

The Frank Archibald Memorial Lecture Series



1998 Lecture Notes

Aboriginal Political Movements: Some Observations

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Fellow Australians, Friends:

At the beginning I wish to pay tribute to the late Frank Archibald in whose name this Memorial Lecture Series is established, and at the same time, register my respects to his people and to those other Koori people who continue to survive him in this land.

As Chancellor of this University I am very pleased to be presenting this 1998 Frank Archibald Memorial Lecture. I believe UNE is the only University in the country which has dedicated one of its lecture series to the memory of an Aboriginal person; a lecture series which has, since its inception, been delivered by prominent Indigenous Australians. In this way the UNE has made an important contribution to the sorts of educational programs that many previous presenters of this annual lecture have urged tertiary education institutions to make. It is one of the very rare opportunities for Indigenous persons to make a contribution to the intellectual and academic understanding of the place of Aboriginal people in the cultural, social, political, economic, and academic life of Australia — and if ever we needed such an opportunity, that time is now.

Since early 1996 we have witnessed the bold assertion once again of racism through what has been termed 'Hansonism' (after Pauline Hanson, founder of the Pauline Hanson One Nation Party), who was most prominent in raising in the contemporary context the 'bogeyman' of Black privilege in this country; with all of its ramifications, most especially access to excessive amounts of unwarranted Government funding, the covering up of the extent of such funding, without need of accountability. The other side of the picture she has consistently painted of Aboriginal people is that they will not work, that they are criminal, that they cannot and will not control their children, and so on. In fact promoting the old stereotypes of Aborigines as being lesser beings than non-Aboriginal (except those of Asian origin).

What was particularly disturbing in the past two and half years is that conservative Governments at State and Federal levels, appeared to endorse Hansonism, driven by what they saw as the influence of Hansonism throughout communities. These communities were suffering economically as a result of Governments' adherence to the most extreme aspects of economic rationalism,

economic and political ideology which gives primacy to the free market, and which underscores all political and social programs with concern for the so-called bottom line, without regard to the needs of the people, by way of housing, jobs, health and education programs, not to mention cultural programs. At no time in the last two and a half years have we heard any of those Government leaders, or their Oppositions condemning Hansonism. Indeed, by their silence have they been heard to acquiesce in the views which Hansonites express. Nor have we seen the continuation, let alone

expansion, of pre-existing programs designed to improve the status and condition of Aborigines in Australia: such programs as health, for instance, for a people who, by any objective measures, suffer some of the worst health profiles in the world, never mind this rich country; such programs as employment, for people who have suffered generational unemployment for two centuries, and for whom there are still no meaningful employment prospects; such programs as education, for people who are the least educated community in the country, and for whom school retention rates are falling.

Specifically, indeed, we have heard the Prime Minister on several occasions over the past two and a half years attack what he calls "the Aboriginal industry", the "Black Armband view of history", and more importantly the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). ATSIC is generally regarded by Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians as the peak Aboriginal body, charged with the responsibility for advising Government, and for promoting and establishing various Aboriginal community projects. That is a correct perception and understanding of the role of ATSIC, which is a creature of Statute. It owes its existence to a law of the Australian Parliament—an institution which you all know, does not have even a minority of Aboriginal members, never mind a majority. In other words, what I am saying is ATSIC is the creation of non-Aboriginal Australia. Of course, what Caesar has given, Caesar can take—with appropriate consequences, one would hope.

Governments, conservative and ultra-conservative alike, have taken the same sort of position on the Native Title legislation. For all that people such as Noel Pearson and Marcia Langton were supposed to have played pivotal roles in shaping it into something like land rights legislation (something which has become very familiar to Aboriginal land rights) and everything about protecting pastoral, agricultural and mining interests on lands which might be otherwise rightfully the subject of Aboriginal land rights claims.

These issues, Hanson's peculiar spin on them, and Governments' reluctance to refute her more lurid claims, have caused division, disharmony and dissension in the Australian community. Yet for all the chatter, blurb and bluster about these issues over the last little while in the recent election campaigns (in the five weeks up to October 3) there was not one mention of these issues. More particularly, not one of the many and varied political interests which put themselves forward for Federal election articulated a political platform which included concepts of social justice, and even more to the point, platforms of trying to build social cohesion and harmony, respect and understanding.

Immigration and multiculturalism got mentions, in negative terms; environment got a mention, in neutral terms; Hanson gave a mention to Aborigines, in hostile terms; but otherwise the mainstream players from the mainstream parties bored us into submission, at a time when we needed a revolution in ideas and vision for the new millennium.

On the other hand, at no time during the election campaign were Aboriginal groups able to raise the debate, or discuss the issues, either as isolated interest groups, or collectively—and that is a matter of concern to me. What is the state of Aboriginal politics in this country?

In October 1990, when he delivered the Fifth Lecture in this series, Charles Perkins said in his own response to his own similar questions:

We, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia, have, as this nation of ours enters this critical decade of the 90s, lost our way. We are floating on an ocean of dreams largely created for us by others. Some of our leaders have neither the credibility

nor the quality to lead our people towards a greater vision and a better life. Many of our Aboriginal organisations have lost their fire, creativity and have died on the vine.

