

# Quadrant Online

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## The Incivility of Marcia Langton: One

Geoffrey Partington

In January 1997 I was invited to take part in ABC Radio's *Peter Thompson's Breakfast Program*. One of the other three participants was Marcia Langton, then a professor in the University of the Northern Territory, a member of the National Aboriginal Council for Reconciliation, and a member of the Order of Australia. She became a Fellow of the Academy of Social Sciences in Australia in 2001 and was awarded the inaugural Neville



Bonner Award for Indigenous Teacher of the Year in 2002.

She subsequently became Inaugural Chair of Australian Indigenous Studies at the University of Melbourne and Chair of the Cape York Institute for Leadership and Policy. The Federal Minister for Education, Dr Brendan Nelson, appointed her as Chair of a new Higher Education Council.

I had recently had published a book entitled *Hasluck versus Coombs: White Politics and Australia's Aborigines*. Langton told listeners:

*Hitler had Goebbels, John Howard's got Geoffrey Partington ... This is the most outrageous interpretation that I've heard in a long time. Geoffrey Partington's book was so appalling and the footnotes were so shonky that serious people didn't bother to*

*review it ... it is entirely irresponsible, but, you know, I urge historians in the Academy to take this man's work to task because it is entirely irresponsible. This is the treason of the clerks that Dr Coombs was talking about that we let people like this assume the mantle of historian when the unmitigated garbage that comes from his pen and his mouth ...*

The only time I had met John Howard had been for about two minutes in Parliament House when Dr John Herron, then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, launched *Hasluck versus Coombs* in 1996. None of its reviewers found significant errors in its referencing. And at least I did not attribute “the treason of the clerks” to Dr Coombs.

My view on self-determination was expressed in that book as follows:

*If asked, however, the overwhelming majority of the Australian people as a whole, and very likely a majority of Aborigines, would agree with Hasluck that the future of Aborigines ought not to be a matter for Aborigines alone to determine, any more than it would be right to exclude Aborigines from participating in the determination of the future of non-Aboriginal Australians. It is ironical that, together with declarations about the unity of humanity and the global village, we should find such an emphasis on the exclusive right of self-determination of a minority group, or rather of a set of related minority groups, most of whose members live intermingled with non-members. The real challenge that faces us all is to ensure that the living standards and opportunities in life of Aborigines should be broadly comparable to those of non-Aborigines, while at the same time respecting that some Aborigines may wish to exercise different choices from those made by most other Australians. Different choices lead to different outcomes, some of which may be unpleasant, but that is the nature of choice.*

Since 1997 my position has not changed: all Australians should be able to influence issues that mainly concern Aborigines and all Aborigines should be able to influence the full range of national concerns.

By 1997 I had become a BA (Hons) graduate in history and a MEd of Bristol University, a BSC (Hons) graduate in sociology and economics of London University and a PhD of Adelaide University. I had been a history teacher in English secondary schools for twelve years, taught History in one English college and History of Education in another. I was the author of seven books, two of them published by Britain's National Foundation of Educational Research. Since migrating to Australia in 1976, I had published articles in twenty-one peer-reviewed academic journals, mostly in the fields of education and history.

In 1997 Professor Geoffrey Blainey made the following “brief appraisal” of *Hasluck versus Coombs* and Langton's comments on it:

*I judge it to be a thoughtful, capable book on a controversial topic: whether the views of Sir Paul Hasluck or Dr H.C. Coombs on policies towards Aborigines—views that were implemented by Australian governments—were the more sensible and appropriate.*

*Readers will naturally approach the book from different standpoints, but even a determined opponent of Dr Partington's standpoint would, I think, have grave difficulty in concluding that his is basically a careless and reprehensible book. No doubt criticism could be made of facets of this book, as of nearly all history books in print, but on the*

*whole Partington reports faithfully the respective viewpoints, weighs arguments with care, handles the evidence with respect, and tries to put events and opinions into perspective. While Dr Partington is much more on the side of Hasluck, he gives praise to Coombs (e.g. pp. 80 and 150) when he thinks such praise is merited.*

*I have read with surprise, even with some astonishment, the devastating criticism reportedly made by Professor Langton on ABC radio ... Unless Professor Langton produces arguments against the book not announced so far, I could in no way conclude that it is an “irresponsible book” or “outrageous”. I venture to suggest that if this book really is “unmitigated garbage”, then few doctoral theses in the humanities and social sciences would, if judged by Professor Langton’s standards, be passed in Australia each year.*

*As the footnotes have been especially condemned by Professor Langton as “shonky” ... I decided to check the accuracy and the honesty of 15 of his footnotes, chosen largely at random and based on various authors. All the quotations listed below seem to me to be fair in spirit and to convey the meaning intended by the author who was quoted ...*

*On the basis of my sample check, my present conclusion is that Dr Partington, rather than treating unfairly or dishonestly the authors he quotes, allows the privilege—much more than does the average historian writing on a controversial theme—of being able to set out their ideas in their own words at some length. I would be interested to know which scholars or which editors told Langton that the footnotes were shonky and that, partly because of this reason, they refused to review the book.*

## **Separatism**

A crucial issue for both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians is whether to try to preserve as much of, and as long as possible, traditional indigenous ways of life or to help indigenous Australians to master the knowledge and techniques of modernity. There have been, of course, and still are, various possible combinations of traditional cultures and modernity, but choices frequently have to be made where the two are in conflict with and often incompatible with each other.

Aboriginal groups made a wide range of responses to the arrival of the British: from armed resistance to joining the Native Police. Many sought out colonists before they had seen any of them but had seen their animals, especially sheep, which moved inland ahead of the colonists. News spread quickly of highly desirable goods available from the newcomers. Others moved away from the colonists’ paths or stations. In some groups men resented and resisted sexual relations with colonists by their women, but others were anxious to barter their women’s services for goods. Langton has claimed that it was “terrifying” to be an Aboriginal woman on the frontier, but large numbers of Aboriginal women sought out white men, partly because they thought they would be better fed, but also partly because they would not get beaten up as often.

In an essay entitled “Chronicler of a Disaster Foretold” in the *Australian* (March 4, 2009) Langton passed on some ideas that W.E.H. Stanner had told her. Stanner considered that it had been a “sound calculus” for Aborigines to:

*replace the rigours and deprivation of the hunting and gathering life with European foodstuffs, especially the addictive tea and tobacco paid to them for manual labour: they grasped eagerly at any possibility of a regular and dependable food supply for a lesser effort than is involved in nomadic hunting and foraging ... a persistent and positive effort to make themselves dependent on the peanut farmers along the river.*

Langton seemed to support Stanner's analysis, even though such dependency was hardly conducive to genuine autonomy.

