

Don't listen to those who despise us

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by Noel Pearson

Indigenous cultures can adapt, just like any other.

TODAY'S ministerial summit about violence and child abuse is a commendable initiative by Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough. Many people have reservations about whether another summit will lead to anything.

But that is not the only problem. The necessary focus on humanitarian emergencies and educational failure makes us as a nation less inclined to reflect on the relationship between the peoples of Australia and Aboriginal Australians' ultimate place in this country.

In Australia, we have had two great debates about national issues: the debates about the rights of Aboriginal Australians, and about Australian history.

Conservative Australians have lent considerable support to contributors Keith Windschuttle and Gary Johns. Windschuttle has been appointed to the board of the ABC, and Education Minister Julie Bishop has endorsed the Johns' Menzies Research Centre paper *Aboriginal Education: Remote Schools and the Real Economy*.

I want to explain why Aboriginal Australians can have a dialogue with the conservatives about policy and history.

First, we should be able to agree with conservative and liberal people that Aboriginal Australians' need modernity, geographic mobility, full command of English, education and economic integration.

Second, cultural relativism should be rejected in favour of embracing modernity when it comes to the fundamental economic and social organisation of societies. It is natural for peoples to advance from hunting and gathering to agriculture to industrialism. What peoples retain is a matter of cultural and spiritual choice.

Third, in the debate about Australian history, rigour and revision of history is essential.

Fourth, much of the political rights criticism of the progressive consensus about policies for Aboriginal Australians is correct, particularly in relation to welfare and substance abuse.

However, I am very concerned about the damage conservative Australians are doing to the prospects of reconciliation through their uncritical endorsement of people such as Windschuttle and Johns. Their influence has decreased empathy with Aboriginal Australians. Johns and Windschuttle would probably reply that it is their critics who lack empathy because the left defends flawed policies that ruin Aboriginal Australians' lives. The coldness that characterises Johns and Windschuttle is an inexplicable antagonism to Aboriginal Australians' wish to remain distinct.

Windschuttle's defence against the charge of lack of empathy is that the responsibility of the historian is not to be compassionate, it is to be dispassionate to try to get at the truth. But Windschuttle's and Johns' antagonism to Aboriginal Australians means that they are unable to remain dispassionately objective.

For example, Windschuttle's generalisation that the early stages of dispossession was not against the will of most Aborigines is not a correction of leftist distortion of history, it is distortion in the opposite direction. The influence of Johns' and Windschuttle's irrational contempt is causing their powerful conservative audience (and thereby Australia) to move further away from the modern, enlightened view that minorities have the right to agreements with the central power about securing the survival of their identity and political rights.

In his recent government-endorsed paper, Johns argued that Aboriginal Australians have no right to government-funded education about their culture and languages. His irrational argument was that a modern Western education system cannot maintain a preliterate, nomadic culture. Of course it cannot. But we have a right to government support for a modern, literate, prosperous version of our culture. This right to cultural continuity is exactly the same right the non-indigenous conservatives demand when they fight to prevent postmodern gobbledegook from pushing knowledge about old Western culture out of the curriculum.

The difference between Australia and most other shared Western states is that the Australian minority peoples until recently had a pre-modern culture and no connection with the world economy. To secure Aboriginal economic development, it might be necessary for us to make far-reaching concessions to the dominant culture. Aboriginal Australian culture and economy have changed and must change. But it seems that conservatives increasingly believe that the difficulties of this transformation justify a complete denial of Aboriginal Australians rights as a minority.

There has been nothing more dispiriting for me than the prominence of Windschuttle's and Johns' ideas in conservative political and cultural circles. Windschuttle's thesis about the absence of a notion of land ownership in Aboriginal Australia, and Johns' notion that our culture is unable to change and must therefore be left to die, are threatening the prospects of successful co-operation between Aboriginal Australians and the conservatives.

Today's ministerial summit illustrates the dilemma we are facing: the extreme crises in Aboriginal Australia and the low capabilities of Aboriginal Australians make non-indigenous Australians and our political leaders lose sight of the natural ultimate goal, which is that Aboriginal Australians become a prosperous constitutionally

recognised First-World national minority.

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