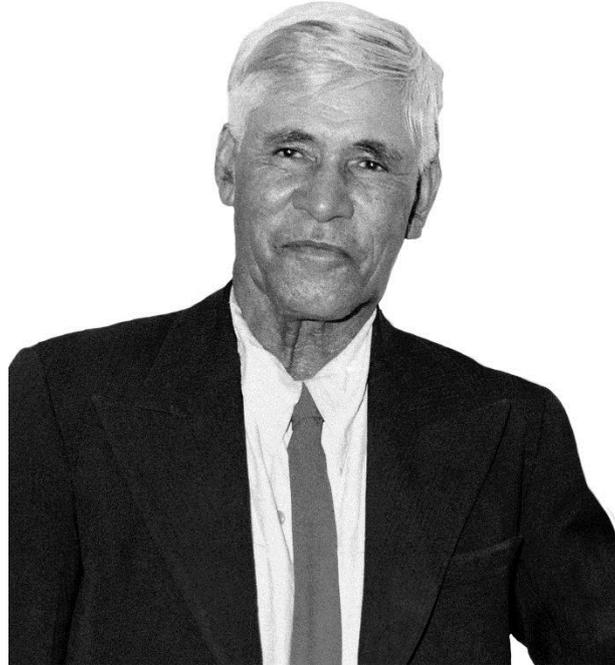


The Frank Archibald Memorial Lecture Series



1996 Lecture Notes

Education and Social Justice

Linda Burney



The Eleventh Frank Archibald Memorial Lecture
delivered in Armidale, NSW
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Education and Social Justice

Linda Burney

President, NSW Aboriginal Education Consultative Group

I begin my address tonight by acknowledging the traditional owners of this part of this land. This land has been occupied since time immemorial. In this acknowledgment I thank members and Elders of the local community in attendance this evening. I also thank the University of New England Union for the invitation to present the 1996 Frank Archibald Memorial Lecture.

I acknowledge the memory, legacy and the family of Frank Archibald and recognise that he held a revered place in the Armidale community. He was an Aboriginal Man of High Degree. A man who epitomised the beauty, the eminence of Indigenous Australia, both past and present. He was a Gumbaingirr man and was highly educated, speaking many Australian languages, and holding the cultural knowledge that ensures he lives on not only through his family and heirs to his knowledge, but through the esteem in which his legacy and memory is held by Aboriginal people of the New England region.

Reading about the life of Frank Archibald, a life that spanned more than a century, I recalled the words of William Faulkner as quoted recently by the Governor-General, Sir William Deane, in the 'Inaugural Lingiari Lecture' in honour of another great Aboriginal Elder, the late Vincent Lingiari of the Gurindji people. Sir William said, and I quote:

"The past is not dead and gone; it isn't even past" ... The past is never fully gone. It is absorbed into the present and the future. It stays to shape what we are and what we do.

William Faulkner's statement was made with reference to racial tension; it is particularly appropriate and needs to be understood in this climate now. And in a similar way Frank Archibald is not fully gone. He is absorbed into present and future and remains to shape what we are and what we do.

When I was asked to present a lecture in this series, I gave my topic as education and social justice. Whilst what I want to talk about picks up elements of that topic, the events of the last month on the federal scene have caused me to think more deeply about what I believe needs to occupy our thoughts, conscience and actions as Australians, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, sharing, sometimes uncomfortably, the place we call Australia.

I want to provide you with my view as an Aboriginal person, a perspective based on social justice, about the process of reconciliation. I want to go to the heart of what I believe the issues are that Australia and Australians must address if Australia is ever going to deal with the legacy of its past. If this legacy is not addressed, if the gulf that has created a society of inequity, of them and us, is not faced fully and honestly, then we will forever remain a diminished nation. A nation that puts its head in the sand and says it's someone else's responsibility.

Identity is where we need to start. Australians need to begin to understand Aboriginality, to at last appreciate what being Aboriginal means. This is an understanding I wish I could magically endow into the hearts and minds of all people in Australia.

I would like to share with you a very personal experience, as personal as it is probably universal for Indigenous people right across the planet.

