
Editorial: *John Hinkson*

After the Intervention

With the backdrop of eleven years of denial in John Howard's dealings with the Stolen Generations of Indigenous Australians, it would be hard to name a more moving ceremony than the one enacted in Canberra as the first formal act of the Rudd government. Making an impact all around the world, the ceremonial apology gained its significance in part from the selection of words, images and rituals grounded in extensive consultation with Indigenous people and their organizations. More importantly, its significance was enhanced by the striking generosity of Indigenous people, despite them having suffered so deeply from neglect, indifference and hostility for as long as anyone can remember. The many statements, delivered with emotion, of a new determination to respect Indigenous cultures as they never have been in the history of settler Australia, added to the occasion. At last, it seemed, hope for the future was possible for both Indigenous people and their many non-Indigenous supporters.

Given this mixture of hope and suffering it may seem inappropriate to suggest that this moment of celebration should not be taken on its own terms. But it is necessary to put aside the emotion of the moment and look at the reasons why doubt might be appropriate. The historical record in its own right is enough to counsel caution and critical inquiry into the deeper meanings of the apology, and there are revealing slippages that surround the apology and the desire for a new start that support a cautious approach. In Indigenous affairs good intentions have a terrible record in relation to long-term solutions. And, more to the point, that record is not incidental or merely contingent. It is the manifestation of an unwillingness to take into consideration deep structures that easily displace even the best of intentions.

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It is becoming apparent that the apology and the intervention are in reality the two sides of a new policy orientation towards Australia's First Nations, and careful consideration and evaluation of their practical meanings is necessary exactly at this point when change is in the air. In this issue of *Arena Journal* several searching articles grapple with the meaning of the intervention and the Howard government's record generally in Indigenous affairs, now continued with minor modifications by the Rudd administration. Two broad approaches are taken that can potentially deepen our understanding of the present situation. The first looks at the depth of the degradation and loss of being in the world that typifies the cultural genocide, the 'catastrophic cultural collapse', faced by First Nations when confronted by settler societies. Taken up by more than one author, it is given sustained analysis and interpretation in Michael O'Loughlin's article on intergenerational trauma, in which the loss of collective identity is distinguished from the preoccupation of emergent official policies with individual rights, health and mortality rates. Societies that believe themselves to be merely composed of individuals have great difficulty comprehending what collective cultural collapse entails.

The second approach is taken by Desmond Manderson. He explores the meanings of the rule of law, with a special emphasis on the early history of settler Australia, by reference to the pictogram *Governor Davey's Proclamation to the Aborigines 1816*. He argues that failures of the rule of law to achieve an equality of status for all before the law should not lead to its dismissal as fraudulent. But such failures can provide insights into how the rule of law works for groups that do not fit dominant expectations: that is, through a process of deferral and an implicit 'educational' demand. Equality before the law is a relative thing until such time as the collective (Aboriginal) subject has passed the test. Until such time, inherent in the rule of law are 'states of exception', black holes or spheres where the rules or values do not apply. These contradictory expressions have always existed but, in various guises — in relation to refugees, terrorists, emergencies — they are growing in contemporary significance.

The intervention is one of a growing number of exceptional instances — justifying limitations on welfare payments, changes to land tenure rights, and so on — that has stepped outside of the rule of law to draw Indigenous people into a new order. Manderson concludes: 'We may see in this both a judgement that their ownership

of land is not a right to be respected but a barrier to be overcome, and a broader judgement that these are 'failed societies' that must be rescued from the catastrophe of their own governance'. Aborigines represent 'a difference that requires radical transformation'.

In this interpretation Manderson shows in detail how the rule of law, so important to the self-understanding of western society and its legitimising doctrine of equality, is consistent with a history that demands assimilation: that demands sameness. In this view Indigenous people have experienced the suffering they have because difference is regarded as a problem to be isolated and 'solved'— in the name of equality.

This is a crucial time in the history of Indigenous affairs; a time when highly significant decisions are being made. The editors of *Arena Journal* recommend these articles to you our readers and ask that they be taken seriously as part of the deliberations now underway.

