

Opportunity Lost

by Boris Frankel

Marcia Langton's Boyer Lectures

It is possible that Langton's five lectures will rank as a particularly shameful episode in the ABC's history. For five weeks, audiences were subjected to the kind of vitriol and empirically unfounded claims against the Left and environmentalists usually confined to Andrew Bolt's columns or Alan Jones' broadcasts. Where was the so-called 'balance' that ABC management invokes usually to placate the Right, but never the Left?

In fact, there would have been widespread outrage and condemnation if Alan Jones, Andrew Bolt or other right-wing shock jocks and commentators had articulated Langton's slander that environmentalists are the new racists who keep or want to keep Aborigines uneducated and living in poverty. Why did the ABC permit these views to go unchallenged without inviting someone from the environment movement or other Indigenous groups to balance such ideas in other ABC programs?

Central Themes

Given Marcia Langton's scholarly work and fearless activist history, it was disappointing to find that the five Boyer lectures followed a simplistic narrative of goodies and baddies based on an equally simplistic political geography. The goodies are overwhelmingly located in the north while the baddies largely, but not exclusively, reside in the south. Who are the good guys? Answer: there are two types of heroes. First, the modern mining and resources corporations, especially Rio Tinto Ltd, Fortescue Metals, BHP Billiton and Woodside Energy. In contrast to the old mining industry of earlier decades that fought Indigenous communities and refused to hire Indigenous workers, the new mining and resource sector executives have apparently learned from their predecessors' mistakes. The Native Title Act gave Indigenous communities control of sizeable land areas and this has eventually led to very positive relationships between corporations and Indigenous councils, with Indigenous businesspeople and workers all seeking economic development and social mobility up the middle class ladder.

The second accolade is given to the new Indigenous leaders. According to Langton:

Three in ten Territorians are Aboriginal. They were fed up with left-wing causes imposed from down south, be it live cattle export restrictions, opposition to mining or rolling back the Intervention. Once the party of the frontiersmen and spruikers, and rabidly opposed to Aboriginal rights, the Country Liberal Party has changed its colour—four of its members in the new NT assembly are outback Aboriginal leaders. It seems the Territory's rural conservatives have finally figured out: they have more in common with Aboriginal people than with their kin in the cities. Both groups need land-based industries to support their economies and way of life. Both share a deep disdain for greens, animal liberationists and bureaucrats, whether from Darwin or Canberra. (Lecture 2)

Despite Langton's enthusiastic endorsement of political conservatives, it should not be surprising that many Indigenous people vote conservative. The ALP's record has hardly been anything to sing about. Langton should know from her early years as a Trotskyist that without a sizeable degree of support from 'working-class Tories' no conservative party in the world would have won a majority of votes in the past century. The same is true of Aboriginal voting patterns. It is a surprise, however, that as a long-time Buddhist, Marcia Langton can endorse the incredibly cruel live-export trade (resulting in the horrible deaths of tens of thousands of animals), a trade that should have been banned years ago.

As for the baddies, you guessed it: the Left, greens, animal liberationists and bureaucrats (except, of course, those bureaucrats overseeing the NT Intervention). The Left and greens, Langton claims, hang on to the idea of the new 'noble savage'. Consequently, their 'wilderness' ideology makes Aboriginal poverty invisible. Langton then proceeds in Lecture 2 to embellish this distortion by deploying an old tactic of 'the smear' and 'the Big Lie'.

Whenever an Aboriginal group negotiates with a resource extraction company there is an unspoken expectation that no Aboriginal group should become engaged in any economic development. They tolerate Aboriginal people as caretakers of wilderness only. They only tolerate Aboriginal people living on their land if they live in poverty and remain uneducated and isolated. (Lecture 2)

Contrasting herself and other 'goodies' with the vile 'baddies', she asks: 'How did it come to be that those of us who argue for jobs for Aboriginal people, for policies that encourage entrepreneurship among Aboriginal people, are despised and loathed by that section of the population that can only tolerate the "cultural" Aborigine?' (Lecture 2). But who are these 'baddies' that oppose more jobs for Aborigines and want to keep them as welfare state beggars? Langton can't say because her assertion is a hurtful fiction.

