

Poor Fellow My Country: Lamenting our Poverty of Spirit

Graeme Mundine

Executive Secretary

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission

National Council of Churches in Australia

I acknowledge the Ngunnawal Peoples. We are all visitors to this land and I pay my respects to the Traditional Owners, past present and future.

I want to start tonight by reading an excerpt from a book that I am sure you all know well, *Poor Fellow my Country* by Xavier Herbert.

The small boy was Aboriginal – distinctly so by cast of countenance, while yet so lightly coloured as to pass for any light-skinned breed, even tanned Caucasian. His skin was cream-caramel, with a hair-sheen of gold. There was also the glint of gold in his tow-tawny mop of curls. Then his eyes were grey – with a curious intensity of expression probably due to their being set in cavernous Australoid orbits where one would expect to see dark glinting as of shaded water. His nose, fleshed and curved in the mould of his savage ancestry, at the same time was given just enough of the beakiness of the other side to make it a thing of perfection. Likewise his lips. Surely a beautiful creature to any eye but the most prejudiced in the matter of race. Indeed, but for knowing the depth and breadth of prejudice against the very strina that gave him perfection, one might well be amazed to know that such a thing could stand up to the sight of him. Yet most people, at least of this remote northern part of the Australian Continent, would dismiss him as just a boong. He was aged about eight.

When I read this I don't think of a piece of fiction, I think of a truth. We might use different words today, but deep down in the Australian psyche Aboriginal people are all just "boongs". What do I mean by that?

I mean that Aboriginal people have always been subjected to White Western perceptions of the world and countless attempts to Westernise or "civilize" us.

We only have to look back in recent times to see this philosophy in Indigenous affairs. Kerry Arabena, for example wrote about the new arrangements in Indigenous affairs which were announced in 2004. You might recall these were the arrangements that saw the abolition of ATSIC, the setting up of regional Indigenous Coordination Centres and a commitment to a whole of Government approach. In discussing those policy initiatives,

Arabena talks about some historical policies such as the 1939 “New Deal” for Aboriginal people. Arabena’s analysis shows that the aim of that policy agenda was to “civilize” Aboriginal people. She quotes Elkin, a professor of anthropology and ordained Anglican Priest as saying:

Aboriginal people who had become ‘civilised’ were those who in varying degrees had forsaken their native view of life and [had] also in varying degrees become involved in our economic system and in a few cases...to some extent adopted our view of life.

Arabena also highlights similarities between the policy philosophy of the 1950s to 2004. In 1954, Elkin said:

With mutual behaviour more and more based on understanding and goodwill there would be a time, not so far ahead, when Aborigines, full-bloods and mixed bloods, will share proudly with us all an Australia which they have helped to enrich.

In 2004 the then Minister Vanstone said:

The Indigenous people of this country [can] look to their full enjoyment of the benefits and the bounty that Australia brings to all its citizens.

In 2010, we are still hearing the same rhetoric, although it is also couched in economic terms. Jenny Macklin during the recent election campaign said:

Pivotal to our agenda – and a driver for the future – is finding ways for Indigenous people to play a greater role in the economic life of the nation...For most Indigenous people – like any other Australian, participating in economic life usually starts with a job....And a job means financial responsibility – it means managing money and the possibility of saving for a home or an investment. And it can lead to having the skills to take advantage of business opportunities. And we will continue to seek ways of harnessing the benefits of native title rights - for jobs, for business development and for converting traditional knowledge of country into sustainable economic and social benefits – now and for the future.

Macklin goes on to say:

Ultimately it is economic participation and development that can change individual and community fortunes over the long term. As an expander of opportunity – through employment and economic activity. As a driver of responsibility – through jobs and financial planning. And as a forger of new positive relationships – in new business settings and through shared economic interests.

I don't dispute the importance of jobs and economic development, but I do dispute the model that has been foisted on us, The efforts to 'mainstream' us. Where is the recognition in the Minister's statements of our culture, our spirituality, our complex law systems, our languages, our systems of trade, our forty, perhaps sixty, thousand years of experience and culture in the above statements? Is that all our traditional knowledge is, something to be converted into an economic entity? Don't forget this modern economic world is only a few hundred years old and if the past couple of years haven't made you question how functional it is I don't know what will.