The *Arena* editors also think that insights into the apology and the intervention may be gained by interrogating the changes in culture that have been stirring the western world for the last thirty years. These changes, we believe, are implicated in the crisis now facing the land rights and reconciliation movements.

The backdrop of the intervention is an ossification of the land rights and the reconciliation agendas that carried so much hope in the 1980s and 1990s respectively. Evolving out of earlier movements, and especially various judicial findings in the 1980s, this broad agenda of support for Aboriginal people and change in government policies towards them, still has substantial vitality and support on the ground. Nevertheless there has been a loss of political momentum towards reconciliation, which can be put down to the political and budgetary resistance towards it by the Howard government over the past decade. But there is more at work in this loss of momentum than political resistance. Even much of the Labor Party, originally a significant political support base for reconciliation and land rights, is now inclined to regard these approaches as having failed. And they are now strongly influenced in their view by the statistics on child abuse, alcohol use and violence.

But the core institutional complex behind this shift in the sense of what is possible in Indigenous affairs has little to do with statistics and a great deal more to do with the attractions of and hopes associated with neo-liberalism. This is not to speak of neo-

liberalism as merely a set of economic policies that prioritize markets over central planning, but rather as a broader set of practices that have entailed a major shift in the nature of social life: how we relate both to others and the natural world. Neo-liberalism is a revolution that, through the rise of the technosciences, not only relies on the market but changes the character of the market, strengthening it enormously by enhancing its reach into the everyday world. Neo-liberalism carries a new way of life that distances us from the past, in part through the promise of a cornucopia of commodities. All previous social experiences tend to be seen as novel historical oddities, the superiority of the present and distance from the past being two sides of the same coin. Arguably, this was the backdrop to the deadening silence that was the response to the intervention, from both Labor and many sympathetic commentators and members of the public. The world has moved on! You cannot cling to the past!

It is true to say that the intervention instigated by John Howard and Mal Brough contained many elements consistent with a history of settler assimilationism. It differed with this historical position, however, in that it also worked on the basis of the intuitions and sense of possibility of the new neo-liberal world stance. In general, this combines firm demands and, if necessary, militaristic strategies with acknowledgement of individual difference; a lack of cultural empathy with real concerns for health, longevity and the rights of children. And it is exactly this determination to pursue a new start around a centerpiece of individual rights in Aboriginal matters that is of grave concern. It is this shift that allows the Rudd government to take over and continue the intervention as a form of reconciliation without land rights; concern for individuals, without cultural rights, except where culture is understood as merely a variation of individual agency; to apparently celebrate Aboriginal uniqueness and creativity without comprehending their basis in a connection to unique ways of life.

The possibility of neo-liberalism becoming a basis for a new approach to Indigenous policy has been gaining momentum for some time now, especially through the advocacy of Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson, who has articulated new avenues of development for the Indigenous people of Cape York. Helen Hughes, in *Lands of Shame*, has smoothed the way with her critique of H. C. Coombs, land rights and the homelands movement and her advocacy of a new market liberalism. David McKnight has

noted the influence of Pearson on Rudd in his attempt to go beyond ossified positions — to go beyond Left and Right. And there can be little doubt that Marcia Langton is attracted to this 'way forward' when she refers to the possibilities contained within 'development economics', or the possibilities of contemporary globalization for Indigenous people:

The transition from the marginalized postcolonial Aboriginal special administered settlements, epitomized by Aurukun or Wadeye, to the interconnected nodes of modern globalism that Aboriginal communities, businesses and institutions could become, is occurring at a furious pace, just as economic change in China has ... This is more important than the social-worker approach, which relegates us to a case-file and denies our agency and responsibility. This is the heart of Kevin Rudd's responsibility as leader of the nation — to support and encourage clear, empirical thinking and to demand change.

But advocating the neo-liberal way of life as a basis for an Indigenous future is seriously flawed. These advocates are being misled by neo-liberalism's promise to respect all cultures, when it 'allows' all while respecting few, and certainly not Indigenous ones. Arguably, it will feed a new form of assimilation, apparently tolerant but potentially more destructive than even the assimilation of the past. This is the message obscured behind both the apology and the intervention. The lack of respect for Indigenous culture is structural, not a mistake or a temporary error soon to be corrected. It is lack of respect grounded in a denial of such cultures' very specific means of renewal.

