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AUSTRALIA DAY *at the* ABORIGINAL

TENT- -EMBASSY

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Under the regal eye of the statue of George V, *Rex Imperator*, outside Old Parliament House in Canberra, some of the descendants of his Majesty's Australian subjects were being distinctly insubordinate on the national day. In George V's day, of course, we celebrated Empire Day; now much of the meaning that used to attach itself to Empire Day has been transferred to Australia Day. There is a public holiday. People describe it as the most important day for all Australians and there are all sorts of nationalistic eruptions around the Australian lease as Australians do what Australians do on Australia Day.

During the transition from Empire Day to Australia Day, Aboriginal nationalism also grew. The Aboriginal flag, for example, was designed as the emblem of the Aboriginal people from all the different countries in Australia. Flying publicly though, the Aboriginal flag is an important cloak for places such as the Health Department, ATSIC, Attorney-General's Department, Prime Minister and Cabinet, Department of Education, Department of Small Business & Training, Department of the Environment, and the universities, which democratically bureaucratise the lives of Aboriginal peoples. The subordination of the insubordination of Aboriginal people and their cohorts constitutes the Aboriginal Industry. It is a nice, tidy little money-spinner for thousands of non-Aboriginal people contracted to bring Aboriginal people under the governance of service provision. The bits and bobs of government available to manage Aboriginal people are like a bucket full of Lego: you can take pieces out of the bucket and make anything you like within the specific framework there is to work with; you can build a facade of a thing, but you can't make the thing function in its own right. Moreover, you can dismantle the thing or crush it and laugh at its naiveté, its primitiveness, its crudeness any time

you like. After all, it's not meant to be anything. It's just a game, the permanence of which is apolitical.

This commodification of oppression exists to nationalise a sense of a 'common good'. The common good is not a communal ethic; it's a goading on that the healthy, buyable and reasonable respond to as workers in industry. In this country the common good is trade between industries that engineer wealth in order to create hierarchies of inequalities that maintain the greed industry, otherwise known as economic growth. The pay-offs and the sell-outs are such that the Australian state can afford to pay no attention to the acts of treason perpetrated on the Australian state by Aboriginal people and others who take up issues such as Aboriginal sovereignty as moral and just causes. The desecration of Aboriginal people is so entrenched in Australia that on a purely social level, before people even think to fight, the courts are in recess and the fight has been postponed or reduced to a rhetorical skirmish that abrogates Aboriginal social power.

Knowing this and living the effects of it, a couple of hundred people gathered at the Tent Embassy to take part in a corroboree for Aboriginal sovereignty. The corroboree was performed so that the old people's spirits, unsettled and in pain, could be reached and shown that even though there is still great pain in the land, Aboriginal people are doing what they can to heal the land. The theme of the day was: 'Don't just say sorry, say sovereignty', behind it the conviction that one day Aboriginal people might be able to escape the control that occupation, and especially 'Aboriginal affairs' and the Aboriginal Industry, has on cultural transition, and a commitment to heal the poor people who destroy the land for material spiritual and social immaterials.

The *Canberra Times* called the day 'Invasion Day', so as to imply that only violent, 'negative' Aboriginals would be interested in it, and put the number of people who attended the events of the day at one hundred. Another wall. More covert bludgeoning of the rights, philo-

sophical, intellectual and spiritual of politicised Aboriginal people so that good, solid, sensible people grown fat on the backs of Aboriginal people can carry on about their rights, their tastes, their prerogatives, their government, their plans. Good old common good. Good old Rule of Law: 'Dear Aboriginal people/s, I hereby enclose your citizenship rights. I have retained my right to dispossess you of your land. Making a fuss will not prove worthwhile because we are many and you are few. Our God is now your God. Enjoy. Goodbye erstwhile companions of my explorers, and thanks for all the land.'

