

Don't listen to those who despise us

Noel Pearson

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Indigenous cultures can adapt, just like any other.

Today's ministerial summit about violence and child abuse is a commendable initiative by Minister Mal Brough. Many people have reservations about whether yet another summit will lead to anything.

But that is not the only problem. The necessary current focus on humanitarian emergencies and educational failure makes us as a nation less and less inclined to reflect on the relationship between the peoples of Australia and Aboriginal Australians' ultimate place in this country.

Almost every sovereign state is shared by two or more peoples, usually a strong majority people and vulnerable minorities. Most democracies grapple with how to accommodate national minorities.

In Australia we have had two great debates about national issues: the debates about the rights of Aboriginal Australians, and about Australian history.

Conservative Australians have lent considerable support to contributors Keith Windschuttle and Gary Johns. Windschuttle has been appointed to the board of the ABC, and Education Minister Julie Bishop has endorsed the Johns' Menzies Research Centre paper *Aboriginal Education: Remote Schools and the Real Economy*.

I fear that Australia's conservatives do not understand the dangers for our nation of this endorsement.

Before I make clear what these dangers are, I want to explain why Aboriginal Australians can have a dialogue with the conservatives about policy and history.

First, we should be able to agree with conservative and liberal people that Aboriginal Australians need modernity, geographic mobility, full command of English, education and economic integration.

Second, cultural relativism should be rejected in favour of embracing modernity when it comes to the fundamental economic and social organisation of societies. It is natural for peoples to advance from hunting and gathering to agriculture to industrialism. What peoples retain from earlier stages is a matter of cultural and spiritual choice.

Third, in the debate about Australian history, rigour and revision of history is essential. Whilst the first three books by Professor Henry Reynolds are seminal contributions to Australian history, his later books are not immune from challenge. I would argue however that historian Bain Attwood has articulated more telling critiques of Reynolds' oeuvre than Windschuttle.

Fourth, much of the political right's criticism of the progressive consensus about policies for Aboriginal Australians is correct, particularly in relation to welfare and substance abuse.

However, I am very concerned about the damage which conservative Australians are doing to the prospects of reconciliation through their uncritical endorsement of people like Windschuttle and Johns.

Windschuttle's and Johns' influence has decreased the empathy with Aboriginal Australians. Johns and Windschuttle would probably reply that it is their critics who lack empathy because the left defends flawed policies that ruin Aboriginal Australian's lives. However, the lack of empathy which Johns and Windschuttle exude is more insidious than indifference to humanitarian disasters. The coldness that characterises Johns and Windschuttle is an inexplicable antagonism to Aboriginal Australians' wish to remain distinct.

Windschuttle defence against the charge of lack of empathy is that "[t]he responsibility of the historian is not to be compassionate, it is to be dispassionate...to try and get at the truth". But Windschuttle's and Johns' antagonism to Aboriginal Australians means that they are unable to remain dispassionately objective.

For example, Windschuttles generalisation that the early stages of dispossession “was not against [the] will of...most Aborigines” is not a correction of leftist distortion of history, it is distortion in the opposite direction.

The influence of Johns’ and Windschuttle’s irrational contempt is causing their powerful conservative audience (and thereby Australia) to move further away from the modern, enlightened view that minorities have the right to agreements with the central power about securing the survival of their identity and about appropriate political rights.

In his recent government-endorsed paper, Johns argued that Aboriginal Australians have no right to government-funded education about their culture and languages. His irrational argument was that a modern Western education system by definition cannot maintain a preliterate, nomadic culture. Of course it cannot. But we have a right to government support for a modern, literate, prosperous version of our culture. This right to cultural continuity is exactly the same right which the non-Indigenous conservatives demand for their people when they fight to prevent postmodern gobbledygook from pushing knowledge about old Western culture out of the curriculum, and when they suggest that school chaplains maintain our pre-modern Christian heritage.

The difference between Australia and most other shared Western states is that the Australian minority peoples until recently had a pre-modern culture and no connection with the world economy. To secure Aboriginal economic development, it might be necessary for us to make far-reaching concessions to the dominant culture. For example, English should perhaps be the regular language in school and government-funded teaching of our languages should be an extra-curricular complement.

Aboriginal Australian culture and economy have changed and must change. But it seems that conservatives increasingly believe that the difficulties of this transformation justify or necessitate a complete denial of Aboriginal Australians’ national rights as minority peoples.

There has been nothing more dispiriting for me than the prominence of Windschuttle’s and Johns’ ideas in conservative political and cultural circles. Windschuttle’s thesis about the absence of a notion of land ownership in Aboriginal Australia, and Johns’ notion that our culture is unable to change and must therefore be left to die, are threatening the prospects of successful cooperation between Aboriginal Australians and the conservatives.

Today’s ministerial summit illustrates the dilemma we are facing: the extreme crises in Aboriginal Australia and the low capabilities of Aboriginal Australians make non-Indigenous Australians and our political leaders lose sight of the natural ultimate goal, which is that Aboriginal Australians become a prosperous constitutionally recognised First-World national minority.

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