People still look at me and ask, 'What nationality are you? Spanish? Indian? Lebanese?', and so on. This is because I don't fit the mould, the stereotype. Some people still ask, 'What part, what percentage of you is Aboriginal?' And people still say, 'But you must be only half'. This is really code for, 'You dress and/or speak too well for an Aborigine'.

Nothing could be further from what and who we are. Nothing could be more biased and ignorant.

Aboriginality is not about skin tone, curly hair or living in the desert. It is about a connection to each other and the dirt of the land. It is about a shared heritage, a shared pride—and a shared pain. It is about being passionate that our children inherit those things and our history. It is about what is in our hearts. It is an inside, not outside concept. It is about pride.

For true reconciliation to be realised for all Australians, this appreciation of who we are must be realised, along with social justice.

This brings me to social justice. What is social justice for Indigenous Australians? Perhaps a look at the Aboriginal experience and a mention of justice broadly is timely.

First of all I need to tell you something about Aboriginal experience in this country over the last 200 years. This is our story. And we will never forget—it is the story of the greatest crime ever committed against humanity in this country. One quick way of telling this story is the chapters of *Survival*², one of the better accounts of Aboriginal history. The three sections of the book are: 'Dreamtime', 'Nightmare', and 'Awakening'; Dreamtime is about the 100 000 years and more of Aboriginal history and culture before the invasion; Nightmare stands for the horrors of invasion and colonisation and the aftermath, including the pain and the legacy of the stolen generations of Aboriginal children. Awakening is the revival of Aboriginal Australia, and at the same time other Australians waking up to themselves—a long process with a fair number of slow learners! Which is one reason why the next chapter of that book when it is updated to the present will be 'Wake Up Australia!'.

One reason why our story needs to be told is that so few non-Aboriginal people know anything about Aboriginal Australia or Aboriginal experience, though I'm happy to say that this has changed over the recent years—and about time too. As you may or may not know, the reason for this widespread ignorance is that there was a conspiracy of silence about Aboriginal Australia through all the dark years of White Australia. And fundamentally that silence started when Captain Cook landed on an uninhabited island off the tip of Cape York, planted the English flag and claimed the whole of eastern Australia as *terra nullius*—'land belonging to no one'.

If you think about it—and it is about time people did—*terra nullius* meant denying the humanity and even the existence of Aboriginal people, the Indigenous people of this land. That denial led to the exclusion of Aboriginal people from White Australia and from Australian society. *Terra nullius* is why it was not until 1967 that Aboriginal people became citizens in our own country.

Terra nullius was the basis of the whole idea of White Australia. What people need to realise is that White Australia was exclusivist and racist by definition—and where it survives, it still is. By that I

mean that you can't even talk about White Australia without talking about racism in the same breath. The other thing that people need to be aware of is that the White Australia Policy was not abolished until December 1972. That means that until that time Australia was still officially defined at the highest level as White.

Now defining Australia as White meant two things. First, it meant that, even after the 1967 Referendum, Aboriginal people still did not exist. Secondly, you can change policies or laws by a stroke of the pen or a proclamation, but you don't change so easily the attitudes and values that go with them. And the fact that Australia was still White Australia until 1972 means that practically everyone now in a position of power or influence or authority who grew up in Australia, by definition grew up in White Australia, and therefore grew up with all the attitudes and values—and the White-European frame of reference—that White Australia stood for. We say that education is the key but the average age of our teachers in this country is over 40 and rising. That means our teachers too have grown up in White Australia. And that means we have to teach the teachers.

It was not until 3 June 1992, in the case of *Mabo v. Queensland*, that the High Court of Australia overturned the ridiculous notion of *terra nullius*, and recognised that *terra nullius* was a travesty of fact and a fallacy of law.

Now, what about social justice?

We all know that Australia is supposed to be the land of the fair go. But the point is that you can't even begin to talk about the concept of the fair go until you have some awareness of the people who were excluded from Australian society as such and by definition, and were therefore also at the same time excluded from the benefits of this Australian ideal. And that is the Indigenous peoples of this land. And the point also is that you can't even begin to talk about a fair go without talking in terms of justice. There can't even be a fair go without justice. And justice by definition has to mean justice for everyone—without exception.

