

NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON RACISM IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

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Murdoch University

Workshop

Intersections of Identity and Discrimination: Shifting from Division to Self-Determination

Invited address:
Sandra Collard
Aboriginal Health Council of WA

Presented by:
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Introduction Brief for Panel Chairperson

Sandra Collard

Workplace Implementation Policy Officer (WIPO)
Aboriginal Health Council of WA (AHCWA), and
Interim Chairperson, Aboriginal Disability Network WA
National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation
(NACCHO).

sends her apologies as she is unable to attend today to deliver this paper.

Doris Hill

Aboriginal Advocate, Aboriginal Advocacy Program of Advocare.

will be presenting this paper on her behalf.

Doris is a Yamatji Lady from the Gascoyne/Murchison and Midwest Region of WA.

Introduction

As a Yamatji woman, like Sandra, I wish first to honour the cultural protocol of paying due respect to the Noongar people of this region where this important conference is being held, and to acknowledge that in this most densely settled area of the State they have felt the largest intergenerational impact on their Aboriginal culture and being, one that we *all* still continue to struggle with in different ways throughout this land.

It was only in 1967, by a national Referendum, that we were accepted as Citizens in our own land, before that being classified in the Census along with flora and fauna and the goods and chattels of non-Aboriginal property owners. It is now 40 years, and although we now have the right to vote, we are still marginalised and excluded from citizenship in our own right as Aboriginal people. By what, in this paper prepared by Sandra, we can readily identify as endemic systemic racism. We have to identify it to deal with it. The long denial of the past treatment of Aboriginal people must also be broken, even more importantly, here and now in the present.

This short paper seeks to clearly raise that issue. How we deal with it constructively together in a spirit of real reconciliation is complex but it is essential to be honest and clear with each other about where we are starting from and know what we are dealing with. We can do that. We can start here.

Also, as Aboriginal people too we are divided among ourselves, through internalising and being co-opted into this systemic racism and we too cannot always see that we can also be part of this problem to our very own people.

So this paper is addressed to all of us, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, in a spirit of hopefulness, that we can together understand, and together seek just ways forward, so that the despair that continues to cripple Aboriginal communities now down through many generations can begin to stop with us, and that is not further entrenched by our failure to begin, or rather *recover* the process of achieving life-affirming solutions for Aboriginal people as Aboriginal people.

I would like to start by acknowledging the important and rather brave research by Murdoch University, where we are today, that provides the basis in solid evidence for what I have said. It is important that we establish the actual realities, the hard and rigorously tested facts, of what we are faced with, and not just continue the polite socially-correct rhetoric that lead to more empty solutions of convenience that collaborate with continuing the great denial in modern guise and so perpetuate the Aboriginal disadvantage that has, for these reasons, proven so intractable and continues to be what would constitute a monumental disgrace in any country, but is doubly unforgivable in our 'lucky country'.

In brief, Murdoch School of Psychology, Dr Anne Pedersen and the now Dean, Prof Iain Walker, with an inter-university team, conducted research in

metropolitan and rural areas on attitudes and behaviours toward Aboriginal people. What they found and reported and published in the profession's Journal was that the overall level of racism here has not changed much over the decades since a comparable previous study was completed. But it's character has changed, as it is now recognised that it has right throughout the western world. The amount of 'in your face' personalised racism has reduced, and been transformed into increasingly higher levels of 'impersonalised' systemic racism. That is, racial discrimination and the roots of disadvantage are built into the social systems our lives are governed by. This is 'modern racism' compared to 'old fashioned racism'. So we must seek systemic answers. Its no longer a matter of simply seeking to improve the ways people relate to each other across the Aboriginal - non-Aboriginal cultural divide (and with the internalised areas of complicity where they overlap, as I mentioned earlier), improve interpersonal relations along what in reality is more of a complexly mixed continuum anyway. Important as this is, it is now essential to see that we must critically examine our social systems in all areas of life, and at all levels, to seek constructive ways to dismantle these mechanisms of racism.