If neo-liberalism is to be viewed as more than policy — that is, as promoting a way of life — the structural supports for its emergence need to be identified in social terms. To do this, new ways of thinking socially are indispensable. Without them the neo-liberal market will be viewed merely as a policy choice to favour the market over the state. Without new ways of thinking socially the technosciences will be no more than 'new technologies'. The editors of *Arena Journal* have for a long time noted a distinctive element in social relations that allows an understanding of neo-liberalism via a distinction between two properties in social relations: relations that are, relatively speaking, tangible and face to face, and those that proceed abstractly, or in the absence of the

other. Local community, for example, is necessarily face-to-face, while the internet community is structured on the absence of others — the technological extension of the internet mediating between self and other.

All societies have a mixture of these two qualities in the make-up of their social relations. Aboriginal societies are composed more of the former than the latter. Neo-liberal societies are increasingly composed of relations where the other is more absent than present. At bottom, *this* is the neo-liberal revolution, made possible by markets that are not only facilitated by high-technology but could not work without it (in the form of communications and advertising, supported by television, email and the internet).

Implicit distinctions of this kind lie behind the conclusion, increasingly current among critics of the land rights movement, that the Aboriginal homelands are 'museum pieces'. Such judgements are made from the standpoint of global societies and the shift towards technologically mediated social relations. This negative view of Indigenous culture has a certain equivalence in the tendency amongst critics influenced by post-structuralism to view the family, cultures or even the idea of the social group as lacking coherence and requiring deconstruction. Arguably, in both cases the eating away of relatively tangible social relations by the institutions of neo-liberalism is an active influence in such a judgement — surely an example of neo-Darwinism being alive and well.

There will be important implications for humanity if we base practical action on this tendency towards the loss of relatively tangible relations in social relations. In fact a defence of the opposite view has much going for it if we consider the scale of the social crisis that neo-liberalism has set in train. Potentially on a scale incomparable with any other crisis in modernity, neo-liberal institutions might be thought of not in terms of a Leviathan but rather of a Behemoth — carrier of chaos.

This can be seen in a great variety of areas. As the deeper meanings of climate change come to the fore, the assumed background of natural resources, necessary for neo-liberal global development is going into reverse, in part caused by the ever-expanding demands that follow from unsustainable growth assumptions. This is evident in climate change directly as drought and higher temperatures make their effect on land and sea. And this intersects with the growing pressure on oil supply, for the moment reflected in higher pricing. On the one hand higher pricing

of oil and gas flows onto fertilizer costs and in turn food costs. On the other hand the availability of land for food production comes under the dual pressures of deteriorating climate and the switching of land into bio-fuels in order to sustain western consumption patterns, including global travel and global trade. This is now emerging as a systemic crisis, with a first stage of food riots breaking out in many societies around the world. What will happen when oil and gas production goes into decline in the near future? These are not isolated events, they are structural, and merely the tip of the iceberg as far as a social order based in global neo-liberalism is concerned.

Such examples multiply when it is recognized that the global way of life is framed by the desire and a certain need to go beyond physical and biological limits by relying on the techno-sciences rather than accepting certain relative limits of place and being in the world.

Any choice to return to the past by Indigenous people is not actually available to them. But Indigenous people do have to choose, and one choice — as individuals — is to take the path of neo-liberal development, as some Indigenous leaders seem to be recommending. But to do so will have profound implications for Aboriginal cultures; indeed it may spell the end of Aboriginal cultures having any substantial thread to the past. Alternatively, they might recognize, along with increasing numbers of people from non-Indigenous backgrounds, that the road offered by neo-liberalism threatens cultural disaster of historic proportions for everyone. The question is how to rebuild all cultures with a substantial face-to-face, tangible level of interchange. There are no short-term or easy answers, but a basic regionalization of society in contrast with the global city is one way to start. How Indigenous societies might do this would no doubt differ from how non-Indigenous groups would do so. The point is that both groups need each other and with open co-operation they have much to learn from each other.