The Tent Embassy, a meeting place for Aboriginal people from many different Australian countries, has been torn down, tidied up, attacked and defended over the years. The attacks serve to keep the 'radicalism' in Aboriginal politics defined and marginalised. The support serves to keep the Aboriginal Industry functioning. One of the best descriptions of the tearing down of the one blue tent that was the Tent Embassy for a while in 1972 is in Roberta Sykes' *Snake dancing*. Not much has changed in the years that people have continued their demands for Aboriginal sovereignty. At this point elements within the Aboriginal Industry are putting pressure on the government to sign a treaty with Aboriginal people. This action abrogates the clique of activists, some very old, some very young, who have been lobbying for a treaty for twenty-seven years outside the edifice of government and within the context of Aboriginal lore and contemporary Aboriginal reflections of the politics of our times. Who can represent the needs of all Aboriginal peoples? 'We can, we're in the system.' 'No, we can, we're out of the system.' So it goes on. During the corroboree, trees are planted in honour of the people who established the Aboriginal Tent Embassy but have since died. The mothers and fathers who made the Tent Embassy have children who have children who have children who survive the politics of the place and ceremonially contain their struggle in the apotropaic element of smoke used to inoculate such visitors as politicians and media people.

When the news broke a day or two earlier that under the Trespass and Commonwealth Land Ordinance (1932) it was likely that the Aboriginal Tent Embassy would be razed because the land had never been gazetted, Aboriginal people from near and far travelled to be there in case fights with the Authorities broke out. The corroboree intensified during Australia Day 1999 as more and more people arrived to show their support and to contribute their ideas, networks and resources to ensuring that the Tent Embassy remains, like the flag, an emblem of Aboriginal people's fight for recognition of Aboriginal lore in the countries that are Australia. Strange that if the Tent Embassy were safe, that is, if it were an embassy like the Australian embassies in other states, it would not be secure, there would be no hope for the land of this land, for it would be lost in the cultures of other lands, other tyrannies, models of life that separate the fate of the human species from the rest of life.

The morning ceremony was a cleansing ceremony involving merging of the elements of fire and water and the smoke from green leaves being kept whirling. All day the smoke continued to billow out over Parliamentary Triangle; fragrant wood-smoke, blowing over the non-native trees and formal gardens. In the afternoon, banks of black cloud drifted over Canberra, lightning struck and growlings of thunder were heard. During the day people, all sorts of people, drifted through the land of the Tent Embassy. ('Welcome to Aboriginal land. Genocide prohibited.') People, Aboriginal and Sympathetic, drift over to talk, as they do most days, giving visitors and tourists one of the few unscripted meetings with an Aboriginal entity they're likely to get. The Riverbank Band jammed for a while. Tourists took pictures of the murals, Buddhist monks came and went, people looked at the humpies. They love the humpies.

Most photographed were the magnificent flags blowing out in the strong wind. The Governor-General had unveiled a couple of banks of flags, for some national event or other, down by the lake that morn-

ing. all new and fresh (with one vexillological howler, the 'old' Bosnian flag with fleur-de-lys—it's difficult to get nationalism quite right). The Aboriginal flags, however, battle-stained and used, are pegged on wattle spears. There were two arrests to do with flags that were related to non-Aboriginal people's fervour prior to and during the corroboree for sovereignty. One person scaled Old Parliament House on the evening of 25 January 1999, took down the Australian flag flying on the main flagpole and then reinstated the flag flying upside down, a maritime signal of distress. Ha ha ho hum. The next day, someone scaled Old Parliament House and tied the Aboriginal flag to the front of that building. Strange how the 211-year settlement of this country has involved the theft of most of what is precious and fundamental to Aboriginal people/s and when someone wants to add something else Aboriginal to the collection, sirens scream. ('We don't want your flag. We don't want you bothering us. We'll come and get you when we need you to do something that we think reflects your past for the Olympics. You know, the Africans are coming so we ought to try to please them.')