To be absolutely frank, we are dealing with a tsunami of neocolonialism and revitalised assimilationism that if it goes unchecked amounts to what Perth's own authority, the late Sir Ronald Wilson, prominent lawyer and nationally appointed Queens Counsellor, the founding Chairperson of Australia's Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission termed, - 'cultural genocide'. You too may find this offensive, as our current Prime Minister who did not renew Sir Ronald's appointment, but I offer it to you for you to consider, as a real threat, and as *the* root cause of the entrenched and persisting problems of Aboriginal disadvantage today.

Just weeks ago, Australia, along with the United States (as always!), and New Zealand and Canada, the world's 'developed' nations with the largest Indigenous populations, refused to sign up to the United Nations' Resolution on the Rights of the World's Indigenous Peoples – just like we did not sign up to the Kyoto climate change agreement. Exploitation of our natural resources takes precedence over their protection. We developed agriculture and the cattle industry in Australia, and to some extent mining, on the backs of Aboriginal people dispossessed of their lands, as the 'new slavery', along with the British exporting their own people as convicts and their own young British children to Australia and Canada, (Fairbridge and Bindoon in WA for example), and boatloads of unfortunate women from the sweatshop factories, all as forms of forced labour to 'settle' this 'terra nullius', after Wilberforce had outlawed the old forms of slavery, of Africans, in the British Empire. I raise this simply to point out that, as you might say, 'the words change but the tune remains the same', or, as one of my Aboriginal colleagues more aptly put it, 'different dog, same leg action'. Read into that what you will!

Let me persist with the history lesson, because this systemic racism has been around for a while. Racism is like a leopard that is forever changing its spots, it increasingly camouflages itself within the systems of our daily lives, and

mostly we don't see it – as the cultural predator that it really is, until we find ourselves as a culturally endangered species.

After the 1967 Referendum, when we suddenly became real people, and admitted into the modern world as Aboriginal people - no longer only just those of us who were able to 'pass' as white by denying our culture, language and kin – we were accorded the right for our cultural identity to continue to exist, to be counted, and even to be valued as part of a widening conception of the Australian culture. Within a very few years, the late 1970's this was followed by a series of Senate Select Inquiries, investigations and reports providing a platform for Aboriginal voices themselves, into all areas of Aboriginal life, from health to education, and how Aboriginal people needed things to be done and be included and recognised and resourced to get them done for the betterment of Aboriginal people as Aboriginal people in all respects. The Reports of the first Aboriginal Social Justice Commissioner of Australia's new Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, Aboriginal lawyer Mick Dodson, articulated this as 'empowerment and self-determination' conceived as a partnership accommodated within the broadening notion of Australian culture. These were exciting times. Enabled and supported at the time by Federal and State Labor Governments, subsequent political change however, internationally as well as here in Australia, saw a gradual retrogression to the outmoded social models of the past recast in modern clothing. The capacity building partnerships based on cultural respect that began that era were systematically stripped of resourcing and support as 'mainstreaming' has now become the dominant social agenda of a government committed to privatisation and a for-profit large scale business corporatisation of everything from health to education.

Aboriginal people as Aboriginal people are not going to go away. Here is no 'smoothing of the dying pillow'. Our birth rates are the highest in the nation, and despite a disgracefully high mortality rate, life expectancy much less than for other Australians, and dreadful morbidity rates of illness, sickness and disease – we are growing. More importantly we are resisting modern assimilation, so the numbers of Aboriginal people identifying as Aboriginal people is also growing. But the cost of the standoff from being assimilated continues in these ways to be devastatingly high. The solution is not more mainstream health, education and police, privatised for corporate profit, it is instead decently supported self-determination of Aboriginal cultural ways as the core and centre in all aspects of life. Not a return to the past of just traditional beliefs and practices but the transformation of Aboriginal ways into contemporary life retaining core values, identities and cultural protocols of care, control and guidance – and as negotiated by us as Aboriginal people for ourselves within and celebrating the rich diversity of our many local cultures.

