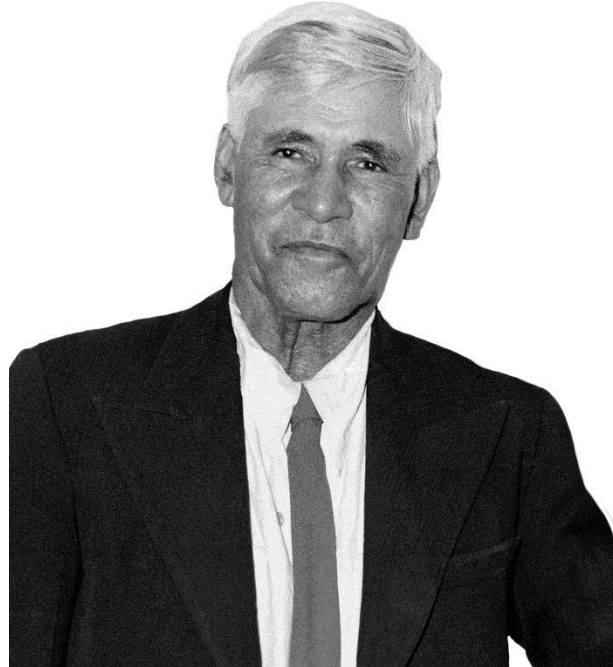


The Frank Archibald Memorial Lecture Series



1991 Lecture Notes

Aboriginal Education—Development or Destruction. The Issues and Challenges that have to be Recognised

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Aboriginal Education—Development or Destruction. The Issues and Challenges that have to be Recognised

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I have titled this discourse "Aboriginal Education—Development or Destruction" because they are the two extreme options which face us at the moment. Underlying these options are the issues and challenges which have yet to be recognised.

From the commencement of the formal administration of Aboriginal Affairs, education has played a central role in the life of the Aboriginal community.

The decision-makers of the past used education as a tool for assimilation. After the initial contact period, assimilation became the overriding policy. It was to be implemented through special schooling. Schooling was the means by which they separated the children from their heritage.

In the first schools established for Aboriginal children, the teachers were non-Aboriginal, thus severing the tie between the children and the traditional teachers. This displacement of the traditional teachers separated the children from their heritage. The children lost contact not only with the content of the knowledge of the old ways but all the practices associated with the inculcation and acquisition of that knowledge.

They lost contact with the long established philosophy that provided a framework for the traditional education. Traditional education was purposeful; traditional education was goal oriented; traditional education was achievement oriented. Education in the Aboriginal life-way, for all children was designed to enable them to become participating and contributing members of the family and the clan.

The boys were trained in the knowledge and skills to provide for and protect the family—to understand, respect and observe the spiritual practices of the clan. The girls were trained in the knowledge and skills to protect the mores of the group and raise a family.

The schooling that was offered lacked the underlying foundations of the traditional education, namely that the ultimate outcome was to teach the individual how to cope with and overcome the hardships of life; how to understand and fulfil the responsibility and obligations to other members of the family and the clan.

The success of this character building was of course structured upon a very rigorous system of discipline which was firmly enforced.

The early decision-makers took the point of view that the adults were uneducable, so they concentrated the provision of schooling on the children.

This practice not only separated the children from the parents intellectually, but more importantly, it interfered with the development of the emotional relationship between the children and the parents.

Many children were physically separated from the parents in boarding schools or institutions and as a result they lost their own induction into parenthood.

Schooling was also the means by which they lost the relationship with their grandparents. In Aboriginal society grandparents played a significant role in the development and education of the young children. Grandparents provided the information link between the children and their heritage in the content of the story telling. More importantly, grandparents inspired a love of learning through the process of story telling. They aided the development of the children by reinforcing the social relationships of the family and provided emotional security by "just being there". The schools intercepted this vital source of child development by removing the grandparents from the learning environment of the children.

Schooling was the means by which the children were denied the right to develop and realize their full potential because it provided a restrictive curriculum and a limited amount of tuition. The philosophy and purpose of schooling was to provide minimum tuition for a minimum length of time to prepare the children for minimum employment. In short, the early decision-makers had minimum expectations of Aboriginal capacities and therefore they made the minimum provision which severely restricted the options available to Aboriginal children and the Aboriginal community at large. Far from opening the door to the world, schooling closed off their access to mainstream society and the associated opportunities.

But the Aboriginal people survived despite the limitations and restrictions imposed upon them. We not only survived but we increased in numbers, left to our own devices on the fringes of the cities and rural and provincial towns. In this detached existence we set about rebuilding our social organisation.

