

The Inaugural
Peter Howson Lecture

Bess Nungarrayi Price

with a Postscript by

Dave Price



The Bennelong Society

3 December 2009

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I want to thank the Bennelong Society for giving me the opportunity to speak and to be able to give you an insight into how I think and feel about how our people see themselves. There are many more out there who are not given an opportunity like this to tell their story and how it is.

My name is Bess Nyirringali Nungarrayi Price. My first language is Warlpiri, English is my second and there are five other languages that I understand. I was born under a tree at a place called Yuendumu, where the airstrip now is. My father was 10 years old when he first saw a white man. My mother was a little bit younger. They were both born in the desert out of contact with the rest of the world.

I came from a family of eleven. My Mum has now outlived 8 of her children. We have lost eight, but I had a happy up bringing. I spent my childhood living in yujuku my father built, what whitefellas call 'humpies'. I was always warm, dry and comfortable. We ate both whitefella food and our own bushtucker. We camped on my Dad's country every weekend, walking a round trip of around thirty kilometres from Yuendumu and back, but we always got to school. When I was too young to go my older sister and brother rode to school on a donkey all that way. My teachers were good, hard working people. I had plenty of white friends as well as the company of my own extended Warlpiri family. I learnt both ways before we had what we now call bilingual/bicultural education at our school. My teachers and my parents taught me well.

I come today to talk to you about my people, and where they are in this land we call Australia. I have come to speak today hoping that you will listen to what I have to say.

People think Aboriginal people all think the same. They are wrong. We have Aboriginal people who live in cities, towns and in the remote parts of Australia and we all have different issues. The issues and needs are totally different. The politics in the bush are so different from the way southern blackfellas think. They, the yapa, are gullible at times and they accept anything that's put in front of them, without a question. They are easily lead whether it's in good faith or not. Others blame colonization for the reason that our people are the most disadvantaged group of people. But nobody can explain why that is ... I don't see it that way. All I see is that they are hunters and gatherers and they were vulnerable then and they are vulnerable now. They know nothing about how everything else operates outside of their communities and how they need to change in order to keep up with the rest of the outside world. They need to be given the tools and the mechanism to move forward.

We have had so many self-appointed people, black and white, who have decided to be our spokespeople, who know nothing about us and our issues. They are the people who have been running the show all these years without ever asking us whether it's okay for them to do so. They are the ones who want to keep our people in the dark as if we are some sort of stone age people.

It had to take urgent measures by the government in order to help our people, for them to recognise what was happening to them, and to do something for themselves before it was too late.

I am one of those people who embraced the government's move, what is now called the Intervention or the NTER, the Northern Territory Emergency Response. To me it meant at last somebody was acknowledging that there was a crisis and that it needed to be addressed. For a long time our peoples' lives have been in a state of crisis, spiralling downwards, rapidly, uncontrollably.

The protestors and the media only seem to care when whitefellas kill blackfellas, or blackfellas kill whitefellas. They don't seem to care when our kids are killed by their own people or they commit suicide.

Before the Intervention three of my brothers drank themselves to death on the Alice Springs town camps. Two nieces, one 21, one 26, did the same. My granddaughter was murdered on a town camp. She died because she was stabbed by her ex-husband, my cousin. The ambulance wouldn't go in there without a police escort because the drunks attack them when they go there to save a life. So she died waiting for them. This is what the town camps have been for us, places of sickness and self-destruction. Yet there are those in Alice Springs who call it racism and an attack on human rights when the government tries to help us make the camps decent places to live and raise kids.

I could go on all day about the violence I have seen. It has happened to so many of my loved ones. My own body is decorated with scars. Yet the protestors, the whitefellas in Alice Springs and those who come from Down South, who think they are supporting my people, have treated me like an enemy. They have tried to tell the world through the internet that I am a drunk and that I only support the government because it pays me to do work for them. They aren't interested in the truth. They aren't willing to open their ears and listen.

