

## Gary Foley at Decolonizing activism, de-activating colonialism, MAYSAR Gym 31 August 2010

Transcript by Edwina Howell 10 September.

I'm just going to read a bit from this, it's called 'Working as allies', and it's a Winston Churchill fellowship report, written by a Pakeha woman from Aotearoa, called Gen Murray, because it contains a few things that go to the questions that we are talking about here. She has a list here:

*Qualities for being an ally of indigenous people.* Humility; being passionately aware that could be completely wrong; an ability to listen carefully; a sense of humour not taking yourself too serious; patience for the long haul of the struggle and the different ways of working; usefulness, it's not about being right or good; knowing yourself your identity and history; knowing and acknowledging who's land you're on, the history of people and place; groundedness, inner strength and the ability to stay calm in challenging situations; a thick skin; endurance; messing up, learning, picking up and keeping on; long term commitment, which includes a commitment to personal sustainability and the sustainability of relationships; flexibility, an ability to go with the flow; letting go of knowing of being right and having the answers; always being aware of how much you do not know; being open to constant learning; acting making mistakes, getting feedback, reflecting, acting, share your ideas with people who do not always agree with you; courage to act and take a stand; critical awareness, political awareness, strategic thinking; self-awareness, knowing your skills and what you can offer, knowing your limits; awareness of not domination, awareness of power, ability to reflect.

Honesty, humility and courage, wisdom, respect, generosity and love: that's a pretty good list of qualities. Then she has a bit here about working with allies, challenges and responses.

*Working with allies, challenges and responses.* Recognise the complexity of power is seldom a simple powerful/powerless, coloniser/colonised dynamic, both indigenous and non-indigenous people can carry or take the victim or victimizer role both parties hold different types of power including moral, ethical, financial and decision making power. Identify and acknowledge this. Power dynamics can change in different circumstances. Acknowledge privilege, understand and recognise the benefits of your positioning colonial/colonial inheritance and how that might manifest in your work as an ally. Recognise the difficulty of acting outside of the inherited role. Addressing power and privilege is an ongoing, life-long work. Be mindful about power operating in any given context and take conscious steps to mitigate power imbalances. Determine when to speak up and when to shut up. Respond if requested by indigenous people to speak. If you have not been asked to consider why you might want to speak and ask yourself if it is necessary. Give space to indigenous voices.

*Ignorance of the white settler population.* Ignorance and collective denial of colonial violence, a lack of awareness of colonial privilege and racism within the broader population are key challenges for white allies to address. Education is the key response to addressing these issues. A task central to the role of the ally is to speak up against racism whenever possible. White people need to turn the mirror on themselves and take responsibility for changing themselves rather than fixing the other. It is necessary to move white people beyond a charity model of helping poor indigenous people, to seeing the struggle in terms of justice and rights. ....

*Analysis parralisis.* After becoming aware of injustice people can get caught up in feelings of guilt or denial. White people like to be comfortable and like to feel right in their actions and can become immobilised in these feelings of not knowing what to do.

*Working cross-culturally.* A challenge many people face is trying to work out the level of cultural competence needed to be a useful ally. It is critical to have an appropriate level of cultural knowledge to engage respectfully whilst not appropriating. Working cross-culturally is often uncomfortable and misunderstandings are common. Therefore be prepared to sit with discomfort and learn from it. Be prepared to engage with unlearning assumptions and behaviours. Be open to feedback and challenge. Some people of colonial heritage respond to learning about colonial violence by wanting to run away from their own culture and adopt another culture. This is not a useful response.

*Building trust.* Trust is important to strong relationships however given the history of the enduring impact of colonisation there can be suspicions of lack of trust of non-indigenous people who want to work as allies. Some groups, for example church based organisations, face particular challenge because of their previous active role in colonization. Therefore it is important to recognise that building trust can be slow and is an ongoing process. **Be reliable over time. Do what you say you are going to do.** Maintain continuity in relationships. When working in organisational group contexts work to build group relationships.... Develop a collective approach as this assists in sustaining relationships.

*Respecting different conflicting expectations.* We should not expect unity. We need to be able to deal with working in environments where there are contradictions and complexities. Where possible or appropriate, learn about internal issues before getting involved. It is important not to exacerbate internal divisions between groups and communities. It is not the ally's role to reconcile the differences. In some circumstances this may mean not acting on an issue.