Throughout the country, visionaries emerged to press the case for landrights and greater equality in Australian society. By the 1950s, local groups were catering for sport and recreational activity. By the 1960s, Aboriginal organisations were providing welfare services, all operating through a well coordinated system of volunteers. Membership was open and their services available to all. By the late 1960s, the rust graduates were coming through the mainstream university programs with mainstream qualifications. And then came the 1970s and the explosion of opportunities and programs for Aborigines.

Twenty years on, it is time to look back and see what has happened in that time; the double-edged sword of development. What are the educational issues that arise out of the past 20 years of activity and what are the challenges for the 1990s, that face us now?

In 1971, the Office of Aboriginal Affairs was established and associated with this was the beginning of a contemporary Aboriginal mythology.

From the commencement of its operations, the Council of Aboriginal Affairs (all non-Aboriginal men) seemed to take the point of view that the decision-makers of the Aboriginal community were young Aboriginal urban activists (all male). This thinking was no doubt encouraged by the Council bureaucrats at that time who were predominantly Aboriginal men. When the militancy became too

strong, the Council seemed to look more favourably upon the more traditional communities—"the only true Aborigine was a traditional oriented one".

It was in this period that the myth of Aboriginal male supremacy as the cultural norm took root and has dominated Aboriginal politics ever since. It is a myth, because in the traditional life-way women had equal but parallel roles. Men and women observed ceremonial practices; and both men and women had responsibility for the custodianship of land. Men and women contributed to food gathering, though in the gathering of plant food and small game, women were more successful and could be said to be the main food provider. While the Council of Elders made the laws, it was the women who enforced the day-to-day rules of behaviour. The men had the responsibility for external affairs—dealing with neighbouring clans. Women had responsibility for internal affairs—enforcing the social mores of the group. So the notion of male supremacy in decision-making cannot be sustained nor justified.

But the promotion and institutionalisation of this myth has had a destructive effect on the administration of Aboriginal Affairs in general and seriously retarded the development process of the community, especially for women and girls. After all, the survival of our community will be determined by the health and well-being of our women, but none of the policies and practices of the black bureaucrats appear to give recognition to this reality.

Associated with the promulgation of this myth was the emergence of those people who had been raised in the institutions during the 1940s-1950s, especially in South Australia. This period was governed by the assumption that children reared in these institutions would have better life chances and could take a leading role in the community.

This prediction proved only too true. As the community agencies developed in the 1960s, these children of assimilation became involved in these activities. This then prepared them to take over the Aboriginal bureaucracies as they were established through the 1970s and the 1980s. They formed their own system of political kinship which was reflected in their decision-making.

Another issue which we must now face is the severe shortage of educated, well-trained and experienced personnel to take positions of responsibility in the bureaucracy and the community organisations.

During the past 20 years Aboriginal people with qualifications and expertise, as well as talented people with potential, were deliberately excluded from those appointments which would have given them the necessary experience to qualify for the management positions today. They were excluded by the patronage kinship system of the bureaucracy.

This lack of suitably trained and qualified personnel also causes problems in the management and operations of our community councils and welfare organisations.

It was interesting to hear the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs saying this week that he planned to send management training programs to the remote communities.

This idea is not new. In 1976, Natascha McNamara and I made that proposal to the then Department of Aboriginal Affairs. It took two years of meetings at regular intervals to gain approval and that came after a direct approach to the Minister of the day.

Similarly in 1979 we sought government interest in an Aboriginal and Islander Youth Worker Training Program. They would have been more interested in training zoo keepers. Youth workers were not a designated position at that time.

I mention these two examples, if only to illustrate the damage that an uncaring, uneducated, uniformed and unsympathetic bureaucracy can do to our community, particularly when they are Aboriginal decision-makers.

Another Commonwealth structure established in the 1970s was the Aboriginal Consultative Group to the Schools Commission. At the end of two years, we had negotiated the formation of the National Committee with the agreement of the States to recognise its role in advising the Federal Government. At the same time we negotiated with the States to set up their own State Advisory Committees.

At that time it was the only organisation that provided a forum for Aboriginal and Islander views to be channelled from the community, through State Government but also direct to Federal Government.

The National and State Committees now "control" Aboriginal Education. They have taken control of the policy and the resources. What have they achieved?

There is now a National Aboriginal and Islander Education Policy with 21 long-term goals. But a statistical profile provided in the joint policy statement is most discouraging: our children are playing truant now more than ever.

