the other experience of different people.

The “glad” LOTE teacher is glad that Australia became so much more multicultural after WWII. She (the great majority are female) is glad to know of her own ethnic and cultural provenance just as she may be glad to know and appreciate the Australian bush or local urban history and traditions. Many Australian LOTE teachers are glad their parents came to Australia as migrants or refugees (like this writer’s mother from Hitler’s Germany) and to be brought up hearing other languages spoken in the home. Inter-marriage among older and newer migrant groups is healthy for the gene pool and beneficial and necessary for the cultural pool, our diet and cuisine, all our arts including the language arts, our pool of ideas and the diversity of ways of living. LOTE teachers are glad that the Special Broadcasting Service continues to offer films and programs in many languages and that Australia has a proud record in provision of English education for migrant adults and children. The optimistic view leads language educators to believe widespread and diverse languages learning and use is all to the good for social, cultural, economic and political reasons.

BUT ... and here we turn to “the blame game”, when it comes to language – the DNA of the human mind – Australia is a language graveyard. The last 200 years has seen us eradicate about 200 indigenous languages and all those remaining are endangered (Amery, 2001).

Far from committed engagement to other languages, there is strong social pressure in Australia for migrants not to pass their languages on to their children and rare are the grandchildren of migrants who really inherit that precious gift, a natural competence in another language, through the family (Clyne, 2005).

As for learning languages as instructed second languages by the Australian born – whether indigenous languages, European or Asian languages, heritage migrant languages or languages of strategic importance - our record is marred by what Michael Clyne calls a persistent “monolingual mindset” (Clyne, 2006a). Our efforts in primary and secondary school rarely produce students who can hold a sustained conversation in their second language or comfortably read an authentic text like a newspaper article. Dissatisfied, attracted by many other rewarding and possibly easier offerings in schools, few stay with languages long enough to give themselves a chance.

Australian university students nowadays are mostly starting languages from scratch and have caught up with those who did school languages in one semester or so. Then the vast majority

desert FLL after one year. It's "too much like hard work" in the plug and play age (Mueller, 2005). Tertiary language courses struggle to attract double digit enrolments in third year courses. To become decently competent languages graduates, some undertake in-country courses which cost them extra, especially if in Europe. Fewer than 3 per cent of individual students at Australian universities now study an Asian language. This is far from the target of 10 per cent called for by the Asian Studies Council in 1998 (Asian Studies Association of Australia, Inc., 2002, 42).

This dismal state of affairs is despite some 20 major national reports on languages teaching and learning in Australia since 1971, all affirming the economic, cultural and political importance of languages for Australia's future.

If we play the blame game, it must be someone's fault that the nation continues to be so under-equipped. Who is accountable?

Is it languages teachers? Are they boring, out of date, burnt out, unable to devise rewarding and exciting activities that will attract today's students to languages instead of to drama, art and music for active, hands-on fun? Must it be only in Advanced Science, Maths and English Literature that bright students show their mettle? Can only some subjects like hospitality and outdoor education studies claim to be "vocational"? LOTE teachers who only see students for one or two 40 minute lessons per week in upper primary school, or perhaps three 40 minute sessions in grade 8, fail to raise them to any satisfying standard and fail to convince most Australian adolescents that the sustained effort of gaining a FL proficiency is worth the effort (Crawford, 2002). The Commonwealth of Australia ([DEST], 2002) reports of LOTE study that "What is needed is more tangible demonstration of these benefits in a form that will convince students and the community of this validity."

Personal contact with LOTE teachers reveals sincere, creative, committed, overworked individuals, forever reading, thinking and re-thinking, in search of improved teaching ideas, of "what works" pedagogically and often frustrated in an all but impossible job. Like all teachers, they are pushed and pulled by curriculum and educational fads, the exigencies of school life and the sheer resistance of unmotivated students (although it is politically incorrect to say so). Many do undertake continual advocacy work in the community and occasionally among educational and government circles through professional associations. Some undertake overseas study at personal cost to upgrade their proficiency or postgraduate studies to seek new insights, adding to their time poverty. Others bottle their frustration and struggle on in difficult positions –itinerant primary school LOTE teachers routinely visit three or four schools a week and "teach" hundreds of children - or abandon the enterprise. Such a situation makes some prone to doubt and self-blame, little reassured by academics that there are no magic success formulae or short cuts in language learning with all its complexity and variability (Ellis, 2000).

