

## If I Can Dream

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January 26 2022.

Each year at this time of year Indigenous Australians barely tolerate a renewed anguish regarding the national celebration of our country Australia. For all indigenous Australians who are in tune and steeped in their culture, they know this has been and is still “our” country, our traditional lands for at least 60 000 years.

The day for us has long been a difficult symbol for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people who see it as a day of sorrow and mourning, a celebration for the British occupation and colonisation of the Aboriginal people of Australia.

The Dutchman, Willem Jansz, was the first European to access the Greater Australian lands in 1606; however, the first British voyage into the region was managed by William Dampier in 1699. The two voyages had shared interest in the acquisition of knowledge about the Pacific Ocean, the Australian lands, and the suspected maritime trade routes, and on how to take control of all these. The second British voyage into the region was led by Captain James Cook, with Botanist Joseph Banks in company. Dampier would be later court martialled for cruelty.

The two parties arrived in the territory of the Gadiwara Band, known today as Botany Bay, on the 29th of April 1770, and as mandated by King George.III, they mapped out the Australian lands for British annexation (Smith, 2011). This cartographic voyage was immediately followed by the first fleet of convicts, led by Captain Arthur Philips in 1788, who without delay began the rapid colonization of Australia (Rogers, 2001). With the continued inflow of British convict fleets, and the use of other strategies, the British established a colonial state over the Indigenous Australians to this day. (Genger, 2018).

Australian Indigenous Peoples have however repeatedly established that they have been existing on their ancestral lands “from time immemorial” (National Museum of Australia, 2001, p.3). The Anbarra clan, for example, explains that the lands, fauna, flora, aqua, sediments, aerial and human knowledge (collectively called in their language a *wangarr*) were created by the Supreme spirit in the time before living memory (Jaconline, n.d).

Economically, pre-colonial Indigenous Australians engaged in complex trade exchanges in land, mining, and quarry materials such as flint, pituri, ochre, pearl shells, drum, canoe, artefacts, etc., with other peoples and those from Indonesia (National Museum of Australia, 2001, p.8).

The British were given explicit orders from the King. 1787 - Before departing England, Phillip’s instructions of 17 April 1787 included the following:

*“You are to endeavour by every possible means to open intercourse with the natives, and to conciliate their affections, enjoining all our subjects to line in amity and kindness with them. And if any of our subjects shall wantonly destroy them, or give them any unnecessary interruption in the exercise of their occupation, it is our will and pleasure that you do cause such offenders to be brought to punishment according to the degree of the offence.”*  
(Historical Records of New South Wales, Sydney 1889)

History will demonstrate most egregiously, that these orders were not followed. When Cook landed his views of the local inhabitants were as follows.

*"From what I have seen in the natives of New Holland they may appear to some to be the most wretched people on earth; but in reality they are far happier than we Europeans .....they live in tranquility which is not disturbed by the inequality of condition. The earth and sea of their own accord furnishes them with all things necessary for life.....in short they seemed to set no value on anything of their own nor any one article we could offer them. This is my opinion argues, that they think themselves provided with all the necessities of life....."*

*"All they seemed to want is for us to be gone"*

*(Capt. James Cook, 29 April, 1770 – Log of the Endeavour)*

The next 250 years, despite the accuracy of Cook's assessment of the natives attitude's and desire, has been an existence in British dominance and colonialism.

The first two hundred years of interaction between the two Australian cultures has been a tragic story of violence, imprisonment and suffering. It has become patently obvious that the passivity and disempowerment of our welfare condition is, together with racism and the legacy of our colonial dispossession, the fundamental causes of socio-economic dysfunction in our society today.

In 1888, the centenary was widely celebrated by the colonialist population with a regatta in Sydney harbour and other festivities to celebrate "Landing Day" or "Foundation Day".

In 1888 the New South Wales premier at the time, Henry Parkes, was asked which activities would be included for Aboriginal people in the celebrations marking a centenary of British colonisation of Australia. He replied: **"And remind them that we have robbed them?"**

Despite our timeless occupation stretching 1000's of years, Australia historically acknowledges an empirical history of an emerging nation built on immigration, diversity and a fair go for everybody. However, this has not always been the case for Australian indigenous people until a significant step was minimally rectified in 1967 and not followed up on until 1975 and 1992.