They have never given me a chance to talk at their rallies. They bring white students and cranky kooris and murris up from Down South who know nothing about us and who hate whitefellas. They look for local people who think like they do and try to keep the rest quiet and away from the media. When the UN's Special Rapporteur came to Alice my people were not told of the meetings. I was only invited the day before. The meetings were very carefully controlled and orchestrated. It was a joke. He didn't hear from the people with the problems, the ones living with the violence and the misery. He heard from those with a vested interest in the present situation.

My people, the ones with the problems that the Intervention is designed to address, were deliberately excluded. They were lining up down at the pub and the bottle shops as they do everyday or sitting in filth in the camps worrying about their kids and waiting for the next round of grog fuelled violence. People are given a fairytale version of our culture by people who don't live by our law. They want you to think that it is the government that causes all our problems. That is an outrageous lie. The government gets it wrong because it consults with the wrong people. It gets it wrong because it cannot help people who won't, or don't know how, to help themselves. We want to be able to help ourselves.

I know plenty of Aboriginal women here who want the Intervention because they can feed their kids now. The protestors treat them like enemies as well. They never support the old women who come in from bush to protest against the grog. They verbally attacked and insulted the women at the Women's Centre at Yuendumu when they set up their own shop. They took the side of the violent men and the corrupt ones in our communities and refused to support the women worried about their kids, sick of being beaten up by drunks. They have never even tried to talk to us. We are very grateful to the government for keeping income management going.

My people don't use money the way white people do. They don't save, they don't budget, they can't say 'no' to relatives even when they are drunks and addicted to gambling and drugs. They need help in spending their money wisely. We are very happy that the government has decided to extend income management to everybody. That is what we have always asked for. Don't stop doing it for us, do it to everybody who needs it if you are worried about racism. Even Warren Snowdon, our ALP Federal member admits now that it is working. That is a big change for Warren.

We still have a lot of other problems. Education is one of the biggest. Education has not worked for our mob for the last thirty years. White people told us that they wanted to preserve our language so now my people can't express themselves to the rest of the world and rely on white people and city blackfellas, who know nothing about us, or who want to keep us in ignorance to do it for them. I went to school before the bilingual program started yet I speak both Warlpiri and English better than our kids and our grand kids. Our young people now need their grandparents to speak for them to the outside world. The old ones speak better English. Most of our kids now can't read and write English or their own language. They are not learning to speak their own languages properly. They are losing the best of our culture but not learning the best of the whitefella's culture. They are learning the worst instead. They are losing on both sides. Bilingual education is a wonderful idea but it seems to me that it has never been done properly. We want our kids to keep speaking our languages but we also want them to be able to speak and read and write English. My people are linguistically talented. Many speak several Aboriginal languages. Our kids are intelligent and want to learn. Why can't whitefellas teach them English? It should be easy.

Teachers have never been trained properly. Our kids have never been taught English properly. Our schools don't get the resources they need. The high truancy rates have been ignored. Education hasn't been compulsory for our kids

so they don't bother turning up and parents don't make sure they go and the government has ignored all this. We want the best of both world's, not the worst, and we will need the government's support to get it.

Our people need to be challenged. There needs to be an open and honest debate between ourselves, as people. We need to change in order to make it better for future for our children and our grandchildren. These protestors have done their best to stop that from happening and yet they call it 'solidarity'.

With all the money the government has poured into our self managed organisations and communities everything has gotten worse. Our organisations can put energy into campaigning against government policies and into getting the UN to take notice of their views but they don't stop our men from murdering our women, our kids from killing themselves. They don't make sure our kids get to school. They don't keep our languages alive. All they can do is bleat for more money and complain every time the government tries to do something.

I've read the speech by Mary Victor O'Reeri from the Kimberley. Her family's approach is exactly what is needed in our country. It was a woman who stood up and told the truth at last and the protestors and organisations can't stop her. Yet my own uncle told the Wall Street Journal that women have no power in our culture. He is wrong. The media should stop listening to rubbish like that. We women are the main ones now trying to save our kids. There are men trying to get things right but they are quietly working away and the media don't take any notice of them, their voices are drowned out by protestors and their white supporters.

