

Beetson Confintea
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address to the UNESCO Confintea V Indigenous Education Panel, 15.7.97

Beetson, J. President of the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers, Australia

I bring greetings and solidarity from the indigenous peoples of Australia to the delegates at this UNESCO forum. In particular our solidarity goes out to the indigenous peoples' organisations from all over the world who have gathered here, I want to begin by acknowledging the indigenous peoples of Europe, in whose lands we are honoured guests.

We must also acknowledge our solidarity with those millions of indigenous peoples who are not represented here, whose oppressive human rights situations prevent them from being here. Their voices too should be heard at this historic gathering, the Fifth World Conference on Adult Education since the UN Charter was established to guarantee those rights.

I am here as a representative of the Federation of Independent Aboriginal Education Providers in Australia. I am also part of the Australian government delegation and of the delegation from ASPBAE. In this indigenous education panel I am speaking from the mandate of the indigenous educators, students and communities in Australia which our Federation represents.

For your information, and because this is what we have been invited to contribute, I will begin by saying a little about indigenous peoples' education in Australia.

In Australia, there are two groups of indigenous peoples, the Aboriginal peoples, and the Torres Strait Islanders. I am Aboriginal. and will speak about our situation. We are called Fourth World peoples. Why? Because although in Australia the dominant economy is a first world economy, our people live in conditions which are as bad, if not worse, than many third world and developing country peoples. The reason is simple – it is because we have been the victims of racist colonialism. Our lands have been invaded, our traditional systems of law and government undermined, our people killed or rounded up into government and church run settlements, our children stolen and our cultures and languages reviled. The last two hundred years and nine years, since the colonisers began arriving, has been a terrible time. But Aboriginal people have lived in Australia for over 50 000 years, and we are not disappearing. Our cultures are the longest continuous surviving ones on this planet. While we have our cultures, we survive.

Today, our cultures, our laws, our languages, our lands, our people themselves are still under threat, as they have been since the first Europeans set foot on our continent. Australia is a first world country made rich from the plunder of our lands and resources, with a national budget many times that of developing countries, and with some of its citizens and its corporations among the wealthiest and most powerful in the world. Yet what is the situation of our people? The Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner, Michael Dodson was appointed by the Australian government following the 1988 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, to investigate why our people were incarcerated and died in custody at many times the rate of non-Aboriginal people. He recently compared our situation with non-indigenous Australians in these words:

Our women are four to five times more likely to die in childbirth.

The children they bear are three times more likely to die in infancy.

If they survive, our children will almost certainly suffer hearing impediments before they are even four months old.

They will have less access to decent medical services than any other children in the country.

As they grow older, they will have a significantly lower chance of getting through high school, and later, of obtaining a decent job.

Finally, our people have a life expectancy 20 years below that of the average Australian, and are dying at ten times the rate of the national average.

THE IMPORTANT POINT IN RELATION TO ADULT EDUCATION IS THAT ALTHOUGH SINCE 1989 THE AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN COMMITTED TO EDUCATIONAL EQUALITY FOR OUR PEOPLE. AND ALTHOUGH THERE ARE SOME SMALL INCREASES IN OUR PARTICIPATION RATES IN EDUCATION, AND MANY MILLIONS OF DOLLARS SPENT PURSUING THIS GOAL. THE FUNDAMENTAL REALITY OF OUR PEOPLE HAS CHANGED VERY LITTLE.

There is a most important lesson about indigenous education to be learnt from this. Indigenous education has to mean something different from education FOR indigenous peoples.

If our education is conceived as simply something we can get from the non-indigenous mainstream system, by increasing our 'access' and 'participation', then education will remain what it has been for us for over 200 years, a continuation of our colonisation.

The education systems Europeans brought into our lands in the period of colonialism were deeply racist in their philosophies. In Australia, we were subjected to so-called education programs which systematically set out to destroy our languages, our cultural and religious beliefs, and our own law, dismissing them as primitive, heathen, and uncivilised. Today, those who say that indigenous peoples development requires us to be educated need to be very careful that they are not simply continuing, in more subtle forms, the educational racism that has to now underpinned all such efforts to 'assist' us.

The non-indigenous colonial state has used education as a major arm of its strategy for more effective government administration & control of indigenous peoples, and we have always struggled against this. This struggle has seen the emergence, alongside our informal indigenous educational practices, a new and now officially-recognised indigenous community-controlled education sector. Today, this sector struggles to survive on inadequate funding and a lack of acknowledgment of its expression of a fundamental right of indigenous peoples, the right to control our own education. Public policy on Aboriginal education still avoids the question of indigenous peoples' special rights in this area, focusing instead on issues such as individual disadvantage, access and equity.

1997 is the fourth year of the International Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples. The theme of the decade adopted by the UN General Assembly was *Towards a New Partnership*. I want to emphasise this term, partnership. We are here, as indigenous

peoples, to establish partnerships among equals, not to be treated as the deserving beneficiaries of a one-way educational exchange. Our task is to formulate an adult educational strategy to help make this partnership a reality. Such a strategy must begin with honest and serious study of the UN *Draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* by the international adult education community. In 1994, indigenous peoples accepted the current text of the Draft Declaration as the final expression of the minimum international standards for the protection & promotion of our fundamental rights. We therefore think that the key question for this historic conference is to decide what kinds of adult education are necessary to take these rights beyond statements on paper, and make them part of the lived reality of the 21st century.

We believe the first task is the education of the international community on the nature of our special rights as indigenous peoples. We want people to stop seeing us as the objects of someone else's educational assistance, but as the world's First Peoples who have preserved and maintained a special knowledge which the world needs and must value, if it is to survive the next century.

The second task is clearly expressed in Article 15 of the UN Draft Declaration, which declares the right of indigenous peoples "to establish and control their educational systems and institutions providing education in their own languages, in a manner appropriate to their cultural methods of teaching and learning." It also calls on states "to take effective measures to provide appropriate resources for these purposes."

We recommend that the text of this Article of the Draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples should be included in the CONFINTEA V DECLARATION and AGENDA FOR THE FUTURE, as expressing the minimum international standards for the protection and promotion of our fundamental rights—to education, and the standards which UNESCO itself will meet in its education work with indigenous peoples.

Finally, we urge all participants at UNESCO Confintea V, to add their voices, the collective voice of the global adult education movement, to those of the indigenous peoples of the world, urging the immediate adoption by the United Nations of the Draft Declaration and of programs to implement its provisions.

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