For several years Langton appeared to give higher priority to retention of Aboriginal particularity than to greater integration of Aborigines in mainstream Australian life. In 1983, Dr Coombs *et al* in *A Certain Heritage: Programs for and by Aboriginal Families in Australia*, commended her view that all Aborigines have a "world view derived from the Dreaming that is irreconcilable with the demands of a modern industrialized market economy".

In 2005 in a foreword to the book *Treaty*, Langton commended African jurist Bayona-Ba-Meya for his concept of "the ancestral tie between the land or 'mother nature' and the man who was born therefrom [*sic*]". That man "remains attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with his ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty." Let us hope that pensioner rates are available for the millions across the world returning to their native soil to claim ownership over it. And how are current landholders going to react?

Langton argued in that foreword that:

*just as British sovereignty did not wipe away Aboriginal title, neither did it wipe away Aboriginal jurisdiction. This is the logic of the many Aboriginal proponents of a treaty or treaties between the modern Australian state and Aboriginal peoples.*

*The calls for a treaty go to the heart of the juridical denial in Australian case law of the existence of Aboriginal nations in Australia prior to the seizure of the land and consequent dispossession of Indigenous people by the British Crown ... In Australia, the denial at law of Indigenous sovereignty and, indeed, the very existence of Aboriginal polities has a peculiar history. Here, the doctrine of terra nullius—or empty land belonging to no-one—was applied to justify colonization.*

*It is this attachment with a place through ancestors and tradition that enables those of us who can claim a kind of sovereignty that predates the colonists to have a sense of place that is deeply emotional and also social and political at the same time. It is this attachment of blood and spirit that makes the sacrifices worthwhile, and makes it possible for one to believe in one's own humanity.*

*Whether the recognition of this spiritual relationship to land is best reflected in the recognition of Aboriginal peoples constituting a fully-fledged nation or nations, is still for us to consider ... The Australian state has consistently failed to understand and to accept the right of its Indigenous peoples to be allowed the fullest rights of self-determination. It is little wonder that calls for a separate nation find ready adherents in the Aboriginal community.*

Who would form this “separate nation”? Langton herself pointed out that in pre-contact Australia “there was no such thing as an ‘Aboriginal’”, but rather Bundgelung, Wiradgeri, Eora and scores of other groupings. She did not approve of the way in which “the term ‘Aboriginal’ homogenizes [*sic*]” all those people into “a single group to whom a wide range of negative stereotypes and functions can be applied by the dominant culture.”

Nobody had ever seriously denied that a large number of Aboriginal communities lived in Australia in 1788. What had been very difficult to establish was whether each Aboriginal group, or their totality, speaking many different languages, exercised sovereignty over identifiable territory. Langton referred to “multiple constructs of Aboriginality occurring daily”. For example, by whether each Aborigine comes from the community in which the encounter takes place, whether the two speak the same language, whether one is a city-dweller and the other is from a remote community. Langton’s “multiple constructs” of Aboriginality would further confuse the situation.

With which people descended from pre-contact Australia should or could treaties be made now? Should persons of mixed ancestry—by far the majority of Australians currently identified as indigenous—make a treaty with themselves? Would not such a treaty imply that Aborigines are not already part of the Australian nation? Does Langton really believe that “blood and spirit” permanently define or constrain one’s own humanity?

During the 1990s, when the Aboriginality of Mudrooroo, Archie Weller, Roberta Sykes and other claimants to Aboriginal status faced challenges, Aboriginal woman author “Wanda Koolmatrie” proved to be a white man and “Eddie Burrup” a well-known white woman, Elizabeth Durack. Disagreements as to what constitutes Aboriginality may become increasingly acrimonious if the advantages of indigenous status continue to increase.

## **Religion**

Langton once considered that the purposes of the Lutheran missionaries were based on a “mad vision”, partly because they gave the Western Aranda “endless sermons in German”. In fact, as Peter Vallee pointed out in “Dreamtime and Nightmares”, in *Quadrant*, “their policy was to learn the local language, and they translated into it and taught in it for several years before English was taught”.

In 1996 Langton claimed that “the relationship between this nation and Aboriginal religion has, since the resources boom of the 1960s and 1970s, been largely based on conflict and on an overriding motive to trivialize and dismiss Aboriginal religious beliefs”. She did not mention that the majority of indigenous Australians classified themselves as Christians in census returns or that non-indigenous Australians were more likely than the indigenous to reject all religious beliefs.

Langton denounced what she called “the racist perception of Aboriginal women’s religious beliefs in Australia, the continuing maltreatment of the exponents of Aboriginal women’s business and the continuing denial of a fair hearing to Ngarrindjeri women who sought protection of places of great mythological significance [on Hindmarsh Island, in South Australia]”. Yet, overall, Australian governments give greater consideration to Aboriginal beliefs, ancient or modern, than to any other religious beliefs. In the Hindmarsh Bridge controversies the only obstacle to the fullest and fairest of hearings was the refusal of some Aboriginal women to testify before men, including male ministers for Aboriginal Affairs.

About the Hindmarsh Island Bridge Langton admitted disarmingly, “I personally do not know much about the facts of the case, and it is not proper that I should know.”

Although Langton had demanded more job opportunities in the outback for Aborigines and better water supplies in settlements, she backed the application by Aranda women in Alice Springs for the protection of women’s sites from a dam proposed by the Northern Territory government. She claimed, too, in 2007 in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (October 30) that women who defended their religion and their sacred places were “hounded and trivialised” by the media and by remote-area politicians.

Yet Langton accepted that traditional beliefs are by no means changeless. She disagreed with claims that “the Altjira [the pre-contact cosmology of the Western Aranda] leads them in their life and is their law ... apparently referring to all Aranda people today”. She commented, “Such a conclusion is neither historically accurate nor adequate as description of the current state of Aranda culture ...”

After the Fox Inquiry into the proposed Ranger uranium mine, Langton alleged that:

*The religious and mythical ancestor—dangerous if provoked—was maligned by proponents of progress and Aboriginal people were, through protection of their lifestyle and of their religious life, pilloried as superstitious and backward. They were called “stone age” on the front pages of several major daily newspapers ... The great security of a white secular state tucked away at this end of the globe is challenged and contested by less than a hundred thousand Aboriginal women. It speaks not so much about the powers of Aboriginal women, which I assure you are great, but the insecurity and feeble mindedness of white male culture in this society.*

Does, or did, Langton herself believe in the presence of that dangerous ancestor? Are all non-Aboriginal Australian men insecure and feeble?

