

LAYERED IDENTITIES AND PEACE

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Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York;
And all the clouds that lour'd upon our house
In the deep bosom of the ocean buried.

*Nhilaaygu nganhthanun guli mugan
Yumurr York-nganh ngalanda bajarrin
Wulbu nguulbaan bayan nganhthanun thiinbaanbiga
Thalunh bathaalbi duugaamani*

Now are our brows bound with victorious wreaths;
Our bruised arms hung up for monuments;
Our stern alarums chang'd to merry meetings,
Our dreadful marches to delightful measures.
Grim-visag'd war hath smooth'd his wrinkled front,

*Nganhthanun ngaabay ngan-gaanda yuurrbay
Mangal malathirr than-gamanaathi
Guli dubiithi, nganhthaan nhila garrbunthirr
Warra wunay, nhila dabaar
Guli Muguulbi buthiil walu-yindu manaathi*

And now, instead of mounting barbed steeds
To fright the souls of fearful adversaries,
He capers nimbly in a lady's chamber
To the lascivious pleasing of a lute.¹

*Nhila instead of yarraman naybuthirr-bi ganbanbarr
Bama ngarrbaal-ngay wawu yiniilgurranu
Guli nhulu gabiirrthirr wawuway duugaathi
Guruthirr manaathinu gumbu dabaarthirr²*

I wish to acknowledge the Indigenous Australian people of Brisbane. Let me also acknowledge my fellow speaker, the hosts of this dialogue, our distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

I wish to speak today on the matter of identity.

How we view ourselves and how we view others in society – in other words how we identify – is critical to whether, in circumstances of diversity, we are able to find and maintain unity. Identity is key to both violence and peace between the peoples of the earth. If identity is not always the cause of conflict between humans, it inevitably becomes the marker of conflict. Opponents and friends in any social conflict are marked according to some form of identity, whether political, cultural, religious, social or economic. Identity is ever-present in most forms of conflict. It is invoked or denied in order to justify the basis of enmity or amity between humans.

I have long considered that we labour under impoverished conceptions of identity, and have long believed that we need a better metaphor for popular comprehension of how peoples with varied identities come together to form a united nation.

The American metaphor of the 'melting pot' is the most famous of the identity metaphors. But for people concerned that the melting pot implies an utter

¹ William Shakespeare, *Richard the Third*, Act 1, Scene 1.

² William Shakespeare, *Richard the Third*, Act 1, Scene 1, *Guugu Yimithirr* translation by Noel Pearson.

assimilation of all the diverse ingredients into a muddy soup – the melting pot is not an adequate capturing of the diversity of identities within a nation.

Other attempts such as the ‘patchwork quilt’ or the ‘rainbow’ or the ‘salad bowl’ have not succeeded in becoming the defining metaphor for a multicultural society – but people convinced of the correctness of diversity are likely to harbour some kind of metaphor such as the patchwork quilt, implying as it does that the great picture of society is comprised of diverse and interesting parts that make up a united whole.

I suspect that that clumsy word ‘multiculturalism’, and its adjective, ‘multicultural’, conjures its own metaphor through its closeness to ‘multi-coloured’.

But when we ask ‘is there a metaphor which captures our common understanding of identity in society?’ the answer is ‘no’. Rather there are a few vague concepts that swirl around in the collective consciousness.

The failure to come up with an optimal model capturing diversity and unity must be the consequence of ongoing policy disagreements concerning the basic questions of assimilation and integration of diverse peoples within a unified society. Segregation, separatism, apartheid, ethnic cleansing, the clash of civilisations and other such ideas lurk in the background of discussions on assimilation and integration across the world.

Australia is generally committed to the concept of multiculturalism (and it has been a real achievement in Australia) though there has been a gathering conservative critique of this model. Prime Minister John Howard’s misgivings about the word reflect a widespread ambivalence about whether multiculturalism is the optimal model. I get the sense that he is not entirely happy with the concept of multiculturalism, but does not have an adequate analysis of its shortcomings, and does not have a persuasive alternative model. The Prime Minister knows that it is far too late in the day for Australia to be mono-cultural. I suspect that many thoughtful Australians view multiculturalism in much the same way as Winston Churchill viewed democracy: as ‘the worst [model] except all those other [models] that have been tried’.

