

Identity politics traps the indigenous mind in cycle of grievance



Stan Grant speaks at Recognise meeting in Cootamundra, NSW, in 2016.

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What would my grandfather make of our world today? I have wondered about that lately. What would he make of this age of hyper-identity? I doubt he ever uttered the word identity. I doubt he ever considered what it meant to identify with anything. Cecil William Henry Grant was an Aboriginal man. He would have said a Wiradjuri man. He lived among Wiradjuri people, he married a Wiradjuri woman and raised his children to know what it was to be Wiradjuri.

He was an Australian, proudly so. Defiantly Australian, at a time when he was told he wasn't. When war came he signed up: he became a Rat of Tobruk. My grandfather fought not to prove his worth but because he believed himself already worthy. He came back and told his children of the world he had seen. He told them that this world was theirs, that no one could shrink their horizon but themselves.

He was a Christian; his faith was founded in a belief in justice and equality. He would have heard that same message in the words of a black preacher from the segregated south of America, who dreamed of a day when we would be judged not by our colour but our character.

When I think of Martin Luther King Jr, I think of someone who represented everything my grandfather, Cecil William Henry Grant, stood for. Yes, he was Aboriginal — that was his heritage, his family. To be Aboriginal was as natural as breathing. But it was who he was, not all he was. Like the great majority of Aboriginal people, he was what we clumsily call “mixed race”: he had an Irish grandfather. He found a world beyond his own in books and a love of knowledge. He wrote short stories and poems. I am told he kept by his bed the works of Shakespeare and our own bards, Lawson and Paterson. My father still has my grandfather’s old Bible, nearly half a century since the old man passed away.



Cecil William Henry Grant with his family before he was sent to the Middle East during World War II. Picture: courtesy Aunty Flo Grant.

My grandfather lived the words of the ancient Roman playwright Terence — a man bought and sold as a slave: *Homo sum, humani nihil a me alienum puto*: “I am human, nothing that is human is alien to me”.

He was a man of sacrifice and courage; a man born on the margins, who endured harsh poverty, bigotry and state-enforced discrimination, but who never wavered in his dignity and hope for his country. A man locked out, yet who looked for a way in.

In 1966, towards the end of his life, my grandfather nominated as a candidate to be elected as an Aboriginal representative of the Aborigines Welfare Board. I found his campaign pitch in an old edition of the welfare board magazine *Dawn*, distributed to Aboriginal communities across NSW. There was no mention of blame, shame or victimhood — just an unflinching belief in our basic human dignity.

Reading the pitch, I can hear his voice: it is the voice of a preacher, his cadence distinctive, his inflection rising and falling:

“Anyone claiming that Aborigines are not humanly equal to other people seems to lack knowledge of the common ingredients of which all human beings are made. For instance, all mankind is blessed or plagued with egoism, irrespective of the pigmentation of the skin. We are also subject to the influences of various other elements such as the physical, natural and Divine influences — all of which are evident in all men. Thus far we are humanly equal and should be regarded by all as such.”

Today those words may seem quaint. They are so at odds with the spirit of our times. These are angry times. He campaigned for equality and justice, but today we are likely to hear more of resentment and vengeance.

My grandfather fought for inclusion. Today we talk a lot more of separatism and exclusion. We are more likely to define ourselves by what we are not: whom we are against rather than what we share in common.

We have lost the art of moderation. We are quick to take offence, too readily wounded and too reluctant to forgive or understand. As French philosopher Simone Weil put it: “Modern life is given over to immoderation. Immoderation invades everything: actions and thought, public and private ... there is no more balance anywhere.” She was writing more than a half-century ago, yet her words continue to resonate. These are times of passion more than discretion. And as another French thinker, Raymond Aron, said: “Passion automatically goes at a gallop.” In a time when we are wealthier and healthier, paradoxically we are also fearful and vicious.

Consider the Australia of my grandfather’s life, and the world I enjoy. Then, Aboriginal kids often were locked out of schools; today we have more indigenous university graduates than at any time in our history. Once, my grandfather and so many like him were denied the vote; today we have indigenous people in our parliaments. My grandfather lived on Aboriginal missions, among those rounded up and forced off traditional lands; today we have won rights to our land, our courts recognise native title. My grandfather lived in the great Australian silence, indigenous people written out of our nation’s history; today our stories are celebrated in film and music and art and literature. This is the world he dreamed of, the world he fought for: “We are humanly equal and should be regarded by all as such.” Indeed.

This is the world dreamed of by Aboriginal heroes who were often, like my grandfather, people of deep faith: Bill Ferguson, Doug Nicholls, William Cooper. They and those who followed — everyone who marched, carried a flag, raised a voice or pitched a tent for the struggle — are part of our folklore. They helped make Australia better.