The Indigenous Australians' culture has not lost its intrinsic material and spiritual dimensions. Materially, we were well established in hunting and food gathering. We existed and lived in different clan groupings, and had our unique and successfully enduring laws, indigenous conflict resolution principles, customary practices, and social activities. We are still strongly homogenized around our core values such as relationality, communal harmony, restorative welfare, religious beliefs, and respect for the sanctity of life.

Ever-present in our consciousness as Indigenous Australians is a deep-felt sense of pride in our personal identity. It is our identity as Australia's first peoples that characterises our cultural distinctness relative to the rest of Australia and its migrant origins, and it is through our identity that we assert our social, cultural and political autonomy. In a very real way our identity is our last frontier in terms of our symbolic resistance.

Indigenous people in this country are still traumatised by our recent history and the policy platforms which embraced the current status quo of social exclusion and race based discrimination. It is a legacy which the indigenous community live with and are shaping the lives of subsequent generations. Until this perverse national policy attitude is aligned to a more inclusive and socially equitable footing, indigenous people will remain anchored to the lower levels of socio-economic and political advocacy.

Indigenous Australians experience significant disadvantage across almost all aspects of life including health, employment, education and the criminal justice system (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 2005). *'Closing the Gap'* is considered one of the most significant socio-economic challenges facing our society.

To illustrate the notion of *"valuing difference and diversity"*, I hold the view that productive societies are those that are able to negotiate cultural differences, build alliances and inter-cultural collaborations. It provides for a collaborative definition and analysis of the reciprocal community needs and aspirations of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people and their links with economic and social trends, political directions, and the vision and goals of our country.

The social exclusion framework is simply a way of helping us to understand why some people are excluded and some are not. It is particularly useful in helping us to understand the factors that contribute to social inequity because it goes beyond poverty and incorporates the roles that political, economic and social factors play.

Part of the picture of social exclusion of a group can be conveyed by a statistical profile. While not revealing the whole story such a profile in the case of Australia's Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander population certainly confirms that we are excluded from an eclectic range of life opportunities, experiences and tangible amenities generally regarded by a majority of their fellow Australian's as essential parts of life.

Social policy responses have been plat-formed upon improving the self-determination of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people to have the ability and right to determine their own future and chart their own development. In the longer term, this translates into being denied the opportunity to feel that we are valid and contributing members of this society. In practical terms, the framework also enables us to identify areas where political, social and economic capacity building activities are most necessary.

Australia is the only country in the world which still celebrates the British arrival and colonisation of its country from 1770. In most other nations, the national day marks independence (often from the British) or foundation. But, as it stands, Australia Day marks the anniversary of invasion and the beginning of an era of mourning, survival and resilience for Australia's First Nations peoples. Not only do we need to change the date, we need to change the nation. We need to establish a "tomorrow Australia."

Perhaps this confusion – for now – is good for us because it forces us to question who we are and where we are going. Are we a colonial outpost or are we a nation that is guided by and builds upon the rich heritage of its First Nations peoples?

Every year January 26 causes division and identity confusion. We are a nation suffering from arrested development. Our national symbols clash around us – a flag with the invader's flag inserted at the left corner, an anthem that lies about our age (and used to forget its women) and a day that marks a land violently taken without consent or treaty.

The United States celebrates Independence Day as the 13 colonies signed the Declaration of Independence from the British colonial rule.

At the beginning of the 20th century, nearly two decades of negotiations on Federation concluded with the approval of a federal constitution by all six Australian colonies and its subsequent ratification by the British parliament in 1900. This resulted in the political integration of the six Australian colonies into one federated Australian Commonwealth, formally proclaimed on 1 January 1901.

Despite, not being recognised and included in the original constitution, isn't this the date we should be celebrating and honouring our Australian modern history. As the official New Year's Day is January 1, perhaps January 2 can be our national day and have the day as a national celebration.

It has also been mooted that when the historical Uluru Statement becomes enshrined in the Australian constitution via parliament, it could be another justified reason to celebrate a day which unifies, recognises and harmonise all Australians as a one country like the United States.