Their interested colleagues at tertiary level are encouraged to publish research results in "in-house" academic language with all its strictures, often highly specialised and reductionist, not easily accessible to the wider public or having any striking impact. Confining themselves to scientific analysis of policy, pedagogy, curriculum or linguistic theory, they see on their own

campuses that Australian university students routinely study international business, politics, law, art and music, even development studies, without studying a related language. The specific training of future LOTE teachers often consists of “language proficiencies considerably below that which the ALCC report considered to be the minimum” (Ingram, 2003, 14) and one, or at best two, units in some kind of LOTE curriculum studies along with limited in-school practicum. “Between 1997 and 2000, 90 university teaching positions in languages were lost across the country. Asian languages other than Chinese and Japanese, which remain steady, have been hit particularly hard” (Russell, 2003). Occasionally, the ludicrous contrast between stated policy goals and rhetoric about quality on the one hand, and real conditions and outcomes on the other hand, inspires an academic to launch a broadside in the popular press, ignored or forgotten in a few days.

To proceed with the blame game, is the failure of LOTE attributable to school principals and state education departments who allocate LOTE teacher timetables and funding and, above all, moral endorsement? Government bodies produce high-minded policies, never fulfilled, and detailed curriculum documents, never implemented in reality, expecting LOTE teachers to make the best of it, which they do. Crawford (2002,2) indicates that, despite being accorded the status of Key Learning area (KLA):

in Queensland, for example, proposed time allocations (QSCC, 1997) clearly give less time to LOTE than to any of the other KLAs. The proposed 420 hours are also well below the 800 to 1,000 hours often recommended as necessary for achieving useable levels of proficiency.

The outcomes are not good enough for our society, our culture and our national needs. Illusory policies are an excellent way for politicians and bureaucracies to appear to be acting. In fact, the volumes of policy disillusion the public and educators yet again by not being carried through. Who is accountable for the lack of implementation?

School principals are key models and actors in the fate of foreign language programs: their attitude and actions influence all teachers, parents, students and community. During 14 years as a teacher, this writer enjoyed the support of enlightened Principals but some are impressively insular and unaware of other cultures or the national need for languages skills. Lindsay Rae (2003) writes, controversially, that “Australians are such poor language learners” but also of the “reluctance on the part of principals and systems to commit large scale resources.” It is good to see such frank admissions of the adverse situation of LOTE teachers.

Invariably as overworked as their teachers, Principals cannot and should not micro-manage every department in their school but their active and public endorsement of the language program is an essential and hugely motivating contribution. Even just a regular “look in” on the classroom and approving comments, learning a little of the language, talking about the languages program at Parents meetings or in the school newsletter, affirmation of the LOTE teachers, genuinely praising students for languages achievement as much as for sport, these are all helpful and much needed signals from the school Principal.

Above, I dared to blame unmotivated Australian students. Are too many lazy, blithely uncaring about their own education? Young Australians are highly motivated as regards sport, pop music and television, computer games and shopping, and indeed education that is seen as having direct relevance to later employment. The knowledge many children have about television programs is a stunning demonstration of their ability to retain information. Can we blame kids for being kids? Australian kids are not unteachable nor are languages unlearnable (Crawford, 2002).

Ultimately though, teachers cannot do the learning for them. Learning happens in the minds of students. This writer asserts that many Australian students are passing day after day, term after term, year after year, not achieving the levels they could, not fulfilling their potential, shirking sustained mental challenge. Cognitive development is one of the many benefits of languages learning which should appeal to young learners with an eye to a globalised world, elaborated in Mueller's (2003) pessimistically titled article, *Learning languages in Australia - too much like hard work?* Unfortunately, some Australian children – emulating many prominent figures in the adult world - are precociously snide about any area that calls on them to reflect on themselves, their values, their history, language and culture, all those domains that comprise the Humanities.