I would argue that the failure to agree on an optimal model is not just related to policy disagreements around assimilation and diversity – it is also related to the fact that we do not have a proper theory of identity upon which to base an optimal model. The prevailing theory of identity, including that theory which underpins multiculturalism, is flawed. We need first to get agreement on how identity ought to be understood.

Unlike democracy, I think there is a better model than the simple culture-centred concept of multiculturalism.

There are two great problems with the dominant popular understanding of identity:

- Firstly, the identity of a group in society is assumed to be singular – arising from some salient characteristic such as ethnicity or religion.

- Secondly, the identity of an individual within such as group is also assumed to be singular – and again arising from some salient feature of the group of which she is taken to be a member.

This reductive approach to identity, whether that of the individual or the group, assumes that the individual or group have a singular affiliation. Even those who may readily agree that no individual or group identifies in such a simple way perhaps assume that the other ways in which the individual or group may identify are trivial compared with the dominant identification with ethnicity or religion.

I have long considered that individuals and groups possess ‘layers of identity’. These layers include identification with cultural and linguistic groups; religions; places of birth, upbringing, residency and death; local and regional geographic communities; regional, provincial and national polities; professional, literary, recreational, philosophical and other sub-cultural groups. Each individual harbours many layers of identity. She shares many of these layers with her closest kin, but there are some layers that she does not share with them. She shares these other layers of identity with other members of society, sometimes long distant from and unknown to her. In the same way other members of her family share layers of identity with other strangers in society, which she does not share.

It is the same with groups. Groups may be formed around a dominant characteristic such as ethnicity or religion – but the individuals or subgroups that make up the group will also harbour layers of identity. Each member of the group will share layers of identity with people outside of the group. Some of the layers shared with non-members of the group will be shared with some members of one’s group, but not with others.

I first thought about layered identities when I considered my own Aboriginal identity. I am patrilineally descended from a group whose language, *Guugu Warra*, is now extinct. My great grandfather spoke this language and his estate was called *Bagaarrmugu* in the language of the neighbouring nation called the *Guugu Yimithirr*. My great grandfather spoke his own language as well as *Guugu Yimithirr* and many other languages of neighbouring groups. Multi-lingualism was a necessary feature of life in classical times. With the colonial destruction of the *Guugu Warra* speakers, my grandfather, who was removed to the Cape Bedford Lutheran Mission in the early part of the 20th century, became a *Guugu Yimithirr* speaker: a language his people spoke, but did not own in classical times. My great grandfather who continued to live a traditional life remained in contact with my grandfather who lived in the Mission; my family’s connection with our ancestral lands was therefore not broken. My father and myself therefore grew up in the mission as *Guugu Yimithirr* people, which we are in terms of the history of the past century, but not in classical terms.

My mother was born in *Kuku Yalanji* country, *Guugu Yimithirr*’s neighbours to the south. From her I learned the *Kuku Yalanji* language.

Furthermore, as well as local clan affiliations, there are larger group affiliations, around language and cross-clan kinship and land tenure systems. It is simply not possible to understand traditional Aboriginal identity in a singular, reductive way:

there are layers of identity. The identity of individuals is context-dependent – and there are no absolute boundaries that can be drawn around solidary groups.

On top of the complexity of traditional identities, there are the identities that have arisen out of my history. I am a member of a community that was gathered together by governmental fiat into a mission where my paternal grandfather and grandmother rebuilt what would become the Pearson clan out of the ruins of traditional society. We live in and are intimately connected with a place called Hope Vale, we know its place-names, the events that have taken place there, we know its contours: its sand-dunes, rivers, rainforests, mountains, swamps and reefs. We have camped and fished and hunted and walked around this place which we love dearly and which we would not hesitate to call ‘home’, even though our traditional country is not at Hope Vale.

