

People's Health Movement

People's Health Assembly 3

Plenary Address

by

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Cape Town, South Africa

6 July 2012

Distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, brothers and sisters

I come here today from the 'Fourth World': this is the world of Indigenous peoples who have been colonised and find themselves living within nation states.

Appropriately, the term 'Fourth World' originated here in Africa.

While it was popularised by the Canadian Indigenous leader George Manuel in the 1970s, it was based on the words of a Tanzanian diplomat, Mbuto Milando, who in conversation with Manuel said that:

[quote] When Native peoples come into their own, on the basis of their own cultures and traditions, that will be the Fourth World [unquote].

While the terms 'First', 'Second' and 'Third' World may no longer be relevant, the concept of the Fourth World as colonised Indigenous people – often minorities in their own countries – is still useful.

And today, I want to talk about the Fourth World in Australia.

We are the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander nations who – if you ask the scientists at least – have occupied the continent for the last 60,000 years or more.

I want to try to give you a picture of the relationship between our peoples, and those who came later, the non-Aboriginal peoples who have been in Australia for a comparatively tiny amount of time, a little over two hundred years.

This relationship is one that has been marked by profound inequalities, that continue to this day.

These inequalities can be measured by the statistics – on ill-health, life expectancy, poverty – and I will mention some of these today.

But what really interests me is the unequal relationship between our First Nations and the nation state in Australia – a persistent and fundamental inequality that we are yet to resolve or even properly address.

It begins – as it always does with the colonial process – with land.

The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples of Australia were – and are – hugely diverse, living and prospering in the many different environments of the continent, from the deserts of Central Australia, to the tropical north, to the ancient forests of the south.

Today, despite the stereotypes, most of us live in the towns and cities.

But traditionally, across our diversity, one thing unified us: a profound spiritual and practical relationship to the land.

I want to show a short video to give you a sense of that relationship, because it remains central to how we relate to the non-Aboriginal nation state to this day.

This is from the SBS television series *The First Australians*:

[Played clip from *The First Australians – Episode 1: They have come to stay*]

From that moment, when non-Aboriginal people 'came to stay' on the land now known as Sydney, the interaction of the two civilisations has been difficult, to say the least.

The histories of that interaction unfolded differently – and at different times – across the continent.

But all were marked to some degree by violence and dispossession, exploitation and marginalisation, impoverishment and theft – including the theft of land, of culture, and even of children from their families.

The inequalities that resulted were comprehensive.

Introduced diseases and frontier violence claimed innumerable lives.

Life-expectancy, especially for children, was catastrophically low, comparable to the poorest countries on earth.

Extreme poverty was the common experiences of our peoples: Australia became a wealthy country, but we did not benefit from Australia's wealth, even though much of that wealth resulted from our labour and our land.

Traditional languages and cultural practices were frequently suppressed.

And then there was the widespread practice of forcibly removing children from their families, the so-called 'Stolen Generations' which, from the late 1800s through to the 1970s, led to somewhere between one in three and one in ten Aboriginal children being forcibly removed from their families.

Ostensibly taken for their own good, to be educated and assimilated into white Australia, many of these children were instead raised in harsh institutions and used as a source of cheap labour.

My mother was one of the Stolen Generations, taken in the 1930s by white men on horseback from her Alywarre family in the desert of central Australia.

She was put in an institution with other Aboriginal children from all over the Northern Territory, a thousand kilometres from the desert to the tropical north in Darwin, and then sent to work on a cattle station.

Yet the promised benefits of this violent disruption to her and her family's lives never eventuated: the state that took her (supposedly 'for her own good'), never even taught her to read and write.

This is a common story, shared by a very large number of Aboriginal families.

Indeed, more broadly, the exclusion from formal education was another of the great inequities that resulted from the colonial process: the very first Aboriginal university graduates were Charles Perkins and Margaret Valadian.

The year: 1966, almost two hundred years after the non-Aboriginal people 'came to stay' in 1788.

I could go on and multiple the examples: the high level of incarceration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and associated Aboriginal deaths in custody, for example, or the effects of alcohol on communities whose traditional tightly-managed network of relationships to land and to kin had been profoundly damaged.

However, I want to make more general points about these inequalities.

The first is that many of these inequalities stemmed from structures embedded deeply into the fabric of the nation state.

For example, discrimination against us was enshrined not just in law but in the very structure of the legal system – until 1967, the constitution of white Australia specifically excluded us from being counted as citizens.

More profoundly, there was the doctrine of ‘terra nullius’ or empty land.

Under this doctrine, which became the legal basis of all land tenure and ownership in Australia, when non-Aboriginal people arrived in Australia they were arriving in an ‘empty land’ – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples were not recognised as having any pre-existing system of law or land-ownership, and the land could therefore be taken by the nation state without recognition or compensation to our peoples.

Unlike elsewhere in world, no treaties were ever signed with our peoples.

So, the inequality which our peoples suffered had these deep roots in the structure of white Australia.

The second general point I want to make is that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples did not acquiesce in this process of exclusion.

