

SECURING THE GROUND: THE AUSTRALIAN NEOLIBERAL PROJECT AND INDIGENOUS AFFAIRS

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In the 40 years since the referendum in which the Australian people decided overwhelmingly to include us in the reckoning of the population and give the Commonwealth the power to legislate on Aboriginal affairs, we had hoped that successive governments might use their powers to protect and support Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. But apart from the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (Cth) there is very little evidence that the state has the capacity to support our aspirations, let alone recognise and respect our sovereign status.

Shamefully, in this day and age, with the enormous wealth of this nation, many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to struggle to find basic housing, to access quality education for our kids, to participate in a self-determined economy at the same rate of pay as other workers, and/or exercise and enjoy our cultural wealth and diversity. Certainly these and other issues were nominated as the contributing factors that have exacerbated the situation for Aboriginal people in communities in the Northern Territory.

In thinking about the road ahead, I keep coming back to how we might overcome the colonial imperative to steal our land, strip us of our culture, demoralise us as peoples and nations. The intensification of this kind of activity in recent years is parallel to the desire of Australia to participate in a globalised capitalist economy. This globalised economy is not only robbing us as a people, but is underwritten by culturally imperialist and biocidal practices that are interfering, in a magnitude unknown in the history of human occupation on the planet, with the very systems that support us and give us life.

For this reason, I want to focus not only on the emancipation of Indigenous peoples, but also on the future of the planet.

The road ahead can only be possible if we are able to break through our illusions about what is real and what is desirable and develop the kind of attention that rehabilitates the necessary solidarity between peoples and the biodiversity that sustains and ultimately liberates humankind. Until each of us realises that we are all pawns in what has recently been referred to by political commentators and activists around the world as the Neoliberal Project, I am afraid that there will be no opportunity for us to discuss 'futures'. This is because Neoliberal societies are divided according to multiple lines of inequality based on race, gender, sexuality, ability, age, and region (both globally and within nation states) as well as the domination of nature. In determining the road ahead we cannot fail to question the type of society we acquiesce to living in, and in choosing *not* to live in it, to find and create alternative spaces. This is becoming increasingly difficult, particularly if you are Aboriginal and living in a remote area community in the Northern Territory.

The Indigenous Affairs Minister, Mal Brough, in a statement on national television, declared that the 'state of emergency' in the Northern Territory was such that the deployment of military and police forces was necessary to 'secure the ground' in order to progress a long term commitment to the needs of people in Aboriginal communities, particularly vulnerable, abused children.

The Prime Minister also stated that the Commonwealth was prepared to put in place sweeping reforms, including measures to protect children from abuse following the release of the *Little Children are Sacred* report,¹ in which the authors articulated a desire that from this year on, no child will ever be the subject of sexual abuse again.

The report clearly calls for individual and collective leadership; for childrens' interests to be at the forefront of

all policy and decision making; and for consultation with communities to occur alongside a process of immediate recovery for people affected by abuse.² Finally, the authors state their hope that the nation will work together for the sake of all its children.

I was abroad when the first Commonwealth response to the report was made public. Quietly optimistic at first, I was hopeful that something I had spoken and written about for at least 15 years was going to be addressed. However, I am now certain that despite the best intentions and the collegial partnerships being brokered between governments and bureaucrats, and between governments and communities, the current Commonwealth approach will fail. While activities to save children are noble, the motives behind these activities are many. Someone as suspicious as me looks not only to the *content* of the current modes of domination and exploitation but also the *forms* that give rise to them.

One of the reasons for why this intervention will fail was adverted to by Professor Mick Dodson in his Mabo Lecture at the Native Title Conference in June of this year. Quite simply, people heavily invested in colonial regimes are incapable of showing respect because of the need to subjugate land owners and steal land. It is Indigenous peoples' land that is the basis for colonial regimes' wealth accumulation. The recent tangle between Tangentyere Council and the Commonwealth over the latter's offer to privatise communal land demonstrates how long traditional land owners have had to fend off those 'offering glass coloured beads'.

Soon after the Tangentyere Council rejected the Commonwealth proposal, the Northern Territory intervention was announced. There are two pivotal points bound up with the globalised Neoliberal Project that are worth mentioning here. Firstly, the Government is trying to negotiate access-to-property rights in order to exploit our land. Secondly, the intensification of the social conditions in which those who are first exploited and then left exploited for many years serves to contribute to the colonial regime.

Another reason that the intervention will fail is the nature of the 'emergency' being declared. In recent times, the Commonwealth Government has likened its actions in the Northern Territory to its aid program to Aceh immediately following the Tsunami. This is an incorrect assessment of the situation in the Northern Territory, which is in fact a 'chronic' emergency. The response will therefore fail because the

processes for dealing with acute and chronic emergencies are significantly different.

Acute emergencies are characterised by principles and resources specific to their circumstance and are often declared in relation to death rates or potential death rates. Disease outbreaks and natural disasters often contribute to or cause these types of emergencies. Complex emergencies are situations in which the capacity to sustain livelihood and life is threatened primarily by political factors and, in particular, by high levels of violence usually occurring across a high density population. A chronic emergency is one that occurs over a long period of time for a group of people (often in rich nations) in which a belief exists that someone will sort it out. Some of the Australian Indigenous populations in the Northern Territory and elsewhere have been living in a state of chronic emergency, similar to people in Darfur. Not only that, but the Prime Minister himself has known of the chronic nature of the emergency, and indeed sought advice about the chronic emergency at a meeting of 17 leaders some years ago. His delayed response to these issues has been to turn the military and the police against Australian citizens.

