

A People's survival

Noel Pearson

The Weekend Australian

3–4 October, 2009

THAT education is seen to be central to the reconciliation agenda is entirely justified. Aboriginal disadvantage in employment, housing and, ultimately, life expectancy can be removed only if education is fixed up. Patently, it is the key to inclusion in the real economy.

However, the question of Aboriginal people's place within the Australian sovereign state has all but disappeared from the national agenda. There are many reasons for this. First, the social problems have become so deep and seemingly intractable that issues of culture and identity appear to be distractions. Not only distractions but obstructive of social and economic improvement.

Second, the discourse on Aboriginal Australians' rights to culture and identity has been weak. Sovereign states are slow to recognise the aspirations for cultural survival of ethnic minorities. A political movement performing an analysis of the issues from first principles, to break through the wall of fear, indifference and misconception about Aboriginal self-determination, is needed. This has not yet happened in Australia.

Our vision in Cape York Peninsula is that our children be able to orbit between two worlds and have the best of both. It is the ultimate purpose of our reform agenda that our younger generations achieve their full potential, realise their talents and creativity, and have the confidence and capacity for hard work to enjoy the best of both worlds.

To fulfil this vision, we work to restore social order so that families can grow in good neighbourhoods, where parents and community leaders demand better education, and students are supported to reach and exceed national benchmarks and make the transition to secondary and tertiary study. Higher education is our goal.

The other part of our vision for individual mobility and engagement with the wider world involves the restoration of culturally and economically sustainable indigenous homelands, places to which economically integrated future generations can return for longer or shorter periods.

SEVERAL thousand ethnic groups in the world have to find ways to coexist within the approximately 200 existing sovereign states. This is a conundrum that leaves no room for separatism as a solution. In the case of this country, I remain convinced that indigenous rights must be reconciled with a united, undifferentiated public citizenship of the commonwealth of Australia.

Fragmentation and separatism is not a way forward for sovereign states. However, the metaphor of layered identities may give rise to the misconception that government policy is not obliged to support minority cultures within a sovereign state. If such an attitude informs public policy in Australia, Aboriginal cultures and languages will slowly (or rapidly in some cases) fade away.

I argue that government has a formal responsibility for the preservation of that cultural diversity native to the territory of a sovereign state.

Today our nation does not have a realistic policy for Aboriginal culture. The development of such a program would require a discussion of some fundamental issues:

- What constitutes a people?
- What determines whether people remain distinct or are assimilated?
- How can government support the ethnic distinctness of the minority peoples of a country?

Peoplehood is, in the words of sociology professor John Lie, "a self-reflexive identity" that may be shared by thousands or millions of individuals. This self-reflexive identity is in principle entirely cultural and does not depend on common descent. An ethnic identity may be adopted by domestic or international migrants who move to an area dominated by another ethnic group; if the first generation does not completely assimilate to the local culture, the second generation of migrant families often does.

There are many sources of a sense of shared ethnicity: history, language, religion, economy and so on. Classical Aboriginal Australian thinking was very different from European thinking – so different that European concepts of religion, law, economy and so on are of limited use to describe Aboriginal culture – and classical Aboriginal concepts are very hard to translate into European languages.

Similarly, concepts of ethnicity not only have varied from place to place but also have changed through history. However, as contact between cultures has increased, a common understanding of ethnicity appears to be emerging. Today, a Yolngu person from Arnhem Land, a Welsh speaker from Britain and a Uighur from China would recognise each other's concerns for the political and cultural future of their peoples in a way that their ancestors would not have been able to.

In pre-industrial societies, small ethnic groups often remained culturally distinct even in the absence of political independence or national consciousness. The Estonian people, for example, were politically and culturally unrecognised for a millennium until they became independent for the first time in 1919, but lost none of their distinctness in all that time.

Modernisation and industrialisation appear to have ushered in an era in which assimilation is much harder to resist.

Today, culturally vulnerable ethnic groups face a stark dilemma: people who do not achieve independence or autonomy or some other kind of constitutional recognition, or at least develop a very strong ideological determination to secure their cultural survival, are likely to lose their distinctness and become assimilated.