While the committees have been preoccupied with acquisition of power and control over the resources, particularly at the National level they appear to be out of step with the community.

The philosophy espoused by various committees over the last few years is a negative one: today's children have been told repeatedly that they cannot learn in a mainstream school; they cannot work on their own; they cannot study at tertiary colleges on their own or in mainstream courses.

Consequently the future options for our young people are severely curtailed by this "cannot" philosophy. This same "cannot" philosophy denies our young people the sense of achievement and reward to be gained from overcoming hardship, so much a part of our traditional heritage.

It is true however that the education committees have fought very strenuously for Aboriginal studies in the schools. By now we have a much greater awareness of our Aboriginality.

But have we devoted the same energies and attention to the development of aspirations in our community, especially in our young people?

As I read the current National education policies, I listen to the spoken values of the decision-makers. But as I hear the reports coming in from the communities, I ask 'what are the practised values of the education bureaucrats?' 'What is really being done in the communities to advance and enhance the education of our parents and children?'

It seems to me our bureaucrats have adopted the decision-making practices of the mainstream—namely "that money solves all problems". Every time we see a particular problem reported in the media we see the same cry for more resources. This simplistic approach prevents a more thoughtful solution.

Large amounts of money have been allocated to the various programs required for the National Education Policy. But how much planning has preceded the payment of funds? How much training has been given to the various committees who will be responsible for the expenditure of those funds?

One issue that has not been recognised is the failure of our community to develop an interest in reading. This is not an inherited cultural trait, but a contemporary attitude developed through a process of indoctrination as part of the "cannot" philosophy.

Over the years I have been concerned at the number of decision-makers in very senior positions in the governments and community who have been unable or unwilling to read documents. This must surely detract from their ability to make informed judgements and policies.

These are just a few of the issues which arise out of the activities of the past 20 years. What are the challenges associated with these issues?

One challenge for the nineties is to open up the power structures to ensure that merit, rather than allegiance to family or political associates, is the sole criterion for appointments.

The challenge of the nineties is to break away from the debilitating attitudes of the victim philosophy and break into a development mode of the victor philosophy.

The challenge of the nineties is to take a more thoughtful approach to education. The key to development used to be education. Yet education is still failing under the policies and programs designed by Aboriginal bureaucrats.

The challenge of the nineties is to allow Aborigines to become genuinely independent of Government. With 80% of our population dependent on Government funding we cannot claim to have control of our own lives or own destiny. Since Government instrumentalities decided the priorities, Government instrumentalities decide the pace and nature of development.

The challenge of the nineties is to have a more literate bureaucracy, one that is capable of reading, understanding and interpreting any document or relevant legislation. Anything less is to give us third rate administration by third rate bureaucrats.

The challenge of the nineties is to have an informed bureaucracy who will judge programs on their potential and the performance of the organisation rather than pure prejudice or patronage.

The challenge of the nineties is to have a professionalised bureaucracy with all the knowledge and skills to strategise programs to have minimum stress on the community and maximum beneficial outcomes.

All this could be achieved if through the nineties we could develop decision-makers with a single-minded dedication to the well-being of the community. This is not the case at the moment.

The challenge for the nineties is to develop an honest definition of our heritage.

Over the past 20 years our cultural heritage has been minimised by the predominant focus on the manifestation of the culture rather than the total substance of the culture, especially in the school studies—most of which is focused on the arts.

Over the past 20 years our heritage has been subverted by the can not, will not, do not philosophy. Any form of negative or anti-social behaviour is rationalised as doing things the Aboriginal way.

We have turned our backs on our most precious asset—the future generation. There has been a persistent protest about Aboriginal deaths in custody. But I cannot recall one single protest about the thousands of children put at risk every day through child abuse and neglect. Is that just another example of doing things the Aboriginal way?

Perhaps the greatest challenge of all for the nineties is to take time out and reassess who we are, what we are and where we are going. It is time to rediscover "the essence" of our cultural heritage and begin again.

We could start by regenerating in our children a love of learning and a love of "reading" that was the foundation of child development in the traditional past. Teach a child to read and you give that child the freedom to determine his/her own options in life. Teach an adult to read and you give that adult the power to access the world, improve his/her life chances and make this a better world in which to raise the children.

Despite all the technology our community is less educated today than our ancestors of 40,000 years ago.

The challenge of the nineties is to make us not the least educated, but the best educated.

That is our heritage of 200 years ago, that is our right today, the year. That must be our goal for the year 2000.