

#5 WE THE AUSTRALIAN PEOPLE (Transcript)

I am human and proud to be so. I am so astounded to be part of this race, the race of the humans. We are a staggeringly amazing species. Our genius is the source of my most profound wonder. Our home is this planet where in which we have evolved. This planet is also the most amazing thing in the known universe, growing smaller and more precarious each passing year. My fear for our foolishness is equal to my amazement at our genius. How could we have such a clear sense of how we are jeopardising our ecological future and not muster the resolve to change our course?

That we are first of all humans may sound like a trite way to begin a discussion about Australian identity, but it is the right one. The correct starting place for all discussions of human identity is our common humanity, for we cannot take for granted that we have put racial distinctions behind us. Even as we emerged out of the pseudo-scientific racialism that so tragically informed the cultural and social distinctions of the 19th and early 20th centuries, these distinctions still inform human prejudice and conflict around the world.

My purpose here is not to explicate why humans form identities and attach so much significance to distinctions. I accept that identity is important to all of us and distinction is part of that importance. My point is the extraordinary diversity we have developed as a matter of social and cultural fact is undermined when we forget the great similarities and commonalities of our humanity.

The concomitant of difference is commonality. All of this prologue is to explain why it is that I share with that dead white male literary critic of the eighteenth century, Samuel Johnson, that the greatest production of our human genius is John Milton's great epic of the preceding century, *Paradise Lost*. I could devote the rest of this Boyer justifying this case, but I will spare you my zealous idiosyncrasy.

The point is my greatest artistic enthusiasm comes from the literary culture of English poetry, from a blind revolutionary republican who was the chief propagandist in favour of the beheading of our new King's first predecessor, Charles I, who in turn was near put to death by his son, Charles II, when the reign of the Cromwells ended.

The world is my culture. I am so enthused, interested and astounded by the extraordinary diversity of human societies and cultures. I am so impressed by the cultures of tribes all over the world: the Jews, the Germans, the Sioux and Iroquois of North America, the Bushmen of the Kalahari, the Pintupi and Wik of Australia. The cultural and linguistic distinctions of these great tribes are a gift to more than their members and their achievements and failures are a source of endless fascination. It is our respect for our common humanity that animates our respect for this great diversity.

Of course problems arise when the distinctions of culture are posited as distinctions of race. Valuations of innate qualities, capabilities and worth, are assumed to be racial and hierarchies of superiority and inferiority. When fixed upon these distinctions, our common humanity is diminished and sometimes shattered in a process of racist oppression. The economics of power is the great driver of racist oppression between humans. And so it has been with the Aborigines of Australia, whose relegated place in the hierarchy of the globe was 'the lowest of the low'.

In the midst of the culture wars on the Western Canon in the 1980s the Jewish American writer Saul Bellow asked: "Who is the Tolstoy of the Zulus? The Proust of the Papuans? I'd be glad to read him."

The best riposte came from the African American journalist, Ralph Wiley: "Tolstoy is the Tolstoy of the Zulus." Proust is the Proust of the Papuans. Einstein is the Einstein of the humans. Milton is the Milton of the Guugu Yimithirr.

We all own Shakespeare. And Dickens. And Tolstoy. And Ellison. Because we are human. And this heritage is ours.

When we secure the recognition of our identity as the First Peoples of Australia, through the constitutional enshrinement of a Voice to the Parliament and Executive Government, we must then make it our business to teach our young that their indigeneity is not all of their identity.

We must teach our young people to also embrace the other ethnic identities from which they are descended, and of which communities they are also members. To embrace one's own British or European or Asian or African ethnic identification does not diminish one's identification as indigenous. Contrary to the racist formulas of the past, one does not become 1/4 indigenous or 1/2 indigenous: one becomes Indigenous and Chinese in terms of ethnic community membership – if one so chooses and these communities recognise this.

We must teach our young to embrace all communities of identification that mark our sense of who we are. There are myriad communities associated with ethnicity, religion, political association and politics, recreational, philosophical and artistic identification, sexual orientation and lifestyles. We are not just indigenous.

I used to refer to the plural identities we all harbour as 'layered identities' that criss-cross each other, some of which we share with our families and some of which we don't, some of which are core and some of which are context specific. I borrowed from social theorist Robert Putnam the idea of bonding and bridging social capital and proposed that we think about bonding and bridging identities. Let me now refer to layered identities as 'communities of identification'. We are all members of many diverse communities, and in the modern world each of us is unique in our communities of identification, some of which bond us to those close to us, and some of which bridge us to people who would otherwise be strangers.

Let me tell you about my own four communities of identification. This is what I told the students at my old school, St Peters Lutheran College, in Brisbane in a Mabo Day address I gave this year.

