

Pearson, Langton, Mundine are not our leaders



by Dr Woolombi Waters

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It was Edmund Burke who is credited with the saying: “The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing”. He was also reported to have said: “The greater the power, the more dangerous the abuse”.

Edmund Burke was a 17th century Irish political philosopher, politician and statesman who is often regarded as the father of modern conservatism.

It is a parable that also occurs throughout the Bible in (Matt. 25:14-26) where Jesus describes a man who did nothing. When the man returned to the lord he was just able to give back what had been given, nothing more.

Though the man had not committed any outright evil, neither did the man do any good (v.25). Jesus labelled the man a “wicked and slothful servant.”(v. 26).

It begs the question how then does Prime Minister Tony Abbott call himself a Christian as he presides over another Stolen Generation?

Paddy Gibson, a senior researcher with the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at University of Technology in Sydney, has raised this issue along with many others, stating that in the Northern Territory five times more Aboriginal children than non-Aboriginal children are being put into care. This is at a greater rate than what was happening during the previous Stolen Generation. And yet we do nothing.

What are people waiting for. Another apology in 40 year's time saying sorry for what is happening now?

We are as responsible now as that generation was then for allowing this to happen. In fact we are even more responsible because we are more aware.

Just over a week ago I did something I promised myself, my wife and my children I would never do again. I walked out of work taking an extended period of leave.

I can no longer justify the compromises I make daily as a Black man working in a position of privilege while our people continue to suffer in our communities.

Today's Stolen Generation is justification enough but to consider also we have the largest suicide rates in the world makes action not only an obligation but a must.

I need to be able to write without the distraction of teaching and the pressure of publication that comes with academia. I am blessed my university is so understanding ... not everyone is so lucky.

Figures compiled by the Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander Suicide Prevention Evaluation Project reveal the rate of Aboriginal suicide in the Kimberley is as high as 70 deaths per 100,000 people. This is more than Guyana in South America, which has the highest international rate of 44 deaths per 100,000 people. Last week the death of an 11 year old child in Geraldton, Western Australia to suicide has once again highlighted the despair our people are living with.

We also have a number of refugees throughout the Northern Territory and Western Australia who have had their dwellings bulldozed and their water supply cut off by government. Again this is only happening because we are allowing it to happen.

The environment is one of hostility toward our Aboriginal Culture, our people and our way of life are being attacked almost daily. Most recently was Marcia Langton claiming our communities are in the grip of an ice crisis, irresponsibly trying to stir up "moral panic" without offering a shred of evidence or proof to support her claim.

The tendency for our own Aboriginal people who have reached middle-class status wanting to assume the identity of conservatives in judging and attempting to micro-manage the lives of their own fellow Aboriginal People is devastating.

Australia's so called "Aboriginal leaders" such as Professor Langton, Noel Pearson and Warren Mundine have no followers in our grass root communities. They demonstrate no foresight into the future or any real vision of hope for our communities. Instead they approach the issues with punitive, uncaring politics that only raises their profile in the White community with no consideration to collective responsibility or community obligation within our Black communities.

I know I am not the only Aboriginal person in this country who is battling their moral conscience, trying so hard to not let what's happening in the Northern Territory affect me as I put my head down and work hard, striving for a better life for my kids.

I, like so many others, am sick and tired of seeing these people in overpaid jobs doing nothing but complaining they are tired, playing computer games or checking Facebook while at work and then judging our own mob who are struggling.

It's the same Blackfella's who continue to post blogs of Black people with no teeth, or drunk and embarrassing themselves. Yes, it is all related. You don't do this when you love your people, their colour and feel connected in your Culture.

So having left the security of work I found myself at the Sovereign Aboriginal Embassy at Musgrave Park in Brisbane. There are around 20 people, mostly old women and men. There are a couple of young people but not many and a few white people, artists and fringe dwellers.

It makes you wonder how we are meant to be taking on the largest and most powerful governments and corporations in the world over the next two weeks in protesting the G20!

But soon you hear how, without funding and limited resources, we are providing travel, food, accommodation, toilet facilities and a voice to the most vulnerable people in Australia.

To the non-Indigenous and those Blackfellas trapped in the security of their middleclass jobs we may appear as a rabble of vagabonds and ragamuffins but together we have created not only within Australia but internationally a network of Indigenous media globally who are watching, reading and supporting every move via social and Indigenous media.

Once the practical necessities of food and accommodation were sorted out a meeting at Musgrave Park turned to self-governance and strategy. Most of that discussion was about developing a strategy of peaceful demonstration and the need to avert violence during the G20.

What was interesting was that at no stage were we concerned with our own mob reacting to violence, even though we are the ones under hostile and daily attack. The discussion instead turned to avoiding opportunities to allow the police to draw us into confrontation and also how we engage with outsiders who may be coming to protest the G20 violently.

Also discussed was the need to protect our old people and our young at all costs if we get caught in the crossfire between these two agitators of violence – White Police and White protesters. After all they are the ones who have subjected violence to every other major city that has hosted the G20 in the past.

And also in our sights at that meeting was Noel Pearson. Only that same day we were meeting at the park Noel Pearson was being hailed as brilliant for his eulogy for Gough Whitlam. He was riding a crest of a wave with some even calling for him to be our next Prime Minister.

As the most well-known and respected Aboriginal man in a turbulent and racist Australia he was surely out of reach ... but there was one small opportunity – he was giving a speech at the Queensland Conservatorium the next day. So we decided we would attend and confront Noel with questions challenging his divisive politics.