Mary Victor is right. We are the only ones who can save ourselves and we don't need the protestors from our southern cities to tell us what to think and say. We have the strength ourselves if we can only be honest for once. The Intervention started this debate. That is the best thing about it. It has made us think

for the first time about what's happened to us, where we are and where we want to go. More and more Aboriginal people are now getting up the courage to tell the world what is really happening. More and more are willing to take responsibility for our own problems.

The Racial Discrimination Act was there to protect us from white racism and we needed that protection. But it has not protected our people from ourselves. We need an act, we need laws that recognize that the problem now is blackfellas killing blackfellas and killing themselves. If a law like the Racial Discrimination Act gets in the way of doing that then it must be changed. We are different, we are special, we have special needs. We are caught in a trap. They want us to be citizens with the same rights but then they

want us to keep our culture with no changes. How can we do both? We need to do some special things to solve our problems. Now we know that and can do something about it. Let's roll forward instead of backwards.

We want leaders who will lead us out of our misery not sit around whingeing about how hard their lives are when they have the jobs and the power. We want leaders who tell us that we are not 'Victims' who can't do a thing for ourselves but sit around dying while we wait for the government to get it right. We want leaders who will convince our own people to stop drinking, fighting and feuding, who will get our kids into school so that we can produce our own professors of indigenous rights who can go to other peoples country to listen to their stories.

Postscript

Dave Price

I am calling this a postscript because it is right that Bess' voice is heard first. I can't claim to be 'indigenous'. In my three decades of work with indigenous students, clients and colleagues I was constantly reminded of that fact. More than once I have been advised to take a look in a mirror to remind myself that I am not black and that therefore the right to speak out on indigenous issues was denied to me. The problem for me is that I have been married to Bess for three decades. My wife, my daughter, my grandsons, in fact, all of my descendants for ever more, are and will be indigenous. They do have the right to speak because they, one and all can claim the ethnic and political label 'indigenous'.

I took on board this idea that I should be voiceless and decided therefore to support Bess in her efforts to bring her people's plight to public notice. But then it occurred to me that many of those out there making the loudest noises in the public space would also fail the

mirror test and many who would not had no idea of my wife's people's plight. That has not stopped them from shouting their ignorance from the roof tops. For much of the last thirty years I have mourned the death, rape, life threatening disease and injury, mostly entirely avoidable, arrest and incarceration of my loved ones, the great majority indigenous. Yes they are and were my loved ones. So I have decided to speak for myself, in support of my family and on behalf of those non-indigenous spouses who watch in agony, the destruction of their indigenous loved ones in self imposed silence.

We work as cross-cultural trainers. I have a photograph of my last class at Yuendumu taken in 1979, the year I left with Bess to start a new life. I love that photo. I wanted to use it in our presentation. Bess wouldn't let me. There were too many in that photo that had died. For most of the whitefellas I talk to all of this is academic. They expect me to discuss the issues dispassionately, objectively. They expect me to

talk about my loved ones as if they were the objects of research that I was doing rather than as people I love members of my species whose lives are entwined with mine.

I will now bring up an issue that my wife feels unable to discuss publicly because she is a woman. I will do this because I am a man and I speak for my family. Last January a white, female police officer drove on to the men's ceremonial grounds at Lajamanu, a Warlpiri community at the northern end of the Tanami desert. There was outrage in response. The old men in the community and their white supporters went to great lengths to protest what had happened as a profound affront to their culture and law.

In an interview with Eric Tlozec on the ABC evening news in Darwin, Lyndsay Bookie, the chairman of the Central Land Council said the following, and I quote:

It's against our law for people like that breaking the law, they shouldn't be there. Aboriginal ladies, they're not allowed to go anywhere near that. If they had been caught, a woman, aboriginal lady got caught she (would) be killed. Simple as that.