We also identify as Christians and specifically as Lutherans. We connect with the members of another Lutheran mission nearby at Wujal Wujal, on the basis of our traditional, marital (my mother is from there) and Lutheran connections. We also feel a connection with our fellow Aboriginal Lutherans at Hermannsburg in Central Australia and Yalata in South Australia – though we do not know them. Stranger still we feel a connection with that relatively small group of German and Scandinavian descendants of Lutherans in Australia – one of the more culturally insular denominations it must be admitted – with whom we share a common conviction in Martin Luther’s theological proposition that we are saved by the grace of God, and not by our own straws. Even stranger still we feel some remnant connection with Neuendettelsau in Bavaria, from which the Lutheran mission to Cape Bedford was launched in 1886. It is, in the striking words of one of our Indigenous pastors, a spiritual wellspring for the people of my village.

We also identify as *Bama*. Variants of the word *Bama* mean Aboriginal person in the languages across Cape York Peninsula. Of course we also identify as Murri Aboriginal people from Queensland, as distinct from Kooris down south and Noongahs out west. We also identify as Aborigines of Australia, who share a common layer of identity from Tasmania to Cape York, from Brisbane to Perth. The Aboriginal flag, one the world’s greatest flags if I may say so, is also a potent symbol of our identification.

The point of my biography of identity is that I have long understood that it was not possible to answer ‘what is your Aboriginal identity?’ in a simple, reductive way. I and the members of my community possess layers of identity, some of which are shared with each other, some of which are distinct.

And more layers of identity come to bear when we consider our wider geographic, political, social and sub-cultural affiliations. We are North Queenslanders, but often we are specifically people of Cape York Peninsula. We are Queenslanders when the Origin of the Species is running, though some of us are overcome by some kind of Oedipal compulsion to barrack for the Blues. I must say I am a less fervent participant in the tribal passions of Rugby League, preferring instead The Game They Play in Heaven. I well understand that my private schooling inculcated this finer appreciation of the merits of Rugby Union, though the class dimension of this

particular passion is not at all attractive to me³. In respect of Rugby I part ways with the passions of most of the members of my community, and indeed my own history. But I probably share with most of my community members a complete perplexity about the point of Australian Rules Football. Where many Indigenous Australian friends from western and southern Australia find excitement, I find boredom. I am indeed reaching such a stage of intolerance, that if soccer is going to take over as the national sport of Australia – and every four years I am persuaded of this – then I think Australian Rules should be folded up.

When it comes to patriotism my feelings about identity are more volatile. Of course I am an Australian, but I am not necessarily a proud one. I feel too troubled about the place of my Indigenous Australian people in this their own country, to just simply say ‘I am a proud Australian’. And the ‘Oi, oi, oi’ is just embarrassing. I have a strong intellectual appreciation for all those who serve in our country’s armed forces. I consider few things more honourable in citizens than service in the armed forces. In this I share the humility of Samuel Johnson⁴.

But on ANZAC Day, which is the subject of a growing patriotic identification on the part of younger generations of Australians, I feel a faint nausea on that ‘one day of the year’. Two of my maternal Aboriginal grandparents served in France in World War I, but still I feel alienated about ANZAC Day. I suspect I feel alienated because my grandparents’ service to their country did not make them citizens when they returned to Australia. I feel alienated because I find it hard to stomach the sight of white Australians saying ‘Lest We Forget’ at the shrines of ANZAC whilst vigorously seeking to forget what happened to the country’s indigenous peoples. I feel alienated because ANZAC Day just feels too white to me.⁵

The Nobel Prize winning economist, Amartya Sen, has supplied us with a theory of what I have called layered identities in his most recent book *Identity and Violence*⁶. Before turning to Sen, let me first turn to the expatriate intellectual Robert Hughes who is I think indispensable to understanding the debates about multiculturalism and its relationship to the ‘culture wars’ which emerged in the United States and which later became the grist for Australian mills.

We live today in the age of anti-‘political correctness’. True it is that the intramural cultural left of the 80s and 90s constructed the more ridiculous and easily mocked

³ Mark Ella’s great achievement was to show that class transcended class.

