

SYMPOSIUM: CULTURAL STRENGTH – RESTORING THE PLACE OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IN PRACTICE AND POLICY

Wednesday, 11 February 2015

Presenter: Professor Taiaiake Alfred

Panel members: Professor Taiaiake Alfred, Dr Lawrence Bamblett, Professor Kerry Arabena, Mr Tony Lee, Dr Lisa Strelein, Professor Mick Dodson (chair)

A DISCUSSION BY ARISHA ARIF, WITH APPROVAL FROM DR LISA STRELEIN

ON THE SAME DAY THAT THE Australian Prime Minister's seventh *Closing the Gap* report was released, a different assessment of 'reconciliation' took place across the lake at AIATSIS.

Here, a symposium led by Professor Taiaiake Alfred of the University of Victoria, British Columbia, and featuring several Australian thought leaders, re-framed 'reconciliation' to focus on the restitution and cultural resurgence of indigenous peoples.



In his opening presentation, Professor Alfred posed a powerful challenge to the contemporary understanding of reconciliation. Adopting this understanding, he argued, would accept and legitimise the coloniser's understanding of what indigenous people were denied. Restitution must be incorporated into this understanding because:

Without massive restitution made to indigenous peoples, collectively and as individuals, including land, transfers of federal and provincial funds, and other forms of compensation for past harms and continuing injustices committed against the land and indigenous peoples, reconciliation will permanently absolve colonial injustices and is itself a further injustice.

Professor Alfred characterised the profound loss experienced by indigenous peoples as the inability to function as their ancestors did. Settlement destroyed important cultural relationships, practices and reciprocal relationships with the land, and any efforts at decolonisation would continue to be incomplete without the preservation and renewal of indigenous knowledge of culture.

Naturally, Professor Alfred looked to the situation in Canada, where reconciliation continues to be framed in terms of individual suffering. As a result, collective needs for reinvigoration and restoration of culture are unmet and Indigenous people remain psychologically, physically and spiritually disconnected from their land.

For the other panellists, Professor Alfred painted a very familiar picture. In the dawn of native title negotiations and litigation

for compensation in Australia, Professor Alfred's presentation provided a timely opportunity to re-examine what restitution *should* look like. The panel's discussion drew on their own personal and professional experiences, and developed Professor Alfred's push for a 're-presencing' of indigenous people on their land.

First, Dr Bamblett addressed how the dominant narrative of Indigenous disadvantage could be replaced with a narrative of a vibrant and proud culture. For Professor Alfred:

*Language is power – [Indigenous peoples] must recover ways of knowing and relating from outside the mental and ideational framework of colonialism by regenerating themselves in a conceptual universe formed through Indigenous languages.*²

Professor Alfred noted in his presentation that young people needed to be back on their land to experience it wholly and to remember it when they returned to the world of the coloniser. Dr Bamblett echoed this sentiment and stressed the importance of

language in restoring cultural strength, sharing his own experience in passing down the Wiradjuri language to his son.

Tony Lee, as a member of the Nyamba Buru Yawuru native title corporation, provided an insight into the practical limitations of purely economic restitution. Reinvigorating the Yawuru culture needed sustainable policy and practices that looked beyond the immediate needs of the community. For Lee, this had only *started* with the recognition of native title. The importance of choice and agency was developed by Professor Kerry Arabena, who argued that activism and cultural strength in a regional context was the key to empowerment for that community, unlike a mere focus on making money.

Dr Lisa Strelein acknowledged that native title could be both a decolonising and colonising force, and had the potential to disempower Indigenous peoples. To that end, she argued, it requires a conscious deliberate effort to ensure that culture is seen as essential to the *future* picture. Conversations about compensating loss of native title need to be reframed to be about maintaining and restoring identity, culture and connection to country, rather than economic benefits

alone. As Professor Alfred has previously argued:

*We do not need to wait for the colonizer to provide us with money or to validate our vision of a free future; we only need to start to use our indigenous languages to frame our thoughts, the ethical framework of our philosophies to make decisions and to use our laws and institutions to govern ourselves.*³

This prioritisation would also reflect international law which, as Professor Mick Dodson later noted, lists financial restoration as the last resort for compensating loss of land.

The panel echoed Professor Alfred's concern about the normalisation of an individual or community's status as a colonised subject. Rather than accept the coloniser's indicators of decolonisation, the panel agreed that the answer was to establish a just relationship that had existed before the harm took place. Only then could culture be transmitted to future generations, and true reconciliation be achieved.



1 Gerald Taiaiake Alfred, 'Restitution is the Real Pathway to Justice for Indigenous Peoples' *Response, Responsibility, and Renewal: Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Journey* (Aboriginal Healing Foundation Research Series, 2009) 181. http://web.uvic.ca/igov/uploads/pdf/GTA_AHF%20restitution%20article.pdf

2 Gerald Taiaiake Alfred and Jeff Corntassel, 'Being Indigenous: Resurgences against Contemporary Colonialism' (2005) 40(4) *Government and Opposition: An International Journal of Comparative Politics*, 597, 613.

3 Ibid, 614.

Far left: Professor Taiaiake Alfred presenting at the symposium

Left: The panelists at the symposium