



Who is Bennelong?

Looking into the Bennelong Society, **EVE VINCENT** draws a portrait of an intellectual sub-culture.

'Who was Bennelong?' asks the Society named after him. 'Bennelong the Man', according to the Bennelong Society's website, was 'easily the most intelligent and helpful of the Aborigines that had come into Sydney Cove'. Governor Arthur Phillip's kidnapping of Bennelong in late 1789 'may seem a strange way to begin a relationship', but the two men grew close, and in the period between his capture and his 1792 trip to England — despite escaping once and subsequently engineering the spearing of the Governor — Bennelong delighted in affecting the habits and customs of the colonisers. He learnt English and was a valuable diplomat. In short: Bennelong walked in two worlds, and was decisive in convincing the Eora people to 'come in' to the settlement in 1790.

The view of the Society regarding the contemporary position of Aboriginal people is that 'the most wretched Aborigines are those who are least integrated'. Hope lies in a process analogous to this 'coming in'.

Last September I attended the annual Bennelong Society conference, the theme of which was 'leaving remote communities'. The Society arose out of a workshop held in December 2000. This workshop, organised by the Society's current vice-president Peter Howson, Country Party Minister for Aborigines in the MacMahon Government of 1971–1972, was preceded by two other workshops organised by *Quadrant* in 1999 and 2000, devoted to Aboriginal policy. Howard Government ministers that have addressed the Society in the past include then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Amanda Vanstone, Kevin Andrews and Tony Abbott. The current Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Mal Brough spoke at the 2006 conference dinner.

The octogenarian Howson's enigmatic presence loomed large at the 2006 conference, but it was Society president Gary Johns who ran the show. (Howson addressed the conference dinner but was absent on the day of the conference.) Johns, a minister in the Keating Government, is also associated with free market think-tank Institute of Public Affairs (IPA). At the IPA, Johns drew on public choice theory and the 'new class' theories of the American neo-cons, evincing a determined obsession with curbing the activities of NGOs, bent as they are on peddling their self-serving, undemocratic agendas and influencing governments.

Johns opened the 2006 Bennelong Society conference with

his own 'simple plea' to government: for economics to matter in Aboriginal affairs. 'The government has begun to stop supporting a recreational lifestyle in the name of preserving a culture,' he said. Highly mobile Indigenous people are a 'leisured class', he has said elsewhere. Johns went on to deploy a kind of grim sarcasm. He gripped the lectern and told the quiet room: 'The Department of Employment and Workplace Relations is undertaking an audit of jobs in remote areas in the NT with a view to proving up [sic] more opportunities for Aborigines'. Pause. 'We wish them well.' Later in the day, jokes were happily received. But first thing in the morning, with a focussed intensity, Johns put his case plainly: 'If people want the goods and services that a modern economy can provide, they will have to generate an income ... they will have to work. If work is not available where they live, they will have to move to find it.'

A valuable, if small, Australian literature on think-tanks now exists. The most detailed study I've read is Damien Cahill's PhD thesis, which forms the basis of numerous pub-

The view of the Society regarding the contemporary position of Aboriginal people is that 'the most wretched Aborigines are those who are least integrated'.

lished articles. Cahill tracks the funding sources, leadership and participant base, and strategies used by institutions like the IPA to install radical new right ideologies as 'common sense'. There is, however impressively thorough, something missing from this approach. Cahill analyses arguments and shows how the rise of certain ideologies since the 1980s has shored up ruling-class interests. We would be mistaken to conceive of all this as a carefully designed and skilfully executed grab at power. The ideas in themselves are, to their

adherents, compelling, alluring and inspiring.

How can we account for the Bennelong Society as an affective thing, constituted by the small group of influential people that express themselves and their purpose through it — their paranoia, contempt and arrogance; their conviction, commitment, zeal and sense of urgency? There is, as with that mythical construction 'The Left', a sense of belonging on offer here too.