## **Land and Welfare**

Langton realised early on that land rights, welcome as they might be, were unlikely to be the solution to the main problems that beset Aboriginal societies. She came to support Peter Sutton’s view that an emphasis on land rights had been accompanied by “the loss of opportunities to develop economically and modernize Aboriginal institutions that were no longer effective”.

She told Luke Slattery in the *Australian* (February 11, 2008): “Of course some Aboriginal land is sacred, but not all of it. There are degrees of sacredness in any case. Some places are sacred for a time and then not for a long time, like ceremonial grounds.” Langton, a serial stereotyper, added, “White people don’t understand these subtleties. The idea that Aboriginal land can’t be desecrated is just a green slogan.” She also noted that “60 per cent of mining operations are co-located on Aboriginal lands. In exchange, Aboriginal people want protection of actual sacred sites, and fair compensation.”

In 2002 in the *Canberra Times* (October 5) Kirsten Lawson reported that in a Charles Perkins memorial lecture Langton had criticised the welfare dependence that, she believed, had entrenched Aboriginal communities in poverty. Calling for a radical overhaul to the Aboriginal work-for-the-dole program, Langton said that Aborigines had been “enmeshed” in

poverty since they were caught up in the safety net and that “the one-dimensional social-worker, welfarist [*sic*] approach to the Aboriginal situation has made things worse”.

Langton argued that in this “failed state” called Australia the key problems are “welfare dependency, an extraordinary low level of economic participation, and a lack of capacity to participate”. She had been speaking to people who have worked in Africa and asked them questions about what they have found that works in Africa in terms of sustainable development. They held that “mostly what they have seen will not work here in indigenous Australia because of the very high levels of welfare dependency and lack of capacity”.

Langton agreed: she told Slattery that, “While mining offers a serious opportunity for Aboriginal people to be involved in several regional economies, the great barrier is lack of literacy and numeracy. Mining sites are dangerous places. You have to be able to read the signs.” This time she praised mining companies for “doing all they can to train groups of Aboriginal people, and some of their programs are fantastic. But the school system has failed.”

## **Education**

Langton considered that the best way to increase capacity was through education. When asked in 2000 at an Aboriginal festival, “What do you want to get out of the festival?” Langton replied (*Live Chat Program*, September 6) “We want to see the incorporation of Aboriginal knowledge systems into the curriculum of Australian universities, colleges and schools. We don’t want our intellectual traditions to be ignored any longer—and we want them to be treated with respect in educational institutions.” She did not specify just which Aboriginal knowledge systems and intellectual traditions she had in mind.

Langton understood that “Poor attendance, especially in remote communities, continues to thwart teachers and principals. Aboriginal kids perform poorly on national benchmark tests for literacy and numeracy. Often trailing four years behind white kids, they rarely catch up.” Her claim that “the curriculum is rubbish” was unlikely to improve attendance rates. Langton alleged that “there aren’t enough classrooms or chairs or desks or paper”, but many new and well-equipped schools have failed to produce significantly better results. If inadequate financial support had been the key problem, great leaps forward would already have taken place.

Langton added that “the kids come to school and they can’t speak English but they have to be taught in English, and the kids can’t understand anything that’s said to them because they have a degree of deafness, or come from a sick home situation, or are just bored out of their brains”. She is better at restating problems than in solving them.

Langton told of ordeals with which she had had to cope. As a girl she had a two-mile walk from home to school and was frequently late for school, but, apparently, she did not think of leaving home a little earlier. In one school she was excluded from religious education classes. She did not mention that this was part of the “conscience clause” available to parents for their children. Many students would have been pleased to miss RE, but Langton’s explanation was that the principal hated her “because she wasn’t Anglican or Presbyterian or Methodist, you see”. The principal hated her so much that he started to hate her favourite teacher as well, because “he’s been doing something good for those of us that the principal hates”. The monstrous principal made her sit on a bench in the school hall during RE as a “form of

humiliation and exclusion”. Langton claimed that RE took up the whole of Tuesday morning, although Australian government schools did not normally allow as much time as that for RE.

Langton believes that “persisting in a high school like that in 1960s Queensland makes you pretty tough. It also makes you smart.” She needed to be tough as a university teacher. Some unnamed people were hateful to her. She called them “the Ku Klux Klan academic chapter who try to make my life hell ...” She bemoaned, “even though I had a first-class honours degree and a PhD nobody would address me by my correct title. You know, I’m always Ms Langton not Dr Langton or Professor Langton.” Can this really have been so? Not a single academic willing to call her Professor? Where were the Equal Opportunity Commissioners?

Langton sometimes recommended private school education as the “best way forward for Aboriginals, for the best of them would, eventually, be at the top of their fields”. Like herself, many of Australia’s leading indigenous activists, such as Patrick and Michael Dodson and Noel Pearson, had attended “elite private schools”. Langton praised the “very high standard” of education they provided. As its foundations, Langton identified, first, “Learning formal English to a high standard and learning in the formal mainstream Western tradition, the history of ideas” and, second, avoidance of racism: “I just don’t want to have to defend my daughter every day against racism.” Many non-government schools may well be less racist than some government schools, but Langton provided no evidence for the claim. Neither did she explain just how curricula can be permeated with both traditional Aboriginal beliefs and practices and the “formal mainstream western tradition”.

Langton claimed that “the emerging [Aboriginal] middle class completely breaks the stereotype that is dominant within the Aboriginal community, of people who are socio-economically disadvantaged. There’s a real challenge in seeing people who are middle class, who have successful careers in professions that are quite influential in mainstream society.” Langton’s pride in the educational and professional achievements of many Indigenous Australians was admirable, but it undercut her attacks on the integration/assimilation policies that made those achievements possible.

## **Alcohol**

Problems caused by or made worse by alcohol abuse are very difficult to resolve. Refusal to supply Aborigines with alcohol is often denounced as unjust racial discrimination and a violation of human rights; willingness to supply alcohol is often attacked as undermining Aboriginal families and culture.