Not surprisingly, she caricatures those who oppose her rabidly pro-development line as the main perpetrators of Indigenous poverty. 'Time and again, native title groups have spent years getting an agreement with a resource company over the line ... only for a ragtag team of 'wilderness' campaigners to turn up with an entourage of disaffected Aboriginal protesters to stop development at the eleventh hour' (Lecture 2). In other words, 'dissidents' are illegitimate and only pro-development values should prevail regardless of environmental degradation and sacred site desecration. As a person with a long history of activism, where does this new authoritarian prohibition against dissent and speaking up in opposition come from? Moreover, a detailed examination of various resources projects that local Indigenous communities have strongly opposed would reveal that their reasons that have nothing to do with a fabricated 'wilderness ideology' of the noble savage.

As for those Indigenous people who reject her politics, Langton's response is equally scathing:

In the south, the predominant issues raised in the media and public domain by Aboriginal advocates concern human rights, reconciliation and 'self-determination'. Practical issues—education, employment and health—take second place. In the north, the predominant issues raised by Aboriginal advocates concern land acquisition, industry and commerce, education, training, employment, and health issues. (Lecture 1)

This simplistic stereotypical view is an insult to all those in the south struggling for better access to and standards of Indigenous education, health and jobs, including her own colleagues at the University of Melbourne, such as Professor Ian Anderson.

It is equally offensive to northern Indigenous activists who treat human rights, reconciliation and self-determination as crucial issues.

Langton continues her tirade against environmentalists in Lectures 3 and 4 with particular reference to the Wild Rivers legislation in Queensland and Tim Flannery. Finally, Lecture 5 tries to link the market to Indigenous culture.

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. 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.

Tellingly, Langton assumes that this new culture has been created by market forces and is silent on the massive and indispensable role that federal and state funding has played in educating Indigenous people, in fostering Indigenous artists on the ABC, SBS and through Australia Council for the Arts grants. Her praise of ABC series *Redfern Now* also contradicts her central thesis about the key role played by the mining industry in Indigenous economic improvement. No business entrepreneurs appeared in this excellent series. All the 'middle class' employed characters either worked in the public sector or in Aboriginal NGOs. This doesn't make them any less real or less worthy of praise but it certainly punctures the narrowly focused faith in the ideology of the market to which Langton wants us to subscribe.

Getting Real about the 'Real Economy'

It is a pity that Langton resorts to stereotyping to advance her arguments, as there is a serious debate to be had on current and future social and economic strategies. During the past twenty years there has been a profound shift among parts of the Indigenous leadership that has mirrored the earlier move to the Right by mainstream political parties. Despite the faults with ATSIC, and there were many, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders have since been robbed of a national representative body.

There are so many unresolved issues relating to recognition, reconciliation and compensation that becoming part of the 'real economy' (Noel Pearson and Marcia Langton's mantra) will not resolve on its own. Langton, however, prioritises Indigenous development economics and sees reconciliation as part of the dead-end 'culture wars', a side-show of little benefit to Aborigines because it is designed to see if a settler colonial nation can be honourable while Aborigines suffer in misery. (See 'Trapped in the Aboriginal Reality Show', *Griffith Review*, no. 19, 2007)

While there is a truth in Langton's views of reconciliation rhetoric as a sideshow for whites, there remain many Indigenous Australians who do not share her desire for marginalisation of these burning issues. Reconciliation may not put bread on the table, but no culture can live by bread alone, especially not in the larger Australian society without rectification of two centuries of colonial abuse.

As to socio-economic strategies to improve Indigenous living conditions, it depends on which parts of the larger Indigenous population we are talking about. It also vitally depends on whether the goal is to 'close the gap' with non-Indigenous people on all key social indicators in a normalising or mainstreaming, standardised fashion, or whether to give those, for example, in the hundreds of small remote communities, the right to participate in framing viable socio-economic development options combined with the retention of their customary cultural practices (a hybrid economic strategy advocated by Jon Altman and others).