Shall we blame, therefore, their parents and the community of voters and citizens at large? Iain McCalman labels Australia an "incredibly utilitarian society"(in Russell, 2003). Australians are interested in more money for consumer products, house and garden, endless evenings watching the television and sports, all of which can be enjoyed perfectly well through the English language. How can wearisome language and culture studies compete? Even at wealthy independent schools in Australia where languages might be expected to be highly regarded as a badge of a well educated world citizen and a very marketable skill in many careers, many LOTE teachers have very few students in senior grades (for a cheering exception, see Johnson, 2006). In a blaming mood, we could conclude, the rich just do ignorance and consumerism more lavishly than the poor.

One can find plenty of excuses for Australian parents, busy earning a living, chauffeuring children to sports events, seeking advice on how to manage their children from Super Nannies and keeping them from drugs and junk food. Parents who set the all-important model for school students can themselves become stressed from work, managing finances and relationships, and cannot necessarily be informed about or involved in all that their children study, or do not study. Of course, parents too are the products of all their own experience, diverse backgrounds, and attitudes influenced by the media and the community. Foreign languages are, naturally perhaps, foreign to the list of priorities of many. Not all, it should be added. For example, Rupert Macgregor (2006) of the Australian Council of State School Organisations, in a review of Clyne's 2005 book, states:

... the issues around languages education affect how we should prepare and equip young people to take on an effective role in a changing world, in ways that bear directly upon their own opportunities and the economic well-being of this country.



Australians are said to be great readers, travellers, innovators and early adopters of new technologies. Despite all these advantages, most Australian parents are not interested in raising the consciousness and literacy of their own children through languages, or about their region of the world in particular on which their future welfare depends? Are they not aware of the urgent national need for languages and cultural skills, especially Asia-related skills, as skilfully argued by Lindsey and Kingsley (2006)? Or are Australian parents, Principals, politicians, obstinately and happily ignorant?

Raising cultural consciousness through learning other languages is not a high priority in contemporary, mainstream Australia. “Language and languages are no longer a front page issue in Australian social and political life,” writes Michael Clyne (2006). The public is drenched in too many messages – often negative or fearful representations of different others (viz the September 2006 Howard attack on Australian Muslims) - to receive the feeble few about engagement with other cultures, peoples and languages.

Such neglect is a kind of passive racism? That which we neglect, we tacitly condemn. If a majority of Australians will commit to the rest of the world no more than a few minutes of commercial television news, before switching to “reality TV” or soap opera imported from the USA, is this not sustained, obstinate ignorance? It is no comfort that Australia is not the only persistently xenophobic, obstinately monolingual, backward-looking and inward-looking society (viz the decline in GCSE language enrolments in Britain, Smithers and Whitford, 2006). Most English-speaking nations are equally slothful and complacently believe that “English is enough”.

Indeed they joyously make enormous profits selling “the global hyperlanguage”, imposing “a huge burden of costs entailed by the worldwide hegemony of English in education, science, commerce, and communication” (Templer, 2002). Jo Lo Bianco has written that knowledge of English in this globalising world is a great advantage; knowledge of English alone is a massive disadvantage (Lo Bianco, 2004). Australians live in denial of this reality so evident to most of the world’s population.

Whose responsibility is it to awaken the public, young and old, to the undeniable fact that there are worlds of wondrous experience, opportunity and peril out there in the non-English speaking world and that our present and future welfare relies on our understanding of it? The final round of the blame game should naturally include pot-shots at those groups who have significant influence in the Australian society and polity. These people are attitude and opinion shapers, and decision makers with genuine power to make things happen. These authority figures shape Australian language attitudes.

They are politicians, especially those in elected office at federal and state levels, business leaders, religious leaders, some judges and military figures, academic commentators, sports and popular entertainment “celebrities”, and the media people who report on all the rest. Some in their ranks do not shy from declaiming (if never carefully defining) the Australian values all citizens should subscribe to. They thereby assume moral responsibility for Australia’s core or common social values.

"We don't have any clear statements of policy from the Federal Government level. Above all, there's no sort of clear statement that a national competency in languages other than English is of strategic advantage to the country. The same thing is true for humanities in general," says Colin Nettelbeck, head of the school of languages at Melbourne University (in Russell, 2003). Indeed thanks to the current Federal government, "Funding for studies of Asia in schools was cut by 80% in 2003 with the cessation of the National Asian Languages and Studies in Australian Schools (NALSAS) strategy" (Russell, 2003).