Yes, there is much to do. The possibilities and promise of this country remain out of reach for far too many. The most impoverished and imprisoned in our nation are the First Peoples. My grandfather knew that too well. It was the struggle to which he dedicated his entire life. But I am sure he would recoil at the rancour and bitterness of modern politics. He believed in an inclusive citizenship; today we cleave to our difference.

It is one of the pitfalls of identity politics that it requires a permanent, unchanging enemy. At its worst it appears less motivated by justice or reconciliation than vainglorious struggle for its own sake: grievance without end.

Lately, I have sought refuge in the words of my grandfather. I have returned to the writings of great thinkers who shaped our world. My grandfather would not have read the likes of Immanuel Kant, John Locke or John Stuart Mill, yet the teachings of those Enlightenment philosophers found their way into his world view.

The belief in a shared humanity, in the fundamental worth of each individual, is the cornerstone of the liberal democratic order. Think of Kant's ideas of liberty — the foundation of Enlightenment is that we should strive to live “free of the ball and chain of an everlasting permanent minority”. He urged us to have the courage to think for ourselves, to “make use of our own understanding”.

Or Mill, who asked we find that elusive centre to “soften the extreme form to fill up the intervals between us”. These philosophers challenge me to look outside of myself, to cast off certainty and test my ideas. The Enlightenment placed reason above superstition, disrupted conventional wisdom, reimagined society and challenged old hierarchies. It asked humanity to look beyond parochial affiliations — to, in the words of Rousseau, “cast away the yoke of national prejudices”.

These thinkers were also products of their times. Some of their views, particularly on race, are hard for me to read. Some were apologists for slavery, the architects of empire and colonisation. The same Kant who spoke of our shared humanity could say black Africans were “stupid”.

Yet, for all its faults, the Enlightenment is my inheritance, too. Its legacy is universal. Richard Dawkins says liberalism is a meme rather than a gene: it transmits across bloodlines and cultures. To French philosopher Pascal Bruckner, Western civilisation is “like a jailer who throws you into prison yet slips you the key”. Tyranny, racism and colonialism are part of the Western tradition, yet that same tradition holds out the tantalising possibility of freedom.

Liberalism, born of the Enlightenment and centred on the principle of the rights of the individual, has proved remarkably resilient. Yet, across three decades in journalism, I have seen old divisions of race, religion, tribalism and nationalism reassert themselves. The end of the Cold War — the great ideological battle between liberal democracy and communism — promised liberation. Old borders were coming down. US political scientist Francis Fukuyama proclaimed “the end of history”. Liberal democracy, he wrote, constituted “the end point of mankind's ideological evolution”.

But history has returned. Borders are going back up, democracy is in retreat. The strongman is back: Recep Tayyip Erdogan in Turkey; Viktor Orban in Hungary; Rodrigo Duterte in The Philippines; Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Egypt; Vladimir Putin in Russia; Xi Jinping in China; and, in his own way, Donald Trump in the US — each riding a wave of resurgent populism. This is a frustrating, maddening time. As father of conservatism Edmund Burke wrote, “The wild gas, the fixed air is plainly broke loose.” We don't look for common ground; we dig in and shoot from the trenches. It is politics as civil war: words are weapons. We don't disagree, we abuse.

We don't debate, we yell.

Paradoxically, when social media gives us greater means to offend each other, we try to silence those we find offensive. Liberalism is under siege.

American political scientist Mark Lilla has condemned the growth of identity politics as a cancer on democracy. He considers himself a liberal (progressive in American political parlance) but fears his fellow liberals have become dangerously obsessed with identity and exclusion, and are sacrificing the idea of shared citizenship. In his book *The Once and Future Liberal* (Harper, 2017), he despairs at how “identity liberalism banished the word ‘we’ to the outer reaches of respectable political discourse”.

Lilla’s book grew out of an article he wrote in response to Trump’s election. It was the most widely read opinion piece in *The New York Times* in 2016. He argued that the fashionable idea of celebrating difference was a “disastrous foundation for democratic politics”. He said the US was in the grip of a “moral panic about racial, gender and sexual identity that has distorted liberalism’s message”; it impedes progressive politics becoming a unifying force.

Lilla believes it cost Hillary Clinton the presidency and propelled Trump to the White House. He has been tracking this trend for years. In an earlier book, *The Shipwrecked Mind* (New York Review Books, 2016), he captured the resurgence of populism.

The shipwrecked mind, Lilla says, is the mind of the reactionary: it is the mind of the person turning away from change, who sees “the debris of paradise drifting past his eyes”. The shipwrecked mind is nostalgic for the glorious past lost. As Lilla writes: “Hopes can be disappointed. Nostalgia is irrefutable.” Yes, things were better back then.

We see the politics of nostalgia in the pledge to make America great again, or the Brexit campaign’s lament for “Little England”. Putin appeals to the longing for the glory of the Soviet empire; Xi stokes Chinese nationalism with references to the 100 years of humiliation by foreign powers.

The shipwrecked mind is the political Islamist, European nationalist, the American alt-right fascist. In Australia it could help explain the lure of Pauline Hanson’s One Nation. These groups may speak about liberation but, like purveyors everywhere of identity politics, depend for their survival on a “permanent enemy” and an army of “endlessly aggrieved” foot soldiers.

Indigenous politics is not immune. We have our “shipwrecked minds”. These are people who would like to imagine themselves as the radicals, disrupters and truth-tellers. In fact, they are the most stifling reactionaries: chained to tradition, they fetishise culture, reject pluralism and shut their ears to discussion.

I thought of these people when reading *The Economist* last December. The feature article probed the rise of identity politics and resurgent nationalism. It drew on the work of Polish social-psychologist Michal Bilewicz, who separates what he calls “altruists” from “narcissists”. Politics in this way becomes a civil war, with everything boiling down to loyalty. The two groups are categorised thus:

ALTRUISTS / NARCISSISTS

Look to the future / Rake over the past

Positive-sum / Zero-sum

Share / Exclude

Work together / Gang up

United by values / United by race and culture
Opponents complement / Opponents are traitors

We know these narcissists all too well: they are the avatars of resurgent populism. They are the most successful politicians of our time. History is the pulse of populist identity politics. This is history as betrayal. It is the narrative of loss, of being robbed of inheritance. This history looms over the present, obscuring progress; the past frames the present and denies the future.

Lilla calls this the “apocalyptic imagination”: “The present, not the past, is a foreign country ... all that was left was memory of defeat, destruction and exile.”

This has become a powerful narrative for many indigenous Australians. It is a history I was raised on: the story of invasion and dispossession, racism and segregation, passed down through the generations of my family. These stories are painful and vivid. They have marked me — at times, I have felt, indelibly. History is where we locate ourselves; it is the foundation of identity. It can help explain so much ongoing suffering and injustice. But it can become a crippling narrative. It has been my struggle — the struggle of all of us — to move beyond it. Not to ignore it or airbrush the worst aspects but to lift its weight from my shoulders. I have no desire to be bound to a history of misery — or, worse, to revel in it.

Historical truth can be elusive, particularly when it is filtered through memory. Friedrich Nietzsche warned us to tread warily; where remembrance is concerned it is worth recalling his words: “There are no facts, only interpretations.” Memory is unreliable and selective; as we have seen, it can be a powerful and destructive political weapon. In the words of French historian Jacques Le Goff: “Memory, on which history draws and which nourishes it in return, seeks to save the past in order to serve the present and the future.”

In his 2016 book *In Praise of Forgetting* (Yale University Press), journalist and philosopher David Rieff challenges the adage that those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it. “Thinking about history ... is far more likely to paralyse than encourage and inspire,” he warns. He says we risk turning it into a “formula for unending grievance and vendetta”.

French historian Ernest Renan was grappling with this idea of history and identity more than a century ago, saying in an essay that nations seek a “collective identity”. Nation, he wrote, is “a soul, a spiritual principle”. But how to form a nation out of the conflicting stories of our past? Renan looked beyond history. His words are an antidote to today’s obsession with remembrance: “Forgetfulness, and I would say historical error, are essential in creating a nation.”

Nations — peoples — do this all the time. We elevate one event over another, we celebrate particular historical figures, we commemorate victories and find glory in defeat. We are always editing history — what philosopher Homi K. Bhabha calls “narrating the nation”. The stories we tell ourselves are what we become. We have to ask: what is it that we want to be?

Identity can kill. Think of Hutu versus Tutsi in Rwanda, Hindu pitted against Muslim in India, Catholic and Protestant in Ireland, Palestinian and Israeli, the blood feud between Sunni and Shia. Identity spawned in history and nourished on violence can exert a deadly hold.

Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen has warned against what he calls “solitarist” identities. He says it can be a good way of misunderstanding nearly everyone in the world. When we divide ourselves, he writes, “our shared humanity gets savagely challenged”.

At its worst, the politics of identity appears to me like that line from Franz Kafka: “A cage went in search of a bird.” It is rigid and conformist. It is policed by self-righteous moral and political guardians. Identity has its own orthodoxy, it imposes its own tyranny.

Cosmopolitanism appeals as a counter to these forces. Its embrace of hybridity rejects identity politics that turns “we” into “us and them”. Kant described this idea of cosmopolitanism as a loyalty to universal humanity. Cosmopolitanism demands that I think harder about identity. It challenges me to find a better answer to the question: who am I? This is a new frontier for indigenous Australians. There has been a tendency to cling to ideas of identity purity or authenticity. This is understandable: historically, indigenous identity has been heavily politicised.

What it means to be indigenous — who is recognised or classified and who is not — has been in an almost constant state of flux. The Australian Law Reform Commission counts 64 separate definitions of Aboriginal. Indigenous (Yiman and Bidjara) academic Marcia Langton once wrote: “For Aboriginal people, resolving who is Aboriginal and who is not is an uneasy issue, located somewhere between the individual and the state.”

Today, communities often determine who is recognised as indigenous or not. Individuals can be required to obtain a letter certifying “Aboriginality”. There is a wariness of hybridity, that someone can hold overlapping or layered allegiance or affiliation.

But how do people with mixed ancestry define themselves? What about an urban-dwelling, university-educated, relatively privileged middle-class person of Aboriginal heritage? They won’t necessarily belong to any exclusive indigenous community, let alone look to it for recognition. They may have communal connections, perhaps to ancestral country, but also may trace their roots back to Italy, China or Lebanon. This is the way of our world; indigenous Australians should be no different.

It is fraught terrain. Identity is the third rail of indigenous politics. Yin Paradies is a scholar who has sought to escape what he calls a “prison-house” identity. Paradies is an example of someone with indigenous heritage who chafes at orthodox interpretations of what it means to be Aboriginal. Paradies — blending indigenous and Anglo-Asian heritage — says he represents both coloniser and colonised: black and consummately white. For this, he says, he has endured personal attacks. He has been labelled a “coconut” (brown on the outside, white on the inside) or a “nine-to-five black”. This hostility comes from a history of suspicion of people “passing as white” or “selling out”. Paradies doesn’t deny what he too calls a “deplorable history of marginalisation, discrimination and exclusion”, but that alone does not define him.

Paradies, like me, is in every way a cosmopolitan. As a journalist, I have reported from more than 70 countries. Mine has been a life spent in the world. Apart from China and Britain, I have spent enough long stretches in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iraq and Israel to feel equally at home in each. I can tell you where to find the best dumplings in

Shanghai or the best chicken meal in Amman; I could help you buy a guitar in Kabul or tell you where to catch an art movie Tel Aviv. I count among my dearest friends colleagues from Iran, Pakistan, Iraq, China, Canada and South Korea.

All of this has shaped me. It has given me a glimpse into worlds I once could barely have imagined.

I live an admittedly privileged life — and that is one of the criticisms of cosmopolitanism, that it is the identity of the rich. But cosmopolitanism is also carried on the winds of trade and war. Every refugee fleeing tyranny on a leaky boat is taking what Bruce Robbins and Paulo Lemos-Horta poetically describe in the opening to their book *Cosmopolitans* (New York University Press, 2017) as “the long, exhausting and perhaps endless journey toward invisible others”.

For indigenous Australians, that journey began — for better and worse — with the arrival of the First Fleet. We took on new names, our skin lightened and we spoke in new languages.

Cosmopolitanism is not always a matter of choice. It has been a colonial project.

Cosmopolitanism asks a tough political question: is there a place for group rights? Does identifying as an indigenous person give me a unique or special claim on the state? If so, under what circumstances? Who decides?

Political theorist Jeremy Waldron has argued there is no place in cosmopolitanism for indigenous rights. To the extent that rights are acknowledged, Waldron says it should be more about contemporary discrimination and disadvantage than historical injustice.

Historian David Hollinger says historical events have “destabilised identities”, weakening political solidarity. Groups are not permanent or enduring; Hollinger says there is too much emphasis on homogeneity. Some may make a case for group right — but don’t ask who actually belongs to the group.

Do I, as someone who lives a privileged life and identifies as indigenous, have an equal claim on programs to close the socioeconomic gap in Australia? Despite identifying with the African-American community, Barack Obama, the first black US president, said his children should not benefit from affirmative action. Cosmopolitans value fluidity and hybridity; they embrace change and prioritise multiple affiliations.

So, where does that leave someone like me? Yes, I am indigenous, but this is not an exclusive identity; it is not unchanging, permanently fixed in time and place. Identity is personal choice, a social construct — but it can also have political implications. We see this around the world in the push for separatism or self-determination based on ethnicity, culture or religion.