Things have to change, he basically said:

We should be in a position to at last throw off the old social welfare stigma, and emerge, even in a preliminary way, as a people within this nation, more self reliant, politically independent and mature, with an essential collective understanding of the economic system.

He went on to lament:

We are still the stereotyped welfare class of people as viewed by the Australian public. Deep down we sadly view ourselves similarly. We still react to situations created by others. We have to create our own positive educational, employment, economic and socio-cultural environment. We must become constructive and pro-active and not reactive.

Noting at the same time, the lack of 'proper debate' and the impossibility of Kooris being able to articulate their protests on a broad range of issues, and stated (entirely without irony) that the 'alienation' of our people from 'Australian society' was of 'our own creation'.

As I have just said, I am concerned about the prevailing situation in Aboriginal politics. In particular I am concerned that over the past two decades there has been a significant lack of political organisation amongst Indigenous people, and specifically there has been a complete absence of articulation of a political platform; however Perkins' s description of that phenomenon is superficial at best.

If there is to be 'proper debate', if Kooris are to be able to articulate their protests on that broad range of issues that Perkins identifies, then what is required is that people such as Perkins must make themselves familiar with the history of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations within the framework of colonialism. In the first place there must be an understanding of what is colonialism, and then an understanding and critique of how it has operated in this country, on a people who did not have either the political or social structures which would give them an understanding of what was happening and how to combat it. It requires a realistic understanding of the organisation of Aboriginal communities, prior to, and since the advent of non-Aboriginal society in this country.

In particular it is nonsense to assert, as it was popular to do throughout the 1970s and 1980s in the context of the so-called 'Treaty debate' that there is now, and always has been an Aboriginal nation. What we know is that there were many different tribes/clans/language groups, across which there could be observed certain similarities in language, customs, beliefs, and the like, many of which could be attributed to the physical and social environments in which they lived, but which did not have a consciousness of nationhood, let alone the structures and other incidents of a Nation.

Even after the arrival of Europeans there is nothing in the changed circumstances of Aborigines, where people of different clans or tribal groups were thrown together and institutionalised in reserves, and the like, that suggests a sense of common purpose, or interests, sufficient to constitute a national identity. In particular there is nothing to suggest that the many different groups had a sense of need to form alliances or coalitions in order to present a strong cohesive opposition to the colonisers.

The celebrated French psychiatrist and political philosopher, Frantz Fanon, wrote of the effects of colonialism on such societies of people as Australian Aborigines, which whilst it was set in the context of Africa, is nevertheless applicable in the Australian context, and indeed the very same terms of discourse and thinking were used, albeit to a much lesser extent. He wrote:

The black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro. That this self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation is beyond question. No one would dream of doubting that its major artery is fed from the heart of those various theories that have tried to prove that the Negro is a stage in the slow evolution of monkey into man. Here is the objective evidence that expresses reality. (1967, p. 17)

To deny that reality in Australia means to distort the present situation. It is bad enough that we have non-Aboriginal scholars (allegedly) such as Geoffrey Partington and Geoffrey Blainey ignoring that past; it is a far worse situation when someone like Perkins does. But then, Fanon warned us to expect such betrayal.

The point I wish to make is this: apart from the difficulties presented by the peculiar conditions existing in pre-European Australia, which obviated the development of an effective Indigenous political force, colonialism itself worked to ensure that those forces were stifled before they even came into being. By working on the psychological and personality aspects of the individuals, or even individuals in identifiable disparate groups from others, colonialism has long been able to limit Indigenous protest, either by containment (eg by co-opting Aboriginal spokesmen into the institutions of government) or by division (eg defining Aborigines by degrees of blood).

Unfortunately Perkins, who it must be remembered, long held positions of power and influence within the power structures of modern Australia, having been appointed to the senior most positions in the bureaucracy, fails to acknowledge, even implicitly, these aspects of Aboriginal history.

What is also not acknowledged by Perkins (and for that matter many other commentators, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, who would express the same sorts of opinions) is that Aboriginal history since White Australia, has been one marked by dispossession in the form of Government policies of assimilation, integration, and self determination. Many would be surprised at the inclusion of self determination as a form of dispossession, given that it has ostensibly been the political catch-cry of Aboriginal community groups for many decades. But consider this: ATSIC was developed as a vehicle through which aborigines could be self-determining. In fact, as I said previously, ATSIC is the creation of non-Aboriginal Australia. It is charged with responsibility for providing health, housing, education, employment, etc for Aboriginal communities—as distinct from the Government providing those services, which it provides to all other Australians. On any criteria, as many commentators and researchers have revealed in recent years, funding to ATSIC, and to Aboriginal community organisations responsible for delivering those services, is extremely low, whether in proportion to the rest of the Australian society, or whether in proportion to the extent of the disadvantage suffered by Aboriginal communities.

