

“So, what DO Indigenous people want?! AND, what can I do about it?”

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“So, what DO Indigenous people want?!”

This question is often asked, but seldom answered, partly because it is the wrong question focused on the wrong people. We do not have an “Aboriginal problem”. This is *NOT* an issue about Aboriginal people. The issue here is not what we can do for “*them*”; it is about what we need to do to redeem ourselves, of the brutality of our past and present relationship with Indigenous people. The question ought to be “what are Indigenous people owed?” and must be asked of non-Indigenous people. In this context, I would respond as follows, “Indigenous people want very little. They just want justice”.

Given that our words have little currency – having broken them so often before – we will be judged by our actions and over time. I think we need to deliver what follows as the foundation upon which a common and respectful future may be built. We must;

1. Acknowledge Sovereignty:

Aboriginal people have been on this land for over 60,000 years, have never surrendered their claims to sovereignty, have never sold their country and have never lost a war. Aboriginal people still live on this land. We must acknowledge that they are sovereign owners of this land. It is only on the basis of this acknowledgement that we can negotiate our continued presence on this land and become a civilized people.

2. Be Honest about our history:

The truth must be told in regard to the facts of history. That is, that Aboriginal people have suffered greatly, but have endured and survived in spite of the conscientious efforts by the dominant culture, including our attempted genocide of their culture (land, language, belief systems and way of life), their society (family, systems of authority, group integrity and rape) and of them as peoples (massacres, removal of children, reasons for and rates of incarceration, deaths in custody, physical forced relocations and structural exclusion - social, legal, by formal government and institutional policy, normative racism and from employment and thus, from a stable present and a secure future – to name but a few). As such, Aboriginal people are *NOT the problem*. They do face huge problems – US and OUR (the dominant) culture. We have to change what we do if Aboriginal people are to survive, let alone thrive.

3. Safeguard Aboriginal Cultural Heritage:

Cultural Heritage can be defined in at least two ways – as physical and as social. In the short term, the remaining physical traces of Aboriginal history and culture must be protected – sacred and burial sites, artefacts, art, ceremonial grounds and so on. Aboriginal people must be given the means and authority to protect these. In the context of social heritage, Aboriginal people must be given the means of preserving their languages, society and people. From the denial of their Land Rights, through the on going ‘Deaths in Custody’, to the continuing removal of their children, the dominant culture seems to still be pursuing policies that equate to a sort of relentless ‘genocide by stealth’. We must act to stop the destruction before this unique Australian heritage is lost to us all.

4. Recognise and Respect Aboriginal culture:

Aboriginal cultures are the oldest surviving cultures on this planet. They lived in relative harmony on this land and as such, have a great deal to teach us, if we are to cultivate a sustainable and just society. Aboriginal people deserve respect not the derision we have for them as we destroy this, their, land. We must recognise this as fact and learn to behave accordingly. We must also realise that given the damage we have done in every one of the generation with which we have had contact over the last 200 years or more, that it will take years, perhaps even a generation or two, for Aboriginal people to rebuild their society – providing, we STOP sabotaging their every effort! Rebuilding will take time, money, mistakes, confusion, conflict and great leadership. Our job is to provide the resources, a stable and safe context and if asked, particular expertise; it is the job of Aboriginal people themselves to work through the mess we have created for them and to determine their own futures.

5. Seek Aboriginal representation in all areas and at all levels of civic society:

To negotiate for their immediate survival and a longer-term prosperous future, Aboriginal peoples need the status of being ‘equals as negotiating partners’. As such, Aboriginal people must be allowed to the time and means of developing and be resourced to operate their own systems of representation by which to interface with the dominant culture (they already have models of governance that, if allowed, supported and adequately resourced, can work effectively within their own communities). These representative mechanisms will be the foundation of future relationships between the governments and other institutions of the dominant culture and Aboriginal peoples.

6. Pay reparations:

The past cannot be forgotten or ever entirely forgiven. What has been taken is nothing less than almost ‘everything’ - the land (economic base and state of place), the languages (meaning and unconscious connections), culture (the way of being and spiritual possession) and family (the founding relationship between the self and all others in the world). Money will not compensate for the losses, but it may enable a fresh start – built from a secure economic base. Besides, in the dominant culture, money is the means of compensation and should not be denied to those whose losses, at our hands, are the greatest.