Langton has been consistent in her concern about drunkenness among Aborigines. She urged (on November 30, 2007) in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that:

*It’s time for both the federal and the Territory government to stop playing politics with the lives of the vulnerable and shut down the alcohol take-away outlets, establish children’s commissions and shelters in each community—as Noel Pearson has suggested—and treat grog runners and drug dealers as the criminals that they are. Otherwise, they will all have the blood on their hands*

In a foreword to his book *The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Australia and the End of the Liberal Consensus*, Langton agreed with Peter Sutton that “much of the anger and misery can be sheeted home to the obvious: the general extension of legal drinking rights to Indigenous



people by the late 1960s”. Langton endorsed Sutton’s account of the degeneration of Aurukun, the site of much of his work as an anthropologist, from “a once livable and vibrant community...to a disaster zone” in which “levels of violent conduct, rape, child and elder assault and neglect had rocketed upwards since the introduction of a regular alcohol supply in 1985”. Langton conceded in “Too Much Sorry Business”, a report of the Aboriginal Issues Unit of the Northern Territory, that “Many Aboriginal societies in the Northern Territory have never been dispossessed and yet the grog problem is crippling these same Aboriginal people ... Once Aboriginal people are in the grip of alcohol they find it difficult or impossible to escape.”

Langton praised the Aboriginal leaders in Cape York and other areas for their self-imposed restrictions on alcohol and drugs for having reduced domestic violence to the extent that there were no longer any women there who needed women’s shelters. She advised mining companies to “be the heroes and introduce these permit systems into their mining towns ... the limit should be more like what the medicos are recommending ... four middies for males and two per woman but zero for pregnant women”. She declared:

*If it were in my power, I would immediately close the alcohol canteen in Aurukun and send more police into the community, including a special police taskforce to interview women and children victims, health workers and suspected offenders, and increase powers to detain and arrest suspected offenders. I would send in a police taskforce to inspect airline charters, cargo and luggage, confiscate all drugs, illicit substances and sly grog and the equipment, vehicles and associated paraphernalia. I would increase the penalties for grog runners and drug dealers and ensure jail sentences that befit the harm caused by their crimes.*

Douglas Chalmers responded:

*Sadly, though, it won’t work—and you know why. If people want to drink, they will eventually find alcohol of whatever kind and wherever and at whatever price ... You cannot effectively imprison people on remote communities and imagine that it is any kind of protection of their welfare. The churches and successive governments have already tried that for generations and we who are old enough are all aware of the results.*

Some leading Aborigines were by no means ideal role models. In “The end of big men politics” (*Griffith Review*, 2008) Langton said:

*Big bunga” [“big men”, or “big penises” according to Sutton] politics had brought the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission into disrepute and finally led to its disestablishment in 2004. The “big men” had “failed to show leadership on the most pressing issues in those communities: housing, health and education.*

Langton found some cunning ways to circumvent the machinations of Big Bunga men. In “Too much sorry business” she revealed that when she chaired the National Indigenous Working Group on Native Title in 1997 and 1998 she would:

*Schedule difficult agenda items for times in the afternoon when she knew that troublesome ATSIC commissioners would be at the TAB betting on horse races. If they were binge drinkers or carousers, the tactic was to start the meetings at the earliest*

*possible hour of the day, or even worse, cut into their social time by reconvening meetings after dinner with an announcement that it would be a drafting session. Assured that copies would be available in the morning, the “big men” and their flying wedges of advisers and minders would retire and leave the detail to mere lawyers and policy advisers ... In winter, we could pretend that the heating—set too high—did not work, and in summer that the air conditioning—set too low—could not be changed. These were the tactics that women used to ensure positive and achievable outcomes and to avoid being bullied into enforced compromises and silence.*

## **Crime and Punishment**

In 1988 Langton wrote in *Medicine Square: Being Black Aboriginal Cultures in Settled Australia*: “My aim is to demonstrate that swearing and fighting in contemporary Aboriginal society constitute dispute processing and social ordering derived from traditional Aboriginal cultural patterns.” She added that “swearing and fighting” in “settled” Australia should not be seen as drunken anarchy and anti-social behaviour but as “two aspects of evolving indigenous law”. A later claim was that “Domestic violence is not tolerated by Aboriginal peoples, it is not considered to be acceptable and is certainly not a part of traditional law, nor has it ever been.”

Langton condemned compulsory sentencing in the Northern Territory and Western Australia for offenders with three previous convictions as a “dumbing down” of Australian politics and policy. She alleged, in “Too much sorry business” that those who supported mandatory sentencing had been “fed a diet of sensationalist, terrifying, but false statistics about crime, criminals, punishment and imprisonment and the threat to their personal safety, homes and property”.

She stated that Aboriginal people who spoke to her during consultations took the view that young people, especially minors, should not be jailed, and that jail converted the young with a propensity for youthful misdemeanours into recidivist criminals. Langton’s informants wanted, she claimed, “minor offenders brought to book under customary law mechanisms, a course of action that had proved far more successful than imprisonment of young males in faraway towns”.

At that time Langton agreed. She wrote:

*their own customary legal system is strict and rigorous, offering a range of punishments, such as confinement of offenders to camps in the bush where they are instructed in the philosophy and values of their society under a harsh ritual discipline. Physical or corporal punishments, such as public spearing, are relatively rare and applied only in the case of major breaches of the accepted standards of behaviour, such as ritual offences and homicide ...*

*There is no evidence that imprisonment rehabilitates offenders. There is no evidence that imprisonment reduces crime rates ... The only reason for mandatory sentencing, other than the electoral welfare of politicians from remote seats where racism plays an inordinate part in public life and keeps in power political parties that can only succeed by damage done to Aboriginal people ...*

*Prior to the introduction of mandatory sentencing, the imprisonment rates for all Territorians were already four times the national rate. But the imprisonment rate for Aborigines was 13 times the national rate, and more than three times the general rate for Territorians; and 70 per cent of the prison population of the Territory was Aboriginal; 95 per cent male; 60 per cent had been previously imprisoned; 74 per cent were unemployed; 60 per cent admitted that their offences were alcohol-related; 54 per cent were single; 45 per cent had a primary or lower education level; the usual offence categories were driving or property related; 48 per cent of the prisoners were under the age of 25; 34 per cent were in prison for unpaid fines for an average of seven days; and 64 per cent of convicted prisoners served less than three months.*

Did Langton really believe that the male “over-representation” in prisons resulted from unfair discrimination against men, or was it simply that males committed more crimes than women? Does or did she really believe that the “over-representation” of Aborigines in prisons demonstrated unfair discrimination against them, or was it simply that they committed relatively more crimes than non-Aborigines?

