

FINDING AUSTRALIA'S SOUL...

REBUILDING OUR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

The political tides that have washed over indigenous people since colonisation have changed the face of their communities, progressively eroding their cultural, spiritual and economic values, writes Leah Armstrong.

For indigenous people, our connection to land, family, beliefs are our identity and it is from these we draw our strength. Before colonization it was from these connections that healthy and wealthy communities flourished in the harshest of environments.

Whilst the current debate around Australian values and identity is being given attention, indigenous people have long fought to have our identities and values maintained and recognised. However the current debate appears to have sidelined Indigenous perspective on what Australian values should be. This is another example of marginalisation.

I recently watched a *60 Minutes* story on Australian values, with expectation to hear from an indigenous person on the debate, only to be again vexed at the omission of our place in Australian society. As the first peoples of this land, indigenous values should be at the centre of this debate.

Indigenous values connect us to this land, determine our community, language and social structures and spirituality. If we are to talk of a reconciled Australia, one thing must be made clear. We are a multi-cultural society and we openly and willingly respect the rights of individuals moving to Australia to maintain their cultural ties and their beliefs. This same tolerance must be extended to the first Australians and recon-

ciliation must not come at the cost of compulsory assimilation.

How can we know where we are headed if we don't know where we have come from?

Communication of indigenous values is of paramount importance to indigenous youth as it is to the current debate. The breakdown of Indigenous families and communities over the past 200 years has left indigenous children with a loss of cultural identity. Our culture and communities are confronting issues faced by our children today and will shape the communities we build for their futures.

As a result of past interventions, the breakdown of communities has led to a deterioration of our culture and in some cases grandparents and parents have denied their culture heritage. This has resulted in the identity crisis now being experienced

by our children and their struggle to find an identity against the flood of negative media exposure of indigenous issues and a popular culture influenced by the US.

The paradox of this is that more and more people are identifying as indigenous. The future means we will have growing communities and any talk on community building should address cultural identity and be allied with constructive innovative actions that deliver hope for the future of our youth and their children. Given the commitment and resources, indigenous communities have the creativity and innovation to take action and there are many positive examples today.

Journalist and author, Stuart Rintoul, wrote in 2001 in his work, *Indigenous Australia: Understanding Concepts of Culture and Community*. 'Against the

'We, the Aboriginal and Islander people, can give this nation the fundamental element it lacks at the present time – a soul.'

CHARLES PERKINS



BHP Billiton's Group President Carbon Steel Materials, Chris Lynch, said the company was enormously proud of the IG Awards program and that he was honoured to be able to stand alongside the finalists to celebrate their achievements. Lynch further added:

'Not only are your organisations participating in, and contributing to society as thriving enterprises, but you are also demonstrating the courage to lead the way for others,' he said. 'Our experience has taught us that leadership and good governance takes courage and persistence. It requires one to stand up to challenges in the face of adversity, and often to take the tough road when there are "easier" options.'

'I watched recently a 60 Minutes story on Australian values, with expectation to hear from an indigenous person on the debate, only to be again vexed at the omission of our place in Australian society.'

The key lesson learned from these awards is that the governance models are diverse and that there is no 'one size fits all'. However, what these organizations had in common was that they had developed governance models which had cultural authority, included community leadership development, pro-active conflict resolution processes, downward accountability and strategic planning processes. Importantly, the one key element that all the organisations have embedded in the work they performed was the promotion of culture.

At Yarnteen Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Corporation 'Cultural Identity' is a key value that has contributed to achieving their goals. Yarnteen, an Indigenous Social Enterprise organisation, is participating in the mainstream economy with commercial enterprises as well as providing support for training, employment and cultural initiatives for the indigenous community.

Yarnteen's governance and social enterprise models offer valuable insight and provides a working example of indigenous community building.

How do we live at this 'place' where the two worlds meet and remain indigenous?

Indigenous people want to participate in the wider economic, social and cultural lives that are enjoyed by other Australians. But they will not be successful and cannot be expected to succeed as long as they are denied the opportunities and the tools to

enable cultural integrity and community survival.

Stuart Rintoul addressed this point: 'The struggle for indigenous people now is bi-culturalism, to be able to walk in both the indigenous and non-indigenous world. It is a vision of social and cultural mobility with an alarm clock ticking alongside of it. Cultural celebrations are tinged with the desperate knowledge that if a word is lost from a language, a step from a dance, a phrase from a story, it is lost to the world forever. Against that, new voices are emerging. There is discussion of a "third wave" of young articulate, university-educated indigenous generation.'

The challenge for indigenous communities is to make the most of this 'third wave'.

