Institutional Racism alive and well in the Barmah Forest:

How white ants and white politics combined to undermine Dharnya

Kevin Rudd’s apology in 2008 may be looked back upon as the day that shaped Australia’s future in regard to race relations, or alternatively, it may be remembered as a day of false hope and little deliverance for Indigenous Australians. A future of equal opportunities for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians alike free of racism and government intervention is indisputably a commendable aspiration. Until the inequalities which are being acted out everyday within Australia’s government organisations are acknowledged and addressed it will remain as simply pleasant rhetoric.

Using the apology as a framework for this paper, it will be argued that existing inequalities are perpetuated through the process of institutional racism—a form of racism that systematically advantages some ethnic or cultural groups at the expense of others. It is produced subtly through bureaucratic decision making and policy which is inherently biased towards the privileged or dominant group. The structures and processes which enable institutional racism develop in a society where there is an unequal spread of power between groups for a prolonged period of time. The infrastructure that the cultural dominant create are tailored to suit their own needs and values. These biases can be produced in regards to the education system, employment opportunities or the structure of its government and organisations. In this environment the minority group is forced to adapt as best it can to work within a framework that automatically privileges the dominant group. Institutional racism is produced by a combination of unintentional as well as intentional factors. Underlying racial stereotypes or biases that individuals or groups within those organisations posses may be intentionally acted upon, they can then be perpetuated until they become a norm.

which no longer bears that original intentionality. If Governments on both sides of the political spectrum are truly committed to providing equal opportunities for Indigenous Australians, it will be necessary for them to examine the ways inequalities are presently being reproduced and reconfirmed. A clear example of institutional racism can be found sitting neglected in north western Victoria in the Barmah National Park-Yorta Yorta country.

For Yorta Yorta people, whose traditional lands straddle both sides of the Murray River in the Barmah-Millewa National Park, a clear example of inequality driven by Institutional Racism and Government neglect is the Dharnya Interpretative Centre. Dharnya was built in 1984 utilising Commonwealth Government funds specifically designated to address Aboriginal disadvantage. It provided a wealth of services and opportunities not only to the Yorta Yorta people but also to non-Indigenous locals and tourists alike. It provided a space in which the Yorta Yorta could educate their younger generation about their culture, history and local environment. It was a meeting place for community events enabling the Yorta Yorta people to maintain their connection to their land. Dharnya also provided services and opportunities to people outside of the Yorta Yorta community. By allowing visitors, education groups, locals and tourists into Dharnya the Yorta Yorta people were able to share the antiquity of their history and culture. This was achieved in a manner that helped to empower the Yorta Yorta people and to promote respectful cross-cultural exchange. The reality that comes home to us with Dharnya now however, is a heartbreaking story of seeing something worth working for, being whisked away by government neglect and a lack of support from mainstream society. I will return to this shortly but let’s take a deeper look at the factors behind the demise of the Dharnya Centre, 1984-2007

In their initial application for a Commonwealth Employment Grant for funding of the Dharnya Centre the Yorta Yorta people identified that the complex should be built utilising traditional timber and staffed by Yorta Yorta people. Some non-Indigenous people and Parks employees were employed in the day to day

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management and maintenance of the Centre. Dharnya would also act as a training venue for Yorta Yorta people wishing to seek work as cultural-site officers and rangers. In this way Dharnya could provide employment opportunities for Aboriginals in both the short and long term. Dharnya operated as a successful tourist centre providing employment opportunities for Yorta Yorta people. The facility was equipped with on-site accommodation, cooking facilities, guided cultural walks and displays of Aboriginal cultural heritage. Dharnya reached its goal of being a thriving tourism destination, achieving increased rates of usage and attracting thousands of visitors each year before it was forced to close. If Dharnya had been properly cared for it could have continued to develop to its full potential providing new employment opportunities for Yorta Yorta people in the cultural tourism industry.

The Commonwealth Government provided a grant of approximately $400,000 for the construction of the Dharnya Interpretive Centre. The Department of Sustainability and Environment (DSE) and Parks Victoria (PV) were jointly responsible for the construction and upkeep of Dharnya and were assisted in this by the Yorta Yorta Clans Group (YYCG). The YYCG set up as an advisory committee involved in seeking advice and support from local community interest groups. The government insisted that the Minister for the Department of Conservation, Forests and Land (CFL) would appoint all council members from a list of nominated people. However the Yorta Yorta people wished to elect their own representatives to sit on the committee. In the end a compromise was made where the Yorta Yorta selected three committee members and the Minister appointed two government representatives whose role was to purely observe. As the responsibility for Dharnya lay with the Benalla Regional office it was intended that the committee would make representations to the manager at Benalla. However, by 1988 two to three staff members from Head Office were attending committee meetings regularly as well as up to eight members of the regional staff. This resulted in the Yorta Yorta representatives being clearly out

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3 Background to CEP Grant of $409,425 Which was used to construct the Dharnya Centre word document, Produced by Dr Wayne Atkinson