Then, with a massive and rapid change of mind, Langton claimed that the criminal justice systems of Queensland, and of other states to a lesser extent, were not too punitive, but too lenient. They:

*rewarded rapists and murderers: Instead of jail sentences that would apply to anyone else, they are freed, often after a laughable lecture, or sent to a prison where living conditions are often better than in the communities from which they come. They are released into the communities where their crimes were committed, and recidivism takes on a special meaning: the younger sisters or cousins of their original victims are the next in line to be raped.*

In 2007 she expressed her disgust that the rape of a ten-year-old Wik girl in Aurukun by three adult and six juvenile Wik males was treated by the Queensland criminal justice system as barely a cause for concern. District Court Judge Sarah Bradley imposed twelve-month probation orders and failed to record a conviction against any of the nine who had pleaded guilty. Langton concluded that an “apartheid regime had been created wherever Aboriginal communities are quarantined by remoteness, welfare dependence, a racist criminal justice system and government officials who entrench this expensive social pathology with dysfunctional policies”.

Langton detailed the “traumas and horrors” of several cases, such as a four-year-old girl drowned while being raped by a teenager who had been sniffing petrol; and two very young children, including a seven-month-old baby, sexually assaulted by adult men while their mothers were elsewhere drinking alcohol. Another baby was stabbed twice by a man attempting to kill her mother. Langton asked herself, “Are there really Aboriginal people so morally confused that they see the rape of babies as normal and not warranting any intervention? I am sad to report that the answer to that question is yes.”

She claimed that:

*The notorious Queensland criminal justice system had demonstrated again ... that it is incapable of anything approximating justice, for offenders or victims. The eventual result of this ultimate race-hate practice is the rewarding of serial rapists and*

*murderers. Instead of jail sentences that would apply to any other member of an ethnic group, they are freed immediately after a laughable lecture from judge or magistrate, or sent to a prison for a few months. They are then released back into the communities where their crimes were committed ... As is so typical in such cases, several of the rapists are from the ruling families of Aurukun, where anti-social behaviour, which varies from day to day only in its intensity and detrimental outcomes ... It would be a fair bet that each of the adults who pleaded guilty to raping this child was receiving a government social security or Community Development Employment Program payment. It is difficult not to draw the conclusion that dysfunctional Aboriginal behaviour is financially supported by federal and state government funding.*

## **Evil Australians**

Langton claimed in “A heartland of instability: Dancing on our graves” that it was “global knowledge that Australia treats its Indigenous people barbarously”. She alleged that it was not only in the past but also in the present that Australia was starkly divided, as exemplified by “the treatment of asylum seekers and by the gap between privileged Australia and the underclass”.

Pauline Hanson and all who consorted with her were, of course, prime objects of Langton’s censure:

*Hanson’s appeal to the electorate was based on the most primitive right-wing stances in 1997: racism, anti-immigration policies, anti-single parent social support, flat tax rate policies, the death penalty, RSL-style jingoism and the retarded commonsense values of the yobbo.*

In 1998 Langton told a conference in Britain on racial reconciliation, in an address published on European Network for Indigenous Australian Rights as “Australia on the brink”, that the forthcoming Australian elections could have “a catastrophic impact on Australian race relations, since there was a stark choice ... Voting for more racism or not.” She claimed that a victory for the Coalition government would “heighten racial tension and bring Australia into international disrepute as the next South Africa, entrenching racism and deliberately choosing not to make peace with its Aboriginal Peoples”. She alleged that the Howard government had “flouted international law in order to pursue its controversial anti-Aboriginal agenda and had implemented the final dispossession of Australia’s Aboriginal Peoples by depriving us of our property rights”.

Langton told Luke Slattery that “Australia is an extremely racist country”. She distinguished between the racism of the Right: “They think we’re all coons. It’s nasty” and the racism of the Left: “They think we have some kind of higher spirituality through our relationship with the land. In the end we become spiritual people who can’t ever be competent citizens.”

To Langton and many others the greatest evil inflicted upon Aborigines had been child removal. Why did child removal take place? Langton’s answer was simple and unequivocal: the children “were taken from their families by the Commonwealth and other Australian governments *with no reason other than to deny them their Aboriginal legacy and hence the future of Aboriginal society*” (my emphasis).

She claimed in the *Griffith Review* that the *Bringing Them Home* report of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission inquiry had revealed that “unknown numbers, perhaps tens of thousands, were removed”, and that “the direct evidence of the survivors, who number about 13,000, revealed that there was sometimes extreme physical and sexual abuse at the hands of adoptive and foster families and employers (to whom some were indentured or enslaved) ...”

Few, if any, of the many adoptive and foster parents who gave loving care to removed children featured in Langton’s narratives, or in the *Bringing Them Home* report. Neither did Langton mention that allegations to the Commission of atrocities perpetrated against Aboriginal children were given under a cover of anonymity and that no cross-examination was permitted. Once challenges were possible before a court of law, a large number of the charges were not brought forward at all and the first two test cases failed.

Faced with the failure of the Cubillo and Gunner cases, Langton was “disgusted that a judge could reason that a young frightened illiterate mother’s thumbprint taken by a government officer could necessarily [*sic*] be voluntary”. Langton ought to have asked herself whether that “young frightened illiterate mother” had been capable of taking adequate care of her child. Langton ought also to have noted that the Cubillo and Gunner claims were the ones thought by their backers to be the most likely among the “stolen generation” to succeed in the courts.

## **Intervention**

As with her views on punishment, Langton changed direction on child removal: now, she alleged, *too few* Aboriginal children were being taken away from dysfunctional families. She even accepted that the Howard government acted in good faith in the Intervention, because it could

*no longer stomach a policy regime whose many failings resulted in endemic poverty, alienation and disadvantage, and sickening levels of abuse of Aboriginal women and children. They rolled out a policy revolution. With the dis-establishment of ATSIC and the removal of elected commissioners whose public reputations were in tatters following allegations of rape, corruption and incompetence, a new order swept in.*

Langton described the 2007 *Little Children are Sacred* report as that “since the ending of child removal many Aboriginal women and children were suffering more neglect, abuse and violence than before, because of ongoing problems associated with alcohol and pornography, sexual abuse, illicit drug use, poverty, illness, homelessness, unemployment and gambling”. In “*A heartland of instability*”, Langton agreed that “It is much, much worse now.” In other words she conceded that Aborigines were worse off after a generation of Coombs-type policies that she had supported so energetically than they had been after a generation of Hasluck-type policies! She claimed that the “tipping point”. It revealed

*many Aboriginal people, probably a majority of women, agree with the measures as they have witnessed the benefits delivered since the intervention commenced: less drunken behaviour and violence, much lower admissions to hospital of people with alcohol-related injuries, and few alcohol-related homicides.*

In “It’s time to stop playing politics” she rejected the “cynical view afoot that the intervention was a political ploy—to grab land, support mining companies and kick black heads, dressed up as concern for children. Conspiracy theories abounded; most were ridiculous.” She denounced child-protection officers involved in the Aurukun case who argued that Aboriginal children in even vile conditions should *not* be removed from their communities because they had a responsibility to avoid creating another “stolen generation”.

