

What Difference Does Writing Make?

Leading Writers on Writing

Published in *What Difference Does Writing Make?: Leading Writers on Writing* in 2007
by Future Leaders (www.futureleaders.com.au)

White Australia has a Black History

By **Bibhu Aggarwal**

Australia has long carried the tag of being the ‘lucky’ country. It is a nation that claims to have overcome the barriers of racism and inequality and wholeheartedly embraced a multicultural future. The 1989 National Agenda gave voice to the three core Australian values: cultural identity, social justice and economic efficiency. These values have swept across Australia and have become enshrined in the homes of the all-Australian family, yet one very valuable group of Australian society remains untouched. It is a group that since 1788 has been subject to crippling discrimination; who have had their opportunities curtailed and who have constantly been overlooked by neo-assimilationist government policy. Even today Australia’s Indigenous people are suffering, and as the Howard Government enjoys a new term with the unprecedented luxury of a Senate majority, they have the capacity to empower Indigenous Australians and open the doors of equality and opportunity, which for so long have remained shut.

However, there is no easy solution to curing the debilitating inequality that weighs upon Indigenous Australians. It is a slur on Australian society that in one of the most industrialised nations in the world there is a group of people who endure a structure similar to that of a developing nation. The life expectancy of Indigenous Australians is over 20 years less than that of non-Indigenous Australians, and their unemployment rate is almost three times the non-Indigenous rate. Thus the basis of the current divisive debate, the ignorant assertion that

Aboriginal Australians are a privileged group, can be thoroughly dismissed. The fact is that Indigenous Australians are the most underprivileged group in Australian society, and recognition of these hard realities is essential to the continuation of any serious attempt at achieving reconciliation.

At the very core of the process of reconciliation must be the acknowledgement of a great wrong. A wrong that goes beyond the history of dispossession; that goes beyond sidelining Aboriginal people to mere fringe dwellers in their own land. It is the fundamental denial of Aboriginal identity — the undermining of a rich culture due to the arrogant assertion that Western culture is superior. For two-thirds of the 20th century, this denial was enshrined in Section 127 of the Australian Constitution: “In reckoning the numbers of the people of the Commonwealth, or of a State or other part of the Commonwealth, Aboriginal natives shall not be counted”. It stood beside the legal concept of *terra nullius* as a denial of the very existence of the true owners of this land, and as the High Court held in its *Mabo* judgement, it was a “travesty of fact and a fallacy of law”. Australia’s treatment of its Indigenous people compose the darkest chapters of our experience of nationhood, and the stolen children of lost generations still carry the indelible scars of injustice. It is time to emerge from a sea of dog-whistle politics and political correctness and formally apologise to Australia’s Indigenous people. It is only then that we can truly begin to understand the hardships that Indigenous Australians have endured because of a history of dispossession and exclusion.

Howard’s neo-assimilationist approach of “practical reconciliation” argues that all Australians should be treated equally, and the focus on helping Aboriginals ‘adjust’ to the modern world demonstrates a fundamental insensitivity to Indigenous culture and values. Rather, the Government must embrace substantive equality, the recognition that particular groups require preferential treatment due to a history of discrimination. Combined with progressive realisation, which obligates States to ensure that economic, social and cultural rights are exercisable in a non-discriminatory manner, Australia may

finally tread a meaningful path towards achieving social justice for Indigenous Australians. However, these ideological concepts cannot remain static. They must become a working reality, and to my mind, there are two processes central to delivering social justice to Indigenous Australians: involvement and education. The onus is on all levels of government to work to fuse these processes and give Aboriginals a fair go in Australian society.

Involvement is the key to unlocking an individual's talents and convictions, and Indigenous people must be at the centre, not the periphery, of the resolution process. Given the lack of true Aboriginal representation in Parliament, the Government must venture outside the world of politics and conduct an extensive dialogue with the true leaders of Aboriginal communities. We cannot pretend to empathise with Aboriginals just yet, because we fail to recognise the true extent of their hardships. Instead we must try to provide understanding, an understanding that can only be fostered through the single most powerful tool in Western society: education.

Australia's youth enjoy a world-class education system that despite criticism enriches the lives of its students. However, the study of our Indigenous people is undoubtedly substandard. It is a study that suffers from a shallowness that only furthers our incomplete understanding of Indigenous affairs. Thus a more holistic approach to Aboriginal affairs at the very roots of our society is fundamental to building a more cooperative relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians and making our journey towards reconciliation all the more rewarding.

However, the Government must first address another more troubling aspect of our education system. With only 32% of Indigenous youth completing all secondary schooling in 1998, it is clear that existing educational structures fail to accommodate the unique culture of Indigenous Australians. While partly due to limited access and opportunity, this systemic problem also stems from a failure to interact with Indigenous culture. A reworking of the syllabus alone will not make lasting inroads into the existing problem. Instead, both State and Federal governments must work to encourage more Indigenous people

to take up teaching, so education infiltrates the very roots of Indigenous communities. Furthermore, government assistance to Aboriginal families must be extended, so children are ably supported as they build a basic groundwork through which they can enter the egalitarian Australia we have come to love.

The wounds of the past will never fully heal, and our current understanding of Indigenous affairs is limited in its reach. The claim that Aboriginal people make on Australia is no more and no less than the claim that we make for ourselves. That claim is the right to belong to Australia and experience the waves of egalitarianism, equality and justice that have for so long engulfed our very being. There can be no reconciliation without justice, and the Government cannot continue to turn a blind eye to Indigenous affairs. It is time for ordinary Australians to emerge from the comfort of dormancy and embrace our Indigenous brothers and sisters, and walk along the same path to a future of equality and opportunity.



Bibhu Aggarwal wrote this essay in 2005 when he was in Year 11 at North Sydney Boys High School, Crows Nest, New South Wales.