

Aden Ridgeway

“Getting on with Business”

NSW Reconciliation Council Forum

NSW Teachers’ Federation Auditorium, Sydney

Tuesday 27th May, 2008

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, the traditional owners of the land where we are meeting today.

I pay my respects to their ancestors.

I would also like to thank the NSW Reconciliation Council, who have made tonight possible and to thank you all for your commitment to the cause of reconciliation organisers for the invitation to speak today.

Perhaps before I talk about why tonight's occasion with the launch of the 'Supporters Program', I thought it might also be useful to reflect upon some of the recent developments and debates relating to Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders and its continuing resonance, and the role that the interpretation, and *revision*, of history has had, and continues to have, on these debates, especially as it relates to media reporting and the continual promotion of stereotypes and negativity about Aboriginal communities.

This is a particularly important matter because it goes to the heart of the meaning of reconciliation; how we construct our national identity; and our understanding, tolerance or intolerance for cultural diversity.

These are issues that are close to my heart and on which I have consistently commented over the years.

I continue to believe that we have reached a critical stage in debates about Indigenous people in this country. There continues to be an ideological wet blanket placed over all debate on Indigenous issues. The result, is a debate that takes place at such a rudimentary level that it overlooks basic lessons from our past and that is based on stereotypes of Indigenous people, which are happily promoted throughout the media.

To give an example, almost all government activity at the moment is based on a commitment to address Indigenous disadvantage. We are therefore defined as disadvantaged citizens, and the goal is about providing us with the same opportunities as all other Australians. To me, this illustrates perfectly a mind-set of the government, because it sees a distinction between, on the one hand, addressing disadvantage and, on the other hand, cultural issues.

Defining us as disadvantaged citizens tends, unfortunately, to mask the structural and systemic barriers that have contributed, I believe, to much of the situation that we now find ourselves in and it enables the debate and proposed solutions to be grossly oversimplified or silenced completely.

Our challenge as people who believe in the cause of reconciliation is to make sure that we are not co-opted into oversimplified debates about our needs which are based on language that is benign in appearance but loaded in meaning, no matter who may be in government.

As you well know, historians, and public commentators in newspapers and other media who *masquerade* as historians, have played a key role in public debate on Indigenous issues in the past five to ten years.

They have led these simplified debates, and the acrimonious and hostile tenor in which they have been conducted.

It is discernable that the majority of such commentators – across all the main broadsheet newspapers for example - are avowed conservatives, railing against the ‘left-wing orthodoxies’ that they claim, and complain, have come to be the accepted version of history.

This has been matched by the sometimes re-emergence of language that takes us back to the 1950s, in some cases continuing to describe remote Aboriginal as the last bastion of communism as it relates to communal indigenous land systems such as under the land rights act in the Northern Territory.

The slavish adoption of this sort of language is one of the main problems that we face. And this occurs despite the clear inconsistencies in the arguments and the factual inaccuracies that riddle many of these pieces.

Now I might add that there is nothing necessarily wrong with a bit of passion or divergent views, but put clearly, it has verged on abuse, and denigrating to Indigenous people and our cultures ... and, disappointingly, it is a debate that is almost totally devoid of Indigenous people’s input.

Curiously, because the debates have been closely aligned, indeed promoted, by the government and have impacted on key aspects of government policy and decision making.

In particular, there have been three main consequences to date:

- The **first** is that they have sought to sever any recognition of the connection between the past treatment of Indigenous peoples and the current circumstances in which many Indigenous peoples live: ultimately, they argue, we are not responsible for what happened in the past and we are under no obligation to make amends for past actions. This has been exemplified by the response to the *Bringing them home* report on the stolen generations as well as to proposals for a settlement or treaty with Indigenous peoples in recognition of the impact of past wrongs and the taking of this land without consent.
- The **second** main consequence, perversely, seeks to present developments over the past thirty or so years as ‘the problem’ with a view to overturning the principles and orthodoxies that have come to be accepted during this period. The principles of self-determination and self-management come in for particularly heavy fire on this front. Recently, we have seen a high profile government Minister put voice to this by calling for a ‘new paternalism’ for Indigenous peoples.

I see this critique as particularly problematic. It mixes up the principles of *engagement* with Indigenous peoples, with their *implementation* by government. Remember, the principle of self-determination began to guide Indigenous policy in the 1970s. This was only a few years after many Indigenous peoples could vote; had begun to receive equal pay; had become entitled to welfare and the protections of the State; and actually received money that they had earned, which had previously been managed on their behalf.

- The **third** consequence in ongoing debate, our claims as Indigenous peoples, and their treatment at the hands of the broader society, are presented as lying **outside** the national story: They are presented as oppositional to our identity and our greatness as a nation. So for example, we frequently hear criticisms of Indigenous peoples as seeking 'separatism', and there is a recurring, and more frequent demand for Indigenous people to be 'treated the same' and not perpetuate different lifestyles or cultures.

So where does this leave us?

I think that we have seen a new settling dynamic come to dominate the current government's approach to Indigenous issues.

There is no longer the open hostility towards Indigenous people as undeserving, needing to be told what to do and to be tightly controlled or a "complete compliance mentality" come to dominate, with a desire to regulate Indigenous peoples' lives.

Nonetheless, I do not believe that we have moved beyond the suggestion that those who oppose the new accepted orthodoxy are contributing to the problem. So those who oppose the leasing out of communal land under land rights legislation are described as denying Indigenous people 'the right to own a home' and 'to have the same rights as the rest of us', and those who have opposed the government's views on Aboriginal customary law are unwilling to be tough on violence against Indigenous women and children.

The simple fact of the matter is that this is an incorrect attribution to make to people who passionately care about these issues and who understand the complexities of achieving lasting change. Some of the debates are like ships passing in the night: the government is talking at such a basic level and seeking to create quite fundamental change in how communities operate; yet they are not willing to engage in an in depth, nuanced debate with those who can see through the simplicity of what is being proposed.

But it is something that is having a broader and potentially longer term effect. The tenor of the debate – the aggression and the accusations – is reinforcing negative stereotypes about Indigenous peoples. It is dispiriting for Indigenous peoples. Hopefully it is not leading to a less compassionate response to our needs from the broader community.

We cannot remain in this place of purgatory, where Indigenous people are seen as the problem, but they are not seen as having a meaningful role in the solutions.

We cannot remain in this state where policy is currently more about doing things *to* Indigenous people, not *with* them or *for* them, yet alone being developed and responding to the needs as Indigenous peoples themselves have identified them.

This is why I am here tonight and this is why despite the negative campaign of the past ten years, we must still remain vigilant in making sure that the new government does not become beholden to the ways of thinking which have not helped our people.

This is why, I am pleased to play my part in launching the NSW Reconciliation Council's Supporters Program.

We want to raise \$100,000 to do small things with big results over the course of the next two years.

If a Government can't lead then we most certainly can remembering that an apology in February of this year should give us all heart in being the first to step forward and make our pledge to this peoples' cause.

I am putting the first \$50 down ... it is less than a dollar a week and on behalf of the NSW Reconciliation Council, I am asking you to join me.

Thank you!