In “The Aboriginal reality show” in *Griffith Review*, Langton attacked the use of the suffering of Aboriginal women and children as a “kind of visual and intellectual pornography in Australian media and public debates”. She alleged that it had “parodied the horrible suffering of Aboriginal people so that the crisis in Aboriginal society is now a public spectacle, played out in a vast ‘reality show’ through the media, parliaments, public service and the Aboriginal world”. She claimed that this “obscene and pornographic spectacle shifts attention away from everyday lived crisis that many Aboriginal people endure—or do not, dying as they do at excessive rates.” One might well think that such spectacles, loathsome as they were, attracted rather than shifted attention. And Langton herself had provided the public with colourful descriptions of evil deeds and undeserved suffering.

She said, “In some critical respects, the outcome of this renewed debate is what *many* have been recommending for decades: protective interventions to prevent the abuse, rape and assault of Aboriginal women and children, and decisive action against the perpetrators” (my emphasis). She seemed to be implying that she had stood among that “many”, but that had not always been the case.

Langton considered that:

*those who did not see the Intervention coming were deluding themselves. It was the inevitable outcome of the many failures of policy and the flawed federal-state division of responsibilities for Aboriginal Australians. It was a product of the failure of Northern Territory governments for a quarter of a century to adequately invest the funds they received to eliminate the disadvantages of their citizens in education, health and basic services.*

Langton described the Intervention as “The greatest opportunity we have had to overcome the systemic levels of disadvantage among Aboriginal Australians.” She noted that most of the factors contributing to the “astonishing rates of rape and violence against women and children— rivers of grog, easy access to pornography, a lackadaisical approach in the court system with a callous disregard for victims were of long standing—were undeniable, yet denied repeatedly by some Aboriginal men and women who ignore these issues in favour of pursuing theoretical definitions of rights”. However, the deniers had at times included Langton herself.

In a very confused passage, Langton accused opponents of the Intervention of making:

*a cowardly attack on Aboriginal people because they have objected successfully to the former policy of destroying us as a people through enforced removals. It is an attack on the Aboriginal leadership who argued the case, but, like well-known methods of torture, the attack is directed at the innocent—in this case children at risk—to “teach” the Aboriginal leadership a lesson for bringing White Australia into disrepute over the issue of the stolen generations.*

Langton attacked indigenous leaders such as Michael Dodson who claimed they were opposing the Intervention because they believed it violated human rights, but some of her own responses were equivocal, perhaps because the Intervention was carried out by people she had always hated and still bitterly denounced. She complained in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the “debate about indigenous affairs has reached a new crescendo, fuelled by the accelerated and uncensored exposure of the extent of Aboriginal child abuse. Shocking accounts of brutal sexual assault and murder ... have become almost routine.” However, those “shocking accounts” were for the most part truthful, and reform largely depended on greater public knowledge of atrocities inflicted on women and children. Langton wondered:

*Are there really Aboriginal people so morally confused that they see the rape of babies as normal and not warranting any intervention? I am sad to report that the answer to that question is yes. There are such people, and it is them—rather than snivelling racists or the shock jocks who exploit Aboriginal misery for fame—who undermine attempts to prevent the rape of Aboriginal children ...*

Langton was delighted that the Intervention had been “a metaphorical dagger, sunk deep into the heart of the powerful, wrong-headed Aboriginal male ideology that has prevailed in Indigenous affairs policies and practices for decades”. Her hope was that the “shibboleths of the old Left—who need perpetual victims for their analysis to work—will also be dismantled”.

## **Extending the Rage**

Langton began to direct more of her vitriol onto the Australian Left. She claimed that the Left had “minimal impact” on the problems of Aboriginal people, because its members “rarely stray beyond the comfort of the cities”. She even suggested that Aboriginal people living in rural Australia could have more points of connection with Pauline Hanson’s supporters than with “city-based leftists”.

*Left-wingers who see themselves as the defenders of Aborigines often do not know what they are talking about, and that their attitudes are not supported by the facts,” she said. She had “abandoned any hope that the left could provide Aboriginal people with useful support ... The left has a romantic set of universal values, such as solidarity and brotherhood, but outside the urban Western cafe society, where ideas have few consequences, these concepts disappoint: They let people down.” Some allies of the Left were also castigated by Langton. She ridiculed “SBS’s house version of that compound of victimocracy, anti-Westernism and weird genetic theory that makes up ethnic identity politics ...*

Langton accused ALP governments in the Northern Territory and Western Australia of “flagrantly breaching the International Rights of the Child, United Nations Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency (The Riyadh Guidelines), United Nations Standard Minimum Rules for Non-custodial Measures (The Tokyo Rules), and other standards accepted by the civilized world.”

She condemned “the incompetents in the Queensland government involved in the Aurukun race case”: they argued on “shoddy logical grounds, and even worse moral grounds, that it will not be possible to remove Aboriginal children at risk from dangerous family situations if an apology to the stolen children is made. This argument is a peculiar form of racism ...”

No wonder Sutton wrote, “Marcia Langton’s support for the Intervention was described to me by a liberal colleague as Marcia having ‘gone over to the other side’.” However, Langton continued to attack her earlier as well as her new targets as virulently as ever.

Langton received some return fire. She was accused of claiming to speak on behalf of those she did not represent, such as the Wik people. The local organisation Women for Wik demanded that she “cease using the name of the once proud Wik people, now reduced into a vicious, violent and miserable existence by failed sentimental policies such as those you advocate and that utterly dehumanizes them that Langton had “skirted around the issues which are most significant in that it is the governments themselves and their bureaucracies which are primarily at fault and are known to be so (your employers). Perhaps it is you who is really hiding from your inability to change things despite your eminent professor status.”

## **Old Hatreds Sustained**

Langton may have learned something from Bob Hawke and Paul Keating: often, when they pursued policies detested by many on the ALP Left, they launched especially vitriolic attacks on the Coalition, as an assurance that they were still loyal to socialist principles.