Notwithstanding the difficulties that I have just described, Bain Atwood and Andrew Markus show, in their soon-to-be-published book *The Struggle for Aboriginal Rights*, that Aborigines have been able to consistently struggle against colonialism, but they emphasise that those struggles had an entirely local character, notwithstanding that the principles underlying those struggles were universal in nature. They go on to point out:

In comparative terms, Aboriginal people in Australia had less of a political presence than other indigenes—such as the Maoris in New Zealand and Native Americans—which was the result of: the British denial of their status as landowners and so the absence of any treaties, itself mainly the consequence of Aborigines lacking the military capacity to force the invaders to negotiate; the extreme depopulation and dispossession that devastated so many Aboriginal communities across Australia; and the paternalism and racism, encoded in beliefs (such as Aborigines were 'a dying race'), government policy and practice, which weakened, crippled, disparaged, demoralised and, paradoxically perhaps, prohibited Aboriginal representation in the political sphere.

It continues to be the situation today that Aboriginal campaigns tend to have a local character, although the many communities have at the core of their demands the same concerns: land rights, housing, health, education, human rights (especially legal rights), and so on. And it continues to be the situation that Government policies and practices present a major impediment to Aboriginal representation in the political sphere. I argue that the latter is most frequently manifested through programs and practices of containment, as I mentioned earlier.

As far as I am aware there has been only one period in modern history when there was a truly national Aboriginal political organisation and campaign, and that in the period of the mid-1960s to the mid-1970s, when the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (FCAATSI) was formed. It was initially a small confederation of several individual community organisations, many of which called themselves 'advancement leagues'. These organisations were entirely free of government representation and interference; and they formulated and articulated a coherent political platform based essentially on the demand for citizenship rights. Its biggest campaign was that around changing the Constitution so as to enable the Commonwealth Government to make laws with respect to Aborigines. That campaign resulted in the 1967 Referendum in which the Australian electorate overwhelmingly supported the changes to the Constitution.

However, whilst it is true that its membership was drawn from all over Australia, it is also true that its leadership centred around Sydney and Melbourne, and included non-Aboriginal Australians, who were very much involved in influencing the shape of its policies and the nature of its campaigns.

FCAATSI was also very successful at what it did, uniting disparate groups of Aboriginal people around common causes.

It was no surprise then that it was considered a threat to Government, and for that matter those outside of strict Government bureaucracies and other institutions whose power and influence over the direction of Aboriginal affairs were seriously undermined by FCAATSI's work. Even in the late 60s State Governments at least, if not the Federal Government, worked to counteract the role and influence of FCAATSI and were involved in supporting alternative organisations which were comprised substantially of non-Aboriginal membership, the philosophies and political platforms continued to be paternalistic.

It was successive Federal Governments which waged a protracted propaganda war against FCAATSI, alleging communist influence, and even stepping up the campaign to allege that the organisation was a communist front. The organisation was targeted for destruction, and a number of Aboriginal people gained membership who then worked to bring about serious divisions over the organisation's Charter. The differences that arose amongst members eventually led to the demise of the organisation. A number of those who had worked to bring about that demise worked in the Federal

bureaucracy at the time, or were to do so later. In those positions those very same people worked to ensure division amongst Aboriginal community groups, especially as between those living in so-called traditional communities ('real' Aborigines), and those living in urban or fringe communities ('ersatz' Aborigines). As Margaret Valadian noted in her presentation of the Sixth Frank Archibald Memorial Lecture, those same people did little if anything to use their positions to enhance the status of Aboriginal health, education, employment, self-esteem and self-determination, instead seeking to advance their own individual interests and aggrandisement.

In the 20 or so years that have passed since FCAATSI folded, there has not been an issue around which Aboriginal community groups have come together to campaign as a consolidated force with a clearly developed and articulated policy or platform. Even at the time of the Treaty debates there was no such political development. Indeed, there was considerable dissension which arose out of some of the more radical philosophical propositions and political theories underlying such proposals as 'nationhood' and 'sovereignty', not to mention the failure of spokespersons to clearly define some of the language used, much of which was in fact the language of Western imperialism.

As I have already touched on, a similar situation prevailed during the development of the Native Title legislation, and the ensuing debates.

What was of most concern about both campaigns, apart from the very prominent role played by non-Aboriginal politicians, was that the individualism of those Aboriginal people who were involved, and their inability to galvanise a mass movement of Aboriginal people around those issues.

These experiences indicate to us just how far we have to go before we can again organise an independent, truly national Aboriginal movement which is capable of developing that political presence that Attwood and Markus speak about. That will require that our youth and other activists become engaged once more in community campaigns around community-identified issues, but more than that it will require that individuals, sponsored perhaps by communities, undertake studies which will equip them with the necessary political theory and political organisational skills which will enable that level of leadership. Without it, we can expect to hear for many years yet to come the sort of superficial descriptions, and gratuitous and divisive insults to which I referred earlier.

It is my hope that at a time when more and more non-Aboriginal scholars are seeing the need for an indigenous body of knowledge and theory to be developed around issues such as the paucity of an Aboriginal political presence in the Australian polity that universities such as UNE, and other institutions of post-secondary education will encourage just such academic enterprise by Aboriginal communities.