⁴ JOHNSON: ‘Every man thinks meanly of himself for not having been a soldier, or not having been at sea.’ BOSWELL: ‘Lord Mansfield does not.’ JOHNSON: ‘Sir, if Lord Mansfield were in a company of General Officers and Admirals who have been in service, he would shrink; he’d wish to creep under the table. Were Socrates and Charles the Twelfth of Sweden both present in any company, and Socrates to say “Follow me, and hear a lecture on philosophy;” and Charles, laying his hand on his sword, to say, “Follow me, and dethrone the Czar;” a man would be ashamed to follow Socrates. Sir, the impression is universal; yet it is strange.’

James Boswell, *Life of Samuel Johnson*, Penguin Classics, London, 1979, pp.241-242

⁵ It should be clear that I mean no disrespect to the Diggers and all those who have served our country through history – not the least my own ancestors. My problem is with the way contemporary Australians, and its leaders, view history.

⁶ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence*, W. W. Norton and Company, New York, 2006.

aspects of what became known as political correctness. True it is that much of the excesses of leftist political correctness were anti-intellectual and part of a political and cultural agenda against the right.

However a leftist political correctness based on anti-intellectual premises, has been replaced by a rightist PC: patriotic correctness. In the same way as the left on campus used PC as a club with which to beat the so-called Neanderthals of the right – and discovered the benefits of so doing – the right are now in the ascendancy in the cultural wars, and they now proudly wear the mantle of Neanderthal insensitivity and anti-intellectualism. And it has yielded much fruit for the parties of the right in their electoral successes of the past decade.

Most of the intellectual and cultural surf in our country are echoes of the main currents emanating from Stateside, and the cultural wars in Australia are usually a callow reproduction of the raging themes, albeit time-delayed like an international phone call. The antipodean application of the latest polemics usually lacks the depth, insight, wit or interest of the original sources – but as long as they furnish an emotional argument, they serve their purpose, and we will press those buttons until the stones bleed dry.

It is ironic that it was an Australian who set out the first proper elucidation of the problem of political correctness in the United States in a lecture series at the New York Public Library in 1992, subsequently published as *Culture of Complaint: The fraying of America*⁷. Robert Hughes did not just attack Political Correctness, Afrocentrism and Post Modernism – he attacked the populist demagoguery of Reagan and the American right, with its appeal to mono-cultural nativism and the disingenuous attack on elites.

In the chapter titled ‘Multi Cults and its Discontents’ Hughes makes the following defence of multiculturalism:

Multiculturalism asserts that people with different roots can co-exist, that they can learn to read the image-banks of others, that they can and should look across the frontiers of race, language, gender and age without prejudice or illusion, and learn to think against the background of a hybridised society. It proposes – modestly enough – that some of the most interesting things in history and culture happen at the interface between cultures. It wants to study border situations, not only because they are fascinating in themselves, but because understanding them may bring with it a little hope for the world.⁸

Hughes tackles the two tribes of PCs: the Politically Correct on the Left and the Patriotically Correct of the Right. He writes:

It is too simple to say that America is, or ever was, a melting pot. But it is also too simple to say none of its contents actually melted. No single metaphor can do justice to the complexity of cultural crossing and perfusion in America. American mutuality has no choice but to live in recognition of difference. But

⁷ Robert Hughes, *The Culture of Complaint*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1993.

⁸ *Ibid*, p.73

it is destroyed when those differences get raised into cultural ramparts. People once used a dead metaphor – “balkanisation” – to evoke the splitting of a field into sects, groups, little nodes of power. Now, on the dismembered corpse of Yugoslavia, whose “cultural differences” (or, to put it plainly, archaic religious and racial lunacies) have been set free by the death of Communism, we see what that stale figure of speech once meant and now means again. A Hobbesian world: the war of all on all, locked in blood-feud and theocratic hatred, the *reductio ad insanitatem* of America’s mild and milky multiculturalism. What imperial rule, what Hapsburg tyranny or slothful dominion of Muscovite apparatchiks, would not be preferable to this? Against this ghastly background, so remote from American experience since the Civil War, we now have our own conservatives promising a “cultural war”, while ignorant radicals orate about “separatism”. They cannot know what demons they are frivolously invoking. If they did, they would fall silent in shame.⁹

As I said earlier, identities and the layers of identities within each individual are issues which I have been thinking about for more than a decade. During this period the general Australian public has associated my name with two different political campaigns.