During 1994 I was involved in consultations of Aboriginal communities across Australia on the government's proposed social justice package. At one of those consultations, the comment was made that, while social justice was very difficult to define, you certainly knew when you didn't have it! And all over Australia Indigenous people stressed, 'There can be no reconciliation without social justice'.

Mick Dodson, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner³, has defined social justice in grass-roots terms:

Social justice must always be considered from a perspective which is grounded in the daily lives of indigenous Australians. Social justice is what faces you in the morning. It is awakening in a house with an adequate water supply, cooking facilities and sanitation. It is the ability to nourish your children and send them to a school where their education not only equips them for employment but reinforces their knowledge and appreciation of their cultural inheritance. It is the prospect of genuine employment and good health: a life of choices and opportunity, free from discrimination.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, social justice means two classes of rights: the full citizen rights we share with all other "Australian citizens; and our inherent Indigenous rights as first peoples of this land. Measures of social justice will be assessed in terms of the preparedness of the wider Australian community to shift from the historically-based regime of welfare-based relationship

with us to one based on an acknowledgment of the rights of the Indigenous peoples of Australia, as well as ensuring that we not only have access to our rights but are empowered to enforce them.

For the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, the vision of social justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people is based on a society that empowers Indigenous individuals, communities and organisations to control our own destinies. This empowerment must be based on a new relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and the wider Australian community. A new relationship is needed to break the cycle of dispossession and disadvantage. This cycle and the parallel maintenance of a process of political and social subordination currently act as barriers to better relations between Indigenous people and the wider Australian community.

Social justice therefore is bound up in rights and the ability to get from Australian society and life what can rightly be expected.

The sad fact, my friends, is that it's an absurdity if we believe for one second that this is anywhere a reality for Indigenous people in our own land.

The statistics tell their own story. I quote again from the Inaugural Lingiari Lecture by Sir William Deane⁴:

The publication 'Australia's Health 1996' which was launched by the Minister for Health and Family Services, Dr Wooldridge, within recent weeks documents a gap between the health levels of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and other Australians which is actually widening. If, using that and other sources, one focuses on particular age groups, the calamitous position which exists can be highlighted. For example, taking account of all causes including injury, Indigenous males between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four years are 2.8 times more likely to die than Non-Indigenous males. Indigenous females within that age group are 3.5 times more likely to die than Non-Indigenous females. The disparity increases even further in the twenty-five to thirty-four age bracket. Indigenous males are 5.5 times more likely to die between those ages than are Non-Indigenous males. Indigenous females are 6.1 times more likely to die. The disparity becomes even worse again if one focuses upon some particular areas of illness. For example. Indigenous people die from diabetes related illness at twelve times the rate for men and seventeen times for women than for other Australians. If we turn our attention to the position of a new-born child destined to be raised in an Aboriginal community, two facts emerge to swamp all others. These facts are that the life expectancy of such an Aboriginal baby is, if conditions remain as they are at present, almost twenty years less than that of other Australian babies, and that Aboriginal infant and perinatal mortality rates are approximately three times those of the general population.

These health statistics cannot be divorced from their human context. That point has been eloquently made by Mick Dodson⁵:

A certain kind of industrial deafness has developed. The meaning of these figures is not heard or felt.

The statistics of infant and perinatal mortality are our babies and children who die in our arms.

The statistics of shortened life expectancy are our mothers and fathers, uncles, aunts and Elders who live diminished lives and die before their gifts of knowledge and experience are passed on.

We die silently under these statistics.

I said before that education is the key. Now some basic facts about Aboriginal education and training:

- ACER (Australian Council for Educational Research) figures show that 47 per cent of Aboriginal primary students have significant literacy and numeracy problems compared with 16 per cent of other primary students;
- Aboriginal students are 2.8 per cent of government school enrolments but 7.5 per cent of learning support classes are Aboriginal;
- in many remote areas Aboriginal children still have no access to secondary schooling;
- retention of Aboriginal students is now 33 per cent compared to 77 per cent for all students; Aboriginal retention is now at the level reached by all Australian students 20 years ago;
- 49 per cent of Aboriginal 15-19 year olds are in education and training compared to 90 per cent of the general population;
- 2.2 per cent of Aboriginal people have university degrees compared with 12.8 per cent for all Australians;
- NSW Basic Skills Test results show less improvement for Aboriginal students than for any other group;
- in NSW the HSC outcomes of Aboriginal students have not improved since the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Education Policy was introduced in 1990.
- more than 25 per cent of youth in NSW juvenile detention centres are Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander.

