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The struggle for Aboriginal rights

Gary Foley

*In August, long-time Aboriginal activist **Gary Foley** spoke at Socialist Alternative's Marxism Today conference in Melbourne. Here we reprint extracts from his talk.*

Today still the popular mythology among too many Australians is that Aboriginal land rights is all about some mystical, spiritual, religious connection to the land.

Well, I put it to you that that's horseshit, and if you approach indigenous affairs from the perspective of thinking that you want to be deeply and profoundly spiritually moved, and are admiring of the culture and you think dot paintings are fantastic, then you will never really understand why and how Aboriginal people have arrived at the point in Australian history where we are now ...

We were duded by the Native Title Act. Cast your minds back, the Mabo decision came down [in 1992] and the scaremongers came out of the woodwork. Jeff Kennett, the WA Premier, every man and their dog jumped on the bandwagon and said "the Aborigines are going to take Australia", which was nonsense. Mabo related to an obscure out of the way island - that's the only place that Mabo affected anything. But there was this big scare campaign mounted that Aborigines were now going to claim back all of Australia.

As a result of that scare campaign, [Labor PM] Paul Keating decided, we've got to placate the white Australian masses, and so under the pretence of creating an Act that's supposed to benefit us, the Native Title Act confirms white ownership of land in Australia. It's about clarifying that whitefellas own Australia, it's not about giving anything to us except this thing called native title, the most inferior form of land tenure under British law.

The Native Title Act was a fraud. It was negotiated by a group of unrepresentative swill - unelected, self-appointed or government appointed. Keating said we'd better find some Aboriginal people to negotiate with, we'll have you, you and you. That's how the so-called A-team of Aboriginal negotiators came about, and what an incompetent bunch they were. The Professor of Indigenous Studies at Melbourne University, Marcia Langton, Mr Noel Pearson ... these people are not mugs, and yet they signed off on an Act that I took one look at and said, this is shit.

We saw Noel Pearson and Marcia Langton and Lois O'Donohue up there in Parliament clinking champagne glasses, patting themselves on the back, patting Paul Keating on the back, saying this was one of the greatest things in the history of Aboriginal Australia. A mere 10 years down the track, ask Noel Pearson today about the Native Title Act - he'll blame everyone in sight, the judges, the interpretation of the Act - anybody except him and those who agreed to this lump of garbage. Today even Marcia Langton and Noel Pearson concede that the Native Title Act is one of the biggest frauds perpetrated against Aboriginal people in history.

So what are we left with today? We're left with the remnants of the A-team, hand-picked, self-appointed Aboriginal spokespeople. Noel Pearson is still there, he's the favourite boy of Peter Costello. Then there's my cousin Warren Mundine, the white sheep of the family. This is the guy who advocates private home ownership for Aboriginal Australians: we've got to get away from communal ownership, we've got to get with the modern world, we've got to have individual home ownership to instil in us a sense of responsibility and an understanding of finances to make us better people, better able to go to work 9 to 5 and be good citizens and all this sort of shit.

So here's Warren Mundine last weekend in the newspaper in his backyard, skiting that he is a third generation Aboriginal private home owner, and this has instilled into him all these values ... His grandfather along with my grandfather, were key activists in [black nationalist leader] Marcus Garvey's philosophy. And his grandfather would be turning in his grave if he heard himself being cited as an advocate of private ownership and private enterprise and economic rationalism and some of these other lunatic ideas that Mundine and Pearson and co. now think are desirable things for us to think about.

When I began life as a political activist - after I got a good kicking from the NSW coppers - the great thing for me learning the ropes as a political activist was that there was no such thing as the black bourgeoisie in 1969-70.

They simply did not exist. In 1974 when Whitlam set up the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and they employed the first ever Aboriginal Commonwealth public servants, they came close to what you could call a black bourgeoisie. In 1974 there were four of them, so few I can still name them for you. Today? It's a battle to stop our kids trying to aspire to what the Pearsons of the world want them to aspire to. It's the black bourgeoisie who sold us out in the time of Keating and again now, as John Howard is pulling in his little hand-picked group of advisors.