Typical of Langton’s venom is a chapter entitled “Indigenous Affairs” in *Dear Mr Rudd: Ideas for a Better Australia*, edited by Robert Manne. Examples from its fourteen pages include:

*The “Apology” was a national acknowledgement of the wrong and harm done by previous governments to an entire race on the grounds of race-hate ...*

*The Commissioners [of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission] found that the race-based child-removal policies were a special instance of genocide under the definition in the convention. This is crystal clear, for instance in Western Australia, where the instructions and justifications were aimed at eliminating the entire race ...*

*... the race-hatred wielded with callous deliberation and deviousness by Howard’s regime ...*

*It is the failure of all within the Australian governments which we have to understand is at least partly responsible along with history for this terrible situation. Really to blame was the terrible violence inflicted on Aboriginal people by colonial officers, police, missionaries and the general citizenry in an orgy of race-hatred ...*

*Whatever scurrilous nonsense is bandied about by the unsavoury characters who inhabit the murky purgatory between amateur history and fascism that is Australia’s own denialist history school, there can be no doubt that some Australian governments deliberately and knowingly set out to eliminate the “Aboriginal race”. Informed by proto-Nazi eugenicist thought, or put more simply, fruitcake ideas about racial purity and the duty of the white man to destroy the lesser races for the good of the nation, some governments set up breeding programs to ensure that no so-called “full bloods” ever “mated” with “half” or “quarter” castes, and that “part Aboriginal” people “mated” only with lesser “castes”.*



*... harm done by previous governments to an entire race on the grounds of race-hate ...*

*Howard's regime debilitated our [the indigenous] social and economic capital and the political structures that might have enabled us to participate more effectively ...*

*The denialists will not stop terrorizing the victims, nor does perverting the nation's history, but Rudd's leadership has the potential to relegate their falsehoods to the margins of the debate about our past.*

Even if it were true, which it is not, that those of us she labels “denialists” had perverted Australian history, Langton ought to have provided evidence for terrors we have supposedly inflicted on indigenous Australians. Her comparison with Nazi racial policy was ludicrous as well as offensive.

*the victims of the child-removal policies of earlier Australian governments ... had suffered years of abuse and humiliation ... first as a result of being taken from their families and second as the targets of Howard's cheer-squad for White Australia.*

Members of the supposed “cheer-squad” included “Andrew Bolt, Christopher Pearson and their ilk”, said by Langton to have “engaged in abominable highly personal baiting” of, among others, Lowitja O’Donoghue and Professor Michael Dodson, and to have “polluted Australian political debate with a vicious account of the nation’s history”. Others picked out for special treatment were Gary Johns, Louis Nowra, Warren Snowdon, Ian Tuxworth, Shane Stone and Harry Giese.

Langton claimed that Louis Nowra “could very well contend for the ministry. He has all the qualifications: moral vanity, loose reporting, lack of evidence and lack of action.” All of this seems to have been provoked by Nowra’s failure to act when from a hospital bed in Alice Springs he heard two Aboriginal men talking about raping an Aboriginal girl.

Langton mocked Warren Snowdon because he had:

*apparently recently discovered after living there [the Northern Territory] for 30 years that there are no high schools for Aboriginal children to attend except in the mining towns and the highway towns. There are no schools. The little schools that exist in the remote communities are basically a one or two room affair. The Aboriginal teachers' aides are part-time. A teacher might travel around a group of communities once every two weeks dropping off workbooks and pencils. This is the kind of education that these children are receiving.*

Langton alleged in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (February 9, 2008) that former chief ministers of the Northern Territory, Tuxworth and Stone, “contributed more than their fair share of race hate to the community”. Worse still was “The man who signed so many of the orders to remove children, the late Harry Giese ... I once stared at Giese from across a room wondering how he could have been so cruel and why he was a kind of demi-god to the Country Liberal Party hard men.”

Presumably after suitable recantations, the still-living Tuxworth and Stone received pardons:

*they both have thought deeply about their Aboriginal friends and finally, free of the shackles of electoral politics, recanted their petty hatred. They have expressed as genuine an understanding as I can imagine of the damage done to Aboriginal people by the policies of child removal.*

Giese, however, died too soon to qualify for a Langton pardon. He had been the longest-serving member of the Legislative Council of the Northern Territory, foundation director of its Welfare Branch, and a Churchill Fellow who made serious studies of policies concerning indigenous groups in Canada and the United States. He headed the Darwin Disaster Welfare Council after Cyclone Tracy, and became the first Northern Territory Ombudsman. He held office in Crisis Line, the Aboriginal Cultural Foundation, the Historical Society of the Northern Territory, the Northern Territory Council for the Ageing and the Marriage Guidance Council. He was a life member of organisations such as the Northern Territory Spastic Association, the Royal Life Saving Society, the Royal Australian Institute of Public Administration, and the Marriage Guidance Council. He was held in esteem by many Aboriginal traditional owners and their families. He recognised the need for training and education that would allow Aboriginal people to acquire skills for self-management and self-reliance. The policies of assimilation and integration that Giese pursued, as did Paul Hasluck at Commonwealth level, were thought by many at that time too radical.

Langton described Gary Johns as “another opinion columnist” who “supposedly thought he had the right to write about Aborigines”. Langton believed that Johns had “some qualifications”, but she was “not quite sure what they are, but apparently belonging to the Menzies Research Institute is one of them”. Johns had been “invited by a previous federal Minister for Education to a meeting about Aboriginal education led by community members ... his principal recommendation in a public report that he wrote was that Aboriginal children be removed from their families.”

Johns was an ALP Member of the House of Representatives between 1987 and 1996 and served in several governmental portfolios, including Special Minister of State, Assistant Minister for Industrial Relations, Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasurer, and Parliamentary Secretary to the Deputy Prime Minister. He had wide experience in negotiations between the Commonwealth and the states and the private sector native title regimes, on construction and housing industry reform, and the registration of hazardous chemicals. For the Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs, he was part of the review of the Immigration Advice and Application Assistance Scheme and the Review of Illegal Workers in Australia, and was a member of the Australian Citizenship Council. Yet Johns, unlike his former cabinet colleague Paul Keating, had apparently no right to comment on Aboriginal affairs.

If Robert Manne exercised some editorial control over Langton’s contribution, one wonders what the passages he eliminated were like.

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### **Apology**

Langton asked:

*Is it so hard to understand how much an apology means to the thousands of Aboriginal people who were removed from their families? What it would mean for me as an Aboriginal person who has consoled and encouraged friends is simply this: I want to be in a relationship with them without the heartbreaking pain of the past 10 years, knowing that there has been a just acknowledgement of the crimes against them. There are no words that could heal the wounds of those people who were taken from their families by the Commonwealth and other Australian governments with no reason other than to deny them their Aboriginal legacy and hence the future of Aboriginal society.*

She did not reveal when and where this heartbreaking pain was inflicted during the 1990s and early 2000s which were by then “the last ten years”. She sought, she claimed, “To do justice to the historical facts and speak above the din of the spiteful people who want to cause more suffering to Aboriginal people.” She thought that “The nation would be healed if we could consign this history to our past by admitting that it was wrong to take children from their families in order to prevent Aboriginal ways of life and traditions from continuing.” But what if children were removed for completely different motives?