Even in economic terms these statistics do not make sense. As then Minister Simon Crean said when launching the Commonwealth's response to the National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in 1995⁶:

It makes sense to invest in the education of Indigenous Australians. Every dollar spent now in education saves eight to ten dollars later on. If we don't provide culturally appropriate and relevant education, we face a hefty cost in terms of remedial training and assistance later in life.

But the real importance of all these statistics in terms of the daily lives and the life chances of Indigenous people in this country is shown by the most appalling statistic of all—of the 99 Aboriginal deaths and lives investigated by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, just two had completed secondary schooling.

Looking at these statistics in the context of what should be our rights in this country, it is patently clear that social justice for Indigenous people must be a clear priority of all levels of government: local government, State and Territory governments and the Commonwealth.

I feel it incumbent on me to talk about the current climate in Australia in relation to my perception of what is going on in Aboriginal issues. It is my true belief that we are on the brink of either recreating the injustice of the past or of forging a permanent change that could bring about real social justice and reconciliation in Australia.

We live in disturbing times. We thought ours was a tolerant society. But it clearly is not—once again let me drift on to a personal tale.

I have been involved in Aboriginal affairs for 15 years. But never have I seen or felt the hatred, the unleashing of prejudice, that fuels the ridiculous assumptions about what Aboriginal people are supposed to get.

Pauline Hanson, the Member for Ipswich, will represent all in her electorate except Aboriginal people. This is a member of the Australian parliament!

There is a constant assertion that Aboriginal people and organisations are not accountable.

We are seeing unprecedented cuts across the Aboriginal Affairs portfolio.

It is so hard to absorb how 15 years of hard work, 15 years of working towards social justice, equitable outcomes in Aboriginal education, can be rolled back so easily in the space of a few months. But it is quite clear that neither social justice in education nor social justice through education will be addressed under these circumstances, or in this climate of opinion.

If we truly want to talk about accountability, what about the States and Territories? As Patrick Dodson said at the national Land Rights Conference in Old Parliament House earlier this month⁷:

There is a challenge to the current government to outline what indeed is its policy in relation to Aboriginal affairs. Not just to talk about accountability. That's a subject for all people who receive public funds. The ATSI Commission or Aboriginal organisations are not Robinson Crusoe in that regard. There has never been a proper accountability applied to the States in relation to the funds provided to States to improve the condition and advance the position for Indigenous peoples. If the Commonwealth government wants to show it's fair dinkum about accountability, let it tackle some of the harder, tougher, stronger, more vital aspects of this nation's economy and peoples rather than those who are at the margins of it ...

You would have to ask what it [the current government] is doing to promote those matters mentioned there. It is easy for the government and the public to blame the Aboriginal people because we are the easy targets. We are the people who get angry. We are the people who get frustrated. We are the people who are sick and tired of being pushed around and subjugated to the fancies of others. It is about time that our media and our captains of industry and those who wield influence within the parties take to task not only the government but the political parties in relation to these matters. This is not a matter of the Aborigines against the States or the Aborigines against the public; this is a matter of government, it's a matter of its responsibility and its obligation to the totality of this nation and in particular to the relationship it needs to develop with the Indigenous population.

'Where to?', you might ask.

As I said earlier, we are standing at the crossroads. May next year will be the 30th anniversary of the 1967 Referendum. A referendum that recognised us for the first time as citizens—no longer just equal to the kangaroos, sheep and waratahs. One wonders how far the Australian psyche has really moved in this country. Some distance I would hope. For many people, leaps and bounds.

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation has a vision:

A united Australia which respects this land of ours values the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander heritage and provides justice and equity for all.

We need to think about how this vision can be achieved. There are four critical issues that Australia has to deal with in the coming months. Reconciliation will depend on Australia's responses to these issues. In particular the Commonwealth must make decisions, and hopefully show just leadership.