There are successes in more recently beginning to recover from what was lost after the '70s. From New Zealand, Maori academic and professional Linda Tupuwai Smith has assisted us considerably with her *Decolonising Methodologies*, prioritising re-creating uncompromised space for Indigenous people to determine their own affairs and the nature of protocols for

engagement with the wider cultural community. Maori Irahepeti Ramsden has followed this with the concept of 'culturally safe practice'. Here, the Australian Health Ministers' Advisory Council (AHMAC) subsequently developed the Aboriginal Cultural Respect Framework for the health sector nationally, and in WA this has been developed as the Aboriginal Cultural Security Policy. We hope that at both levels this will be an initiative that will be followed by all sectors as a whole-of-government commitment.

As Aboriginal people we have also sought explicit recognition within the new WA Human Rights Act, and hope that the Commonwealth Government will have the political will to follow this initiative.

At other levels we have been struggling to emerge from a grudging 'mention' tucked away within the tail end of policies to insist that all aspects of all policies and practices be made accountable to Aboriginal people by Aboriginal people. Best practice examples that I can mention personally are Aboriginal issues being explicitly addressed across all items of the Strategic Plan of the Alliance for Prevention of Elder Abuse (APEA), and, the commissioning of the development of Aboriginal guidelines across the full range of the Disability Services Standards in participatory consultation with Aboriginal communities themselves. Also, our recommendation to the Sector Health Check and to the Minister has been that the new Standard 9 which simply tacks Human Rights on to the pre-existing 8 Standards, be re-cast so that all standards in all sectors will be located within a human rights framework, and that for Aboriginal people that it is ultimately backed up by our government signing up to the UN Resolution on the natural human rights of Indigenous peoples.

We have also made submission to the recent Review of the Mental Health Act, following engagement with the mental health, health, education sectors for many years, endeavouring to draw attention to the deeper levels at which solutions to Aboriginal damage, distress and disadvantage must be addressed in order to be effective and sustainable, as neither is currently the case or has ever yet been so. I addressed an International Seminar at the Centre for Conflict Resolution at Melbourne University and talked of the depth dimension to Reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in Australia and within the Aboriginal population also.

In submission to the National Advocacy Review we spoke of the need for Aboriginal people to be able to have their own voice on all issues of concern in their lives, and currently that means just about everything, instead of others presuming, with the best of intentions, mostly, to speak for us and on our behalf 'for our own good'.

An overview of this must conclude that Aboriginal people must have the right to an uncompromised voice of our own, and the space and resourced capacity to make our own decisions about our own lives and how we will participate in an honourable partnership with the rest of Australia, not the

paternalistic disgrace of a dominant culture that continues to arrogate all power to itself in denial of the basic human rights of others.

My background includes Aboriginal mental health. For the United Nations Decade of the World's Indigenous Peoples 1993-2003 I provided the cultural core to national Aboriginal Counselling and Mental Health Program that we developed and delivered to participants urban, rural and remote Aboriginal communities throughout Australia. The one thing that I learned and that we sought to implement was the lesson that our elder Neville Bonner spoke of so graphically and with such urgency all those years before – that the foundation of Aboriginal wellbeing is the right to exercise responsibility for what happens to you in your own life and in the lives of others for whom you are culturally responsible. Where this is taken away, it has been more than amply demonstrated that all peoples, worldwide, suffer – depression, suicide, family violence, alcohol and substance abuse, high incarceration rates, and the high mortality and morbidity that I have mentioned and has recently been in the news headlines again, and yet again. So the solution is restoring the dignity and basic human rights to cultural identity, values and practice. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), the community elected body of Aboriginal representatives providing leadership in all areas of life, is now decommissioned – just as funding was withheld or withdrawn from Aboriginal community based services and tendered to mainstream organisations, like health, home and community care and disability services. The once independent community-driven ATSIC is now metamorphosed as the Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination re-located as an add-on within the Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs and it's staff employed as public servants under direct government control, no longer Aboriginal community directed.

