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# A peculiar path that leads astray

By Noel Pearson

*The Weekend Australian*



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During the past decade we have been told that some myths pertaining to the Aboriginal people of Australia have been debunked. The myth of frontier massacres is said to have been debunked by Keith Windschuttle. The myth of the stolen generations is said to have been debunked by *Quadrant* magazine. The myth of the noble savage is said to have been debunked by Roger Sandall. The myth of terra nullius is said to have been debunked by Michael Connor.

Now, an environmentalist, William Lines, has stepped up to debunk the myth of the ecological Aborigine (see *Patriots: Defending Australia's Natural Heritage*, extracted in *Inquirer* on October 14). Oh, my poor people! You have been subjected to a relentless and seemingly endless cultural cleansing. And you appear to be utterly defeated in a cultural war in which you have shown a declining and eventually feeble resistance. All that remains is to smooth the dying pillow of our remnant dignity as a people.

There is a breathtaking vehemence to this neo-conservatism. What could be next?

The perennial regret of both sides in the culture wars between Left and Right is that their opponents dominate public debate. Both sides claim that the other exerts a disproportionate influence over policy and culture. Both the Right and the Left believe they speak for a majority of ordinary people who have to put up with follies and injustices imposed by ideologues or interest groups.

Who is right? The answer is that both sides establish and maintain stifling orthodoxies, often at the same time in the same policy area. Indigenous affairs is a prime example of a policy area severely affected by the tribalism of Australian political and cultural life.

Before we started our reform work in indigenous affairs in Cape York Peninsula, my colleagues and I realised that our political theory and practical policies would be controversial and that we could not escape the dynamics of the culture wars. This was a choice I had to make, because there were progressive orthodoxies that had to be challenged and overturned if it was going to be possible to make progress.

My indigenous friend and colleague Professor Marcia Langton understood my argument about what was wrong with progressive policy. But she was hesitant about new policies that could be construed as concessions to the Right, even if those policies were correct. She thought the Right would not meet us halfway; instead, they were intent on waging total war.

Progressive nostrums had to be confronted, but Langton's concern was prescient. A set of conservative interpretations of history, together with established perceptions about the shortcomings of indigenous leaders, dominate public opinion. By association, my people's rights in our own country have disappeared from the agenda. The progress towards recognition of the indigenous Australian peoples as national minority peoples with certain rights has been indefinitely stalled.

The worst effect of the neo-conservative ascendancy is that opinions that normally would be mean and ungracious in a generous, democratic country become acceptable and indeed de rigueur.

An example is Gary Johns's view that government does not have any obligation to support the cultures of national minorities as well as the culture of the majority.

Other examples of the extreme thinking that can pass for mainstream debate in Australia can be found in the article by Lines.

Lines criticises romantic notions about Aboriginal people and argues that some contemporary Aboriginal practices are conservation problems. It is no problem having a debate about these issues. It is a huge generalisation to say that Aboriginal Australians are more concerned with conservation and non-Aboriginal Australians are more concerned with consumption and the accumulation of wealth. This generalisation ignores the strong ideological commitment to conservation that has developed

among Westerners. It also ignores evidence of environmentally destructive practices of contemporary Aboriginal communities.

Lines is partly wrong in his criticism of the ecological Aborigine because this generalisation is largely accurate. In his Menzies Lecture in 2000, John Howard acknowledged that “inconsistencies between indigenous and non-indigenous approaches remain at the root of much of the current difficulty”, including the gap “between exploiting land and living with it”. The environmental affinity of hunter-gatherers arises from their economy: nature is the source of their sustenance and it is no wonder religion and culture are intimately concerned with the natural world. These traditions are still strong and relevant today.

But there are threads of valid insight contained in Lines’s criticism of non-indigenous people’s romanticising of native culture and denigrating their own culture. The problem with the valid parts of neo-conservative argument is that legitimate insights are interwoven with a farrago of polemic, usually aimed at discrediting indigenous rights to land and recognition as a people. The core of Lines’s article was his contention that the land rights movement is to a large extent based on “racial thinking”.

Lines writes: “Land rights activists couched their arguments in terms of them and us.” He continues: “Race thinkers, however, insisted on discrimination. The 1991 Queensland land rights bill allowed Aborigines to claim land rights over all the state’s national parks.” Lines regrets that the Queensland government did not exempt national parks from claims.

It is depressing to have to explain that Aboriginal people are traditional owners of land who are belatedly having their ownership recognised. This ownership is based on the original, traditional occupation and possession of the land (recognised by the common law of England as a basis for title to land), not race. Race is just an incident of the fact that Aborigines were the people who occupied the land at the advent of the common law.

In typical fashion, Lines turns words such as “race thinking” and “discrimination” against my people, who until recently lived in absolute discrimination and oppression because of their race.

Native title, as the law has developed in Australia, is extremely favourable for non-indigenous people. All non-indigenous rights are automatically protected; indigenous people have to go through a difficult process to get what is left over, including some crown land.

It is typical that Lines believes the government should have arbitrarily stopped recognition of our ownership of some of that crown land in national parks. This is symptomatic of a political and cultural climate in which indigenous people’s rights can be attacked in an unprincipled way: how could Burkeian conservatives and Hayekian liberals countenance government arbitrarily taking away land that is the lawful inheritance of citizens?

I am not arguing that there is a hegemony of extreme conservative ideas today. The problem is that in many cases what passes for mainstream debate is in fact a debate between the real mainstream and quite extreme ideas. Such a debate is bound to confer legitimacy on extreme thinking. The question is what we should do about this situation. The first thing is to speak clearly about the fact that Australia is treading a Sonderweg, as the Germans say: a peculiar path that will lead a nation astray. Compared with other democratic countries with national minorities, Australia is developing abnormally. We Aboriginal Australians are being reduced to beggars in our own home.

We need to look at this international perspective to see that nation-states are moving towards cultural plurality. But there is no turning back to a simple activism for Aboriginal rights. We still have to contend with the legacy of flawed progressive and Left-liberal orthodoxies that hinder reform.

Those policies that are needed to tackle indigenous misery – economic integration, social order and welfare reform – have been championed by the Right. I have said previously that Windschuttle and Johns are more attuned to many of the necessary policies than the progressives.

The ideas of progressive Australia that most needed to be challenged were:

- Passive welfare can be an economic foundation for functional communities.

- Choice is possible without capabilities: that indigenous people in remote communities could choose the kind of life they wanted to lead, without education and other capabilities that are necessary for real choice to be exercised.
- The symptom theory that holds it is mainly dispossession and poverty that causes and maintains addiction and dysfunction.

The tragedy is that even as many progressives cling to destructive policies, many people of the Right are focused on a cultural war that attempts to reverse the good things that did happen during the progressive reconciliation era, namely the recognition of our rights and our rightful place in this country.

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