These critical issues are:

1. the High Court in the Wik Case will rule on the extent to which Native Title has been extinguished by pastoral leases;
2. the government's proposed amendments to the Native Title legislation;
3. the review of the Commonwealth Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Cultural Heritage Act;
4. the report of the Wilson Inquiry into the separation and removal of Aboriginal children—the stolen generations.

These are also coupled with the lead-up to the centenary of Federation. This must involve a re-examination of the existing Australian Constitution which fails to reflect anything about Aboriginal Australia—which is why that process is so important.

Clearly the Commonwealth has a responsibility to promote Reconciliation. So do the States and Territories. And let's not forget local government which is where so much service delivery happens. But the responsibility to make it happen is not only a corporate responsibility; it is not only for governments and institutions. It is also an individual and collective responsibility, for all Australians, both Aboriginal and other Australians, at the grass roots level.

The process of Reconciliation is not about us all walking off into the sunset in 2001 holding hands—it's about bringing about a more just and equitable society for all. It's about challenging what isn't right now. It's about every person in this room and every person in this country. We all have a stake in it. It's about addressing social justice. It's about educating all Australians about this country we now call home.

If the reports of the Wilson Inquiry do not present a watershed in this country, nothing will. The forced removal of our babies and our children from their families is not something from the dim dark past. It is living history; it was systematic; and it was an act of genocide.

It was a process that was in the main part of government policy and practice. Not only did it physically remove thousands and thousands of children. This policy went on to attempt to eradicate our very identity.

This nation must deal with that.

This nation must come to terms with the fact whilst there is culture there will be issues with land. The two are one.

This nation must come to realise that it is only collectively, carefully and with respect that we can really hold our heads high.

The spirit of Australia is sick. There is a healing that must go on in the hearts and minds of its people for that spirit to be healed.

It is now that we must choose the path. It will be our children's children and their children that will sit in judgement of us, on whether we here and now had the determination, tolerance and goodwill to do the right thing; or whether Indigenous people are to be relegated once again to the rubbish

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heap of this nation. On whether this nation continues to be a nation that, when its image reflects in a mirror, doesn't reflect still our reality. Whether we as a nation cannot together find pride in a history and knowledge that is older than any other on planet earth. On whether this nation will finally grow up. On whether this nation is determined enough and whether social justice for Indigenous people in education and other areas ever becomes a realisation.

I want to finish by reading a poem by Jack Davis⁸, from his play *Kullark*, about our people and the land—and what has happened:

She was born with sand in her mouth,
The whisper of wind in her hair.
They washed her clean in the warm wood ash
And wrapped her in loving care.

She lay in the mould of her mother's arms,
And suckled her honeyed breast.
She grew and she watched day turn to night
As you came out of the West.

You came loud mouthed with eyes cruel
And made her your concubine;
Then flung her into the wilderness,
That beautiful woman of mine.

With murder, with rape, you marred her skin,
But you cannot whiten her mind.
They will remain my children forever,
The black and the beautiful kind.
The black and the beautiful kind.

Well, Frank Archibald and others of your ilk, heroes and heroines, it is now perhaps more than any other time that we must draw on your strength and wisdom to guide us on a journey where the outcome is truly just.

Thank you.

Endnotes

1. *Some Signposts from Dagaragu*. The Inaugural Lingiari Lecture delivered by Sir William Deane, Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia, at the invitation of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, Darwin, Thursday 22 August 1996. Canberra: Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, 1996.
2. *Survival: A History of Aboriginal Life in New South Wales*, by Nigel Parbury. Sydney: NSW Ministry of Aboriginal Affairs, 1988.
3. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, First Annual Report, 1993.
4. Sir William Deane, Inaugural Lingiari Lecture, op. cit., p. 25.
5. Mick Dodson, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, in *Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker Journal*, 18(3), May/June 1994, 19.
6. Press Release: The Response of the Commonwealth Government to the National Review of Education for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples, September 1995.
7. Conference Papers: *Land Rights: Past Present Future*, convened by the Northern and Central Land Councils, August 1996, pp. 251, 252.
8. From *Kullark* by Jack Davis, published in *Kullark; The Dreamers*, Currency Press, Sydney, 1992, p. 66.