The campaign for an apology generated much rhetoric. At a 1992 rally in Redfern, Paul Keating declared, supposedly on behalf of all non-indigenous Australians:

*it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases and the alcohol. We committed the*

*murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. It was our ignorance and our prejudice.*

Langton rhapsodised:

‘The Redfern speech was a turning point. It was one of Australia’s greatest speeches. He was the man who modernised the Australian economy. His concepts were always big. I think Paul Keating remains certainly as one of my heroes. He was one of our greatest Prime Ministers. I would say the greatest.’

### **The Rudd Government**

Langton had, initially at least, high hopes of John Howard’s successors. She wrote in *New Matilda* that

*With Howard and his class of haters now on the sidelines, it is finally possible to ... rationally and calmly consider the potential benefits that might flow from shortening the funeral “sorry camp” periods of confinement or limiting the impact of traditions such as “house-cursing” ... and both respect traditions and provide a path to a safe and secure life*

None of the numerous occasions for Aborigines’ absence from work or school resulted from government policies, so it was not clear how they might be affected by changes in government in Canberra.

She regretted that the Rudd government had been persuaded to dispense with some aspects of the Intervention. She scoffed at what she represented as their view: “we can’t do anything about child abuse until we fix the housing or until we heal Aboriginal people of their colonial oppression”. Langton sensibly recommended some devolution of authority, notably an area-based opt-in or opt-out system, under which a community or group of communities with common languages or history could choose from a range of policy settings aimed at encouraging healthy behaviours and discouraging unhealthy and wealth-reducing behaviours.

Langton called upon Kevin Rudd to set up a new federal watchdog to prevent misuse of Commonwealth funding, particularly in the Northern Territory. She condemned the “consultancy class” that was profiting hugely from their rides on the current “hopeless gravy train” with “six-figure salaries derived from Commonwealth grants”. “Labor mates” and members of the Territory bureaucracy were, in her view, very prominent beneficiaries. However, persons likely to be appointed as Rudd’s watchdogs are already members of, or affiliated to, that “consultancy class”. Langton also called on the Commonwealth to grant contracts for Aboriginal housing and school building to “well-run, highly accountable Aboriginal bodies such as local housing associations”. Unfortunately, few such associations exist.

Soon Langton was attacking ALP ministers for, she alleged, taking advice from lobbyists who claimed that allegations of child abuse were a fantasy invented to insult Aboriginal men. She also attacked indigenous leaders such as Michael Dodson who claimed that they opposed the Intervention because they believed it violated human rights. Langton **distinguished between two broad camps:**

‘those who claim that several measures, particularly compulsory welfare quarantining and five-year leases to the Commonwealth over Aboriginal township areas are ineffective and racially discriminatory, and those [like herself] who ... are concerned that drastic measures are necessary to close the gap in the differential life expectancy of indigenous Australians as against the national average.’

Langton’s expanded program included:

*Welfare quarantining and income management for child neglect, abuse, failure to send children to school, domestic and other violence, drunkenness, drug and substance abuse.*

*Penalties for school truancy and incentives for school attendance (such as funding for school-based activities, dormitories, culture camps and swimming pools).*

*Regular child health checks.*

*Compulsory reporting of child neglect to a locally based commission, modelled on the Families Responsibilities Commission presently operating successfully in Cape York Peninsula indigenous communities.*

*Township and living area leasing and titling arrangements held by traditional owners in conjunction with government and private sector housing construction projects.*

*The replacement of the Community Development Employment Program with job and training subsidies combined with workforce mobility incentives that ensure that the households of working men and women are not disadvantaged by periods of working away from home, such as loss of rental accommodation.*

*Severe restrictions on access to alcohol, other licit substances such as kava, and pornography.*

*Criminal penalties for drug and alcohol abuse-related violence, vandalism, theft, improper use of motor vehicles in relation to grog-running and affray.*

Paul Hasluck himself would have approved of such a policy.

When Germaine Greer offered her explanation for extreme violence among Aboriginal men, Langton condemned it as a “cleverly disguised but nonetheless racist attack on Aboriginal people”. According to Langton, Greer’s “panoply of protest slogans deployed as social theory was dismissed long ago by the research and policy community as incapable of explaining the present day levels of huge disparities in life expectation, morbidity and mortality rates and other socio-economic indicators”. What a wilful woman Greer must be to have failed to seek permission from Australia’s “research and policy community” before talking or writing about Aboriginal matters.

## **Conclusion**

Marcia Langton has become a prominent role model for indigenous Australians, particularly students and women who wish to engage in academic or political debate. She has shown great

energy over the years and there is, in itself, no disgrace in changing one's mind, but it is bizarre that she should be seen as a champion of "Reconciliation". Civility in controversy is a virtue that she has displayed only rarely.

On her website Langton states that she "conducts anthropological work to *support* land claims by Aboriginal peoples, and their negotiations with mining companies and the state" (my emphasis). No nonsense there about academic impartiality or treating with respect opinions contrary to our own.

When we are engaged in highly contested and controversial issues and decide that we no longer hold our former beliefs, we ought to provide an adequate explanation for our change of heart. This was done by Professor Antony Flew, who had been for half a century one of England's most prominent atheists, but has in his eighties become a deist. Flew gave an account both scholarly and courteous that is itself a significant contribution to a debate that has lasted so far for two and a half thousand years and more. Marcia Langton has to date given insufficient explanation for her radical changes of position, but time is still on her side.

It is easy for me in my eightieth year of life to offer arguments uncongenial to "the research and policy community" of which Langton is a luminary, but very difficult for young people with careers to make. Still, Marcia Langton has changed her mind over the years on several very important issues and it's never too late to mend. One can nearly, but not quite, forgive her disservice to "Reconciliation" for her tricks with the Big Bunga men. However, whatever may be her positions on various questions she should try to moderate her *ad terrorem* mode of debate. In particular I very much hope that she is less confrontational in her teaching roles than she is in public controversy.

*Geoffrey Partington's book **Hasluck versus Coombs: White Politics and Australia's Aborigines** was published by Quakers Hill Press in 1996.*