While a date change for the national holiday isn't a high priority in terms of social, economic and political equality for indigenous Australians, it could be an incremental step in the right direction for unison amongst all our political members to officially recognise our national day without hesitation, fear or politics.

In the bi-annual 2020 Australian Reconciliation Barometer, Almost all (95%) Australians—Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and (91%)—general community members believe the relationship between each other is important. It also recorded that 89% of the general community and 93% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people believe it is important to undertake formal truth-telling processes in relation to Australia's shared history.

The constitutional recognition of indigenous rights in a multicultural society like Australia, and identity politics which it promotes, is obviously awkwardly challenging. The way ahead for Australia demands the construction and nurturing of a more open and inclusive vision of national identity that stresses a common sustainable commitment to a civic pluralistic culture, and to Australia's democratic institutions and values, notably the virtue of mutual tolerance and understanding for all our indigenous people and the continuing need to redress social, economic, health and judicial disadvantage among all Indigenous Australians. This is our ongoing and long term commitment to them.

This assertion is fundamental to enabling Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people of Australia to acquire the business knowledge and skills to achieve their potential in life, and develop the capacity to successfully participate in paid work, education, family, the community and civic life. In terms of education, justice and health, it helps to understand why, in being denied access to an adequate and effective education, justice and health services, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children are being denied the opportunity to integrate themselves into the social and economic aspects of broader everyday society.

Within this complex and changing environment, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people continue to assert the right for their children to access quality health, education and related services that provide a security of culture and identity, for the best life changing and sustainable outcomes.

Our biggest threat to our aspirational standards of a just society is the lingering spectre of sustained overt racism and ignorance. If Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people are to experience success at school, work, exercise control over their civic life in this increasingly complex and rapidly changing environment, Australia has a social, lawful and moral function and responsibility to re-invigorate its systemic social inclusion strategic based cultures, policies and practices.

The continuing negative impact of intergenerational transfer of multiple disadvantages and generational and systemic welfare dependency by Aboriginal people is an organic and continuing Australian societal epidemic. Whilst indigenous people in this country are horribly disadvantaged through education, housing, health and social justice, we remain a vibrant and essential part of the Australian identity and future decision making in forging our national citizenship.

The issues which affect our people in this country are current still today, The Stolen Generation, Deaths in Custody, Native Title, housing and the right to a balanced education, basic health provisions, equality and social justice remain paramount in our minds and heart.

Constitutionally speaking the responsibility for the 1187 so called discrete Indigenous communities in Australia may be shared, but Federal, State, Territory and Local Governments in supposed concert have never provided consistently adequate safe and sanitary housing for all who call this country home.

This is a continuous generational central failure by our nation, a critical underlying factor in so many of the social problems faced by Indigenous people. Shirking, diverting its responsibility, the Federal Government refuses to provide the States and Territory Governments with adequate funding and policy mandate aligned with appropriate service delivery policy, designed for grassroots impact. The social engineering motives appear apparent across the federal government Australia, which showcases is a neo-liberal plan to modernize or renovate Aboriginal culture as some put it, by moving many of our people to the towns.

What is needed is the building of supportive, networked learning communities which value difference and foster high business and political and social achievement, ensuring all Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people are given the opportunity to acquire the knowledge and skills for the practice of responsible and transformative citizenship which values their cultural identity and enables them to engage productively in personal relationships, work, civic and community life.

If inclusive constitutional recognition responsibility policy responses for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people are to be effective, the agreed actions and accountabilities must be premised on the fundamental principle of understanding and respecting diversity and cultural difference. This means the government and the non-indigenous community systemic cultures, policies and practices must “value” and “represent” the diverse social, cultural, economic, and linguistic circumstances of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people and their communities.

In Australia, there are new realities, new opportunities, and new threats that are emerging from a range of social, political and economic dynamics currently impacting on the Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people’s life expectancy and their place in Australian society.

These dynamics include but are not limited to:

- The evolving impact of information communication technology (ICT) on the global economy;
- A focus on increasing the number of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people completing a full twelve years of schooling or equivalent qualification;
- Facilitating access to the labour market for young Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people through a range of post-school options;
- Investing in life-long learning opportunities
- The role of Australia in building social capital/social connectedness as a means of reducing social exclusion, encouraging sustainable growth, increasing awareness of quality of life issues, and celebrating diversity.

