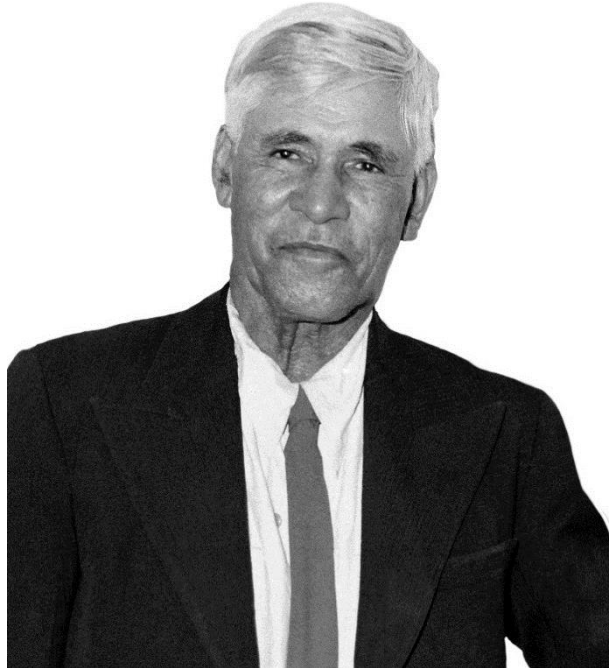


The Frank Archibald Memorial Lecture Series



2004 Lecture Notes

Race, Identity and Politics.

Senator Aden Ridgeway



The Nineteenth Frank Archibald Memorial Lecture
delivered in Armidale, NSW
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Race, Identity and Politics

Senator Aden Ridgeway

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land we meet on.

I would also like to acknowledge the Dean of the Faculty of Education, Health and Professional Studies, Professor Victor Minichiello; and the Director of Oorala, Diane Golden. I especially thank Frank Archibald's granddaughter, Helen Gordon, and the Aboriginal people of the New England region.

I am honoured to be giving the 2004 Frank Archibald Lecture, and to be associated with so many eminent Indigenous Australians who have given this lecture before me. And in particular, to be speaking in honour of the great man, Frank Archibald. I hope to do justice to his memory and to the legacy he has left.

Introduction

I have chosen this topic—Race, Identity and Politics—because it is at the forefront of my political consciousness, and is what I consider to be perhaps the most crucial issue for Australia, in today's political climate.

You are probably thinking that, actually, there is a distinct lack of discussion on race and identity in politics today, and frankly, a certain lack of interest in Indigenous culture and identity.

ATSIC has been effectively demolished and Indigenous affairs barely rate a mention in this election campaign. Not a single other party has put an Indigenous candidate in a winnable Senate seat.

The fact that Indigenous affairs have been pushed off the national political agenda—that Indigenous culture and identity has been dismissed as, at best, another part of our multicultural society, and at worst, worthless—is the very reason why I consider race and identity to be such a significant issue.

I want to talk today about the reality of 'identity politics' for Indigenous Australians. In this context, I will focus on three things:

1. the institutionalised racism that permeates Australian society and that has played such a huge role in destroying, constructing and reconstructing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identity;
2. this government's dismissal of identity as irrelevant to politics and public policy; and
3. the path ahead, including the desperate need for our political leadership to refocus on identity and reconciliation.

Who I am

I feel that any discussion on identity should start with at least a brief outline of who I am, and the things that I believe have shaped my identity and my place in society.

I am a Gumbaynggir man. I was born and grew up on an Aboriginal reserve near Nambucca Heads in northern NSW. I have been fortunate in my life - despite witnessing first hand the pervasive effects of alcohol and violence upon family and community, seeing too many of my cousins tread that well worn path to gaol, and seeing young life extinguished prematurely.

Like most Aboriginal families in this country, mine was not spared the impact of the government policies of dispossession. Most directly, my father was a stolen child, and grew up in Kinchella Boys Home.

I owe much of my success to my family, especially to my mother, Colleen, and my Grandmother, Phoebe. My grandmother, in particular, taught me about my peoples, our stories and the importance of family and community. She also engaged me, from a very early age, in debates—challenging me to think through issues and form opinions. My mother knew that education was crucial for my future and was the driving force behind me remaining in school until year 11, although I found it tough as the only Aboriginal person in my year.