The era in which culturally distinct populations do or do not make a claim to peoplehood appears to be nearing its end. Some peoples have achieved the favoured position of being the largest ethnic group of a sovereign state, which virtually guarantees cultural survival; other groups form a strong sense of peoplehood and achieve a relatively secure minority status, such as the non-sovereign Catalans of Spain. But many other ethnic groups are losing their distinctness. Minorities such as Aboriginal Australians have to make active choices very soon.

MINORITY peoples are naturally more vulnerable to assimilation, but small numbers are not an insurmountable obstacle to cultural survival. The Faeroese number about 50,000 and are constantly exposed to the languages and cultures of their European neighbours, and many Faeroese migrate to other countries. (In fact, many members of this people have been and are orbiting throughout the globe as I hope Cape York youth will be able to in the future.) But the Faeroese people resolutely resist assimilation and cultural extinction.

To do this takes determination. It appears that populations that could potentially form recognised and viable peoples must quickly make up their minds about whether they are going to exist for more than one or two generations more. This is what I mean when I say that Aboriginal Australians must become a serious people.

The development and possible disappearance of a culture is the product of an enormous number of minute incremental changes in a large number of behaviours and beliefs of the individual members of that culture. I believe we should think of the Aboriginal Australian peoples as a population of individuals, who each have a particular relationship to culture and particular living circumstances.

As a thought experiment, let us suppose that a very large survey or ambitious census was repeatedly performed to determine the present state and future prospects of Aboriginal cultures. Of each individual, an array of questions would be asked.

Some of these questions would be specific to Aboriginal culture, traditional and modern: How extensive is a particular person's knowledge of languages? Of law? Of ancestral lands? And so on. Other important variables included in this checklist would not be culture-specific but would capture the individual's social and economic capabilities: How much education and training has this individual received? Are they in employment? How good is their health? Have they managed to avoid substance abuse? Gambling? The importance of these non-culture-specific variables is that they significantly influence an individual's ability to retain culture, to pass on culture, and to develop and adapt culture.

This statistical exercise is a thought experiment, but one with an urgent present-day purpose: Aboriginal Australians need to be brutally honest about the threatening demise of Aboriginal culture. We need to face the evidence and be less rhetorical. The cultural survival of Aboriginal Australian peoples does not hinge on declaratory assertions that "We have always been ...", that "We will always be ..."

The truth is that for Aboriginal peoples, the aggregate scores for the cultural indicators I suggested above are falling across the population, and it is this process that has to be turned around. The general social and economic capabilities of our peoples have been falling or stagnant for decades, and are

generally improving only among groups where culture is fading away. A crisis point is rapidly approaching.

To gauge our prospects, I suggest that we group the many factors that will determine our future into two categories: cultural determination and socioeconomic strength. At present, Aboriginal groups like my people in Cape York Peninsula still have a lot of culture and determination to preserve that culture but are socially and economically weak. Our culture is, however, vulnerable because cultural transmission is not working: as knowledgeable elders die, our culture becomes ever poorer.

Successful economic and social policies in combination with undeveloped and unprincipled cultural policies may lead to a future of assimilation, where Aboriginal people are socially and economically on a par with the mainstream but no longer culturally distinct. This scenario is the best we can hope for with present policies and with present attitudes towards Aboriginal culture in Australia.

To achieve the optimal future scenario – socioeconomic equality and bi-culturalism – will require a significant change of attitude in Aboriginal people, Australian governments and the wider Australian public. The preservation of Australia's Aboriginal cultures is a goal in its own right – an indispensable element of reconciliation – but Aboriginal culture and languages are being weakened at an alarming rate. Yet this does not mean that Aboriginal people are indifferent to their heritage.

The weakening of cultural transmission is the result of three factors that have been beyond Aboriginal people's control. First, the descent into passive welfare and substance abuse – and the ensuing chaos, which disrupts social and cultural efforts – is the result of policy mistakes made during recent decades. Second, Aboriginal people's disadvantage has deprived them of the knowledge necessary to maintain a minority culture in a globalised world. Informal, oral handing down of knowledge to younger generations no longer works for vulnerable minorities.

Third, Aboriginal people are at a psychological disadvantage when it comes to their culture and language. The choking of Aboriginal culture and languages did not end with the abolition of so-called protection in the 1960s; government support for Australia's native languages is still minimal.