Of the approximately 575,000 total Indigenous population, 75 per cent live in major cities and regional towns. In New South Wales, which has the largest Indigenous population of 169,000, 95 per cent live in cities and regional areas, whereas in Queensland, the Northern Territory and Western Australia 22 per cent, 25 per cent and 43 per cent live in remote and very remote small communities respectively. Much of the debate between Langton and other Indigenous policy advocates relates to all Indigenous people. However, it is particularly divisive when it comes to those living in remote and very remote areas.

There is no doubt that mining projects have delivered new jobs and business opportunities for some Indigenous people. But Langton's rose-tinted view of the resources sector is seriously at odds with economic reality. Most people living in

regional towns, or very remote areas have no mines in their immediate vicinity waiting to be developed, even if we were to ignore all environmental considerations. Agribusiness and other land-based business opportunities are also scarce. The reality is that market forces have not gone into many of these remote communities and regional areas because there is no profit to be made. Regional Australia contains too many fragile, crisis-ridden communities. For decades non-Indigenous youth have moved to the cities in search of work and lifestyle, so the likelihood of market forces eliminating poverty for Aboriginal people in hundreds of small communities is fanciful. Even Langton herself partially recognises the limits of the current resources boom and the legacy of former mining towns, now ghost towns scattered across the continent.

Backward-looking reactionaries would be proud of her contempt for environmental issues and defence of a fossil-fuel economy. Langton's desire to see a large Indigenous middle class created by the resources sector ignores the ethical and political economic consequences of mainstreaming. For example, Indigenous people can't suddenly become mainstream and yet be exempted from the same obligations of non-Indigenous people to prevent dangerous climate change. Langton ignores the reality of the 'real economy' that some resources projects will be viable while many others will succumb to global pressures to move to renewable energy and sustainable economies. Her virulent attack on environmentalists may result in short-term benefits for a very limited number of Indigenous workers and entrepreneurs only to see irreplaceable environmental heritage destroyed, carbon emissions intensified and new mining ghost towns appear in ten to twenty years.

Despite some positive programs, the pace of government and private solutions to Indigenous poverty and disadvantage is disturbingly slow. Current Indigenous social and economic policies pursued by the Gillard government and Coalition, state and territory governments are stubbornly committed to either failed or poorly thought through policies for the hundreds of small remote communities. These governments are also increasingly coming under the sway of Langton and Pearson's dangerously deluded conservative market strategy.

Like other market utopians who appear in all political parties, Langton and Pearson see private entrepreneurial activity as the panacea to solving Indigenous misery. The

problem is that the Nirvana of a small business economy free of corporate dominance defies the logic of capitalism, especially in the era of globalisation. Over forty years ago, Sammy Davis Jr. embraced Richard Nixon and promoted black capitalism. Today, in the country of free enterprise, the US ghettos are as desperate as ever and one in eleven African-American men are in prison or under correctional control. Meanwhile, 40 per cent of Native Americans live impoverished lives on reservations or resort to making money from casinos. Similarly, the Third Way strategy of social entrepreneurship that Noel Pearson borrowed from Tony Blair's Britain has largely been an abysmal failure. In the United Kingdom, the successful initiatives have been more than drowned out by the massive growth of inequality and poverty. Pearson's Cape York experiment has benefited from significant corporate and government sponsorship denied to most other Indigenous communities. Yet, the results so far have been poor to meagre at best.

Langton and Pearson want to end passive welfare and give Indigenous people in remote areas a new sense of pride via economic participation in commercial enterprises. Tragically, they blindly ignore that market strategies have overwhelmingly failed to eradicate poverty and marginalisation for Indigenous peoples internationally. If their ideology continues to be pursued in Australia, we will see even more Indigenous people homeless, unemployed and on welfare in the coming decade.

As to the 75 per cent of Indigenous people living in cities and regional towns, their fate is inseparably bound up with the future direction of public policies for all Australians. The more governments pursue neoliberal policies and abdicate their crucial roles in providing employment and properly funded education, health, housing and other vital community services, the more we are guaranteed that both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people will suffer. The ABC has a responsibility to let alternative voices be heard instead of promoting a narrow, market-orientated strategy that, if permitted to completely triumph, will result not just in the prolonged suffering of Indigenous people, but also in the end of public broadcasting itself.

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