*It is not just their decisions but the words, attitudes and behaviours modelled by public leaders that strongly influence Australian thinking and discourse. Since 1996, despite the economy surging on the back of profitable trade relations with China, the dangerous attitude that has been modelled for the Australian public is that:*

- Outsiders are to be feared and suspected, as are different insiders. At best they are competitors, or migration queue jumpers, at worst, dangerous extremists or terrorists (the latest version of colonial era "heathens" and Cold War "commies"). This goes beyond security concerns to racism. The current federal political leadership plays a game where "the race card" is played for political advantage and multiculturalism is consequently downplayed.
- Languages education has had all the attention and budget it deserves (less than the cost of a coffee per Australian per year, according to Hill, 2005.) Crawford (2003) compares this to the European scene: "Unlike Australia where the debate continues about the place of a single language in the curriculum, in Europe, the focus is increasingly on how many and which languages learners should take in addition to English."
- The power of money and force is what counts; the power of understanding is leftist, liberal fantasy. Universities are now run on a business model with disciplines not geared to the job market feeling most "the pressures of decreased funding and increased vocational emphasis" (Russell, 2003). The "life of the mind" has no dollar value; languages of low demand are vulnerable to cancellation.
- The English speaking world is the part of the human race which matters, which has the best civilisation and the right to dictate to and dominate the rest.
- To swim against the mainstream norm in society and education or to oppose "market forces" and consumerism is to be un-Australian, unpatriotic.

Caught in its own trap, this Commonwealth government has now been obliged to use funding threats to compel universities to sustain specialised and nationally significant courses, including "courses for a nationally strategic specialised language (including Arabic and Indonesian)" (Commonwealth of Australia, DEST, 2005).

This is not an atmosphere conducive of teaching and learning the languages and knowing the lives of foreign people or Australian migrant and indigenous languages. This is a model

poisonous to the efforts of language teachers' who "dream of a world in which people are able to interact freely and equally, recognising each other's rights to be different, to live differently, to speak differently, to think differently, and to worship differently" (Ingram, 2003).

The blame game must attribute a heavy portion of blame to those elected politicians in particular who put themselves forward for power and responsibility, presume to define and decide "the national interest" and yet patently do not act in the best interests of the people as defined by their own agencies (eg see the recent MCEETYA National Statement and Plan for Languages Education in Australian Schools 2005-2008.) "Commonwealth responsibility therefore lies in," says its own DEST Report (2002), "providing strong leadership and commitment to LOTE. The Commonwealth should lead the debate about what capability in languages Australia will need in the next twenty years to fulfill its economic, strategic, social and cultural aims and responsibilities, and develop a coherent strategy to meet those needs."

It is those with highest authority over educational policies and influence over cultural trends who force David Ingram to write of an enlightened culture and "positive cross-cultural attitudes" as just a dream:

"We must retain our dream of a society and a world where cultural differences and the languages that reflect and support them are not only tolerated but are valued and genuinely enrich all people's lives (Ingram, 2003)"

Iain McCalman (2004, 3) points to the stunning economic benefits in Ireland and New Zealand of cultural industries, "the most powerful engines of economic growth in modern knowledge-based societies." If cultural creativity is now seen as a core competency which "helps to stimulate a culture of innovation essential to any aspiring knowledge economy" (McCalman, 2004, 4-5), how can Australian governments ignore languages and all those Humanities fields which should be "recognized not only for the commercial profit that they might bring but also for the public good" (McCalman, 2004, 6)?

In conclusion, languages educators may well blame the Howard government for a disastrous turning back the clock in our culture, for revival of an exclusivist, English-speaking White Australia. There is no chance that the current federal government will change its chosen course or outlook, antithetical to multicultural consciousness and critical enquiry. Educators who genuinely care about the minds of the young, not just child-minding or job training, who care about a diverse, skilled, critical and humane culture, other-interested not just self-interested, those who care about Australia's place in a peaceful, not obstinately ignorant world, will have to persist, resist and protest for some time to come.