The Society is more than the words it uses and produces, and the words I might find to describe and condemn it — simplistic, nationalist, intensely ideological, and even that most damning of epithets, racist. I hope this portrait affords an insight into some of the particular performances of self that I observed at the Society conference. Details that might seem trivial — spontaneous asides, audience reactions, the cut and colour of a presenter's suit — formed part of my understanding of this particular cultural space. Here, I want to examine this space, within which some of the dominant ways of talking about the 'Aboriginal problem' continue to be

It's important to stress the sincerity, reasonableness and obviousness assumed within the Society about its own ideas. This internally imagined sense of itself strikes a contrast with the fanaticism that characterises the work of Society stalwarts.

worked out. This is, if you like, a rough portrait of an intellectual sub-culture, rendered from the outside. Primarily, it's important to stress the sincerity, reasonableness and obviousness assumed within the Society about its own ideas. This internally imagined sense of itself strikes a contrast with the fanaticism that characterises the work of Society stalwarts Johns, Howson and Geoffrey Partington. Two spectres, or perhaps phantoms, especially haunt them.

The first of these is 'separatism' — the articulation of Aboriginal identity in terms of Aboriginal-specific practices, aspirations and affiliations — which is seen to threaten the unity of the nation. Keith Windschuttle, in attendance at the 2006 conference, set out these anxieties in a 2000 *Quadrant* article entitled 'The Break Up of Australia': the fear is of an Aboriginality that rejects the nation. It's this kind of thinking that helps us understand Brough's attempt to dismantle the Aboriginal permit system.

The second spectre is progressives, sometimes known as 'the PC', whose imagined influence is vast, and whose understanding of Aboriginal culture and realities is a sentimental, even dangerous, 'fantasy'. I will focus on the latter, by way of anecdotes from proceedings.

The conference was held on a hot day in the Sydney early spring, in a hotel located just blocks from Botany Bay. Salt hung thick in the air, and white yachts skipped across the water.

The 40-odd people in attendance seemed to include missionaries; bureaucrats from the pre-self-determination era; former politicians; Aboriginal members of the Society, some of whom have public identities and roles; whitefellas currently engaged in work in remote communities; and academ-

ics. Most of the men wore suits. Suits, on a hot Saturday. It's not a trivial detail; surely Bourdieu has taught us that taste in clothes forms part of a 'system of differences' that expresses social distinctions. These bourgeois ideologues share the same class position as liberal-left bourgeois ideologues of course, but their suits express their interest in Aboriginal uplift via economic integration.

All sorts of intellectual contortions allowed these particular bureaucrats, workers on Aboriginal communities and academics to exempt themselves from the charges they level at just these liberal-left categories of persons, or 'parasites'. For example, one presenter tickled the conference by explaining how it was that she came to outwit her uniformly 'Marxist' markers and obtain her higher degree: 'I lied'.

A former government worker happily joked: 'We all know the structure of the Aboriginal family: mum, dad, the kids, the social worker, the anthropologist, the government worker.' He told his joke twice, accidentally, revealing how pleased he was with his own script. The first time, the audience laughed heartily. The second time, they laughed affectionately. His presentation discussed a late-1960s resettlement scheme whereby unemployed Aboriginal men and the families from western NSW reserves were re-located to Newcastle, where there was plenty of work. An audience member asked, 'if the scheme as so successful why was it stopped?' The presenter shrugged 'black radicals'. The crowd almost smacked their lips with satisfaction at the answer.

Social worker, anthropologist, government; culture, spirituality, sorcery: all these were code words for a 'romantic' view of the Aboriginal realm. Immediately, the audience recognised them and laughed, or shook worried heads in disgust, when these terms were offered up to them. The Bennelong Society presupposes instead a Hobbesian vision of pre-contact Aboriginal life. In a 2000 *Quadrant* article, Howson wrote: 'Australian civilisation has far, far more to offer Australia's Aborigines than the hunter-gatherer life which their forebears endured'. He described as ubiquitous a 'state of barbarism' in remote communities.

