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Rundle: worse than horse love

by Guy Rundle

There is only one thing worse than be taken as an enemy of News Limited, St Oscar might have written, and that is to be taken up as their friend. Take the case of Bess Price for example. Price is an Alice Springs-based indigenous activist, about whom opinion tends to divide quite markedly. Some see her as a truth teller; others as someone who speaks for communities—such as Yuendumu—that she doesn't live in.

She was a strong supporter of the Howard government Northern Territory intervention, and is much-feted by the Bennelong Society, the pro-assimilationist lobby group. She speaks several languages, holds a science degree and has worked in a wide variety of fields. Oh, and she's also worse than having s-x with a horse.

You probably didn't know about the science degree or the other stuff. But you knew about the equinophilia comparison. Why? Because last week The Australian took a tweet by another leading Aboriginal campaigner comparing Price with horse-love, and made it the basis of a front-page story.

Larissa Behrendt's tweet, made at the time of Q&A, went to her 800 followers, and instantly disappeared down the twitter hole. The Australian's story retrieved it, and presented it to far more than 800 readers (unless it was a Monday edition).

Indeed The Australian was so outraged at this slur on a noble activist that it repeated the story the next day, using Behrendt's reaction as the hook, to talk of how shocking it was that Bess Price had been compared to horse love.

Then it went on to feature in the op-ed section, with an extraordinary article by Marcia Langton that, among other things, recapitulated horse-love comparisons, followed by another article by Chris Kenny, which reminded anyone who didn't know, that Bess Price was associated with horse-love.

Today, it went after Behrendt from a different and even more spurious angle related to tertiary teaching—but still found time to remind readers (800 or so; it's a Monday) that Bess Price had been compared to the passion between man, woman, and pony.

Quite possibly, at some point in this process, Price may have realised that The Australian did not necessarily have her best interests at heart. Amazingly, they were not overly concerned with an attack on her dignity in the borderline private/public space of twitter; indeed, they were utterly indifferent to it.

Whatever one thinks of her opinions, Bess Price has had some courage in saying what she thinks, and associating with groups—the Centre for Independent Studies, the neo-assimilationists—which would win her few friends in indigenous Australian politics, and which form part of the conveyor belt by which News Limited creates controversies.

For this she has been rewarded with the role of patsy. News Limited will continue to run with the story until all that people remember of Bess Price is the horse-love comparison. It did that, no one else.

The attack on Behrendt is doubtless a matter of newsworthy public controversy, doubtless, doubtless. Doubtless, it has nothing to do with the racial vilification procedure that is being conducted by Behrendt and eight others against News Ltd columnist Andrew Bolt; nor is it in any way connected with the defamation action that Behrendt and another leading indigenous figure took against Noel Pearson for two columns he wrote for *The Australian* a couple of years back; an action that was settled out of court by News Limited's lawyers very quickly indeed. Doubtless, doubtless.

But even if one discounts these factors, it is clear that *The Australian* is prosecuting and playing host to an extraordinary war around indigenous politics. Hitherto, one thought that this war was formed along fairly predictable lines, with the right advancing a strongly neo-assimilationist line.

Rural Aborigines should abandon any idea that their communities could form the basis for an alternative path to modernity, mixing the new and the old in a new way; instead they should abandon much of what remained of their way of life as a "culture cult", and simply melt into an undifferentiated modernity.

Quadrant editor Keith Windschuttle—who in the 1970s had written of the coming Aboriginal peasant revolution—was one such advocate; a more recent, and rational one, is Gary Johns. The left version of this is Noel Pearson's idea that Aborigines can get six hours of ultra-programmed rote learning in the morning and the teaching of culture tacked on in the afternoon, as a separate entity.

Ranged against these figures are a variety of leaders who believe that the wishes of Aboriginal people in such communities—which is overwhelmingly for the continuation of those communities on a collective basis, and with the continuation of a distinctive way of life—should be the cornerstone of any question of what happens next, and that such should be encoded in an expanded notion of rights, quite aside from the fulfilment of existing rights such as that of adequate health care and housing provision.

So, now, here is the paradox. The right is determined to spurn the "culture cult", and the notion that there is some sort of indigenous authenticity. It wants Aboriginal people to be mobile, to move to the cities, to aspire to the best that the world has to offer.

Sadly for it those that have—those such as Behrendt, the film director Richard Frankland, the (Torres Strait islander) lawyer and writer Terri Janke—all support the notion of an "independent/rights" agenda, and support those people in remote communities who want to assert their legal and human rights through the courts.

So in order to attack them politically, it has found it necessary to insist on the “authenticity” of remote activists such as Bess Price (even though Price lives in Alice Springs). And Price, as you may have read in *The Australian*, and through it, at the top of Google, is worse than s-x with horses.

That central division has given a base for various people to push their own agendas. Chris Kenny’s reprise of the tweet—that Bess Price ... well you got the idea—was simply a sycophantic, hysterical hatchet job, tipping into the self-parodic:

“In the ABC television green room before Monday night’s Q&A program, Bess Price confessed to apprehension, but told me she was keen to talk about her direct experiences of indigenous disadvantage. And so she did, sharing her support for the Northern Territory intervention with a studio audience and more than 600,000 viewers, making it clear she favours ongoing tough measures to tackle violence and promote education in indigenous communities.

Winding down afterwards, Price was pleased she’d come to Sydney from her home in Alice Springs to make her point. Little did she know that a tasteless tweet aimed at her and her heartfelt views was already circulating ...”