I have often heard of the struggles faced by our educated when reconnecting to community and being accepted. Examples from overseas indigenous communities show that communities are being 'mindful of their collective experiences' through readdressing education. By asking 'whose society are we educating our children?' and re-educating the educated, they are helping those who went away stay connected, engaged and reintegrated into the community.

The world in which indigenous peoples and Australia conduct ourselves has changed rapidly. The face of indigenous Australia is not found only in remote and rural communities. The reality is that the greatest numbers of indigenous Australians are in urban communities. We are in every city, every town and indigenous people will play an increasingly important role in the future well-being and prosperity of Australia.

'Gandhi believed that, since different societies had different histories and traditions, the search for a single model was both incoherent and dangerous. It reproduced and reinforced the positivist rationalism of modern society, and encouraged the tendency to shape all societies in a single mould. For him, all that a critic could and should do was to suggest the general principles that should govern the good society, leaving each society free to realize them in its own unique way,' said Stuart Rintoul.

The notion that all indigenous commu-

'The perpetual cycle of the tides in the lives of coastal Aboriginal people is an extremely significant daily event. Each turn of the tide is different and brings a new perspective in the lives of people.'

PATRICK DODSON
When the Tide Comes over the Reef



nities are the same is another of the myths or misunderstandings that has made its way into the policy and psyche of successive governments.

Indigenous communities are diverse. Diversity is not only in terms of language groups, clans or country, it goes further. Some communities may see economic growth as their primary goal, while others may accord more importance to cultural richness and taking care of country. It is important that differing indigenous traditions and values be recognised and accommodated in a way that contributes to building strong communities rather than undermine them.

There is also a myth that real indigenous people live on reserves or remote communities and follow a traditional or tribal lifestyle. This myth assumes indigenous communities in metropolitan and urban areas have become mainstreamed which involved abandoning our identities, our cultures and our unique standing as first peoples of Australia.

The survival of our communities is the number one challenge facing all indigenous people today. We have been subjected to sustained efforts of social and economic assimilation for too long to ignore the effects.

The challenge facing the broader society is to listen to what our people are saying, include and work constructively with us. Relationships with indigenous peoples in the past have leaned towards being paternalistic. The view that things needed to be done for indigenous people rather than with indigenous people have proven ill conceived.

We must now pursue a new approach based on engagement with building respectful and right relationships. This engagement provides the opportunity to work together and must be built on respect and dignity. This paves the way for improved partnerships, increased trust and mutual respect between indigenous Australians and all Australians.



At Yarnteen, young indigenous people learn valuable skills that help them achieve economic self-sufficiency.

If we genuinely want life to be better for our children and their children, leadership must embrace these challenges and move forward.

In reflecting on leadership I am reminded of my visit to South Africa in the late 90's. At the time when Nelson Mandela had resigned as President and Thabo Mbeki was elected. The overwhelming sense of 'Hope for the future' that the people had was keeping their dream alive. This 'Hope' fuelled the possibilities for justice and reconciliation.

As Nelson Mandela said: 'I dream of the realisation of the unity of Africa, whereby its leaders combine in their efforts to solve the problems of this continent. I dream of our vast deserts, of our forests, of all our great wildernesses.'

As indigenous leaders we must set a vision for our youth, provide them with the sense of hope and possibilities, accept self responsibility and work together to avoid the dangers of our youth remaining on the continuous cycle of unemployment or revolving training, which often still leaves them without jobs, incomes and worst of all hope for the future.

Indigenous community building should not be seen in isolation to the broader Australian community; we have parallel issues – How do we manage our environment and take advantage of economic opportunities? How do we maintain our local/national identity in a globalised environment? These

questions are confronting non-indigenous leaders and communities.

To enable greater understanding of the issues, both the successes and the challenges, communication with the wider society is essential. It is essential that all groups in society engage to address the issues.

At a time in Australia when economic growth with greater prosperity is the highest, the opportunity for engagement between indigenous and non indigenous Australians is paramount. Today there are many fronts in which Indigenous knowledge and relationships would add value to our society.

With the focus on the global environment, indigenous land practices should be valued by governments and the private sector and community for their scientific value and sustainability. The indigenous population in isolated towns can provide employment sustainability to resource companies. The opportunity for indigenous tourism to provide that unique experience is underdeveloped and ready for partnerships. However, we have to be mindful that indigenous aspirations are acknowledged.

As Rintoul said: 'If we look at Aboriginal art and its intrinsic value to Australia it is already recognized as adding unique value to Australian identity. But do Australians embrace Aboriginal art or merely value it? Aboriginal art is valued, but the communities in which that art is produced are poverty stricken.'

This poses the paradigm for engagement which for non indigenous people must be addressed with RESPECT. ○