John Howard has applied acute emergency principles to a chronic emergency situation by mobilising the army, health services and public services in the same way as would be applied in an acute situation like Aceh. These are the wrong principles to apply to a chronic emergency situation and are not sustainable.

The violence the Government is addressing in the Northern Territory is of the interpersonal kind. But the cycle of ideological, organisational and societal structures that has brought this situation about has hardly disappeared. There are three modes of violence: interpersonal, institutional and societal. Within these modes there is no single enemy against which we can fight; not the 17 year old boy who killed his baby while trying to hurt his wife; not the 13 year old who raped his five year old cousin; not the church inculcated parishioners who assaulted the innocent; not the governments who have known of the existence of these problems for at least 15 years. Nor can we fight every person in the rest of Australian society that has allowed this situation to continue unabated.

So when the Prime Minister says 'that this is not laissez faire liberalism or light touch government by any means. It represents a sweeping assumption of power, and a necessary

assumption of responsibility³, I wonder what this actually means. What form of society are we living in? Australia, like other Western, over-developed countries, is experiencing a transformation from Liberalism to Neoliberalism. Neoliberal projects ensnare Indigenous people across the world in the ongoing globalisation of capital, particularly those who live in regions with mineral-rich lands, or lands that can be toiled as cash crops, or those who have a particular knowledge that can be exploited by a corporation. Indigenous peoples are victimised in the process of intensified social control and are indoctrinated into colonial regimes as victims. The Commonwealth could be seen in the Neoliberal Project as a group seeking hegemonic 'dominance' of a kind alluded to by Gramsci in 1971:

A social group which seeks hegemony strives to 'dominate antagonistic groups, which it tends to 'liquidate' or 'subjugate perhaps even by armed force', at the same time as it attempts to 'lead' kindred and allied groups.⁴

Radical activism is a conscious and necessary attempt to alter, impede, destroy or construct alternatives to dominant structures, processes, practices and identities. There is an increasingly limited space in which to contemplate the types of action necessary to resist becoming cheap labour and handing over lands for exploitation in Australia's Neoliberal Projects. The impulse to create alternatives to the state and corporate *forms* rather than just work within them needs to be reclaimed.

The unfinished business we have in Australia is the creation of alternatives spaces in which people can take control of their lives and their environments and render redundant the Neoliberal Project. We need to respond to the needs and aspirations of disparate identities without attempting to subsume them under a common project.

For myself, I am attempting to create a model of universal citizenship connecting Indigenous philosophies with ecological perspectives to underwrite strategies for living in the 21st century. What has been interesting for me in the development of this mode of citizenship is the resistance to imposing settler societies' socio-material systems over Indigenous peoples and landscapes. This is because many of the achievements in science, technology, industry, commerce and finance have brought humans into a new age at the expense of much of the diversity of life and the life enhancing processes of the Earth.⁵ Across the world, life is

being lost, driven to extinction by the essentially unchecked ideal and practice of development, itself underwritten by forms of cultural imperialism, patriarchal relations, and the suppression of Indigenous world views.⁶ If we are to have a future in this country, then we need to look beyond the nation state and focus our attention on the ecology of the planet as well.

Certainly, the Government's intervention in Aboriginal communities has been thought of by many Australians as a humanitarian intervention. This may have been what we wanted 40 years ago when we became citizens: the capacity for a duly elected government to intervene so completely in the lives of some Aboriginal people, while totally abandoning others who do not live in mineral-rich remote area communities. I am thinking long and hard about whether this is what we want for every Australian child.

Children are our meditation. It is through them that we come to experience the richness and meaning of life, whether favourable or adverse. Through the journey of caring about someone other than ourselves, we come to realise that the things that matter most in life are often not fantastic or grand. What matters are the blessed moments in which we touch one another's hearts and lives, when we are invited in to someone else's sacred. My great fear is that the only sacred space we have left will be a manufactured one.

When we have the opportunity to feel infinitely responsible, concerned and committed for each other's wellbeing, we contain all of the potential for great courage. The most courageous action for Australians, in my view, is to disengage from that which will ultimately cause us harm, and create alternative spaces for expression; to be responsible in a manner which ensures our children, seven generations into the future, do not have to suffer from our ignorance. All of us are caught up in the culture of colonisation. There is not one corner of the world that has not felt its effect. Therefore, all of us need to decolonise our minds, and become self-determining again.

Endnotes

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1 Rex Wild and Pat Anderson, *Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Mekarle: Little Children are Sacred*, Report of the Northern Territory Board of Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse (2007).

- 2 Ibid 6.
- 3 ABC Television, 'Plan not racist or politically Motivated', *The 7:30 Report*, 25 June 2006 <<http://www.abc.net.au/7.30/content/2007/s1961744.htm>> at 11 July 2007.
- 4 Antonio Gramsci, *The Prison Notebooks* (1971) 57.
- 5 Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology and Development* (1989) 46.
- 6 Kerry Arabena, 'The Universal Citizen: An Indigenous citizenship framework for the twenty-first century' (2006) *Australian Aboriginal Studies* 37.