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# Never Too Late: Applying the lessons of History

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## Abstract

In this paper, some statistics are presented to identify major areas of Indigenous economic disadvantage. Explanations for this situation are critically analysed to identify the continuing presence of specific ways of thinking which tend to blame Indigenous Australians for their own situation. The tendency has been to see Aborigines as the problem while we as Europeans have the solutions. However solutions based on these premises have not succeeded in reducing Aboriginal disadvantage.

Through re-examining the past, it is possible to identify the ways of thinking about Indigenous people which have continuously underpinned policy and practice in regard to Indigenous Australians. These ways of thinking have been impediments to effective analysis of the problems faced by Indigenous Australians. The paper concludes with some suggestions for a new approach to defining and addressing the problems faced by Indigenous Australians in today's society.

## Introduction

The extent of Australian Indigenous economic disadvantage is readily quantifiable, using statistics regularly produced by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (see for instance ABS 1995, 1996a and b, 2003a and b). However the reasons for this disadvantage and its continuity over decades are not so readily understood. This paper briefly outlines the extent of Aboriginal economic disadvantage and common explanations for this disadvantage. It shows that these explanations do not stand up to scrutiny. A different approach to understanding Indigenous economic disadvantage based on learning from history is therefore proposed.

## Indigenous Economic Disadvantage

Australian Indigenous employment disadvantage is undeniable, as evidenced by high unemployment and low participation rates, industry and occupational segregation and low incomes. A few points suffice to illustrate the extent of this disadvantage.

**High unemployment:** The Indigenous rate of unemployment is from about three to four times that of non-Indigenous Australians, irrespective of whether people live in rural, remote or urban areas. In fact the rates of Indigenous unemployment in major cities and in remote

areas are very similar and the lowest rates for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are in remote areas (ABS 2003 Cat No 4713, Table 6.1).

**Low participation:** Indigenous participation rates are between eight and 30% lower than those for non-Indigenous Australians. The gap between the two groups is smallest in major cities and greatest in remote and very remote areas. Non-Indigenous people have very high participation rates in very remote and remote areas, the same areas where Indigenous participation is lowest (ABS 2003 Cat No 4713, Table 6.1).

**Industry segregation:** Indigenous people are over-represented in 'government/administration/defence' and in 'health and community services'. There was a big drop in employment in the latter and rise in the former industry sector between 1996 and 2001. However these two sectors still accounted for over 30% of Indigenous employment, while Indigenous people were under-represented in all other industries, indicating low levels of private sector employment (ABS 1998 Cat No 2034 Table 4.5; ABS 2003, Cat No 4713, Table 6.6).

**Occupational segregation:** Indigenous people are under-represented in all occupations except 'Intermediate clerical, sales and service', 'Intermediate production and transport' and 'Labourers and related workers'. In fact the latter category includes almost a quarter of Indigenous employees (ABS 1998 Cat No 2034, Table 4.8; ABS 2003 Cat No 4713 Table 6.7).

**Low income:** Indigenous people have lower incomes ranging from approximately 95% of other Australians' income down to less than 43%, the latter example being the difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous CDEP employees' incomes<sup>38</sup>. The largest group of Indigenous workers, labourers and related workers, have incomes 56% of non-Indigenous workers. Even Indigenous managers and administrators have incomes only 81% of non-Indigenous equivalents (ABS 2003 Cat No 4713 Tables 7.1-7.6).

Thus the extent of Indigenous economic disadvantage is clear. The question then is why this is the case. The next section briefly examines the explanations for this situation proffered in the literature.

## Reasons Suggested for Indigenous Disadvantage

As well as providing statistical information about the extent of Indigenous disadvantage, researchers who have reported on these issues have proposed speculative reasons for the disadvantage so clearly demonstrated. These reasons centre around the lack of skill and motivation of Aboriginal people and their locational disadvantage. These and other attributes of the Indigenous people themselves have been claimed to explain high unemployment and low participation rates and virtual segregation of Aboriginal people in low skill, low paid positions. More recently some attention has been given to discrimination as an underlying

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<sup>38</sup> One issue raised by this is why non-Indigenous people would be counted as CDEP employees, when the CDEP program is designed to improve Indigenous Australians' employment outcomes. The statistics suggest that senior positions may be held by non-Indigenous people, a matter deserving of further investigation.

cause of Indigenous employment disadvantage but this has not reduced the reliable placed on explanations focusing on indigo Australians' perceived deficits.