In essence, an inclusive constitutional framework for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people must articulate a committed security of culture and identity, and the best opportunity based outcomes that are:

- Futures-oriented;
- Responsive to rapidly changing contexts;
- Committed to valuing and respecting difference and diversity; and,
- Necessary for the growth of social capital
- The annulment and invalidation of any opportunity for racial discrimination and bias to exist and flourish.

A constellation of social, economic and political factors is shaping the world in which our Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people and their communities live. In this changing environment, we need to continue to demonstrate a joint commitment to providing a “security of culture and identity” and “the best quality of life outcomes for Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people”, necessary for the growth of this nation’s social capital.

Indigenous people in this country are still traumatised by our recent history. It is a legacy which individuals and communities live with and are shaping the lives of subsequent generations. To ensure constitution recognition, reconciliation and equality amongst our community remains very much part of our national consciousness.

The way ahead for Australia demands the construction of a more open and inclusive vision of national identity and social inclusion that stresses a common commitment to civic, mature debate about our culture and its place, and to this country’ democratic institutions and values, notably the virtue of mutual tolerance, cultural acknowledgement and the continuing need to redress social and economic disadvantage still suffered by Indigenous Australians.

There is a difference between the guilt of the past and regret of the past. Whilst recognising that cultural dispossession, oppression and degradation is not something which individuals today should feel any personal guilt. Our country as a whole will remain diminished until there is an acknowledgement of these injustices.

A famous peace advocate once announced “**I have a dream**”. I want you to please share in mine. We as people don’t want sympathy, we seek equality, not because inherently different, but because we are people who are its traditional custodians, and have been for thousands of years....and we **still are** the traditional custodians, we share this land and its future with you.

We simply ask for respect because our dignity has not and will not waiver. We seek constitutional recognition, because our culture and its physical and spiritual ties to this land are thousands of years old, and we don't want it to die. Our children are poor and dying, in time our children will know that the glow of liberation through affirmative action such as the social inclusion measures of truly lawfully and morally inclusive Australia's birth certificate.

I don't advocate the rights of indigenous Australia in order subjugate non-indigenous Australians or those from other countries who have proudly called Australia their new home.

My concern is the right of all people to equal protection under the Australian law--and constitution.

Australia is a country that espouse fairness, equity and justice. However our European mono culture narrow world view in history shames and diminishes the real whole truth of our systematic treatment our nation's first people.

It was Paul Keating who famously said in Redfern in 1993 "This begins, with the act of recognition. Recognition that it was past governments and its related agencies effecting benign social policy that did the dispossessing of our nation's first people. We took their traditional lands and destroyed the traditional way of life which survived for thousands of years old. We brought the disasters, the alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from their mother and their families. We practised discrimination and exclusion and empirical superiority instead of social inclusion and co-existence.

So let us not rest all our hopes on cheap rhetoric, meaningless politically expedient slogans and the assumption of guilt on your part; let us strive to build social inclusion for all Australians.

We should ignore the rumblings of discontent of hysteria and hostility of the uneducated minority of those of insular and xenophobic thinking and their obtuse rhetoric. We cannot be fooled by our acknowledgements of sorry as the cure for our past government policies of removal and cultural dispossession.

It is a starting point for a future constitutional and moral change, there are many of influence who want to resist this fundamental leap toward an inclusive and exciting future.....I say those people.....get out of our way and let our place become a kaleidoscope of peaceful cultural pluralism.

It is incumbent on all of us to strive for social and economic parity between indigenous and non-indigenous people through mutual learning and understanding of the cultural underpinnings of Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander people, as the first and original inhabitants of Australia

This is not a neo-colonial opportunity; it is an opportunity for the continuing development of a new relationship that fits with the spirit of the 'Apology' and the Statement of the Heart, the ongoing 'Closing the Gap' campaign of this nation.

I can count amongst them Murri's, Noongars, Yolgnu's, Nungars, Pallawa's, Kooris and Torres Strait Islanders- all of us united by a common vision of a better life for their people of our country. A place where Aboriginal people want one thing, to walk beside all Australians....not behind you anymore.