I told my alma mater I was firstly Guugu Yimithirr and Kuku Yalanji from Hope Vale and Wujal Wujal in southeast Cape York Peninsula. I was raised to follow our culture and honour my elders, and to care for our heritage. I came to St Peters keenly aware and confident in my Aboriginal identity.

Secondly, I told them I was part of a wider community of Pama – indigenous peoples – of Cape York. After studying history and law at Sydney University, the cause of my Cape York people became the reason for my public life and leadership. I told them my life's work has been to seek better prospects for our Pama and I want for our children to have the social, cultural, economic and political capabilities so that they can choose lives they have reason to value, and take a fair place in their country.

Thirdly, I told them I came to St Peters as a Lutheran. I knew from my earliest childhood I was part of a Christian community that connected my people to Lutherans all over the world, starting with Martin Luther's reformation in 1517 Germany. The Lutheran Church is central to me and my Yimithirr and Yalanji people. It is central to who I am.

Fourthly, I told them St Peters had become my community. My son and daughter have followed me there. I said it was my spiritual home and that I was sure it would become theirs too, as I expect it would become for all of the students there.

Of course there are many other communities of identification which have varying degrees of importance to me.

The reason I want us to teach our young the concept of the multiple layers of our communities of identification, is I don't want us to make the mistake of identity fundamentalism. The idea that we have a singular identity based on politics, ethnicity or religion. Rather each of these communities of identification are only one of a plurality. When our concept of who we are becomes fundamental we lose the other bridges of identification that connect us to everyone else in some way or another, and which is the wellspring of unity and fellow feeling.

Our national identity as Australians is of course the most ubiquitous bridging identity, and I will return to its salience soon.

The second reason I want our young to avoid what Amartya Sen called the delusion of singular identity, is to avoid being prescriptive about identity. We are all unique and individual whilst at the same time being members of many communities in which we share identifications. I don't want our young to be constrained in whatever other identifications they are interested, and which they wish to share with strangers. I don't want our young to be told what is indigenous and what is not. What art, poetry or literature, political opinion, intellectual or philosophical orientation, an indigenous person should be properly interested in and aspire to become expert in. The world is the oyster of our young. Indigenous young people should pursue careers and lives of their own choosing – according to their passions and proclivities, without the strictures of identity politics.

We want our indigenous young to be experts in Russian literature, Chinese philosophy or Mezo-American pre-history – to engage in the world and to use their unique culture and grounding as a vantage point and a new angle from which to see the world anew.

I don't want our young to be identity policed. We want our young to be intellectually and culturally free to make their own choices. The freedom of the individual must not be inhibited by prescriptive identity politics.

Let me now confront the challenge we face with next year's referendum. I am much guided in my thinking by the late conservative English philosopher, Roger Scruton's writings. Like the writings of Robert Hughes, Scruton's are touchstones for me. In particular his 2012 book *Green Philosophy* affected my thinking. Here was a conservative philosopher making the so obvious but today so unexpected bridge to conservation. It is the one book the conservative climate deniers should read. There is much to push back on when Scruton slips into culture war mode, but his trilogy of *Green Philosophy*, *The Soul of the World* and *How to be a Conservative* are indispensable to me.

It is via Scruton I come to his predecessor Edmund Burke's concept of the transgenerational society: that our society is the convocation of our ancestral dead, us the present living and our future unborn. I want to see the day when we welcome to country and acknowledge all of our Australian ancestors whose bodies, bones and dust have returned thither – to mother Earth – to be reunited with our ancestors. It was in this sense that I meant even Andrew Bolt would one day become indigenous to Australia when the ancestral remains of his people become part of the Australian soil. People's roots in the country grow deeper with each passing generation and the ancient soil assimilates us all.

I'm taken with Scruton's idea of the first person plural: We.

With the campaign for next year's referendum nigh, I am troubled with the idea that we will divide into camps of yes and no. It is a requirement of the machinery of constitutional amendment – that voters are required to vote yes or no – but still how I wish it were not so. I am pained by us versus them. And them versus us. Too much of our contemporary politics is consumed by us and them.

I most blame the advent of the permanent campaign. The abandonment of the convention that the contestation of ideas and policies should be vigorous leading up the elections, and then the results should be respected by the contenders for power, and the campaigning should end and governing should begin. The permanent campaign leaves no respite after an election is finalised, instead the next campaign begins immediately the day after.

The permanent campaign came to afflict politics with President Richard Nixon in the 1970s, advised by the wicked genius of the strategy's inventor, Roger Ailes. The corrosion of the American social and political system is such that it may never again be possible for all Americans to employ those most important words:

We the American People. Americans have abandoned the highest plane of their civic mutuality – the first person plural – and descended into the tribalism of us versus them, blue versus red, north versus south.

I hope we aren't following the Americans down this road. As vigorous as our contest of philosophies should be, we should always preserve our commitment to the first person plural.