It's difficult to imagine the arresting officer saying to the person arrested for flying the Aussie flag upside down and for installing the Aboriginal flag on the facade of Old Parliament House: 'Halt. I arrest you for treason against the Australian state.' If these people were arrested for treason rather than trespass, the issues brought to bear by the Tent Embassy might be taken seriously. But no, the charge is trespass. Treason is too difficult for the Australian common citizen to contemplate, especially in relation to Aboriginal rights. Besides, Aboriginals are warriors, not soldiers, therefore just lock those people up so they don't distract the good citizens of Australia from going about doing things for the common good. Apathy, lies, trickery, anything to stop Aboriginal people speaking the truth about the Aboriginal Industry, its masters and its servants.

It is true that the law in Australia is enforced on the premise that

the sovereign British Parliament had the sovereign British right to take out a lease on Australia because it had a sovereign sociolegal infrastructure to do so. The English common law is now Australian common law. Under Australian common law governments enact legislation such as the *Native Title Act*. Usufructuary laws ensure that Britain retains the lease over Australia because services 'for the common good', for example a tap, show that 'Natives' interact with 'society' and their 'traditional lifestyles' are no longer 'enjoyed'. Fiduciary laws also ensure that Aboriginal country is swallowed up for the 'common good'.

The class of 1999 still has the law-making people who will keep the law intact. To go against the tradition of the law is to break the law and then where would we be: up a gum tree pinching honey, not down the shop buying it. Welcome to the dead land of economic growth.

The afternoon is hot with a strong wind, but the wind, like smoke, is cleansing. Newcomers to the country walk around the Tent Embassy draped in Aboriginal flags. Chuck some more logs on the fire, will you?

Only in the afternoon does the corroboree look like typical worship at the shrine of the Goddess of Leisure on Australia Day. Mind you, there's none of that talk about the Land of Opportunity, as shown on the ABC news, here. There are small, very black children laughing and splashing in the ornamental pools, and families picnicking among the rose beds. The yarning carries on. Vegetables are cooked in the coals, bread is toasted over the fire, endless cups of tea are poured, pots of three dozen eggs are boiled again and again to keep up the strength and spirits of people. ('It's nice, but at home we'd have a nice bit of kangaroo tail in the fire—you've got to know how to do it properly—and damper.')

Meetings about how to deal with negative publicity, how to maintain the embassy, are held, and more are planned. Usual thing, they want the Aboriginals out of sight, and doing useful things like white-washing stones to show how far they've come, and how much self-

discipline they've learnt. The question is, as always, how far the Authorities can afford to draw attention to the oppression of Aboriginal people. 'Your honour I admit it, since the embassy was established in 1972 an unconscionable number of meters of clipped box hedge has been brutally trampled to death, and the lawn definitely isn't what it was. In addition countless middle-class people have been offended, and another cause for anger has been added to the great redneck view of the world. Many upper lips have curled, and many people's stereotypes of Aboriginal people have come away reinforced.' Fact is, the place has never looked better, and, with the little means people have, this sacred area is being kept alive. Better inauthentic but Indigenous disorder than inauthentic English order in this place. Besides, places where people with no money hang out always look messy and unsightly to those who have money. Never mind that the people here can do wonders with simple things, like the Aboriginal flag projected on the side of King George's plinth each evening. People with money and power can't see that, they think that if people look poor they should be looking for a job. Wanted, gang of wreckers to demolish the Tent Embassy. If you can't create the appearance of prosperity one way, you can always do it another.

Later the weather (blowy) threatened the ceremony that had been planned for the evening: the lighting of 211 torches to symbolise 211 wasted years since 1788. Oh well, the general feeling is, we can do it another day. The boys from the Fire Brigade and the Police visited the Tent Embassy in the evening. There was no trouble, but they didn't sign the petitions.

In the evening the fireworks organised by the National Capital were set off. Some were visible from the Tent Embassy, but for the first ten minutes most of the fireworks capitulated before they made it over the tops of the pine trees that line the left side of the Tent Embassy. Out of sight out of mind except for a little bit of noise, colour and smoke.