**Do not be afraid of conflict. Instead try to learn from it.**

Over the last 40 years, one of the things that has irritated me most, especially about earnest, well intentioned, good hearted young with people in Melbourne, for 40 years, too many of those people who realised that they wanted to do something to assist the aborigines, the first thing they do is they go running off to the Northern Territory looking for some real Aborigines. And that in itself is a significant problem. And too few of those people ever have the insight to realise what they are doing by thinking like that. What are there no Aboriginal people in Victoria? You know. Are there no communities in this part of the world, where they live, in their own back yard, that don't have problems that are of just the same sort of magnitude as what there are in the Northern Territory. And what is it, this idea of theirs that they have about real aborigines. Where did they get that? And why do they think like that? And there is no attempt to self-reflect before they go off buying a VW Combie and heading off on their quest for real blackfellas. And that's a problem because too many of the people who go up to the Northern territory invariably end up picking up a few words of the local lingo, spend 3 months up there, get what they think is enculturated and they come back down here then and they become in their local community the expert on Aborigines. White people in their community come to them, asking them. What sort of shit is this? That is not a sign of people who

genuinely want to be allies in the quest for justice. That's all about people who've got some sort of inner psychological problem of their own, who are looking for themselves, not for anyone else. And yet, I can say to you I've seen hordes of them go. And even in recent years when I've been teaching at Melbourne University, I said that to all students I taught and yet a significant number of those students did precisely what I told them not to do, no insight whatsoever. Some of them are sitting in this room (laughter).

If people are serious about wanting to become involved in the struggle for justice, then the first thing you need to do is, not go and talk to any blackfellas at all really, you need to look in the mirror, you need to look at yourself, you need to think hard and fast about who you are and make sure that you don't have psychological identity problems of your own, you invariably will discover that you have (laughter), but in the process of sorting out those identity problems you will reach a higher level of consciousness that will make you better prepared then to come and work in an indigenous community.

The other central reason that I say to people 'don't go to the Northern Territory', is like I say for 40 years and long before I started observing it, young earnest white kids have gone off to the Northern Territory, mostly teachers thinking 'we want to help the poor little aboriginal children' and they've gone off in their thousands, from Melbourne and Victoria and here we are 40 years down the track. I look at education statistics in the Northern Territory and for all the good will and all the earnestness and all the expertise that these young kids have taken to the Northern Territory with them for 40 years, thousands of them, they don't seem to have done much good. In fact things are worse in the northern Territory today than when they got there. So what is their justification for going up there? What have they done really for the mob in the NT? But in many instances they have enhanced their own personal reputation and image down here just because they can chuck around a few words of Pitjantjatjara. So don't do that folks. The situation begins with finding out who you are, the community you live in, where you live. What happened to the mob who used to live where your house is. Not just who they were but what happened to them and when? So that you have a better understanding of the little bit of dirt that Australian's call their own. If you can come to terms with 'what happened to the mob here', what really happened, that begins the process of self-education. Self-education is a never ending thing. I have been going through it myself ever since I got kicked out of high school, from the moment I left. My education began the moment I got kicked out of high school and continues to this day and will continue till the day I die. There is no end to the self-education that you have to put yourself through.

It also comes down to what I said over there about the inner qualities of compassion and humanity that you've got within yourself. If you've got those qualities then that's a good start.

Like I've said before, it is important to 'find yourself a racist'. It is important because it is important to understand the arguments that we're up against. It's important to understand the barriers that are their artificially. And like I say, if you can't make a serious dent in the attitudes of one person who is really close to you then you are of no use to us. Go and do something else because the problem is that big.

There are a range of challenges that are there for people who want to be a part of it. In 40 years of my lifetime, I haven't seen a lot of non-indigenous allies, to use the term as it is being used here, who stayed the distance. That is not to say there haven't been many. There have been many and

some really admirable people, including Dr. Bill Roberts who is no longer here with us now. He was a legend this man. He was a Collins Street specialist and he walked away from that at the peak of his career, he could have been a filthy rich man, he could have been an incredibly rich man by the time he died. Instead, half-way through his career, he walked away from Collins St and all the wealth and all the privileges and he came down here to the end of Gertrude Street and he was our first dentist at the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service. He became the Medical director of the Health Service and he stayed with us until the day he died. You ask any Aboriginal person in the State of Victoria, and all over Australia, the people who met him through the NAIHO he was revered and he was loved. And he was revered and he was loved because he was a man of great humility who did all those things that I spoke about before. He conceded that he knew bugger about our community when he came into our community and he was willing to learn and he was willing to be respectful and he became in the long term an incredibly respected man. There have been a few people like over the years who have lasted that long and become that embedded in our community. By the time he died he was more of a Koori than a Gub. So it is possible and there are great examples of people who have done it. But you know in the community we know who the long term people are.