As we arrived at the Conservatorium we could see there was security everywhere – from both federal and local police and also men dressed like they had walked out of the set of Men in Black. It was surreal to say the least.

You could almost see the disappointment on their faces when only Uncle Sam Watson, his wife Aunty Cath Watson and I walked in.

Whether the authorities, schools and governments realise it or not we have always been one step ahead. That's how, after attempted cultural and physical genocide over the last two hundred and plus years, we are still here, we still corroboree, we still speak language and we still gather for ceremony when called.

Don't ever take that for granted. Remember they tried to destroy our language, remove our cultural practice and infiltrate our leadership but as I stated previously Noel Pearson, Marcia Langton and Warren Mundine may be able to fill a room of Whitefella's but only we only we can fill a park of Blackfella's.

Uncle Sam now requires aids when he walks and to see this Elder command the attention of everyone in the room when he entered with his wife, Aunty Cath was empowering.

This is the very basis of our Aboriginality. This is the real Aboriginality Noel, Marcia, Warren and others including Rachel Perkins have appeared to have forgotten or abandoned. Our leaders are not chosen on force but instead on wisdom, endurance, age and service to their communities.

Unlike Uncle Sam, who walked in on crutches, Noel walked in flanked by security and a group of middle-aged white men adoring him like teenage puppy dolls. There was not another Aboriginal or female in sight, Black or White.

We entered the lecture theatre and had to wait for another hour before Noel was introduced and went into a long explanation of what we had to change as Aboriginal People, how we had to take responsibility with no apparent responsibility or change being required by White Australians for this to happen.

Rather than the paternalistic, apologetic welfare we are accused of in our communities this was paternalistic, apologetic social justice spoken by a man willing to let every non-Indigenous Australian off the hook, for the wealth they have obtained from generations of Aboriginal nations, from our natural resources, to our intellectual property and also at the same time allowing White Australians to wash their hands of the trauma of youth suicide, cultural genocide, incarceration and generations of racist trauma and abuse we suffer daily.

As much as we all wanted to interject during Noel Pearson's address Uncle Sam, Aunty Cath and I sat silent – we were there as a collective and we knew our strategy. We also knew there were others who were coming later in order to avoid the opportunity for hostility from police and Noel Pearson's minders. We know White people appear to react when we are seen in groups. They openly feel and show how uncomfortable they are when there is just one of us who catches a bus in public or boards a train but 20 of us with this many police and security?

We were never going to give them that opportunity.

It was when Noel was talking about how our peoples need to stop thinking collectively, to take on the attributes of self-interest and become motivated in material possession and introduce greed and jealousy into our communities things really got interesting.

Yes, Noel said all that. He said he "wants jealous mothers" in our community. He wants people jealous of homeowners and those with possessions. This is Noel's answer to our lack of agency and privilege. The whitefella's were all nodding their heads agreeing with everything Noel Pearson was saying and that is when my Uncle Paul Spearim, one of those who had entered through the back door into the lecture room. spoke up.

It really did feel as if we were witnessing the Gordon Gekko "Greed is Good" speech from the movie Wall Street and Uncle Paul, a Kamilaroi songman and ceremony leader, decided it was time to intervene.

Why? Because the very ideology of our custodial obligation and responsibility to look after one another as Aboriginal people was coming under threat.

The predominantly White men who attend Noel's public forums have influence and capital. What Noel has done is rather than move our case forward he has taken the Aboriginal struggle back decades because these White men of influence and power believe what he is saying.

It was time to put our plan into practice. We all knew our spoken roles and we were united. If anyone of us had chosen to speak out as Uncle Paul had done, we were ready to respond

Uncle Sam just nodded and then it was my turn to support what Uncle Paul had said – why? Because that was my Uncle, my Mother’s first cousin and he had just spoken out against Noel and I had a Cultural obligation to back him up.

I addressed Noel directly, introduced myself culturally and we began our discussion. Noel agreed with me that, yes, he indeed had enjoyed the ear of Government for over 20 years going back to Keating, he agreed with me that, yes this was frustrating to others on the ground who are denied that same opportunity and most importantly he agreed with me that in every aspect of progression we had gone backwards in this time, from the new Stolen Generation and our brothers and sisters in custody.

Then after waiting for the Question and Answer session to begin, Uncle Sam spoke. Uncle Sam received a public commitment from Noel that he would meet with us at the Brisbane Sovereign Embassy to speak of our concerns. That is a commitment he is yet to honour.

Then it was Aunty Pat Leavy who told Noel and the White people in that room how she was born and raised on the riverbank of Cunnamulla, raised on a dirt floor. She told Noel how she sacrificed and made sure each and every one of her children graduated from university.

She also explained how even though she buys her clothes from Myers, owns her own house that the White people just like those in that room make way for her when she sits on a bus because they would rather give up their seat than sit next to her.

As with Rosalie Kunoth-Monks months earlier Aunty Pat let everyone in the room know she “was not the problem.”

Within 24 hours this motley crew of Brisbane Blacks had stolen Noel’s thunder as we woke to the story of “Brisbane Elders Abuse Noel Pearson” across the country.

I sincerely hope Noel Pearson keeps to his commitment and meets with us in person at the Brisbane Sovereign Aboriginal Embassy – otherwise it will be an opportunity lost. Not for us but for Noel Pearson and White Australia who listens to him without question.

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