Government inaction and the Australian mainstream's disregard for Aboriginal languages act in concert to restrict Aboriginal people's freedom to express and maintain their culture. It is entirely wrong to deny native minorities their right to remain distinct with reference to the (correct) principles of the inviolability of the sovereign states and undifferentiated citizenship.

Regrettably, this is what some Australians do. Former commonwealth minister Gary Johns and anthropologist Ron Brunton asked the rhetorical question, "A people any longer?", in a 1999 comment published by the Institute for Public Affairs: "A major assumption of Aboriginal reconciliation is that there is an Aboriginal 'people'. But does it really make much sense to talk about the 'peoplehood' of Aborigines? ... At the very least, reconciliation should mean an acceptance by Aborigines of the historical facts that have led to a single Australian nation, and the social and political consequences that flow from this."

This political and ideological resistance, accompanied as it is by mainstream indifference and Aboriginal disadvantage, makes it unreasonable to expect Aboriginal Australians to ensure cultural and language transmission is strong without government support. The cynical suggestion that the maintenance of Aboriginal cultures and languages is the sole responsibility of the peoples themselves – in a fashion akin to the efforts of recent migrant communities – must be rejected. There is increasing international recognition that it is a governmental responsibility to support – and be competent in – the country's native minority languages.

Because of the effects of historical and contemporary forces beyond their control, Aboriginal peoples need assistance to re-establish the social mechanisms of cultural and language transmission, and to establish modern, multi-literate modes of transmission. Government support for Aboriginal culture and languages would not be a concession to a minority interest but a matter of equality; the English-language majority culture today receives more government support per capita than do Aboriginal cultures.

A big task lies ahead of all Australians to revitalise the transmission of Aboriginal culture. If we thought it necessary to convince the vast majority of Aboriginal peoples to become passionate cultural revivalists, we would certainly despair. But within each culture there is always a minority who take most of the responsibility for maintaining a culture. The majority of any ethnic group passively acquires some knowledge of their people's culture from the passionate minority, and most members of

an ethnic minority learn the minority language if surrounded by speakers from an early age, not out of patriotic zeal.

IN our reforms for Cape York, we propose that the time from early morning to early afternoon be dedicated to explicit instruction in basic numeracy and English literacy. We propose that this domain be called “class” and be clearly separate from another domain, “culture”, which aims to enable Cape York children to become literate in their own culture and languages, and to actively support cultural transmission between these children and older generations.

Together, the class and culture domains will make parallel English and local language development possible from early childhood. Superficially, our objectives resemble policies that have been implemented in regions where Aboriginal languages are very strong.

What distinguishes our program is the uncompromising ambition that students become fully competent and literate in English and reach or exceed benchmark levels in primary school subjects, as well as literacy in Aboriginal languages. We also plan to involve linguists and explicit-instruction experts in developing the written and digitised forms of our languages and the publication of more Aboriginal texts. This work will be urgent and difficult; the governmental neglect of our nation’s languages has been worse than most people realise.

Finally, what is the place and purpose of Aboriginal languages and culture in modern Aboriginal communities? My answer is that they belong to our “cultural hearth”. The majority of peoples considered indigenous in the world differ in one important respect from non-indigenous peoples: relatively small indigenous groups have a strong connection to a clearly defined, relatively small area.

This connection is of the kind that International Court of Justice vice-president Fouad Amoun refers to in his individual advisory opinion on Western Sahara in 1975: “A spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or ‘mother nature’, and the man who was born therefrom, remains attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with his ancestors.”

As long as Aboriginal peoples remain members of cultural communities that hold communal assets – traditional homelands – the communal sphere will be an inescapable reality for individuals and their families.

In my view the essence of the communal domain is identity and culture: tradition, history, language, law and education. This is what it will always mean to be a member of the “tribe”. This essence is what Maori leader Shane Jones once described to me as the “cultural hearth”: the homeland of the soul.

Edited extract from Radical Hope: Education and Equality in Australia, published in Quarterly Essay, Issue 35, available on Monday, \$16.95. Noel Pearson, a lawyer, activist and columnist for The Australian, is director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership and author of Up from the Mission (2009).

Noel Pearson is director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership.