

## Boyer Lectures

### Lecture 5 - Counting Our Victories: the end of Garvey-ism and the soft bigotry of low expectation

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Part of [2012 Boyer Lectures](#)



IMAGE: [PROFESSOR MARCIA LANGTON](#) (PATRICK HAMILTON PHOTOGRAPHY)

*In her final lecture, Professor Langton reflects on the economic transformation underway in the lives of Aboriginal people -- from increasing Indigenous enrolments in higher education, through rising employment in mining and other rural industries, to the explosion of cultural production by Aboriginal people into the Australian mainstream not only on canvas and on the stage, but also in music, literature, cinema and television.*

## Transcript

Australia's mining wealth has had varied impacts on our economy and incomes of Australians. While there is no uniformity, it is clear that the result has increased income levels for a large majority. Aboriginal people have not been exempt from this development. With this new economic status has come social and political change.

I have been counting our victories against the racist tendency in this society, the tendency of the settler state to destroy or control or warp any Aboriginal initiative. This is not a report card, but a simple count of present electoral successes: Ken Wyatt's seat in the House of Representatives, Linda Burney's long record in the New South Wales Parliament, Ben Wyatt's and Carol Martin's seats in the Legislative Assembly of Western Australia, and the four seats in the Northern Territory Assembly held by Alison Anderson, Larisa Lee, Francis Xavier Kurrupuwu, and Bess Nungarrayi Price. These successes reflect not just demography but increasing political sophistication among both Aboriginal people and the political class in Australia. The preparedness of the electorate to accept Indigenous Australians as political representatives who, unlike Pauline Hanson, represent their electorate regardless of race, is a great advance on the state of affairs in the 1960s, the time of my coming of age, when we did not have the right to vote, and were excluded from all national affairs by several racist provisions in the Constitution.

There *is* a general report card on our status developed under the banner of the 'Close the Gap' campaign, designed to measure the progress in overcoming various types of Aboriginal disadvantage in education, health, employment and other socioeconomic categories. The measurement of this status encompasses many institutions, researchers, agencies, and several methodologies and approaches, all with varying sophistication and accuracy. Annually, the federal Parliament receives the Productivity Commission report card on Indigenous disadvantage, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner's Social Justice report card. These are essential reading for obtaining a current picture of the state of affairs. The problem with the report card approach, however, is that it is not required to tell us what caused various measurements to shift up or down the scale.

In these lectures, I have paraphrased fifty years of change in the relationship between Aboriginal people and the mining industry, and the complex historical, social and economic factors at work. During this same period, similar trajectories of radical change have occurred in other spheres, including the overarching relationship between the nation state and Indigenous people, measured by constitutional and legal change.

In recent years, especially with the involvement of Indigenous people in the media, there is more reporting of success. If the conventional mainstream media were the only source of our understanding of these issues, we would be terminally depressed and pessimistic. Many Australians do have a pessimistic, not to say jaded, view of the status of Aboriginal people. We see the simplistic comments from the uninformed readers of newspapers regularly: 'If they worked like the rest of us, they would have nothing to whinge about.' 'Why should taxpayers support these bludgers?' These are the questions asked by our citizens bunkered into the suburbs where no Aboriginal footprint has been seen for more than a hundred years. They read about the budget expenditure on the mysterious category 'Indigenous Affairs', and imagine that cheques are being mailed out to individual Aboriginal people on a weekly basis.

Such naïve views reflect the general unawareness of the actual nature of the 'indigenous affairs' machine. It exists to measure, to categorise and to report. It is administered largely by well-paid white people. Their business is not to write cheques, but to write memos and reports. If they do activate the cheque-writing processes in the bureaucracy, they do so more often to pay the army of consultants producing feasibility reports and evaluations. I receive letters and emails from people of goodwill trying to do something positive and who have tried to engage with the 'Indigenous Affairs' machine. They come away with scathing views of the roundabout of bureaucrats, agencies, websites, application forms and absurd meetings. I have talked to Aboriginal people who have registered with an agency to find employment. Their stories are accounts of Kafkaesque horror. I have my own experiences of being trapped in the dark corridors of this machine, tracking my way through the maze of bureaucracy and papers that seem to reproduce like cancer cells.

Counting the successes, then, is a pleasant pastime that sometimes results in a small measure of hope in a landscape of obstacles, bureaucratic monsters, and traps.

We should not count our progress by measuring them one step after another. The problem is far too complex for that. But one statistic has given me some cause for hope. Professor Ian Anderson, an Aboriginal medical specialist, told me this year that enrolments of indigenous people in first year medical studies have reached national parity with the non Indigenous student enrolments. This statistic tells me so much. I began these lectures by referring to the emergence of an Aboriginal middle class, a phenomenon that has been ignored by the professionals paid to observe and measure our lives. This statistic is an instance of the wellbeing experienced by those Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. Their accumulation of social and human capital in the space of perhaps one, but no more than three generations, has enabled them to send their children to

university to study medicine. This development does not sit well in the standard analysis of the Aboriginal “problem” or the domain of ‘Indigenous Affairs’. Most of the protagonists in the intellectual workforce supported by the ‘Indigenous Affairs’ machine will ignore or refute this singularly important statistic. The anthropologists have accused me of being a ‘conservative’, a ‘neoliberal advocate for assimilation’, of lacking ‘objectivity’, and a litany of other crimes against this hapless discipline. They are flailing about in the death throes of an intellectual paradigm that does not admit the legitimacy of such statistics and their implications.

Poverty, alienation and disadvantage in the Aboriginal community and the history of settler-Aboriginal relations have triggered several intellectual movements and fashions in the last fifty years. I have described the return of the ‘noble savage’ in the wilderness conservation movement in previous lectures. Variations on the ideas in the late Robert Hughes’ tome, *The Culture of Complaint* were fashionable for a while, and so too was Keith Windschuttle’s ridiculous book, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*. There were snide remarks about ‘designer tribalism’ and a new language for race hate emerged. Windschuttle was joined by other rabid denialists of that history, especially in relation to the stolen generations, such as the late Paddy McGuinness, editor of *Quadrant*, Piers Akerman of the *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, Andrew Bolt of the *Melbourne Herald Sun*. Their specious refutations have not survived a decade, and history will treat them with the contempt they deserve.

There are other monsters stalking this landscape, and one of them is a favourite of the professional dissidents of the Aboriginal movement: Aboriginal sovereignty. There is a small and powerful group of Aboriginal people involved in the politics of this domain, and a strident few are advocates of the concept of ‘Aboriginal sovereignty.’ What does this mean? A separate state? Enactment of indigenous rights? Such questions have never been answered, and the concept remains a slogan, one that points to a vaporous dream of self determination but one that does not require any actual activity in the waking world to materialise it. It is Australia’s version of the Marcus Garvey movement of 1950s Jamaica that involved the proto Rastafarians in rituals such as waiting on the wharf for their saviour, Emperor Haillie Selassie of Ethiopia to arrive on a ship and rescue them. In the early 1990s, some advocates for this idea had Aboriginal passports made and travelled internationally using these passports for some years. When Prime Minister John Howard learned about this, he was enraged, and made telephone calls to investigate. A very senior corporate executive called me to ask what he should tell the Prime Minister. I told him to say that they do it to make themselves attractive to women, such as the groupies hanging around in the international forums on indigenous rights. It was

a joke that wasn't funny. It bemuses me that so many people are enthralled by this absurd political ideology. In 1995, Noel Pearson tried to refute it with plain logic. He said

In a world crumbling in the face of the inability of peoples to come to terms with historical grievance and our inability to locate and respect group rights to self-determination within the concept of a unified and peaceful nation - I believe that the only choice available to both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, is to find a way of living together in a unified community which respects our particular and different identities and the particular rights of indigenous peoples. Because, as I often say to the occasional discomfort of both black and white people, Mabo has put to rest two gross fantasies. Firstly it has put to rest the fantasy that the blacks were not and are still not here. The fantasy of *terra* and *homo nullius*. Secondly, Mabo also puts to rest the fantasy that the whites are somehow going to pack up and leave. Co-existence remains our lot.

There is an undercurrent in the reconciliation movement that has gone unnoticed. At public events over the last twenty years, many Aboriginal advocates of reconciliation have addressed themselves not to the settlers who want absolution for their ancestral past in Australia's history, but to young Aboriginal people attracted to the 'Aboriginal sovereignty' slogans. They have tried to deter them from a fatuous political path towards ideas and activities that will improve their lives and sense of self esteem. For all my cynicism about reconciliation and those who coopt the idea to mask the same old intentions, I have respect for these messages from the wise old warriors who brought about the changes during the civil rights era of the 1960s and 1970s.

The message has been received. I heard Neil Wilmet, Aboriginal businessman, president of the Indigenous Business Council, and publisher of the Aboriginal Business Magazine, say at a conference that he was following in the footsteps of his elders who established the Aboriginal medical and legal services in the 1970s. Like them, he is involved in building an institution to assist Aboriginal people. He reminded us that Aboriginal people had established businesses on the Australian frontiers during colonial times, and told a story of his own ancestors in Queensland who were stripped of their property by the State. It was illegal for Aboriginal people to own property and to engage in business. His campaign for Aboriginal business strength is a continuation of the long civil rights movement.

Noel Pearson challenged Michael Mansell and his entourage to develop an ideological consciousness *"that goes beyond absolutist, nihilist daydreaming about what should be, but instead become concerned with how we are actually going to go about making things the way they should be."*

His Cape York agenda over the past twenty years stands in stark contrast to the futile activism of the professional Aboriginal dissidents who cling to their Garveyism. Their ship has not come in, and they have deceived too many of our young people.

But not all. I have been thrilled by the *Redfern Now* television series on ABC television, broadcast during the period of writing these lectures. Produced and directed by Rachel Perkins of Blackfella Films and a magnificent team of Indigenous writers, actors and technicians in collaboration with famous scriptwriter Jimmy McGovern and a range of partners, it speaks to the Aboriginal people who have lived through these turgid political dramas. It depicts the emergence of an Aboriginal middle class with veracity, its members intimately linked to their families living on the block in Redfern, and the transference of Aboriginal cultural values from the Block to the suburbs. It shows Aboriginal values and social practices at work in dramatic scenes of encounters with the police, the struggle of families to deter youth from criminal activities and with mental illness. Leah Purcell's character in Episode 1, 'Family', sacrifices the family holiday in Bali to care for her sister's children when her world falls apart in a psychotic episode. The battle of loyalties and values was brilliantly portrayed. Those who have joined the workforce and earned some of the privileges and assets that most Australians take for granted are not entirely free to enjoy them while others in their family have not been able to improve their circumstances. The bonds of kinship tie these families dispersing across the Australian cities and towns in a cobweb of ancient traditions and modernity's dilemmas.

Artists such as Rachel Perkins and her exceptional team members have done a far better job than anthropologists and the political ideologues in describing these challenges. With minute attention to the intimate details of Aboriginal life at the Block and the tendrils of familial, social and political connection across geographies, class and history, they have broadcast more truth and sociological sophistication into Australian homes than thousands of papers from the intellectual militias of the 'Indigenous Affairs' machine.

Those of us who have raged against the machine and won some few successes know that the challenge lies in large part in capturing the hearts and minds of young people with a message of hope. The elements of that picture of their future that they must imagine for themselves must come not from Garveyism but from opportunities to enable them to live a good life. This is why Noel Pearson's Welfare Reform and education initiatives are so important and effective in transforming the lives of people in Cape York. The inspiration Noel has given to others across the country should not be underestimated. In the face of the rancorous denials from the exclusive club of Noel Pearson

haters, the facts keep stacking up. The majority of Aboriginal leaders have adopted similar strategies to Pearson's. Ben Wyatt, Member for Victoria Park in Western Australia, gave a speech this week that traverses the points made by Noel Pearson a decade ago. Noel denounced 'the soft bigotry of low expectations,' citing American President Lyndon B. Johnson's comment during the civil rights era. Ben Wyatt denounced government policy based on 'palliative economics' – a defeatist attitude 'premised on Aboriginal culture dying'. He said, 'No longer is it acceptable to view regional poverty from the social welfare perspective;' 'palliative economics must be replaced by building relationships between Indigenous communities and industry.' 'Aboriginal people cannot be empowered if they are not willing to prioritise the one key to empowerment – education;' 'If we do not accept that a school in a regional or remote part of Western Australia must perform at mainstream standards, then what is the point of that school? How are we providing Indigenous empowerment with such expectations?' 'We cannot deliver a standard of education lower than what we expect in Perth and then expect "mainstream" jobs to flow. We are, effectively, giving governmental endorsement to a 'palliative education' system.'

