

It's uplifting to stand on ceremony

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Irrational, anti-Aboriginal thinking is the most troubling current in the Australian psyche, from colonisation to the present day. Aborigines are under no obligation to explain why it exists.

One school of thought has been that anti-Aboriginal ideology emerged to justify dispossession, and people have made connections with the history of racist thinking in other countries.

But analysis of racism is ultimately futile.

Anti-Aboriginal thinking is like anti-Semitism: a complex of irrational ideas that cannot be understood as a reaction informed by personal experience, facts or spurious information that is believed to be true.

Irrational contempt becomes the primary reason for its own continued existence. This is captured in the famous dictum on the ineradicability of anti-Semitism: "If the Jews did not exist, the anti-Semites would invent them."

The irrational nature of anti-Aboriginal thinking through history is obvious. No matter how decimated, powerless, removed to the fringe or distant reserves Aboriginal Australians have been, anti-Aboriginal thinking has been virulent.

Non-Aboriginal Australians' property rights have always been undisputed. The fundamental principle of the belated recognition of native title was that the rights of non-Aboriginal Australians were secure.

Traditional owners may get part of what's left when the rights of every party are satisfied, and if there's any conflict between traditional rights and rights derived from legislative grants, the traditional rights of Aborigines have to yield.

That a great proportion of Aborigines receive support from government is testament to their disadvantage rather than their privilege. Our small numbers and the miserable services provided to us show how irrational that idea is.

Nonetheless, the idea of special treatment for Aborigines in relation to land and resources, and the politics of downward envy, have been a real force in recent history, not least among people who almost never see an Aborigine.

I have told Aborigines that the charge of racism must not be made lightly. Much of the lack of acknowledgment of the sufferings of Aboriginal Australians among conservative people may look like denialism, but is better understood as defensiveness.

Conservatives are defensive about their identity and heritage against unbalanced accusations that European settlement was an unrelenting catalogue of genocidal horrors.

The most important reason not to dwell on racism is the danger that our people end up internalising a crippling mentality of victimhood. An identity of victimhood is self-destructive because it makes us think that achievement is trying to "act white" and will always be thwarted by a racist society.

Tony Abbott's unexpected ignition of a debate on the acknowledgment of traditional owners through welcome to country ceremonies at official functions convinces me that it is necessary to bring the central figure of thought of Australian anti-Aboriginal thinking to the surface.

The figure of thought at the heart of contemporary anti-Aboriginal thinking is the sweeping generalisation that Aborigines have been given too much of something, which may be tangible or intangible.

It is legitimate - and often necessary - to severely criticise Aboriginal organisations, communities or individuals. It is legitimate to criticise policies in indigenous affairs and reconciliation. Even if such criticism is incorrect, it is not racist.

It is possible to discuss such specific criticisms with those who make them.

However, when I encounter the underlying, constantly shifting, ever mutating sentiment that "the pendulum has swung too far" and that Aborigines have been given too much, materially or symbolically, I know that I am up against irrational thinking that is not amenable to rational debate.

It is patently obvious that during the past 222 years, the pendulum has never swung too far in favour of Aboriginal Australians in any political, social, economic or cultural sector of society.

Belatedly, our country will need to work out what place Aboriginal Australians will occupy within the nation-state of Australia.

This process will be complicated. At the heart of our challenge will be the question of how we reconcile the recognition of indigenous people within one nation where all Australians share the same indivisible citizenship, as Australians.

My view is that such a reconciliation is not only possible but necessary. Settlement of recognition will include many things: land issues and connection to land, solutions to economic and social issues, language rights and many other things.

There will be symbolism as well.

In each of these spheres, there is going to be compromise. The things Aboriginal Australians have won, the acknowledgments they have received, the concessions they have extracted from the all-powerful colonisers are few and fragile.

What we have managed to win back are remnants, and this will remain the case when the process of settlement is completed.

It is for this reason that I react instinctively against a debate about welcomes to country and acknowledgment of traditional owners.

Some acknowledgments may have been incorrect or tedious or silly or tokenistic.

But all that is unimportant. There is no problem with acknowledging traditional owners that is so big that anybody needs to make it a big issue, let alone be miserable about it.

We all see and hear things that make us cringe sometimes. The sensible thing is to be gracious and let other people do what they think is proper. You don't have to do it yourself if you don't agree.

It is not a bad development in Australian culture that traditional owners are acknowledged and that there is a welcome to country.

If you can't sit through those few minutes or few seconds it is unlikely that you are only annoyed with the occasional political correctness or silliness of it.

It is legitimate to criticise specific instances of Aboriginal policies or Aboriginal behaviour, but it is highly problematic to make sweeping criticisms of the extent of Aboriginal Australians' wins in any broad area, even a seemingly peripheral one such as symbolic recognition. If you do that you cross a line.

Acknowledgment of Australia's indigenous people is only a fraction of what it should be.

It is wrong to start a debate in any indigenous policy area about whether Australia should move from a low level to an even lower level. Doing so contributes only to the perception that the low level is an excessive level and we need to cut down on these excesses because the pendulum has swung too far.

There is no area of reconciliation where the pendulum has ever swung too far; not in land rights, not in symbolism, not in official use of languages, not in government provisioning of opportunity.

When I have criticised passive welfare I have done my utmost to make clear that my position has never been that the total expenditure on indigenous affairs is too large. The passive welfare that I complain about in respect of black Australians is the same passive welfare provided to large numbers of white Australians.

In the early days of my campaign against passive welfare I indeed criticised symbolic acts of the bridge-walking variety because they obstructed a necessary reorientation of indigenous policy.

It is easy to forget today, when Labor supports welfare reform policies such as quarantining of income, how different the political landscape was a decade ago.

In the 2001 election campaign, Labor informed me that it was impossible for the party to use the words "welfare dependency". Now passive welfare is part of the policy lexicon of Labor. But that battle was won a long time ago.

It is regrettable that Abbott cannot see that statements to the effect that there is today too much expended on Aboriginal development and wellbeing - be it money, symbolism or whatever - are completely out of place.

While Abbott made clear that he was not opposed to acknowledgment of indigenous Australians in principle, he failed to see that his statement followed this formula: "The Aborigines are being given a certain quantity of a certain thing X, but they should have less of X."

How much less is not the important point. Anti-Aboriginal ideologists always think X should be cut down to zero no matter what it is, as long as it is for the benefit or dignity of Aboriginal Australians.

Responsible conservatives should understand it makes no difference whether we are talking about money or symbolism.

This may seem like a leap of logic, but it is the anti-Aboriginal ideologists who make it. The people who resent Aboriginal Australians taking their fair share are as resentful about immaterial things as they are about material resources.

Those who have ideas about "reverse racism" in favour of Aborigines will not be able to provide evidence or logical reasoning in support of their fixation but will latch on to anything that vaguely resembles their resentment.

The central figure of thought of irrational anti-Semitism is "the Jews have too much X", where X may be something tangible, material, political or cultural. We all know that every sentence that follows that pattern is unutterable.

It is time we realise that the core of anti-Aboriginal thinking is the figure of thought that "the Aborigines have been given too much X". Thoughtless statements of this kind only serve to feed this unfortunate irrational anti-Aboriginal undercurrent in Australia.

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