Yes! A tweet! Winging its way, even as we speak ... Quite aside from this melodramatic rendering, Kenny’s account drips with condescension for Price, who came all the way from Alice Springs to tell her heartfelt message. Look at ‘em tall buildings, pa. Jesus, spare us.

But if Kenny’s account was merely stupid, Marcia Langton’s was altogether more troubling. A long-time Melbourne resident, with a well-appointed Melbourne University position, and a series of articles to her credit in the style that *The Australian* would usually assess as postmodern gobbledygook, Langton made headlines a few years back when she declared that she would send her daughter to an elite private school, to avoid the racism endemic in the state system, i.e. in white Australia.

Langton has a perfect right to do all that, but it makes it a little hard to play the outsider card as she does. But what is even better is the way she plays it—with the culture cult card:

“I have never in my life witnessed such extreme disrespect shown by a younger Aboriginal woman for an older Aboriginal woman, except where the perpetrator was severely intoxicated on drugs or alcohol. Nor have I witnessed, except once or twice, such snide dismissal by a younger Aboriginal woman of an older Aboriginal woman’s right to express her views. Those of us who were brought up in the Aboriginal way were taught from a young age to show respect for our elders and not to speak while they are speaking. This is a fundamental and universal law in Aboriginal societies.”

Got that? Debate and argument between Aboriginal activists can’t be carried on in the manner of robust modernity, in which people routinely insult each other, fairly or otherwise, but according to special rules. Given that the debate was over conditions of social breakdown and widespread violence between Aboriginal people, one can go out

on a limb and say that Marcia has witnessed more disrespect for elders than one off-colour joke. I've seen worse intra-indigenous disrespect for elders than that in the Spring St supper club, let alone the far north. Come on.

Langton's desire to score some cheap points takes her into some pretty nasty territory—a reprise in fact of the charge not only that non-urban Aboriginal people are less authentic than rural indigenous people:

“Behrendt, on the other hand, was raised in suburban Sydney. Her mother is white, and her late father was removed from his family ...”

Elsewhere, scorning all restraint she dives into the eugenics gene pool that Andrew Bolt has established:

“Australians, whether they support reconciliation or not, must be astonished at the viciousness of the twittering sepia-toned Sydney activists.”

Well many are perhaps astonished at the viciousness around—Langton's mention that Behrendt has “no children”, or her false assertion that Behrendt has given up “human rights” activism and turned to writing novels (she is doing both), or a great deal else about the debate.

They might also be astonished at Miranda Devine's contribution in *The Daily Telegraph* (which reminded those readers who didn't know, that Bess Price is best known for being unfavourably compared to horse love) that such bestiality gags were typical of the “depraved”, inner-urban blah blah—before her tweet about someone “rogering gerbils” turned up.

And on, and on. Langton is as condescending to Price as Chris Kenny was, which now appears to be the News Limited house style, but above all she is taking the opportunity to lob a few missiles from one side of the political divide within indigenous politics, between those following a rights agenda, and those willing to make their peace with more ad hoc solutions (or non-solutions).

Much as Professor Langton and others would like to pretend that such a division has an urban-rural, mixed-race—“pureblood” (ugh) basis, it doesn't—it's a political division pure and simple, and representatives can be found on both sides. Langton's remarks about “sepia-tinted” Aborigines will come back to haunt her and the debate—she should take a swatch to a photo of Charles Perkins next time she feels the urge to take that tack. Perhaps he was a “sophisticate” too.

Meanwhile, News Limited has gone on the same nihilistic tear as one can see at play, for example, in the UK phone-hacking scandal. The latest wheeze—an outright smear. Beneath the headline: “Uni report adds to scrutiny on Behrendt”.

The story itself, of a review of indigenous education at UTS, where Behrendt heads the Jumbunna Unit, which found the usual mixed bag of feedback about performance, notes:

“respondents were happy with the student support ... some submissions to the review criticised Jumbunna for focusing more on research than its role in providing student services”

and

“The review doesn’t make any specific reference to Professor Behrendt or any other academic.”

concluding

“The revelation of the report will put more pressure on Labor to choose a new head [other than Behrendt] for its indigenous higher education review ...”

Christ, that really is a Watergate they got going there. An Australian university doing research. Call the cops. Mind you, they did get a chance to remind people, just in case anyone had forgotten, that Bess Price is worse than horse love.

This would all be grimly funny, if it weren’t so vicious, empty, and nihilistic—a confluence of hidden agendas, none of which have the remotest connection to a barely registered bad-taste joke. For all their calls for Aborigines to get out of parochial contexts to strive for the best, etc, etc, the right has no hesitation in pushing a ridiculous division between real and sepia Aborigines, but is happy to take down one who has gone further than most people, white or black—from a childhood in marginal far outer-suburban Sydney, and Aboriginal identity from birth, to a doctorate from Harvard Law School, authorship or co-authorship of half a dozen legal texts, two prize-winning novels, and heading innumerable bodies and inquiries.

These are not things everyone can do—indeed the failure of some other designated “dutiful daughters” to step up to the challenges of next generation leadership may be the source of some of the anger flying around.

But from what I’d been reading in *The Australian*, this, rather than the “authenticity” model is what Aborigines should be aspiring to. They just shouldn’t have their own ideas when they get there. For if they do, there will be no limit to the destruction and calumny heaped upon them.

A wonderful lesson for any young Aboriginal activist who might be thinking of sticking their head above the parapet. And one wonders if there is anyone with even a modicum of decency on the right to raise even the smallest voice of protest about this sort of old-school smear—one in which Behrendt has been taken down only marginally more dismissively than has Bess Price ... who, as you may have read in *I*, is worse than horse love.