**Thoughts on Assimilation**

**By Gary Foley**

Twenty one years ago when I was a mature age undergraduate student at University of Melbourne I wrote an essay on assimilation. Because 1993 was the *International Year of Indigenous People*, It seemed apt to me at that time to be pondering the effects of creeping assimilation was having on Aboriginal communities. I considered it appropriate because my perception of the *International* *Year of Indigenous People* was that it represented one of those grand token gestures of acknowledgement and recognition which ultimately was both in real terms meaningless and in no way slowed the ongoing destruction of Aboriginal peoples and their cultural values. In other words the process of assimilation continued unabated throughout the *International* *Year of Indigenous People*, and now twenty one years later the very idea of assimilation is now so embedded in Australian political discourse that anyone who challenges it is vilified and demonised by the new black elite and their conservative, white political masters.

I therefore thought it might be instructive to revisit that essay I wrote twenty one years ago and see if some of the assertions and reflections I made then on the question of assimilation are still valid in my mind today.

My 1993 essay was titled “*Assimilating the Mabo-Jumbo*” as it had been written during a period of white community hysteria that engulfed Australia in the wake of the 1992 Mabo decision of the High Court. Despite the fact that Mabo decision was fundamentally flawed, and in reality not in any way delivering land justice to Aboriginal peoples, the outcry from white Australia seemed grossly disproportionate. In Victoria then Premier Jeff Kennet declared that the homes of Melbourne suburbanites were under threat because of the Mabo decision, and National Party leader Tim Fischer had told right-wing radio host Howard Sattler that the Mabo decision would “place in jeopardy so many mining projects” across Australia and that he was “not part of the guilt industry”. Furthermore, the West Australian President of the Pastoralists and Graziers Association said in a public speech to the Australasian Law Students Association that the Mabo decision was the “worst disaster since the Second World War”, and one commentator was moved to observe that the “rhetoric of opposition to the Mabo decision was often old-fashioned racism, a backlash amid new opportunities”.

So that was the context in which my 1993 essay was written. It was a time during which I was lamenting the enormous gulf of ignorance that continued to prevent Anglo-Australians gaining an understanding or insight into the aspirations or cultural expectations of Aboriginal peoples. Worse still, it seemed to me to be a time in which those very aspirations and cultural values of Aboriginal people were under greater threat than at any time during my life.

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| At the time I wrote that as Aboriginal peoples, “we need to be ever vigilant to the subtle undermining of our cultural values - values such as non-materialism, humanitarianism, compassion and the belief that the group is more important than the individual. These and other Koori ideas such as the proposition that living things might be more important than material wealth have always been considered subversive by non-Koori Australian society”.  I went on to point out that, “In white Australia today the free enterprise system with its attendant values, attitudes and myths, prevails. Any person expressing doubt in the fundamental tenets of the system is dismissed or marginalised... A free-enterprise society exists on the assumption that all human beings are essentially motivated, as individuals, by a desire for wealth and material possessions. Further, no meaningful human endeavour is possible without the motivation of money... These are powerful and dangerous myths, especially when propagated by the potent symbols of modern western consumerism, and delivered direct to our children courtesy of the most powerful mind-influencing weapon of all - the TV set in our lounge, community hall or humpy.”  Those statements made in 1993 remain very pertinent today. Perhaps the only thing I would need to add in the last sentence would be the now ubiquitous presence of the internet as an equally powerful transmitter of the powerful and dangerous myths i was referring to. Mercifully however it could be argued that the internet, and especially the rise of social media in the past two decades provides a greater opportunity for two-way communication and a broader range of information sources than did the limited possibilities of television back then. Indeed, as a long term advocate and observer of the evolution of information technology, I have been very impressed at how a younger generation of Aboriginal people have utilised the internet in a way that has been positive and culturally affirmative.  Despite this, I remain largely pessimistic as to our present and future existence as Aboriginal people in the Australia of tomorrow. In 1993 I expressed the concern that “A free-enterprise style system is necessarily an alien concept to ‘Aboriginality’. Therefore we must be wary in Koori Australia of those in our own ranks who promote free enterprise and capitalism for its own sake.” I went on to say that “the unleashing of consumerist forces on Indigenous communities only benefits a tiny elite, whose wealth then translates into power; something not always handled responsibly and well by people inevitably changed by wealth”.  Probably more controversially I put the proposition that an Aboriginal person “who believes in the free-enterprise system, or in some of its basic tenets like individualism, competition, and accumulated material wealth” should, by definition, perhaps not be considered an Aboriginal person. I asserted that, “when people go from thinking, ‘What is ours!’ to ‘What is mine!’, there has been a major fundamental shift in their psyche. This shift is central to Assimilation".  I further pointed out that, “assimilation as a concept is necessarily racist because it presupposes that the majority culture is inherently superior to the minority culture. It creates its own justification for the enforced imposition of the majority culture on the minority.”  Whilst today I would concede that these ideas might be regarded as radical and confronting to some in the Aboriginal community, I would nevertheless argue that a proper debate is yet to be had about the issues that arise. In the two decades since I wrote that essay we have seen the emergence to a position of dominance in the national debate by Cape York identity Noel Pearson. In many ways Mr Pearson would seem to personify many of the attributes I have described above, but more importantly his ideas and policies have been embraced and promoted by Australian political leaders of both major political parties.  It is because of the unquestioned acceptance and present dominance of Noel Pearson’s assimilationist ideas that I am pessimistic about the future of Aboriginal Australia. We need to remember the old saying, “assimilation equals genocide”, because the logical end result of assimilation is that Aboriginal people with Aboriginal cultural values no longer exist. So unless we want a future Australia where there are no Aboriginal people, but rather people who are brown on the outside and white on the inside, and who talk, think and act like white people, then we need to debate, challenge and resist the dominance of assimlilationist ideas and policies that abound in Australia today.  **Gary Foley**  10th March 2014 |