In small-scale studies conducted from the mid-1950s, reasons given for the non-employment of Aborigines included their lack of skill, their unreliability and lack of motivation, and poor hygiene (Bell 1956, Calley 1956, Barwick 1962, Hinton 1966, Beasley 1970, Doobov 1972, Rogers 1973). The high level of poverty found in the Aboriginal community in studies commissioned for the 1975 Henderson poverty inquiry was, in Henderson's view, due to geographical location in areas where few jobs were available, lack of skills and experience to enable competition for the available jobs, and prejudice from employers who saw all Aborigines as lazy and unreliable. Henderson, in common with many before and since, deduced the lack of skill from the type of work in which most Indigenous people were employed. He attributed underlying Indigenous poverty primarily to poor employment prospects without further examination of the issue of prejudice (Altman & Hunter 1998, p244).

Altman and Nieuwenhuysen in the first comprehensive study of Indigenous economic disadvantage attributed high Indigenous unemployment rates to location in rural and remote areas, geographical immobility, lack of education and work skills, and also 'lack of social experience and motivation, as well as employer attitudes' (1979, p14). Again, these latter reasons are not explored further.

In his 1993 paper, Taylor too makes reference to Aborigines' comparatively low skill levels. Commenting on a reduction in occupational segregation he concluded: 'As it stands, the data suggest that overall, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander workers are now more skilled than in the past, although they still lag behind the general skill level of other workers' (Taylor 1993, p29).

Daly, Henry and Smith (2002) put the fact that most of the Indigenous people they studied were not in employment down to lack of education and training, scarcity of local employment opportunities and transport and child-care difficulties. They also note that some of the lack of opportunity arises from discrimination and refer to 'a perception that the wider community was not keen to employ Indigenous people even when jobs are available' (Daly, Henry & Smith 2002, p11). This issue of discrimination is not pursued further but is taken up by others. Hunter's 2004 publication, *Indigenous Australians in the Contemporary Labour Market*, (ABS Cat. no.2052.0) proposes that 'potential discrimination',<sup>39</sup> defined as 'the extent to which the average differential in employment is not explained by differences in characteristics of the respective population' (Hunter 2004, p69) is a likely cause of Indigenous employment disadvantage. Hunter sought to answer the question of 'whether Indigenous status in itself has an effect on labour force status or whether the lower Indigenous employment rates merely reflect their smaller stock of labour market skills' (Hunter 2004, p68). One possibility was that Indigenous people 'may choose a different labour force status' (Hunter 2004, p68), hence qualification of the discrimination as

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<sup>39</sup> See Hunter 2004, p78 for an explanation of the calculation method used to arrive at a value for this.



'potential'. Alternatively discrimination in employment 'may frustrate Indigenous people in their attempts to achieve equality in their employment status' (Hunter 2004, p69).

Hunter found that 'potential discrimination' explains more than two-thirds of the average differential in employment status between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and an even higher proportion in private sector employment. He comments that: 'While this estimate can in some sense be interpreted as potential discrimination, it also illustrates conclusively that the processes that determine Indigenous and non-Indigenous employment are not the same' (Hunter 2004, p83). However, his main findings are that 'lower educational attainment is the major factor underlying Indigenous labour force status' (Hunter 2004, p117) and that 'it is necessary to improve educational opportunities for Indigenous Australians in order to redress Indigenous disadvantage in employment' (Hunter 2004, p82). Thus he too retreats from discrimination as a major cause of Indigenous disadvantage in employment.

Thus the research since the 1950s has attributed the disadvantage of Indigenous Australians in employment largely to characteristics of the Indigenous population. More recently some acknowledgement has been given to the possibility that discrimination against Indigenous people by employers may be a factor in this disadvantage, but no significant weight is given to this explanation. However there are problems with this research, as discussed in the following section.