A younger generation of Aboriginal people are telling stories through literature, the arts, film and music and speaking back to history and oppression without the burden of the Culture Wars. *Redfern Now*, *The Sapphires*, directed by Wayne Blair; *Toomelah*, directed by Ivan Sen, and *Samson and Delilah*, directed by Warwick Thornton are just some examples of their outpouring of creative work, thinking and writing. While several Aboriginal films have been selected for the Cannes Film Festival and won awards around the globe, in a first for an Australian indigenous director, *The Sapphires* will be distributed internationally by American producer Harvey Weinstein's company. Indigenous filmmakers and television producers have cemented their place in the mainstream winning over audiences and proving their box office success.

They are confident and refuse to be stereotyped. They want to keep some of our cultural traditions, and they reject others. They abhor the abuse caused by alcohol and drugs, but they have compassion for the abusers. They want hope. Recently, I asked Warwick Thornton if the non-Aboriginal audience for *Samson and Delilah* were deluding themselves when they believed it to be a story of hope. In the denouement of this powerful drama his principal characters, a petrol sniffer and his girlfriend who is a victim of rape, retreat to an outstation with little likelihood of a happy ending. His answer was this: 'If they believe that they can live for one more day, then there is hope.' What do these extraordinary Aboriginal storytellers have in common? They are educated; they are successful; they are proud of their Aboriginal heritage; they glow with self esteem; and their ability

to tell these gripping stories through award-winning film and television productions comes from their intimate understanding of Aboriginal life, whether in Redfern or Papunya, Toomelah or Cumeragunga. What is also remarkably similar throughout their work is their view of the Aboriginal dilemma in the struggle with modernity. On the one hand there is the backdrop of the scourge of colonial history, alcohol and drug abuse, the vulnerability of youth in dysfunctional family settings, the constant racism and police presence, and on the other, the resilience of Aboriginal people that sometimes results in a victory, small or large, against the odds. Cultural values and kinship bonds are not by themselves the source of victory; they are sometimes the cause of anguish and conflicted values, of threats to survival, catching the young in a web of alcohol and drug dependency, demand sharing and self-exclusion from the opportunities in the wider world. But these cultural values also strengthen their will to survive. They find self-esteem in celebrating their cultural identity and heritage. Youthful desire for adventure, to go out into the world for new experiences, to climb a metaphoric mountain or catch a dream; these are universal. What Aboriginal youth experience is not so different from their counterparts in Brazil or Africa or Timor Leste, where old traditions and rapid change clash also. The details vary, and sometimes considerably, but these stories of young dreams are the stuff of the human dilemma that most settler Australians or their ancestors left behind in their original homelands. Dickens's novels, such as *The Adventures of Oliver Twist*, are rich with analogies to these postmodern tales of poverty, hunger, hierarchies, repression, exploitation and the desire for something better. It is colonialism and racism rather than class that mark these stories as different. The impacts of the end of feudalism in England, the land tenure revolution and the industrial mills of Dickens's England are similar in many ways to those of the mines of 21st century Australia; and, so similar in their power to transform societies and economies. What I have marvelled at in this heady mix of social change is the resilience of Aboriginal culture. The threat that the old racists, leftists and Aboriginal sovereignty advocates level against the new Aboriginal intellectuals is a prediction that Aboriginal culture will 'die out'. Aboriginal culture has changed dramatically in many parts of Australia, but it survives, as the works of our filmmakers and artists demonstrate. The most important thing is that it is viable, supported more and more not by the welfare state but by the engagement of entrepreneurs, artists, filmmakers and workers in the economy and the accrual of the first generation of private material wealth. I spoke to one of my Aboriginal friends at the Perth airport the other day. He is a successful businessman, and he was heading home to attend Aboriginal Law ceremonies for the next three months, because, he said, 'The old people may not be around for much longer.' These ceremonies will be held not far from the mines about which I have spoken. Successful Aboriginal men and women have dedicated some proportion of this new social capital to cultural maintenance and renewal, and made Aboriginal



endeavours commercially successful. Our culture is no longer simply a country for anthropologists, new age mystics and wilderness campaigners to colonise. Their tragic, necrophiliac and self-serving accounts are no competition for the works of the new guard of Aboriginal creative workers, nor for actual Aboriginal culture. Economic factors have made this possible, just as much as the factors that have contributed to our cultural resilience. Ben Wyatt's point about 'palliative economics' is most timely. The grasp of the welfare state, the protectionist state that addresses itself to an old paradigm of the mendicant natives, is loosening. A new generation of Aboriginal people is turning dreams into reality: education, economic participation, self-esteem and success are part of this new Aboriginal world, and there is no going back.