On my facebook page the other day I said 'I don't want people asking stupid questions and if you do then you'll get zapped' and all these people got upset, saying 'what do you mean stupid questions'. People don't seem to understand that every non-Aboriginal person that I have met who is about 17 or 18 or something at Uni, they ask me stupid questions and then they get offended when I am abrupt when I answer and people need to realise that there ain't nothing that no non-indigenous person asks me that hasn't been answered by me or Robbie or any Aboriginal person our age, we've been asked those questions a million times throughout our life you know. No non-Aboriginal person is going to come up with an original question. So it is a great tribute to the incredible patients and tolerance of people like me and Robbie (laughter) here tonight that we are basically listening to the same stuff again.

And the last thing I want to say here tonight is that for anyone who wants to really see in a comedy sort of way, that wasn't intended to be a comedy, there is a brilliant film made about 15 years ago called 'Whiteys Like Us' (made by Rachel Perkins when she was Rachel Lander, when she was married to that [expletive deleted] Ned Lander ) and I thoroughly recommended that you have a look at it and when you finish cringing when you're watching it, you will get an insight into what I'm talking about when I talk about some of the problems that confront us in terms of earnest, well intentioned, white supporters. It shows just how disastrous it can be when a group of earnest well intentioned white supporters come together it what was ostensibly a reconciliation group in the suburb of Manley in Sydney, on the north shore. And it is an hilarious film when you see the disasters that befall them. But the disasters that befall them had to do with, despite all the well intentions and everything, ignorance is a terrible thing especially when a group of well intentioned white supporters are left to their own devices to try and wade their way through that sea of ignorance. So 'Whiteys Like Us' is a salutary lesson for us all. And it is a lesson that is not intended to put you off, it is a lesson that is intended to enlighten you because there is an enormous amount that can be learned from that.

Notes from question time:

As you are saying it is a denial of the Koori's here and as such it represents a gross insult to the local Aboriginal people. These white people in Victoria, this is where they grew up, this is where they live, and if they want to become white activists at the end of the day their task is out there in the white community and they are better placed to be acting in the white community that they grew up in, that they are familiar with, that they know, rather than go up into a red neck culture, ultra red neck culture where they are as much alien as what the blackfellas are. So any white fella down here that wants to bring about meaningful change, the change that they should be working for is in your community, not in ours. The problem that confronts us lives in your community not in ours. ...

X1: Imagine if those thousands of teachers who went up to the Northern Territory had stayed here, and imagine if I had had one of those in my country town school. I wouldn't have started this journey at 20 I would have started this at 5.

Gary: Exactly... had they been working in Victoria amongst their own, as you say the level of awareness and consciousness amongst the broader young community in Victorian would be far higher than it is. The struggle begins at home.

X2: I am going, at great risk, to identify myself as a gubba and ask a stupid question. I live in Boxhill surrounded by racists and I am a member of a local ANTaR group. Occasionally we try to put something on in our community to raise awareness etc. But really one of the most affective things that happens is if a 'real life Aborigine comes', there is nothing like it, but it is really hard to get them there.

Gary: I'll come out. The other funny thing about this. The only reason I am laughing is because in that film, *Whities* like us, that is precisely what they did, they got out a real life Aborigine. And the results were fairly hilarious. I hope it won't be like that when I go.

X3: That is a valid step that whitefellas have to find. I think it is far more powerful and far more meaningful when there is an indigenous voice but then there is the risk of wearing Aboriginal people out, of commodifying the indigenous voice and of turning it into the exotic and so again it is another form of othering

Gary: I've been exotic all my life. But I mean, if I went out, when I do go out the message the message I will be giving to them is in assisting them in ways that they can educate themselves. Because in the long run, when I leave that group, they will realise that they don't need a real live Aborigine. The only reason they need a real live Aborigine is to come out and give them a bit of guidance and then let them go on that path themselves. Because in the end it is about educating yourself and broadening your own education and awareness and then extending that education and awareness you have gained into your immediate community. I think it's really good that you have a group out there in Boxhill and I know Boxhill a bit, I've been out there a bit in my day, and I am aware of the enormity of the task. So therefore I am prepared to sacrifice an hour or two and go out. ... And see my secretary afterwards.

X4: There are a lot of Aboriginal people who use their Aboriginality for their own self interest and are perhaps complicit... Gary: only Noel Pearson. X4: So my question is what is it you should look out for, what is it that ...