## Critique of Research

The concentration on the deficit of Indigenous people, rather than possible systemic problems faced by Indigenous people, runs through much that has been written on Indigenous employment disadvantage. On closer scrutiny however these reasons do not stand up. The research cited above *assumes* a lack of skill from the types of jobs Aboriginal people occupy. For example, Taylor (1993) assumes without evidence that the reported improved situation in regard to occupational segregation is due to an improvement in skills of Indigenous people, and that skill levels are still lower than for other Australians. He provides no explanation of how he has deduced the level of skill of Indigenous workers. Nor does he pursue further the narrower range and lower seniority of positions occupied by Indigenous workers. Until the *actual* skill level rather than the *assumed* skill level of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians is fully investigated at different career stages, any speculation about the connection between lack of skills and lack of employment or skilled employment of Indigenous Australians is unsound.

The commonly proposed skill enhancement solution seems to be supported by the finding of the NATSIS in 1994 that training was positively related to employment. However it is noted that 'some people may have been attending a training course as a consequence of being in a job and not the other way around' (ABS 1996, Cat No 4199, p70, emphasis added). Never do the cited researchers ask whether Aboriginal people's reported lack of skills and concentration in unskilled jobs could be because they are not given opportunities to work in the occupations and industries which would enable the acquisition of greater levels of skill. Could lack of opportunity to acquire skills through job experience and on-the-job training lead to lack of skill, the lack of skill thus being a symptom of deeper systemic discrimination

in employment? Alternatively, could failure to recognise or value those skills that Indigenous people possess, and the activities in which they are learnt and applied, lead to an untested assumption that Indigenous people are unskilled and therefore ineligible for employment in higher skilled jobs?

A close look at the evidence shows that lack of education and training affects mainly urban Aborigines according to the NATSIS of 1994 (ABS 1996b) and, similarly, non-remote Indigenous people according to the NATSISS of 2002 (ABS 2004). But it is precisely these groups who would appear to have greatest access to education and training institutions. The 2001 Census includes information which shows that attendance at tertiary, technical or further education institutions by Indigenous people of working age in major cities and inner regional areas was over ten per cent, twice that of people in remote areas and five times the rate in very remote areas (ABS 2003, Cat No 4713 Table 5.3, p55). But high Indigenous unemployment rates exist in cities and towns, that is in the same areas which have the highest rate of attendance by Indigenous people at post-school educational institutions. Thus the statistics do not support a direct relationship between access to education and training and reduced unemployment rates.

The researchers cited above commonly refer to locational disadvantage as a further reason for Aboriginal employment disadvantage. The explanations tendered for continuing disadvantage generally point to Aborigines' location in rural and remote areas as the cause of the lack of education and lack of access to mainstream labour market opportunities (see for instance Altman & Nieuwenhuysen 1979; Altman 1991; Daly 1994; Altman & Hunter 1998). However, more than a third of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population now lives in major urban areas. If the explanation for disadvantage was so simple, it could be expected that there would be little or no disadvantage for urban Indigenous people. However, the problems are shared by urban Aborigines.

In reverse, it could be expected that non-Indigenous people in remote areas would also suffer from locational disadvantage and therefore have higher rates of unemployment than other Australians. However the evidence indicates that most non-Indigenous people living in sparsely populated areas were employed. One question raised is why employment should apparently be easy to obtain for non-Indigenous people in remote areas when it is in these very areas that Indigenous people are seen to suffer most from locational disadvantage, especially given that the non-Indigenous population is approximately twice the size of the Indigenous population in these areas (ABS 2000, Cat No 6287, Table A1). It is clearly not simply that jobs do not exist in these regions. Sufficient jobs appear to be available for non-Indigenous Australians to support high participation and low unemployment.

As discussed above Hunter (2004) found evidence that 'potential discrimination' is an important factor in explaining the difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous employment status. But he too falls back to the standard explanation that poorer labour force status 'merely reflects' Indigenous deficit, while recommending that 'the legal problems that arise when prosecuting racial discrimination need to be addressed as a matter of urgency' (Hunter 2004, p83). Thus he places the onus on Indigenous people to deal with the discrimination in employment that they experience. The possibility that there may be a

relationship between discrimination against Indigenous people and their assumed lower skill levels as well as their lower employment status is not even considered.