Firstly, land rights and native title. Secondly, Indigenous Australian economic development and education.

I believe that many people do not see any relationship between those two policy areas. Native title is seen to be an issue about Indigenous Australian identity, and about preservation of identity. Economic development and education on the other hand are perceived as issues that automatically pose challenges for the preservation of identity.

Some people have probably concluded that I have fundamentally changed direction during the last decade, and that I no longer prioritise the survival of a distinct Indigenous Australian identity. Others have perhaps concluded that I strive for the emergence of a distinct Indigenous Australian identity which has incorporated elements of European learning and economic behaviour.

The assumption underpinning the latter interpretation of our policies in Cape York Peninsula is that some human affiliations, such as economic affiliations, can be instrumental rather than essential. The assumption is that peoples and nations have essential cultural identities, and that human activities such as economic development can be the means by which this identity is preserved. For example, the lives of the people of Japan have changed enormously during the last one and a half century. This fundamental transformation of Japan is not interpreted as evidence that the Japanese identity has disappeared.

Indigenous Australian identity on the other hand, is often said to be so intimately connected with the organisation of our traditional society, that it will cease to exist if we embrace modernity.

⁹ Ibid, p.15-16

The problem highlighted by the widespread inability to understand my political goal is that in the modern world, people are far too eager to categorise all other people according to a system of singular, exclusive identities. Amartya Sen calls this tendency in contemporary thinking 'the illusion of singular identity'.

As is obvious from the title of his recent book – *Identity and Violence*– Sen is trying to find solutions to much more severe conflicts than we will ever face in Australia. However, his general argument is, I believe, useful for us Indigenous Australians and for non-Indigenous Australians when we try to find the answers to the questions about my people's place in this country.

Sen's main thought is that we should recognise 'competing affiliations' or 'competing identities'. Taken out of context, those expressions may sound alarming. But Sen is not at all referring to 'competing loyalties' or lack of loyalty to the sovereign state where one lives. On the contrary, Sen's thought is that globally we could reduce what is usually labelled 'sectarian' or 'ethnic' or 'religious' conflicts by recognising the plurality of our identities and their diverse implications.

In Australia, we do not have and will not have open conflicts between groups of people. But Sen's thinking is still relevant for the resolution of the issues we are facing. I am convinced that the correct policy for Australia is recognition of Indigenous Australian identity, of Indigenous Australian peoplehood within the Australian nation.

This idea will meet instinctive opposition: It may be perceived by some as a separatist agenda. Agendas that can be labelled separatist are rejected on three grounds.

First, they are seen as threats to the unity of the country. Second, Aboriginal unity and people-hood are said to be modern, artificial constructs. Third, in terms of practical policies, separatism is seen as the main reason why the results of the last forty years of indigenous policies are so disappointing.

However, I do not think that recognition of Indigenous Australians' identities must lead to disunity and isolation.

The goal of indigenous policy should be simultaneous successful integration and recognition of the survival of Indigenous Australian distinctness. Rather than being mutually exclusive, I believe that successful integration is a precondition for the survival of distinctness and *vice versa*.

I have started a translation of Shakespeare's *Richard III* into *Guugu Yimithirr*. I do this because my own cultural heritage is steeped in the literature of England, the play also resonates deeply with the politics and kin-conflicts of my own hometown (I have several cousins who could play the part of Richard to perfection), and because I want the body of texts in *Guugu Yimithirr* to grow.

The question is, am I driven by my affiliation to English literature or my affiliation to the *Guugu Yimithirr* nation?

This simple example shows why Sen is correct in rejecting the notion that every individual has one single dominant identity. Sen does not ignore the fact that, what I have called the layers of identity, often compete with each other. It is reasoning and individual choice that must guide the resolution of these competing affiliations – not fundamentalism and an illusion of singular identity. Individuals and groups are assisted in this process of reasoning by having a more mature theory of identity and a model for unity and diversity which is not reductive or essentialist.