From the very start, our peoples resisted the taking of their lands, the taking of their children, the suppression of their cultures, and fought for their right to participate in the life of the nation as equals.

This resistance took many forms – from outright frontier warfare in the early stages of the colonial process, to passive resistance, to legal challenges, to campaigns at local and national levels to end segregation.

I want to show you another video now – also from the SBS TV series *The First Australians* – which will give you a sense of

how that resistance unfolded in the struggle for self-determination of the 1960s and 1970s.

This video also focuses on the legal challenge to the doctrine of 'terra nullius' launched by Torres Strait Islander man, Eddie Mabo, in the 1980s

His challenge finally overturned two centuries of the fiction that our peoples did not own the land prior to the arrival of non-Aboriginal peoples.

[Played clip from *The First Australians – Episode 7, Self-Determination*]

I would like to conclude by outlining where we find ourselves today when it comes to these unequal, difficult relationships, between our peoples and the Australian nation state.

It is now twenty years last month since the Mabo decision overturned the legal lie of 'terra nullius', and it is 45 years since the 1967 referendum changed the constitution to guarantee our peoples citizenship.

However, despite these steps forward, the Australian nation state has still not yet come to terms with its own past.

There have been some high points.

Former Prime Minister Paul Keating, in the months after the Mabo Decisions, committed himself to building a more equal and just relationship with Australia's First Peoples in his 'Redfern Speech':

"[Quote] It begins, I think, with the act of recognition. Recognition that it was we who did the dispossessing. We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the disasters. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion. ...

... We failed to ask - how would I feel if this were done to me? [Unquote]"¹

¹ Paul Keating, 10 December 1992. http://www.antar.org.au/issues_and_campaigns/self-determination/paul_keating_redfern_speech

For us, these words were welcome as an honest statement of the historical facts.

But for many Australians they represented deeply threatening ideas.

For many, this real but dark side of Australian history provoked fear and resentment.

Following the defeat of Keating in 1996, the new Prime Minister John Howard's Government tapped into this fear and resentment.

He made it clear that there would never be an apology by the Federal Government on behalf of the Australian people for the past treatment of our peoples, and this refusal to acknowledge the painful realities of our shared histories as a basis for a more equal relationship became the defining, the central symbol, of 13 years of government policy.

He also, in 2007, launched 'the Intervention' a complex series of policies ostensibly designed (once more!) to protect

Aboriginal children in the remote communities of the Northern Territory.

The Intervention was for many a return to a paternalistic past which we thought we had consigned to history (even if that history was unrecognised) – it included, for example, the suspension of laws that made it illegal to discriminate against people on the basis of their race.

Continued by the present Government, ‘The Intervention’ has been deeply divisive, both within and beyond Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

I am one of those who believe that the Intervention is flawed policy, who reject the notion that we have to choose between ‘protecting children’ on the one hand and our human rights on the other.

But the Intervention has deeper problems.

It has revealed to us once more the failure of the state to create the intellectual and philosophical space for true

dialogue between us, the first inhabitants of Australia, and those who came later.

That relationship has become narrowly politicised, and this has constrained debate.

Building some more equal relationship between us means the non-Aboriginal world learning how to deal with us, to hear what we are saying, and to engage with us as equals.

This emphatically does not mean accepting what we say uncritically.

But it does mean not dismissing what we have to say out of hand.

It means that when we describe how we see things – what we see the issues are, what we see as the solutions – mainstream Australia shouldn't ignore what we are saying just because they can't see it.

But unfortunately there is a long history in Australia of an attitude of 'because we can't see it, it's not there'.

For example, the erroneous doctrine of 'terra nullius' was based on the assumption that because our peoples didn't cultivate the land, because we didn't have fences and title deeds, we therefore didn't have a 'real' relationship with the land.

Because the first white people couldn't see that relationship, they convinced themselves it didn't exist.

Real equality means overcoming this historical blindness.

It means accepting that we, Australia's First nations, have something to offer.

We have an intellectual creativity and a perspective and an experience that mainstream Australia might find interesting or even, dare I suggest, useful.

But instead of being welcomed into the intellectual debate, we are still treated like fringe-dwellers, trouble-makers, and ultimately a burden on the rest of Australia.

We have been defined as 'a problem'.

But we're not a problem.

We're a fundamental part of Australia and we're not going away.

We want to maintain our difference, our worldview, our value systems.

We're not going to give up who we are.

But we want to actively participate in the life of this country as equals.

That puts certain responsibilities on us ... but it also puts responsibilities on mainstream Australia. There isn't a blueprint out there waiting to be discovered.

It is a process – a mutual process – of discovery and moving forward.

I would like to end, with a quote from another great African and advocate of equality across these kind of historical and cultural fault lines: Desmond Tutu. He said:

[Quote] Being reconciled to our enemies or our loved ones [is] not about pretending that things are other than they are. It is not about patting one another on the back and turning a blind eye to the wrong. True reconciliation exposes the awfulness, the abuse, the hurt, the truth. .. It is a risky undertaking but in the end it is worthwhile, because in the end only an honest confrontation with reality can bring real healing [Unquote].

Thank you.