I understand that response and I have always known that this is true. I admire Lyndsay's courage in saying in public what we all knew to be true. I also could not imagine Lyndsay himself killing anyone; he's just not that sort of bloke. This is my father-in-law's law, my wife's promised husband's---my brother's law. These are two of the men in my life I most respect. But I don't respect every aspect of their law. Much of it now doesn't work. Simple as that!

What disturbed me most about this whole affair is that there was no response whatsoever to Lyndsay's statement. Not one human rights campaigner, not one feminist stood up and publicly objected to what Lyndsay had said. In a country that rejects capital punishment in all its forms, that prides itself on its human rights record, on its struggle to improve the rights of women, indeed on its compassionate

treatment of animals, nobody was willing to challenge the right of Aboriginal men to execute women for cultural reasons. Even Tom Calma, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner, White Ribbon Ambassador and self described Kungarakana and Iwaidja elder had nothing to say, no response. Perhaps he missed the news that night.

It seems that everybody is willing to sacrifice the lives of women on the altar of what we call 'culture': the fetish of the age. In Australia Aboriginal people have the human right to practice their culture. Should this include the right to execute women?

When I bring this issue up with whitefellas I am usually met with embarrassed silence or an insistence that Aboriginal women know enough to avoid such situations. There is no appeal to principles or human rights. I brought the issue up with a middle aged Warlpiri man in private. He is married with daughters. He is also an evangelist and has devoted his life to Christianity. When I quoted Lyndsay Bookie he agreed and repeated some of Lyndsay's words "yeah, simple as that". I asked him how he felt about that as a Christian and got no response. I then asked him if he would kill a woman in those circumstances, he answered 'no' without hesitation. I then asked would he defend one of his female loved ones if other men wanted to kill them for such a reason. Again 'yes', without hesitation. I suggested that there should be a change to the law. He answered that he was trying to make such changes.

For me it is personal. My own wife's life has been directly threatened several times, on each occasion by drunk Aboriginal men, in one case a group armed with knives and machetes also threatening the lives of my sons, nephews by marriage whitefella way. This incident was part of a feud that had gone on for 8 years in conformity with customary law. It began as a fight between teenage girls over a boyfriend. It resulted in several cases of grievous bodily harm, several hospitalisations, several prison sentences and the destruction of property. Although my

wife's life was threatened by armed men in public only one of the participants was charged, in this case with a driving offence in relation to the incident. There were no other charges laid. It was patiently explained to me that this sort of thing is so common in Alice Springs that no charges are laid if no blood is spilt or no-one is killed. We live in a war zone in which women's lives are forfeit.

We believe that many understand that the law needs to be changed. Young Aboriginal men are still trained to believe that they have the right of paterfamilias in relation to their wives and that they have, not just the right, but the duty to execute women who break their law. This causes immense confusion when they are confronted with white man's law. I have no idea why this issue is not raised when we discuss the hideous levels of violence against women in Aboriginal communities and what should be done about it. It is as if it has no effect on that kind of violence. Nothing could be further from the truth.

My father in law saw his eldest son die from the grog. After that I believe that he gave up

in despair. He died not long afterwards. I have seen that same look of despair in the eyes of other old men as they watch the young ones self destruct often taking their loved ones down with them. Some tell us that the young men don't understand the old law anymore and they have not learned to respect the white man's law either. Bess' father and her promised husband applied to spirit rather than the letter of the law to their own lives. They agreed to my marrying Bess for example and let her off her betrothal although that was at the heart of their legal system. They were prepared to defend their women. Young men don't live long enough now to learn that wisdom. Customary law needs some legislative changes. We need to enter into a serious dialogue to help bring about such change.

All we want is the same protections for the most vulnerable of our loved ones that are enjoyed by the wider community. That is all we are asking for and if that means that aspects of Aboriginal law must be challenged, as our own law is continually challenged, to achieve this then for justice sake let's get on with it in a spirit of mutual respect.