I wish also to add a dimension to the concept of layered identities, that is borrowed from the literature on social capital. Professor Robert Putnam, in his now well-known writings on social capital¹⁰, identified two forms of social capital within societies: bridging social capital and bonding social capital. Bonding social capital refers to relations among relatively homogenous groups (such as an ethnic, religious or socio-economic group), and it strengthens the social ties within the particular group. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, refers to relations between heterogeneous groups, and it strengthens ties across such groups. Examples of bridging social capital include the civil rights movement and ecumenical religious organisations.

I propose that we should think of some identity affiliations as *bonding identities*, and these are the ties that bind us to those closest to us, where other identity affiliations are *bridging identities* – and these are the ties that unite us with other less proximate members of society, with whom we nevertheless share commonalities. Our policy must be to support bonds and importantly, strengthen and draw attention to bridges, between the diverse individuals and groups within our society.

If the nation is the foundation, then bonds and bridges are built upon this foundation. The unity of the nation depends upon the strength of its bonds and the bridges. This is both a matter of quality and quantity of the bonding and bridging institutions, networks and relationship facilitators. A country that simply relies on bare patriotic devotion of individuals and groups to the nation does not gain the strength that comes from the overlapping connections between citizens based around a full range of commonalities in addition to the basic commitment to the nation. Bonding ties are important because they give expression to primary and proximate relationships in society. Bridging ties are important because they build and they increase recognition of wider affiliations between individuals right across society – even between cultural strangers.

Sen puts his finger on the main problem with multiculturalism, and this crucial insight flows from the analysis of what I have called layered identities and Sen has called ‘affiliations’. ‘Culture’, implying ethnicity and religion is not the only layer of identity. There are many other layers of identification with which individuals in a particular ethnic or religious group will affiliate. Societies that sponsor ‘cultural’ diversity to the exclusion of other affiliations reinforce the problem of ethnicity/religion being seen as the dominant singular affiliation. Cultures become identity blocs.

¹⁰ Robert Putnam *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, Touchstone, New York, 2001; Deepa Narayan, *Bonds and Bridges: Social Capital and Poverty*, Policy Research Working Paper No 2167, The World Bank, 1999.

Sen's insight is that there is not a simple duality between two policies: 'monoculturalism' and 'multiculturalism'. There is a third condition: 'plural monoculturalism'. Plural monoculturalism occurs where a policy of multiculturalism sponsors culture as the dominant singular affiliation and ends up in a situation where there is a plurality of monocultures. *This* is the potential problem with multiculturalism.

The problem of plural monoculturalism must be understood if the mostly successful achievement of multiculturalism in Australia is to be improved upon. As Sen points out, it is not a matter of multiculturalism having gone 'too far' – as many conservative critics tend to think. Rather the problem – both on the part of conservatives and progressives – lies in viewing culture as the singular affiliation layer of groups in society. The diverse identity layers within groups are overlooked, and the fact that individuals have identity layers that are diverse and often distinct from the groups whom they are assumed to be members of. A mature society will be one where individuals ultimately prioritise their competing affiliations according to a reasoning which is alive to all of their affiliations across society. The challenge for policy is to supply this understanding of layered affiliation, and how this can be consistent with diversity and national unity.

That these competing affiliations are not always settled in the breasts of individuals, and that people will often be torn by the intellectual and emotional factors involved, was best illustrated to me when I heard a speech by the Reverend David Passi at a conference in Townsville some years ago. Reverend Passi is an elder from the Murray Islands in the eastern Torres Strait. He was, along with Eddie Mabo, one of the plaintiffs in the Mabo Case. His address discussed the annexation of the Murray Islands in the second half of the 19th – and how sovereignty had been acquired without the consent of the Meriam People. He spoke of how the Meriam People had not agreed to become Queenslanders and Australians, and he challenged the moral and legal claims of the Crown in respect of his people and his homeland. Then in the midst of this electrifying denunciation of this constitutional history, he recalled that he had once been to 'Bible college' in one of the southern states and he was flying back to Brisbane on his way back to the Torres Strait. He said that when he put his feet on the tarmac in Brisbane, Queensland, he said to himself (thousands of kilometres from his island homeland and at the capital of the very Crown that had usurped his sovereignty): 'I'm home!' And his next words, as he gently thrust his fist into the air, were: 'Go the Broncos!'