At the 2006 conference, a pithy comment of Howson's echoed within the Society's ranks: 'We might still lose this war'. 'This war', we are to assume, is between 'romantics' and pragmatists; between policies that promote 'segregation' and ones that enable access and integration. It's between those who purport to care about Aboriginal issues, only to make themselves feel good, and those like a conference presenter who trembled and bit back tears as she stated softly, forcefully, slowly: 'I'm sorry. I just care so much about Aboriginal women and children'.

I'm especially interested in the way this 'war' is constructed, because it holds up a mirror to progressive investments in a similarly conceived contest. Consider again the moment above: it was at once sincere, manipulative, grotesque and familiar. Noel Pearson's sustained critique of the Left's attachment to the Aboriginal cause has been profoundly disorienting for many who assumed that progressives were the natural allies of Aboriginal political actors: that it was us that just cared so much. In private conversations and public seminars, it seems to me that the Left stakes a desperate claim to Aboriginal issues. However, there's simply no denying any longer that the muddled concept and practice of self-determination is shrouded in 'so much bullshit', as one prominent Aboriginal leader in attendance at the Society conference put it. In fact, Reverend Steve Etherington, a white pastor who has lived in a remote Aboriginal community for over 25 years, talked at the 2006 conference about the 'bullshit tree', so-named because that's where whitefellas come to enact

their consultation rituals. Previously Ethrington has said of the community he knows, 'they have become a kept people', with no way of making decisions about their own lives — the very thing 'self-determination' was meant to enshrine.

Another presenter, a white bloke, spoke enthusiastically about his work on the council of a remote Indigenous township that has become a by-word for disorder. While others wore suits, he donned a faded T-shirt with a print of a dot painting. He had a beard; he looked like an affable, ex-hippy. He assessed the difficulties and successes of the quest to get governance right in the region he worked in — his council services over 2000 people. He seemed to assume that the future looked a lot like the present: it was a matter of applying correctives to the current course. He was at pains to demonstrate his 'respect' for the people he worked alongside. He was received coolly and then question time began:

— 'Am I correct in assuming you think that people can stay where they are?'

— 'Well, yes.'

— 'Ideology mate, pure ideology,' a furious audience member jabbed the air. This, throughout the day, was the ultimate insult, a shortcut to destroying an argument's credibility. 'Ideology' is only ever the preserve, or indulgence, of the Left. In this way, the Society effaces its own philosophical and political commitments.

Then, this angry interlocutor's wife made a suggestion:

— 'I know how you could create a viable economy in the region. Sex tourism! Currently, paedophiles have to go all the way to South East Asia, it would be much cheaper to go to an Australian destination.'

This 'joke' was generally regarded as beyond the pale for the audience, people shifted in their chairs uneasily, while her husband gave a snort of laughter. In this moment the

sediment rose to the surface. All day, a kind of generalised contempt for an Aboriginal realm that was represented as depraved, disordered, sick, illiterate, brutal and addicted was barely suppressed by some — but far from all — of the conference presenters and attendees.

Who was Bennelong? the Society asks us, and then answers. Who is he, in the present, they mean, as they establish him as a kind of role model, an ideal. I do not take this figure, saturated already with expectations and interpretations, as exemplary or predictive. But it's important to note that, as always, there are other readings. For Marcia Langton, it's Bennelong that has entrenched 'the drunken Abo' in the Australian imagination. After Bennelong — originally Baneelon, according to Langton and Inga Clendinnen — returned from England he was unable find a place with his own people. Cross-cultural exchange is a fraught and difficult thing: Baneelon had lost his standing in both worlds. When Baneelon died an alcoholic and a 'nuisance', who had been surviving on the fringes of Port Jackson society, obituaries represented him as a having failed to become 'civilised', as 'irredeemably savage'. It's these relative terms — 'civilised', 'savage' — that the Society wants to invest anew with power and meaning.

Eve Vincent is a Melbourne writer.