So, What Can I do?

If the above is to come alive YOU will need to act. So as a response to the next most frequently asked question – “what can I do about it?” I propose a matrix of options, from which people can chose the most relevant and/or do-able activity. It looks something like this, but remember there is a lot more that can and should be done. Talk to ANTaR Vic if you are having difficulties.

CATEGORY	ACTIVITY LEVEL 1	ACTIVITY LEVEL 2	ACTIVITY LEVEL 3	ACTIVITY LEVEL 4	ACTIVITY LEVEL 5	ACTIVITY LEVEL 6
1 Acknowledgement	Verbal at meetings	Use building plaques & car stickers	Fly the Flags, wear a tie-pin or lapel badge	Seek, pay for & act on advisory input	Public signage & building names	Use/Change street & other names
2 Honesty	Whose country are you on?	Where are you from – really? How racist are you?	Educate self & others* re own & inherent societal inequality	Build into all NGO policy & procedure	Build into all Govt policy & legislation	Build into all Corporate policy & procedure
3 Safeguard	Participate in a “Learning Circle”	What can you influence /safeguard?	Know and speak of Aboriginal days/events	Learn some local Language	Ensure right of access (eg. hunt & fish)	Include in Park & forest management
4 Recog. & Respect	Build into family, work, faith, friends culture	Get political: Inform, educate, agitate & advocate	Mark/celebrate important days/events	Understand cultural obligations (eg. HR policies)	Ask for info & pay for expertise	Land: Pay-the-rent
5 Representation	Join a ‘solidarity’ & activist group – to support Aboriginal voice	Change existing org & representational culture to suit Aboriginal people	Create the expectation of self-determination as the norm	Make demands on NGO and faith groups	Schools, Tafe & Uni – ensure that Aboriginal viewpoint is heard	Govt (all levels) & Corporate policy bodies
6 Reparations	Make space, provide resources & allow time	Human Remains returned from Oz & OS	Create and honour ILUA’s & other agreements	Establish secure opportunities	C’ty. State and LGA land returned	Land returned with freehold title

*NOTE: Schools, Tafe and Uni; NGO and faith groups; Workplace and recreation place; Govt policy & legislation; All other institutions; Corporate

CONSULTATION – means to listen, not talk, and beware not to swamp!

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What do you think of all this? Questions for further discussion

- What are some of the common barriers (mental, material, other...) people might face in being active?
- What are some things non-Indigenous people can do without asking Aboriginal people (if any)?
- What are the things that worked for you in making you interested in and/or committed to 'doing something'? How can we work to give others experiences like that?
- What are your 'spheres of influence' – who are you connected to and how? (eg, family, sport, faith, school/uni, union, ...?) Brainstorm or map out on paper. Is there a way of generating conversations and/or working together with people in your network?

Where to start learning more:

BOOKS

Victorian history – a great place to start and an easy read too

Tonkin, Daryl & Carolyn Landon (1999)

Jackson's Track: Memoir of a Dreamtime Place, Melbourne: Viking.

Colonial violence – takes you back further than *Jackson's Track* – compelling and confronting novel set on the Hawkesbury River, NSW

Kate Grenville (2005)

The Secret River, Melbourne, Text.

An easy-to-read and original essay on how to gain honour as a nation

Germaine Greer (June 2004)

Whitefella Jump Up: the shortest way to nationhood, Melbourne, PROFILE BOOKS

WEB

Go no further than Gary Foley's website. History of the Koori struggle. All other worthwhile sites can be found through Gary's site via links.

**Gary Foley's Koori History Website

<http://www.kooriweb.org/foley>

VIDEO

Melbourne Uni's ERC Library [<http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/erc/index.html>] has all these and you can watch them in the library!

Whiteys Like Us, Rachel Landers, 1999.

Ningla A-Na, Alessandro Cavadini, 1972.

Freedom Rides, Rachel Perkins and Ned Landers, 1995.

Gulpilil: one red blood, Darlene Johnson, 2003.

RADIO

Fire First

3CR, 855AM, Wednesdays 11am-12midday

Indigenous radio, Melbourne

3KND, 1503AM

ANNUAL EVENTS

Day of Mourning/Survival Day/Invasion Day: 26 January

Sorry Day: 26 May - Reconciliation week

NAIDOC: First week of July

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