These ways of looking upon us have been around since Cook first planted that flag. The earlier colonizers brought with them a scientific view of the world that saw their values of validity, neutrality and universality, as the 'truth' against which all other knowledges were measured (Rigney, 2001).

In the beginning Aboriginal people were scientific curious. According to Martin, an Aboriginal academic, Aboriginal people were observed and data was collected about us and our lands. There was a sense of racial superiority and over a long period of time the "research" led to Aborigines being viewed as people that needed protection. That didn't work so then they tried to assimilate us, and now here we are having it explained to us how we must become good active economically viable citizens of Australia and take responsibility for our hardship. And we must also be "reconciled" to the non-Indigenous population, even when that population is supporting Governments that continue to inflict colonial policy agendas on us. For me, these attitudes speak to us of a real poverty of spirit in this country.

When we look at the policy agenda of the current Government, when we look at the well meaning but often misguided paternalistic reconciliation efforts, we can see hundreds of years of history and attitudes being played out. We can see a poverty of spirit that afflicts us all.

We can see this in no better a place than the Northern Territory, which as you would all know is subject to a Federal Government Intervention, the likes of which have never before been seen. By focusing on the Northern Territory I don't want to imply that there are only problems there and the rest of Australia is ok. It's not, by any means. But the Intervention is a microcosm of all that is wrong with the way in which we as a Nation deal with Indigenous affairs. And I do mean "deal" - Aboriginal people are seen as a problem that simply needs to be dealt with.

You may have heard that the World Council of Churches (WCC) sent a Living Letters team to the Northern Territory two weeks ago. We visited several communities with our international delegates who came from Bolivia, Indonesia, The United States of America, Aotearoa/New Zealand, the Philippines and Egypt. The overseas delegates were shocked and many used the word "horrified" to see what was happening here in this developed country. They labelled the intervention racist and colonialist. Many made the observation that Australia is such a staunch supporter of human rights and does not resile from taking

action against other countries, and yet they felt Australia shows hypocrisy by turning a blind eye to what is happening within its own borders.

These are strong sentiments and I know that for some non-Indigenous people of good intention they are hard to hear. I understand that there are many many good people who are working with and alongside Aboriginal people and that many great things are being achieved. But fundamentally we have it all wrong in this country, which is why I talk about a poverty of spirit. Yes Aboriginal people suffer from material poverty, but we are also subjected to the poverty of spirit that has been ingrained in the Australian culture since colonisation. There is a way of thinking that is still steeped in colonialism. A culture that says you must be like us, the mainstream, you must aspire to economic success and you must be good tax paying citizens who conform to the majority view.

NATSIEC has been a critic of the Northern Territory Intervention since it was instigated. While we welcomed the focus and recognition that there needed to be some intense action to increase the quality of health, education and lives in the Northern Territory, the manner in which it was done defies belief. It also defies every report I have read about Indigenous affairs, including Government ones. Even this week the Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities handed down its final report. Even that report stresses the need for consultation and negotiation, involving Aboriginal people in creating their own visions for the future, listening to them, not implementing a top down approach, or a one size fits all. These are not new concepts, they have always been around. And yet, there always seems to be a disconnect between what the Government says it should do, and what it actually does.

So let me talk a little bit about what we saw in the Northern Territory. The first and most obvious thing at every community is the sign announcing that alcohol is prohibited and that pornography is prohibited in this place. The shame and confusion that this causes for Aboriginal people is profound. Strong proud men have been labelled as pornographers, pedophiles and alcoholics. The message we received last week was how demoralizing this was to the community. But more than that, the message was that these things are White Fella culture. These things are created and marketed by Western culture. Aborigines don't produce pornography, they don't sell it, they didn't bring the grog and the drugs to their communities and there is no place for these things in traditional culture. These are all things that they are bombarded with through their TV screens and in non-Indigenous towns.