Hollinger does not support minority nationalism or group rights that privilege some citizens over others; he says society is stronger by breaking down barriers between groups and increasing “shifting, multiple and hybrid identities”.

Cosmopolitans are accused of downplaying historical injustice and ignoring the causes and impact of economic inequality. Political scientist Michael Ignatieff has identified one of the critical flaws of cosmopolitanism: that it is aristocratic, “the privilege of

those who can take their own membership in secure nation-states for granted". While cosmopolitans may prefer to eschew parochialism or nationalism, their rights are tethered to nation states.

The question of group versus individual rights — indeed, the rights of individuals within those groups — is an enduring dilemma of liberal democracy. It is an ongoing process of litigation and negotiation.

Cosmopolitanism appeals to me, even as I struggle with it. Perhaps that is the point: it is meant to make us uncomfortable, posing as many questions as it answers. One of the great cosmopolitan thinkers, Kwame Anthony Appiah, concedes: "There's a sense in which cosmopolitanism is the name not of the solution but of the challenge." Appiah himself is a living example of what it is to be cosmopolitan: Ghanaian father, British mother; an internationally acclaimed academic, multilingual, multicultural. He is, like me, at home in the world.

Appiah says cosmopolitanism begins with the simple idea that "we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related ... or even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship". It isn't an argument for homogeneity. Appiah may dream of a world beyond race, but he also concedes that is unlikely. Difference, Appiah says, matters, but it need not define or divide us.

My children live in the world Appiah imagines. Just last Christmas my youngest son was in the US on a basketball tour, mostly in Texas along the Mexican border. We had met him in Los Angeles and now had come to New York for Christmas. There we were, huddled together on the New York subway, bound in puffy jackets and scarfs wrapped tightly around our necks. Our jaws were still clenched against the biting cold; we hadn't yet thawed out in the warmth of the subway.

The day before we had been in sunny California: the Los Angeles winter was proving warmer than summer back in Sydney. We were far from what I suppose we would call our home, yet feeling right at home anyway. This has been the pattern of our lives, moving from one country to another.

What does it mean for my children to call themselves indigenous Australians? They have a rich heritage and they embrace it. They have deep kinship and cultural ties. They are part of a community and they enjoy the easy friendship of people just like them.

Appiah asks, "Do identities represent a curb on autonomy, or do they provide its contours?" My children will walk through the world as indigenous Australians, but hopefully not bound to any stifling conformity or identity orthodoxy. They are free to be what they wish to be.

They come from a hard history, but it is not a burden my children should feel compelled to carry. They are not defined by poverty or disadvantage. They are, in fact, like so many other indigenous people today: privileged, urban dwelling, racial and cultural hybrids. They are cosmopolitans.

This is the future my grandfather would have dreamed for us. It is a world he fought for. My children live in extraordinary times. Globalisation has changed us all. Our world is smaller. We move more freely across borders.

We are richer. We carry more computer power in our pocket than NASA required to send man to the moon. We have enjoyed the longest period of global peace the world has seen.

Yet there is a blowback. Terrorism can strike us anywhere. Old religious hatreds have returned. Democracy is in retreat. The political strongman is back. We fear the stranger. Inequality is growing. Robots are taking our jobs.

Who we are increasingly defines what we believe, whom we call enemy or friend.

Australia is swept up in these global currents. Like people everywhere, we live with the wounds of history. As a nation we have to answer the question of Renan: what are we — indigenous and non-indigenous — prepared to forget?

We have those among us who would feed on endless grievance. We have our shipwrecked minds attached to a militant nostalgia. We have our populists who, like populists everywhere, need fear, suspicion and division to stay alive. And like populists everywhere, they spin a compelling tale.

The politics of identity, of separation and exclusion, is not the cure for populism — it is the root of populism. It is dangerous; it has made the world inflammable. Identity is important, the need to belong is instinctive. A sense of belonging gives the world meaning, but it also can distort the meaning of our world.

Liberalism demands vigilance. Calling out injustice and racism, closing the poverty gap, ending mass imprisonment, graduating more kids from school and university, creating jobs: these are Australia's challenges. We have inherited a history, a history that indigenous people carry heavily. But as a nation we can choose to be altruists and look to the future, or narcissists and rake over the past. We can choose to be united by values or divided by race and culture.

The liberal democratic order that emerged from the great Enlightenment thinkers — those who sought liberty, reason and freedom — has triumphed over repressive ideologies. It has not delivered the end of history but it may still be history's best chance.

I think that's what my grandfather was saying.

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