Gary: well this is the process of educating yourself. White allies have got to educate themselves and raise their own level of awareness about that sort of thing. You know it shouldn't be that difficult if you're looking at a bunch of blackfellas and one of them is Noel Pearson, it shouldn't be that difficult to just listen to them talk for five minutes and figure out which one is a good guy and which one is a Cane Toad. It is not that difficult. And of course there are white-wing nutcase blackfellas of which Noel Pearson and Marcia Langton are classic examples but then you just had the Liberal Party vote in Ken Wyatt over in Western Australia. So it is a question of if Noel Pearson comes to your little ANTaR group and says support my Cape York Institute so that I can get richer and spend more holidays over on that luxury resort in Vietnam and get fatter from all the good feeds that I am managing to eat, well if you're stupid enough to go along with it then you shouldn't be here. But it is, both in the same way that I say to blackfellas that study under me at Victoria University, we really must be more sophisticated in our political analysis, we must have a higher level of and a more sophisticated understanding of what is happening around us and in the world and the same applies to you. So therefore you should be able to spot fairly easily who the crocks and the frauds and the charlatans are and who the good ones are. Like I say, just take a look at Noel Pearson, that's all you need to do, you can spot the enemy and the problem. That is a problem that we have to sort out, not you, but you have to be aware of it so that you can save yourself the agony of the problem of being done over or ripped off by some charlatan or crook or scoundrel. Therein lies a lesson in itself: people need to understand that not all blackfellas are good just like not all whitefellas are bad and yet there are so many people who come into our communities starey-eyed and think that any blackfella is good because he is poor or oppressed or a person who needs help. You have to sort that out for yourselves, and be a bit sharper in your thinking. You wouldn't got up to Tony Abbott and say 'G'day mate how are you going? Would you?'

X5: I think one of the biggest problems in our communities have is that we don't have any clue at all about what an aboriginal identity is.

Gary: Well you've got to educate yourself don't you.... It's not as though there ain't literate out there to begin. ... I knew fuck all about the Chinese Revolution too until I educated myself about it, to an extent when I was able to go there in 1972 when the red guard were still on the street and Chairman Mao was still in power, and I knew what was going on around me, I wasn't being stupid. If I don't know something about something I educate myself. If I don't know anything about rocket science I will go out and teach myself about rocket science. It's not that difficult educating yourself about whatever subject, so why should Aboriginal stuff be any more difficult?

X6: One of the excuses that Australians would give is that we have been indoctrinated, enculturated to believe that this is an empty land.

Robbie: Even the word Aboriginal – what's it's Ab mean? If you put the word Ab in front of the word use, 'abuse', what about the letters Ab in front of the word normal. It is easy to understand original title, rather than Aboriginal title... and greed is a very powerful thing.

Gary: The worst problem in the Aboriginal community over the 40 years that I have been involved in the struggle are those that think they are your best friend because they haven't worked through this consciousness-awareness thing, they were people who still hadn't come to terms with their own position of power in relation with us because of their mere whiteness. The whole question of whiteness and the privilege that that bestows on you in a country like this is something that most

Australians, even half the people in this room, have never thought about. And that is a crucial component in the building blocks of understanding and reaching a level of consciousness and awareness where a lot of the sorts of things that you are saying aren't there anymore. To educate yourself is really a life-long thing, and I'm still in that process myself. And as you get older you either become an old cynical bastard like me, or you become better at identifying the opportunities to advance awareness and knowledge a bit more as you go. Because it ain't going to happen overnight... some of you young kids might see it.

X5: Where can we get that video you mentioned?

Gary: It is called 'Whiteys Like Us' and ironically it was made by Rachel Perkins when she was Rachel Lander, when she was still married to that [expletive deleted] Ned Lander. Rachel Perkins is the one who made that appalling waste of money, waste of 7 million dollars, called *The First Australians*. If you want to find out what Aboriginal History isn't you should watch *The First Australians*. When your level of awareness is sophisticated enough you won't need me to tell you that. You'll watch the first Australians and you will know what is wrong with it, that should be a bench mark that you should set yourself, so that you are capable of watching some TV show that everybody is raving about, that one awards all over the world, you'll be able to watch it and say to yourself, that's wrong that's not right, that's fucked and you'll know what is wrong with it rather than needed me to tell you and that is a way of testing your own level of awareness. It's made in 1988, no it was later than that because it is about one of those mickey-mouse reconciliation things that the Hawke and Labor government set up.

X6: [Makes a comment about nowadays you can access the indigenous voice on YouTube, on line, though various mediums, you don't need to get a 'real Aborigine in to speak' to respect and represent the Aboriginal voice]