

## **Conservatism, too, is relevant to our culture**

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Last week I presented to the Centre for Independent Studies Consilium our argument about the relevance of liberalism to indigenous Australians.

There can be no policy for development that is not founded on the three key articles of liberal philosophy: self-interest, choice and private property.

There is no closing the gap without Adam Smith.

It has been necessary to forcefully advocate these liberal principles because the belief that indigenous Australia is an exceptional case is widespread.

There is no separate development path for indigenous Australia. Our agenda in Cape York has a distinctly social democrat flavour – government provisioning of opportunity for people to build their capabilities – but in Australia both liberals and conservatives support the opportunity as well.

A more serious consequence of the necessary emphasis on liberalism is that the conservative element of indigenous policy remains undeveloped.

Conservatism is, in the world's dominant culture, the Anglophone sphere, usually understood to stand for a defence of established societal and cultural institutions and social values. Because the Anglophone states are so uniquely strong, English-speaking peoples harbour no existential angst that their nations and cultures will perish.

Not even English essayist Theodore Dalrymple, notwithstanding his dismay at the decline of his beloved Britain, believes that Shakespeare will be unread or the Magna Carta cease to guide the growth of global freedom.

However, a conception of conservatism that is more relevant to Aboriginal Australians is patriotism in adversity: fighting for one's life for the survival of one's people, culture and language.

There is indeed no closing the gap without Smith, but the people whose social and economic disparity is to be closed will no longer be Aboriginal Australians without German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder.

Herder objected to the decision of Emperor Joseph II to enforce one official language in his empire.

In 1791, Herder published the first collection of his *Letters for the Advancement of Mankind*, which contained a fictional dialogue called "Conversation after the Death of Emperor Joseph II":

A. Which innocent preconceptions of the people did the Emperor Joseph offend?

B. Of many I mention but a few; first the preconception of language. Has a people, especially an uncultivated people, anything more dear than the language of their fathers? In it lives its entire wealth of thoughts about tradition, history, religion and principles of life, all its heart and soul. To take from such a people their language or debase it amounts to taking from them their only immortal property, which passes from parents to children.

A. And yet Joseph knew many of these peoples personally and very well.

B. The more it is to be amazed at, that he did not discern the intrusion. "Who suppresses my language for me," thinks the simple man not without reason, "will also rob me of my ability to reason and my way of life, my honour and the laws and rights of my people." Obviously, as God tolerates all the world's languages, so should also a ruler not only tolerate the different languages of his subject peoples, but also honour them.

A. But he wanted to achieve a more expeditious prosecution of commerce, a faster moving culture.

B. A people's best culture is not fast; it does not allow itself to be forced through a foreign language. It thrives at its most beautiful and, I would like to say, exclusively on the nation's own land in its inherited tongue. With the language one captures the heart of the people, and is it not a grand idea to plant the seed of well-being in the most distant future among so many peoples, Hungarians, Slavs,

Romanians, completely in line with to their own way of thinking, in their most distinctive and loved fashion?

A. It appeared to him to be a grander idea to amalgamate if possible all his states and provinces to one code of laws, to one education system, to one monarchy.

B. A favourite idea of our century! But is it feasible? Is it reasonable and beneficial?

We could take Herder's text immediately and declare it to be the manifesto of Australia's original peoples. Liberalism and social democracy are necessary but not sufficient: man cannot live by bread alone.

If the engine of self-interest is cranked up, if the incentives structure is right, if people exercise choice, if the institution of private property is well developed, if there is social democrat provisioning of opportunity -- our lives will still be unfulfilled. What we human beings really want to do are things like studying the Bible and Talmud in the original Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic, or maintain Aboriginal Australian languages in order to uphold week-long song cycles such as those of the Yolngu in Arnhem Land.

This may seem a strange claim when many people appear to have few interests beyond socialising and entertainment. Individuals have the right to choose their lives; my hypothesis is however that the cultural and spiritual side of human nature is suppressed.

Aboriginal Australian traditional culture is evidence that when human behaviour is at an equilibrium, people build structures of tradition tied to language and land and pass these traditions on to the next generation.

Conservatism is the insight into the imperfection and mystery of human nature. This imperfection and mystery will ultimately make liberal and social democrat structures inadequate and unfulfilling.

Conservatism is the idea that distinct groups of people should continue to exist because deep difference (not just multicultural diversity) is an end in itself. We don't know what the purpose of existence is, if any. The homogenisation inherent in liberalism and social democracy is risky because it robs us of many possible attempts to answer the unsolvable existential enigmas.

Conservatism is qualitatively different to liberalism and social democracy. Liberalism is based on a few principles, and we let people do the rest through choice. But there is no end to the number of human traditions. Japanese and Aboriginal Australian liberalism are the same; Japanese and Aboriginal Australian social democracy are similar; but Japanese and Aboriginal traditions are different worlds. Tradition is by definition about the detail and not the broad principle.

Self-interest is the engine that drives the vehicle of social and economic progress. But tradition is the engine that drives the human will to exist. Conservatism makes the case for continued existence in a deep sense, not just in the trivial sense of having biological descendants.

This is what Australian conservatives don't understand. They believe Aboriginal Australians will be content to survive physically and become prosperous and culturally assimilate to the great global English-speaking tradition. We will not.

Four things need to be made clear. First, Aboriginal Australian cultures and languages are a concern for all Australian patriots.

Second, political freedom is not enough because there are thousands of peoples in the world but only 200 sovereign states, which are usually dominated by a strong majority ethnic group: in Australia the descendants of British colonisers. It is not to plead for a special interest to point out the obvious, that minorities are likely to become culturally extinct unless the law recognises all peoples who share a sovereign state.

Third, such recognition is pointless unless minority peoples actively maintain modern forms for their cultures and languages.

Fourth, I don't advocate "freezing culture in time". I admire the work of Jewish author Isaac Singer. His was an example of cultural change that didn't lead to assimilation but retained distinction.

In just one generation the migrant Singer became radically different from his Jewish ancestors. But he remained 100 per cent a knowledgeable Jew who had his work translated into English. He maintained only a minor part of his ancestors' way of life, but he consciously maintained a new Jewish position as distinct from the rest of his world as his fathers' position was distinct from the rest of the world.

People have difficulty distinguishing between such cultural change on the one hand and cultural loss on the other. They believe there is cultural change in Aboriginal Australia when the reality is cultural loss.

But “cultural loss” is not the absolutely correct thing to lament because cultural loss is unavoidable. Even if culture is recorded, much culture will be lost in the sense that no one lives it. The reason to cry is when there is no new version of the culture that retains a memory of previous stages.

New generations of Aboriginal Australians do not, like Singer, remain clearly distinct with an evolved culture. There should be such first-nation cultures based on knowledge of modern forms of Aboriginal Australian languages. But I do not think I belittle the efforts of many of my compatriots if I say there are no strong evolved Aboriginal cultures equipped to survive the 21st century.

We now have recognition of native title, indigenous Australians’ special place in the nation, and a commitment to closing the gap. The missing piece is practical recognition of our languages as official languages. There must be a rapid development of government agencies’ competence in Australia’s languages and an urgent effort to revitalise them.

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