I've worked in numerous roles, including boilermaker, park ranger, public service manager, ATSIC Regional Councillor, and Executive Director of the NSW Aboriginal Land Council.

I am currently the only Indigenous Federal Parliamentarian. Before me there was one other—Neville Bonner.

I have known for a long time that the figures quoted about Aboriginal people are not just statistics, but are human beings. This struck first when I attended the funerals of my two uncles on the same day, the same church, one after the other, preventing me from saying farewell to both in the proper way.

It continues to sting me on a fairly regular basis. A few weeks ago three good friends of mine passed away within 10 days of each other. All were under 43 years of age.

This is the reality for Indigenous Australians

As shocking as most people find the statistics, the sadness that accompanies the reality of the figures is unfathomable to many people, I think.

And yet this characterises the experience of the great proportion of my people, despite the unparalleled prosperity surrounding us.

It is not surprising, then, that the identity of Indigenous Australians is intrinsically affected by the extent of suffering and death that we deal with on a day-to-day basis.

The only blackfella in Federal parliament

As the only blackfella in parliament, I find it very difficult, at times, to represent all that I feel I should represent. Indeed, all that I want to represent. I walk in two worlds, and I really have to function in both of those worlds simultaneously. I was voted in as a Democrats Senator for NSW. I represent my constituency of NSW voters, and I represent all Indigenous Australians. I don't think that any other

parliamentarian has comparable demands on them, although I'm sure many would disagree with me!

I don't shy away from the expectations of Indigenous Australians; I believe that it is my duty to continue to raise issues of importance to Indigenous Australians and to try to keep these issues on the national agenda.

Being in Federal parliament has given me all the more confidence that what our political leaders do and say influences public attitudes. Leadership can change people's views.

Unfortunately, over my five years as a Senator, the direction that our political leaders have been leading us in has been a narrow-minded, regressive and discriminatory one. I have felt this keenly.

Racism in parliament

I believe that what is said in our national parliament ends up on the streets of our towns and cities. While articulate, university educated, middle aged lawyers in parliament house talk the talk about how the 'new policy paradigm' is shifting from a 'preoccupation with race and guilt' to a focus on 'practical reconciliation', people on the ground start talking about 'lazy, dole-bludging Aborigines'.

There is literally a stream of racist tropes alluded to, or expressly relied upon in parliamentary debates and in the policy positions of this government.

Every time Indigenous issues are raised there is an inevitable racist comment or speech from someone. Some are worse than others; some are clearly more intentional than others and therefore more malicious. And there are comments which I do not believe are even supposed to be subtle.

I'll mention a couple of incidents, but will relate one that particularly stands out in my mind. It is representative of some of the typical attacks on Indigenous people, including the bizarre misconception that Aboriginal people are treated more favourably than other Australians, always getting something for free; and the stereotypical construction of the Aborigine as untrustworthy.

Of course, they are always very careful to exclude me from such commentary. It is very hard to prove the kind of racism that prevails in the current political climate. It is an insidious, coded racism—no less discernable, but less easily contestable.

Example of racism in parliament — Brett Mason

On 16 September 2003, after the release of the Australian Citizenship Ceremonies Code, Senator Brett Mason, a liberal backbencher, took exception to the Code's encouraging words on including a 'Welcome to Country' in citizenship ceremonies.

This speech captures the attempt at portraying outright racism as a defence of 'normal' Australians, and even as some kind of anti-discrimination stance.

Senator Mason objects to acknowledging 'traditional owners' and believes that the ceremonies should actually recognise all the groups of Australians, including those who "tamed our harsh continent" like the "convicts, pioneering men and women, the Anzacs or the migrants who flocked to this country after World War II".

He views acknowledging traditional owners as an exclusionary gesture, rather than an inclusive one. He feels that it excludes him.

Senator Mason continued on, and I quote:

"Bruce Woodley, of the group the Seekers, writes in his famous song I Am Australian that 'we are one, but we are many'. Unfortunately, for many on the Left we are not one; we are two—there are Indigenous Australians and then there is the rest. Indigenous Australians are the real and authentic Australians, while the rest of us are interlopers and uninvited guests. This is not a healthy world view to promote at citizenship ceremonies. Just when our nation is welcoming its new citizens and should be saying to them that they now belong to Australia and Australia belongs to them—that they own its institutions, its democracy, its rights of citizenship—we are reminding them that they do not and cannot really own this country: their title is defective; their ownership is somehow contingent upon someone else's. It is as if our new citizens are at best merely tenants in their new home and, at worst, tourists. Citizenship should entail a sense of ownership but this sort of statement fosters division."

Not only has Senator Mason completely misrepresented Bruce Woodley's song, he has also epitomised the level of insecurity that permeates out of Australia on the topics of national identity and race relations.

Incidentally, I responded the following day, by giving a speech on the importance of recognising Australia's first peoples and calling on the Prime Minister to discipline Senator Mason. I'm reminded of that speech each time I use the bathroom in my Rozelle office, where I mounted the laminated letter from the Senate President, received for "reflecting on another honourable senator in an unparliamentary way". I believe the term to which the sensitive senator took offence was "lazy bigot".

Treating unequals equally does NOT result in equality

This episode highlighted to me the extent to which Australians have a tendency to pervert the use of the word 'egalitarian', and the idea of 'equality'.

The views and strategies embraced by the current Australian government seem to be based on the naïve, or malicious, view that because many of the legal barriers to equality are no longer in place, this equates to equality itself.

By ascribing to such an inane view on equality, it would be hard to understand that Indigenous people do not feel like the 'only genuine Australians'. We do not feel like we are being treated as the centrepiece of Australian culture and identity. In fact, I think that Indigenous people only feel half Australian. This is not surprising. We feel only half an affection for and affiliation with the Australian nation because we are still waiting for the affection to be reciprocated. Our culture is not respected and we are the only Australians, along with refugees, who are denied basic human rights that all other Australians rightfully enjoy.

When the issue is identity, it is very hard to quantify the level of respect and appreciation accorded Indigenous culture in comparison to non-Indigenous culture. We can say, without a doubt, that a 20-year gap in life expectancy, Year 12 retention rates half those of other Australians, and a 15 times greater chance of being imprisoned are woeful statistics and indicate drastic inequalities. But it is harder to prove that Indigenous culture isn't equally respected and valued.

Except, of course, that there is an inescapable connection between identity and well-being, the recognition of which I believe is central to reconciliation in this country.

Government's dismissal of identity in politics

John Howard and his government have repeatedly dismissed identity as irrelevant to politics.

I believe it is indisputable that who we are, our individual and collective experiences, shapes our political self. It is only those privileged enough not to ever think about their racial identity, those whose racial identity has never held them back, who can glibly assert that everyone's racial identity is not relevant.

Tony Abbott is 'over identity politics'

Two weeks ago, Tony Abbott delivered a lecture in the context of Indigenous issues. Tony Abbott is our Minister for Health, so perhaps we would have expected him to talk about Indigenous health. But he had nothing to say on Indigenous health at all. The word 'health' featured once in a list of things that Aboriginal people need to 'create for themselves'.

Instead, the Minister for Health talked about how "we have all moved on from 'Identity politics'". Well, I'm glad that Tony Abbott has moved on from identity politics. I hope I'll be forgiven for sounding a little incredulous at this statement—I'm sure the Minister's identity as a straight, white, middle-class, middle-aged male is a huge issue for him—a real source of anxiety in his life.

The Minister used Noel Pearson extensively in his lecture, so as not to even take responsibility for his own comments. He said:

"By all means, says Pearson, pursue apologies and treaties, but the right response to poverty in Aboriginal communities is to prevent substance abuse, promote good education (mainly in English rather than community languages), foster personal responsibility and encourage people to take whatever economic opportunities present themselves."

There just seems to be a missing link in this simplistic argument—the 'how' question.

It is pretty clear that the statement "improve education" is not enough in itself to actually improve education. Some real, structural, societal change is needed.

This government continues to pursue its mainstreaming agenda, based on the flawed understanding of equality and a complete disrespect for and distrust of Indigenous people. Racial identity is clearly relevant to the way John Howard forms policy—racial stereotypes are in fact fundamental to this government's treatment of Indigenous people.

An example of the distrust based on racial stereotypes occurred a few months ago regarding ATSIC. Minister Vanstone and the Minister for Administration and Finance removed ATSIC's exemption to the requirement to seek Ministerial approval to divest assets—an exemption that ATSIC has held since its inception, and that existed for the other bodies prior to ATSIC. The reasons given to me were: "This is an unpredictable group of people" and "we need to prevent firesales at bargain basement prices".

This was said straight to my face, as though it does not reflect an attitude towards all Indigenous people.

The need for Reconciliation

I believe that the government's dismissal of 'identity politics' is primarily an abdication of responsibility for reconciliation. By that I mean that they take no responsibility for the material

disadvantage suffered by Indigenous people, or the spiritual deprivation that all Australians suffer as a result of the unfinished business that plagues our national identity.

Initially, I didn't want the Indigenous Affairs portfolio, which I now have. I strongly believe that Indigenous affairs and Reconciliation are NOT Aboriginal issues—they are Australian issues, they belong to the rest of the nation too, and need to be dealt with by non-Indigenous Australians too. I did not want to perpetuate a situation where the only people calling for Indigenous rights and reconciliation were Indigenous; where only Indigenous people are working to constantly educate the rest of Australia. It is about race relations, not just black people.

Unfortunately, there is such a lack of political leadership at the moment, that Indigenous people need to step up and be visible in parliament.

Time and time again, report after report, we are finding that leadership at a Federal level is crucial to the reconciliation process. And that the reconciliation process is fundamental to improved outcomes for Indigenous people.

The Commonwealth Government should be motivating and educating the 98% of Australian that is non-Indigenous about the benefits to the nation of true reconciliation. And they include positive contributions to our national culture and identity. For too long, Australians have been defensive and insecure about our colonial history. Improving race relations in this country will benefit all Australians.

The debate about practical and symbolic reconciliation

It seems to me that the issue of identity is actually central to achieving a reconciled Australia. This acknowledgement has to come in the form of symbolic gestures and structural change—change to the way we measure human worth, the way we construct legislation and the way we recognise and enforce rights.

The debate between 'practical reconciliation' and what John Howard persists in calling 'symbolic reconciliation' is a diversion from the path to true reconciliation. Recognising the importance of 'symbolic' things, such as an apology to the Stolen Generations, was never espoused as a solution separate to making practical achievements such as increased school retention rates and improved health.

In fact, it has long been acknowledged that improved 'practical' outcomes will only come about through holistic approaches which focus on an acknowledgement of Australia's history of dispossession, and recognition of the basic human right of all peoples to self-determination.

Making our institutions relevant to Indigenous people is the way to start. Teaching Indigenous languages, Indigenous culture, and our shared history of dispossession are practical things that should be done.

But it is also on a grander scale that we need to make change. Restoring purpose and self-respect to people's lives, includes restoring a governance structure that is meaningful to people. This means that both the law and the government must be a part of a system that encompasses Indigenous control over Indigenous people's lives.

I believe that in this context, a treaty would provide the framework for a meaningful relationship between all Australian government's and Indigenous Australians. At the moment, Indigenous affairs

are too vulnerable to the three-year election cycle. Reinventing the wheel every time there is a new government is a waste of resources and more importantly time.

Conclusion

My experience of living as an Aboriginal person in Australia is one of rich spirituality—I feel a connection to this land which I do not believe exists in white Australian culture. It is not all racism and despair, but our collective identity is heavily influenced by our nation's shameful history of race relations.

To pretend that identity is not, or should not be, an issue in contemporary Australian government and policy is in itself discriminatory. And it is this pretence which is hindering the reconciliation process. Until our political leadership tackles the underlying racism in Australian society and embraces Indigenous self-determination we will not be able to reconcile our history and our future. I believe we have unrealised potential as a nation, and I look forward to (hopefully) being in the Senate for a different kind of Australian government.