If you take a walk through Darwin, as I did last week, you will see sex shops all over the place, there are so many pubs and bars. At night the CBD is full of tourists and locals having a great time. Sex and drinking are there for all to consume and it seems the tourism industry encourages these images. If you turn on the TV or watch a movie, the images that people are seeing are all created by Western Culture. And the communities are saying two things, one is we don't accept what you are peddling us and the second is that we don't accept the hypocrisy. In fact many communities were already dry communities, by their own decision, long before the Intervention. They had already

rejected this aspect of our culture. But think for a minute how you would feel if a big sign was put up in your street banning pornography and alcohol.

I am not saying that there isn't a problem with drugs and alcohol in our communities. Of course there is, as there are in your communities. But these Big Brother attitudes are not helping. Do you really think for a minute that putting a sign up will stop the alcoholics, or the alcohol peddlers and drug pushers? No it will just bring shame to the non drinkers. And, by the way, the double standards of our culture are compounded when White people working in the communities are able to get exemptions from the alcohol ban. Proper drug and alcohol programs are desperately needed in communities to stop this scourge. When the Intervention first started they stopped the grog, but where was the support for the alcoholics. In many places the problem was just relocated.

Another area of concern raised with us was the future of homelands. What are Homelands, or outstations as some call them? They are places on Aboriginal lands that are culturally and spiritually significant to the Aboriginal people who live there. According to the Human Rights Commission "homelands represent the intersection of specific areas of country, with individual, social and spiritual Indigenous identities. That is they do not represent random settlements 'where people go for a better lifestyle' away from the larger communities created by non-Indigenous agents. In contrast, homelands represent particular living areas in which each Indigenous individual or group is based in order to fulfill their own cultural obligations to their inherited country and its underlying traditional Law".

The homelands movement has a long history and was a response by Aboriginal people to reoccupy traditional country and to fulfill the religious and social obligations to care for country. They are good examples of self-determination.

The current debate around homelands is mostly a question of viability. Are they cost effective places to run? The consensus amongst just about everybody except Governments is that homelands are viable and desirable places to ensure they continue. The concept is strong, where there are problems it is mostly due to a lack of infrastructure such as housing and municipal services. Despite the view that Governments seem to be pushing that homelands are some kind of failed experiment, the evidence suggests otherwise. For example, despite a lack of access to medical services health is better. The Human Rights Commission cites a report on the Utopia homelands which found that mortality rates are lower than the Northern Territory as a whole. The researchers found that these improved outcomes were consistent with outstation living, physical activity, diet, lack of access to alcohol and connectedness to culture, family and land and opportunities for self determination.

Some members of our group were able to visit Mapuru a Yolngu homeland near Elcho Island. This visit deeply touched those who went. They saw a functioning independent school; healthy eating via a successful community developed and run cooperative store and a strong connection to culture and traditional practices. They saw the wonderful weaving the women do and heard about the successful tourism project the community has

developed. These are places that keep people connected to culture, that are essential to wellbeing and which surely should be encouraged, supported and allowed to flourish. But where is the space for that kind of thinking in our neo-liberal world?

I might also add that at Galiwink'u they are expecting the population to rise to 8,500 as people are forced out of homelands. There is currently a base population of 2,200 people there and they have about 15-20 people per house. Are the government committed to building infrastructure for these extra 6,000 people and how will this impact on the natural environment and the wellbeing of people who feel they are being corralled into a town away from the places that connect them to their families, their lands, their spirituality. And how is this different from the reserves and missions of the past?

Another area which of course came up during our visit was the Basics card, and I have to say that we heard mixed messages. Some people did say it had helped them, some people from the Tiwi Islands told us that they used the card as a savings plan to buy bigger items. They did not use it to buy more food for their kids, they were already doing that. Others told us of the shame and humiliation the card brought. Even those that could see benefits, also talked about being "treated like kids". The blanket nature of the card is the problem. No doubt for some people it is a beneficial thing. There is no doubt that some people would choose the option. There is also no doubt that a facility such as you can get through centrepay (where you can buy larger items and pay them off through centrelink) is a great benefit to those who choose to use it. But to label every single Aboriginal person as irresponsible with money and unable or unwilling to feed their kids or otherwise care for their family is outrageous. There also seems to be so much confusion about the basics card, things have not been clearly explained, even now.

And now there are more changes. Last week I heard of the experiences of some women near Alice Springs who tried to get off the basics card now that the legislation has changed. The lengths they had to go to and the "persuasion" employed to get them to stay on it is woeful.

Another area of concern is the Racial Discrimination Act (RDA). Although the Government thinks it has reinstated it in full, others including the Special Rapporteur on Indigenous peoples, question that. The areas which are deemed "special measures" and thus excluded from the RDA are alcohol restrictions, pornography restrictions, five year leases, community store licensing, controls on use of publicly funded computers, law enforcement powers and business and management powers.

These "special measures" have not been constructed with the consultation and participation of Aboriginal people and I have yet to see the evidence that says they are for the benefit of Aboriginal people.

The lack of evidence is a problem throughout the Intervention's areas of impact. We have stated time and time again the evidence is not being produced; the data that is available is generally inadequate or open to interpretation and basically the Government are sailing in the wind when they talk about the successes of the Intervention.

So what does need to happen? Well really it's simple. Aboriginal people need to be empowered, enabled and supported to make decisions about their own life. This doesn't mean that a Government goes in with a predetermined policy agenda and expects communities to give it a tick of approval. What this means is proper negotiation. Right from the start.

Each community has its own needs and own aspirations and will approach things differently. You can't really expect the salt water people to approach life in the same way as the desert people. Government needs to slow down and take time. Proper negotiation and consultation takes time, it can be awkward, slow moving and appear to be going nowhere. Often it is the complete antithesis of a Government's need for timelines and policy frameworks. But if anything is going to work it's going to need this approach.

We need to allow communities to work with their own systems of governance. One community told us last week that the Government expects them to always hold whole of community meetings, but the way that they do things is to have each family represented by their elders. They then go out and talk to their people. This is the cultural way of doing it. It's also more sensible in an environment where there is a constant stream of Government bureaucrats flying in and demanding meetings with them. The burden of meetings is incredibly onerous.

Governments also need to stop destroying what is working. In every single place we visited last week we were told life is worse under the intervention. Every single place.

We were told about previously functioning community initiatives that had been completely obliterated under the intervention either through lack of funding or through being taken over or subsumed by Government. I remember when the Intervention was first introduced the stories of programs such as Night Patrols which were doing great jobs in communities being stopped under the Intervention. The money that was wasted on duplicating medical checks when the problem was with the follow up care available and the amount of money that was spent bringing in a duplicate health system, when they could have put the money into existing services and had a much better long term effect.

The hurt that has been left by the Intervention will take a long time to heal. We were told by so many about how they felt when they saw the army and police taking over their streets. They felt like they were being invaded and being treated like criminals. That their children would be taken away and their families torn apart. No matter what the Prime Minister of the time, and those since, would like us to believe this was not a time of hope. This was a time of confusion, despair and desperation.

The much lauded Government Business Managers seem to be a bit hit and miss. I am sure there are some good ones, but as one woman said to us when asked about her community's relationship with the GBM, "oh we don't see much of them, they don't stray too far from their cappuccino machine".

So what hope is there for the future? The one thing you should know, which we rarely see in the mainstream media or recognised by politicians and bureaucrats is the level of resistance. There are some great and strong leaders; there are some great and strong initiatives to resist the imposition of this Intervention. Communities are fighting back. They are knowledgeable about their rights as Australian citizens and their human rights. In many places they are saying enough is enough. In many places they are saying you have to stop treating us like this, like children who need to be told what to do. They are saying we have rights, we have dreams and aspirations. We are full citizens of this country and we will be treated thus.

At Amoonguna, for example, the Community President, Marie Elena Elis, told us how that community has taken legal action against the new Shire council. They are not willing to compulsorily hand over assets to the Shire council without just compensation. They are also saying no to the Intervention. This is a community which had a great community run health service, which was dry and had minimal alcohol problems, which kept the houses and community spaces in good order and which has seen a rapid decline in the quality of life in their community since the Intervention began. They are not going to take it lying down.

Closer to Alice Springs, in the Mount Nancy Town Camps, we spoke to Barbara Shaw and her family. Barbara is well known for her activism against the Intervention. In the recent election she ran for parliament for the Greens. She didn't get in, but she was incredibly successful never the less.

While Warren Snowden retained his seat, there was a primary vote swing against Labor of 13.3%. Barbara Shaw says this swing shows a deep hostility to the NT Intervention as well as the Shire takeover and nuclear projects planned for Aboriginal land. Barbara's result also shows that Aboriginal people are realising their political clout. Often we are told "there are no votes in Aborigines", I beg to differ! Especially in the Northern Territory where the proportion of Aboriginal people is much higher, they are a political force to be reckoned with. It gives me great hope to see and hear about this resistance.

Finally, I want to comment on where to from here. As one Elder at Galiwink'u said to us:

Ok so be it – what is the outcome. Now WCC has heard our story. We are living here without hope. There are so many things happen. We need somebody who can carry our voice to the people. Be on your way. Tell our story. Tell the Government. They are deaf, they can not hear. They do not listen to Yolngu people.

The Living Letters visit was a wonderful inspiring trip. We were very grateful to be so warmly welcomed into communities. We recognise that we were only able to visit a handful of places and that we, like so many bureaucrats, flew in and flew out. But we were all moved, shocked, saddened but ultimately heartened. We strongly felt a responsibility to bear witness to what we saw and heard. For the Australian delegates who have been speaking out against the Intervention since it began we did feel both reinvigorated and a fresh sense of urgency. While we in the Southern States wax lyrical

about what should or should not happen people in the North are suffering under an unjust, racist and paternalistic regime.

The Churches have spoken out against the Intervention, but we must encourage them to do more. More needs to be done at a community level. Churches are major providers of services through their various agencies. But it is at the community pastoral level that we can do so much more. Working alongside people, bringing resources to the community to support them. Churches are already in the communities and are doing some great work. Let's not forget that so many ministers in these communities, particularly in the Anglican and Uniting Churches are not only Aboriginal, but are also community Elders. Churches remain a positive presence in the communities and so we can do more to support the needs of the community. We also need to support the NT dioceses which are mostly struggling to do so much with so little. Those from other dioceses and Churches can talk to people on the ground and find out practical ways to support them.

We need to Lobby governments. Shortly the team will be producing the report from the Living Letters visit and we expect it to have recommendations for action. We then need to take that report to all our local members of parliament. We need to bang on Macklin's door and not be fobbed off with a form letter. We need to talk in our churches, in our homes, in our book clubs, anywhere we meet people and debunk the myths that media and Government are peddling.

At an international level we need to keep telling the world what is happening here. We were happy to have two members of the World Council of Churches Central Committee on our team. They have committed to take the message to the WCC and to agitate for increased focus on Indigenous peoples. These issues are not Australia's alone. The delegates recognised what they saw and said that as Indigenous and marginalised peoples they connected with the stories of racism and colonialism. And as we said in our statement, "Your fight is our fight".

Beyond these actions, I think the greatest challenge to us all as Australians is to change the underlying perception of us "boongs" and as an issue to be fixed. Stop fixating on your view of the world and imagine for a minute what life would be like for us and the wider community if we stopped hanging out White Western Culture as the benchmark against which we should all be measured.

Imagine for a minute what would happen if you stopped judging us on how we fail to live up to your expectations and instead try looking at the world through our eyes? What if we measured success by some other means than economic performance? What if instead of a poverty of spirit we created an affluence of spirit. By that I mean sharing our common humanity at the deepest level. Loving each other, respecting each other and delighting in that which makes us different. I don't think it's only Aboriginal people who would benefit. Let's remember our common humanity and start working together in a true partnership so we can all be the best that we are called to be.

Disclaimer: The opinions in this speech are those of Graeme Mundine and do not necessarily reflect the position of the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Commission or the National Council of Churches in Australia.

For further information about the NT Intervention and NATSIEC's position see our website www.ncca.org.au/natsiec

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