The ALP was looking for a couple of tokens for their vice-presidents. They needed a token woman so they got Carmen Lawrence - who introduced mandatory detention to Australia, which has put more blackfellas in jail than any other thing in the last 10 years. And who do they get as the "token boong"? Warren Mundine, who's been an apparatchik in the party for long enough to float to the top. He nailed his flag to Mark Latham's mast ... but Labor's ship sinks, so Mundine spots Howard and Costello's ship, climbs on board and is now very much part of John Howard's little hand-picked group of advisors. The Deputy President of the ALP, in bed with Howard - and the ALP hasn't sacked him. We all know what the ALP thinks of rats. If Warren Mundine had been white, he'd have been sacked. The ALP won't sack him, because they are racist.

In the discussion following Gary's talk, he was asked about the prospects for the struggle for Aboriginal rights.

The brutal reality out there is that the jails are full, the people are still living in the same shit they have for 30 years, all the social indicators show that the majority of Aboriginal people are essentially still living in Third World conditions.

In the last 20 years we've seen the emergence of this new group of "representatives", people who purport to speak on our behalf. I don't think Warren Mundine or Noel Pearson or any of that crew are representative, but they're so aggressively promoted - Noel Pearson has a big article about him every 5-6 weeks in Rupert Murdoch's Australian. And this is the way I reckon people should evaluate who's who. If Noel Pearson is promoted by the likes of Rupert Murdoch and loved to death by Peter Costello and is John Howard's little brown-eyed boy, then people need to think about where this guy is coming from. There's still too many people who think he's a legitimate spokesman for the Aboriginal people just because he can talk pretty ...

So I think it's a lot more difficult, there's a few more generations of struggle to go yet while you've got so many blackfellas in jail, both here and all over Australia - and it's people who are coming out of those sort of conditions who are the ones who are going to take the struggle to the next stage, whatever that may be.

In response to a question about how the talk of "Australian values" sat with him, Gary enlarged on his objection to individual land ownership.

The values that have sustained us through the protection years, the welfare years, the stolen generation years and the apartheid years are essentially those values that derive from an extended family community, the belief that we all go together or we don't go at all, and that ultimately the answers have to be communal rather than individual answers. I can't come at Warren Mundine's proposition that individual land ownership is going to do much for communities where there is extensive dysfunction, which has to do with historical issues of dispossession and oppression. Just giving someone a house in the suburbs is not going to solve that.

In fact giving someone a house in the suburbs is the promotion of values that are anti-Aboriginal. [This] was exactly the policy pursued by the NSW government in the 1970s, and it's how they emptied Redfern of all the Aboriginal people that lived there 30 years ago. The Block today is about a thousandth of what it used to be - when I lived in Redfern there were close to 30,000 people there. They got moved into suburbia by NSW government policies that decided that Aboriginal families should be housed one family per street in the wastelands of the western suburbs of Sydney. That's imposed and enforced assimilation. And assimilation equals genocide!

Finally, Gary agreed with a speaker who argued that calls for individual land ownership are part of a softening-up process for a new land grab, opening the way for more uranium mines.

Absolutely. If you were a white property developer on the north coast of NSW and you wanted to acquire some of the fantastic land that the Gumbainggir people own - freehold title, none of this Mickey Mouse native title - you can't do it because it's communally owned, you'd have to con every Aboriginal owner in the district, which would be an impossibility.

Whereas if somehow you could create a system where that was broken up into individual parcels for each of the Aboriginal owners, it makes it so much easier for a property developer to go in and convince individuals to sell their plots and slowly but surely the land disappears and ends up in the ownership of white Australia. It's the thin end of the wedge that denies us what little we've got left.