Discrimination as a cause of Aboriginal disadvantage in the labour market was also raised but not pursued by Gray and Hunter in 1999. Their results indicated that discrimination, school quality and other causes not able to be determined through using the available quantitative data 'will need to be addressed if significant inroads into Indigenous employment and participation are to be achieved' (Gray & Hunter 1999, p 10). Their analysis casts doubt on the efficacy of policy initiatives aimed at improving education and increasing geographical mobility in addressing Indigenous employment disadvantage. They admit to being unable to discern the precise policy required, nevertheless they suggest that: 'An holistic approach to increasing indigenous attachment to the labour market and employment outcomes is likely to be required' (Gray & Hunter 1999, p11). The issue of discrimination seems to have been forgotten and once again the focus is on dealing with the deficit of Indigenous people. A deeper questioning of the reasons for disadvantage, reasons that may not be able to be dealt with by the current employment and education systems, is again avoided.

It appears, then, that there is a somewhat disturbing tendency to blame the victims, and to avoid turning the spotlight onto the system which, on the evidence of the statistics, continues to effectively exclude many Aboriginal Australians from many of the benefits of Australian society. There are here and there some tantalising hints that there may be issues associated with non-Indigenous Australians. For instance Altman and Nieuwenhuysen refer to 'lack of social experience and motivation, as well as employer attitudes' (1979, p14). But the absence of any further discussion of these issues implies that the problem lies with the Aboriginal people themselves, not with a system which has failed to provide Indigenous people with opportunities to acquire relevant skills and experience or to recognise skills not acquired in conventional ways. The issue of employer attitudes, which may significantly reduce opportunities for employment for Indigenous people which in turn may have a discouraging effect on Aborigines' motivation, is left up in the air or dismissed without adequate examination.

## **The lessons of History**

The facts outlined above point to deep systemic problems which the employment programs aimed at reducing disadvantage have not effectively addressed and may even have worsened. No explanation has so far been provided which fully explains the differences between the two populations and it seems that any attempts to improve the Indigenous situation in regard to employment have not succeeded. There is an urgent need for an explanation of this situation which could lead to better identification of the underlying issues and more effective policy and practical measures to address them.

There is a promising avenue of inquiry which has been acknowledged a number of times, but has yet to be followed. As early as 1979, Altman and Nieuwenhuysen stated in relation to the Indigenous disadvantage which was clearly evident from their statistical analysis: 'the current situation is, of course, the product of the past' (1979, pxv). Altman and Sanders made a similar point in relation to employment, that 'persistently poor mainstream

employment outcomes... reflect the historical legacy of entrenched structural disadvantage in an increasingly competitive labour market' (Altman & Sanders 1991, p24). In reference to the Henderson poverty inquiry Altman and Hunter wrote in 1998 that the report 'highlighted the historical legacy of the exclusion of indigenous people from the mainstream provisions of the Australian welfare state' (Altman & Hunter 1998, p238). In 2000, Hunter pointed to the importance of historical factors in Indigenous disadvantage which 'may be partially explained by Australia's history of appropriation of Indigenous peoples' lands and property, and the suppression of their traditional lifestyles' (Hunter 2000, p25). However still, despite acknowledgment of the legacy of this history and notwithstanding unsuccessful efforts since the 1960s to redress Indigenous disadvantage, a thorough analysis of the impact of this historical legacy on Indigenous economic participation has yet to be conducted.

An analysis of history conducted by the author provides a possible alternative perspective on Indigenous employment disadvantage. In brief, this analysis suggests that current disadvantage is the result of discriminatory attitudes and treatment from 1788. These attitudes, and this treatment, have continuously been based on tenacious belief, not based on evidence, in:

- inferiority of Aboriginal culture and people;
- Aboriginal laziness, irresponsibility, incapacity and consequent need for control and supervision;
- the need for white intervention to help Aborigines to 'improve', or to 'become like us'.

As a consequence of these beliefs, whites define the problems, devise and impose solutions and do so with minimal Aboriginal input, and with little or no respect for Aborigines or their culture or perspective. Discrimination is thus firmly embedded in the way the problems are defined and implemented.

A new approach would focus on the legacy of this discrimination. This would involve using history to inform research, at the same time recognising that Indigenous Australians should be the ones to define the problems and propose solutions while whites should support, *not direct*, this.

It's never too late for us to learn... Is it?

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