Which is why I am convinced the referendum on Indigenous Australian recognition should not be understood as yes alliance versus no alliance, conservatives versus progressives, left versus right, us versus them. This is not the plane on which we should settle the matter of recognition.

The question we are facing is not one which should be allowed to descend into binary conflict. Recognition is about synthesis. It is about yes meeting no, city meeting the bush, remote meeting the metropolis, and conservatives meeting the progressives. It is one of those times when we plead with both camps to see the other as fellow countrymen, and to find the common and higher ground that can unite around.

The question is about the future of the country and the Australian identity we wish for our children to have. An identity that is sure about who we are as a people and the promise of our mutuality. We don't want our grandchildren to grow up in an Australia which is still troubled and marked by unfinished business. We don't want Indigenous Australian children to remain on the margins of their own country, conscious of their strangely enduring alienation from Australian society.

There are two lies we will have to be vigilant about in the forthcoming campaign. They are egregious lies because they rely upon a Trumpian obscurantism to be sustained. It is like the birtherism lie raised against President Obama – that contrary to all the evidence Obama was born in Kenya and not in Hawaii and therefore ineligible for presidential office. Or like the election lie of 2020 – that President Biden had stolen the election from his predecessor.

The strategy of relying upon a big lie is learned from the anti-democratic precedents of Germany in the 1930s. The psychoanalyst Walter Langer wrote in a wartime report for the US government that the German leaders' primary rules were: *never allow the public to cool off; never admit a fault or wrong; never concede that there may be some good in your enemy; never leave room for alternatives; ... people will believe a big lie sooner than a little one; and if you repeat it frequently enough people will sooner or later believe it.*

And so the Institute of Public Affairs has prosecuted its campaign against the recognition of Indigenous Australians on the bases of two Big Lies.

The first is the lie that a First Nations Voice would constitute separate treatment on the basis of race in the constitution. This argument succeeds only if you ignore the truth that our claim is on the basis of our being indigenous to this country, not on the basis of race. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are indigenous peoples, they are not a separate race. Our race is human, the same as all other Australians.

The second lie is that recognition would breach the principle of equality. The IPA cloaks its argument under a commitment to liberal democracy, blithely ignoring that liberal democracies worldwide – not the least its leading exemplar; the United States of America – recognise the native peoples as indigenous under their constitutional law. They never mention the accommodations reached in other liberal democracies in northern Europe and around the world.

Surely, the starting place for a convocation dedicated to a grand philosophical tradition such as the liberalism of Adam Smith and John Locke, might first be honesty? How can there be any credibility to philosophy if at first there is no commitment to honesty in public discourse, and instead the peddling of Big Lies? The IPA's sheer dishonesty would shame Smith and Locke and the great founders of the liberal tradition if they knew what was being prosecuted in their names.

Let me invoke one last thought experiment for these Boyers.

That we bring together all of the great Australians of our public life who have now passed:

From James Cook to Bennelong

From Arthur Phillip to Jandamurra

From William Cooper to Dorothy Mackellar

From King Barraga to Samuel Griffiths

From Daisy Bates to Margaret Tucker

From Jack Patten to Margaret Guilfoyle

From RM Williams to Eddie Mabo

From Essie Coffey to Bill Wentworth

From Jim Killen to Kim Beazley, the elder

From Vincent Lingiari to Robert Hughes

From Ninian Stephen to Wenten Rubuntja

From Paul Hasluck to Nugget Coombs

From Harold Holt to my hero Pastor Sir Douglas Nicholls

From Patrick White to Neville Bonner

From Ron Castan to Arthur Boyd

From Margaret Tucker to Jack McEwen

From Bill Stanner to Barangaroo

From Pearl Gibbs to Bob Hawke

From John Koowarta to Malcolm Fraser

From Doug Anthony to Rick Farley

From Sidney Nolan to David Unaipon

From Mum Shirl to Slim Dusty

From Steve Irwin to Victor Chang

From Evelyn Scott to Jack Munday

From Arthur Beetson to John Toohey

From Charles Perkins to Gough Whitlam

I will stop here, but you get the idea.

We would add to their number the countless Australians who are known to each of us, our relatives and friends of our families, people from our community, ordinary Australians of common decency, of human foibles and failings, but all possessing an abiding love for the people and the country of Australia.

If we asked this conference of our ancestral dead to consider the prospect that lies before us now – that we secure recognition of Indigenous Australians through a constitutional provision that empowers legislation establishing a Voice to the parliament and government of the day – what would our ancestral dead tell us, the present living, we should do on behalf of our as yet unborn?

Next year Prime Minister Anthony Albanese will take the recognition of Indigenous Australians in the Constitution of Australia to a referendum of the Australian people. If we rise to the opportunity that now presents, our three Australian stories will become one, and even as we maintain our diverse individual and group identities, we will be able to speak in the first-person plural: “We the Australian People”.

Thankyou.