Other disappointments, of many, have been the similarly increasingly government-driven nature of services, no longer supporting and resourcing or even partnering with Aboriginal community-based and culture-centred service development and delivery programs, but 'getting it right' in services for Aboriginal people has come to mean diverting the resourcing to mainstream service providers to deliver those services, albeit with 'cultural awareness training' and 'in partnership with Aboriginal communities'. But guess where the power, policy making, program development, staffing and resourcing and financing are all located. Recently the Report *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage in Western Australia* (2005) cites "Safe, healthy and supportive family environments with strong communities and cultural identity" as the main Priority Outcome (of three). Yet, of the 7 Strategic Areas for Action, none identifies the principle of strengthening culture-centredness as a key

requirement. Like research on the published Stolen Generation cases, identity is recognised as a key issue for Aboriginal wellbeing, but the essence of that must be the right and the resources to make decisions and take meaningful action in all aspects of our own lives, - otherwise we are captains of an empty boat of someone else's design and construction, owned by others and navigated wherever they will for their own advantage, albeit, and we no longer believe, 'in our best interests'. This is not addressed in understanding the causal pathways to Aboriginal suicide or in constructing 'pathways to resilience'. Nor in the north has the identification by psychiatrists of both depression and unresolved post-traumatic stress of intergenerational loss through death and dying, and cultural loss and displacement - as underlying Aboriginal alcohol abuse and violence - led to prioritising addressing the underlying issues of loss of control of being able to live in meaningful and purposeful ways as Aboriginal people and as self-determined by Aboriginal people. This despair has turned inward in the most destructive ways.

For some time now, the perceived problems in all these areas of 'the Aboriginal problem' were not responded to with a commitment to developing a mutually negotiated approach to capacity building that would seek solutions to preserving Aboriginal cultural self-determination in ways rendering that effective within an overall partnership of mutual respect. Instead, difficulties have been seized upon as an opportunity for dismantling the social policy gains and initiatives that had been won together since the Referendum. To a new and retrograde social policy agenda, these hard won gains have been steadily discarded in the interests of expanding government-facilitated mainstream corporate enterprise, with co-opted Aboriginal actors, into all areas of Aboriginal life.

One can argue that cultural genocide is unavoidable 'collateral damage' in Australia's manifest economic material destiny, and there is not a purposefully culturally destructive agenda. But as the generationally collaterally damaged, we say firmly and clearly, for our forebears and for our children, that we continue to be the victims of changing forms of structural violence, which in its effects, even if not in its intentions, amounts to structural racism.

This is shared also by others in this country who are also culturally different. The struggle to retain commitment to multiculturalism as Australia's policy, different to but alongside Australia's Indigenous policy, has its own history, issues and effects, but the root issue of structural racism is there too. We have researched this together, and I am sure other speakers from the other cultures that make up the richness of our society, will talk on their own behalf about it, from their own different experiences and perspectives, and, like us, toward their own positive solutions.

In concluding, I hope you will join with me in dedicating what I have said today to the memory of one of our own Aboriginal leaders, Rob Riley. He is always with us in heart and mind and is the strength and inspiration for us to have the courage to say things as they are and to continue this struggle that we can only win *together*. Systemic racism finally broke his enormous spirit

and he took his own life in despair. Our first Aboriginal Senator in the Australian parliament, Neville Bonner, wrote of this root problem much, much earlier, as 'fatal despair'. He was right.

And it is worse now than ever. The suicide of now even very young Aboriginal people, such as reported in the West Australian only a few days ago, is many times higher than even the worst of any other peoples, anywhere else in the world.

Rob addressed the National Conference of the Australian Psychological Society here in Perth as it's first Aboriginal Keynote Speaker. His address was entitled 'From Exclusion to Negotiation'. Struggling with his own despair of establishing effective mechanisms for Aboriginal self-determination within, and as a recognised and valued part of, the overall Australian society, he nevertheless left us with the trust and the hope and the challenge to find ways to make it work. We can. And we must. I too like to believe that we will. But we have to start with the brutal honesty of what is really going on. I hope, on his shoulders, we have made that start with you today.

Thank You.

Doris Hill on behalf of Sandra Collard