4 Comments on the management of the Dharnya Centre and the Barmah Forest, by Department of Conservation, Forests and Lands (CFL) between 1984 and 1991, word document produced by Dr Wayne Atkinson.
numbered by non-Aboriginal full-time government employees and often having to compromise on their views regarding Dharnya. This behaviour by the governmental body supposedly meant to be supporting the Yorta Yorta people and working collaboratively, led to a significant amount or strain on the Yorta Yorta community. These government employees demonstrated a prejudice in their attitude towards the Yorta Yorta people and behaved in a manner which was intimidatory and condescending. These people were supposed to be working alongside the Yorta Yorta people, and were representatives of the government agencies responsible for ensuring the success of the Dharnya Centre. However, from the outset their behaviour demonstrated their racial prejudices and highlighted the unequal distribution of power or influence between the government bodies and the Yorta Yorta people. It was very much like what Aunty Liz Hoffman described from here long experience in the power dynamics of working with government bureaucracies as ‘fighting from the old position of nowhere’.

Before Dharnya was even built the DSE and Parks Victoria made a decision which would inevitably lead to its closure. A Victorian Government website about the Barmah State Forest highlighted that “the durability of River Red Gum and its resistance to termites made it suitable for railway sleepers, building foundations, fencing, wharves and mine timbers”\(^5\). However, despite this and the fact that the Echuca area is known for its termite problem, much of Dharnya was constructed using imported European wood which was highly susceptible to termite infestation. Unsurprisingly Dharnya developed a termite problem which the DSE and Parks Victoria then failed to address and which inevitably led to Dharnya being closed in May 2007 because of structural problems. If the termite problem had been treated promptly it is unlikely that Dharnya would have needed to close. Indeed if the same duty of care was demonstrated towards Dharnya as that to other surrounding tourist and public structures there would have been no need for its closure. Dharnya could have continued to flourish and

grow to its full potential, an opportunity that other government tourist facilities are allowed to enjoy.

The manner in which the Yorta Yorta people have been treated since the advisory committee was first formed displays a complete disregard for the Dharnya and its value to their community.

In view of the obvious case of neglect shown towards Dharnya by Parks Victoria and the DSE, the fact that the closure of Dharnya clearly restricts the Yorta Yorta’s capacity to be in control of the teaching of their own culture suggests this is another example of racism that denies the Yorta Yorta the fundamental right to practice, teach and enjoy their own culture on at least an equal footing to that of the more recent colonial heritage.

Aboriginal Tourism research demonstrates that many international visitors and domestic travellers are seeking an Indigenous experience. They want to learn about the timeline of Indigenous history and culture which is the bedrock of our nation.

In 2003-04 tourism contributed $3.4 billion to the regional Victorian economy and accounted for over 61,000 jobs. Tourism Victoria has identified that Indigenous tourism is one of Victoria’s product strengths. One of this governmental body’s key actions for 2008 includes implementing the Nature-based Tourism Strategy 2007-2011.\(^6\) This strategy was implemented in conjunction with Parks Victoria to promote ecotourism, adventure tourism, and Indigenous tourism and trails.\(^7\) The 2008 Victorian budget committed $6.3 million dollars to this initiative. So far there has been no suggestion that any of this money is likely to benefit Dharnya. The Yorta Yorta people have a wide range of environmental knowledge and were providing educational and guided cultural walks when Dharnya was operational. By denying the Yorta Yorta people the opportunity to create meaningful employment within their

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community and to share their cultural and environmental knowledge the Victorian Government is restricting their ability to prosper economically from their traditional land and heritage. This is reminiscent of Ian Hughes notion of ‘Welfare Colonialism’ which claims that through policies of Aboriginal welfare the state constructed a situation where Aborigines are both subject to and dependent on the state, which results in them remaining different from ‘normal’ citizens. In other words, denying Aboriginal people access or opportunities of employment and self sufficiency is a means of control as it restricts Aboriginal people from obtaining the level of equality that Kevin Rudd assured the Australian public is the Australian Government’s goal.

Jason Eades, the Chairperson of Aboriginal Tourism Victoria, identified that Aboriginal tourism is a vastly undervalued aspect of Victoria’s tourism industry. In 2004 there were over 230,000 Aboriginal tourism visitors to Victoria, accounting for 18% of the total of International visitors to the State that year. However, despite identifying this niche market the majority of government funds for regional tourism development continue to be directed towards promoting the colonial heritage. In the Murray Regional Tourism Development Plan 2004-2007: once again Aboriginal Tourism ventures were identified as an area of growth and potential development. However, when listing key infrastructure developments required or underway in the region, there was a conspicuous absence of any mention of Aboriginal infrastructure or the Dharnya Centre. Instead the key actions identified included; the Murray Outback Riverfront Precinct in Mildura, Mildura based paddle steamer experience and the Port of Echuca working heritage river port which all contain elements of European Setter history and culture.

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In particular the Port of Echuca has attracted huge amounts of funding and support from government bodies. The 2004/5 Campaspe Council Budget allocated $250,000 towards the Port of Echuca project and the following year contributed a further $258,000\textsuperscript{13}. Then in 2005 with the help of Tourism Victoria, the Shire of Campaspe produced an Investment Strategy Report estimating the Port Echuca project to cost around $21 million. They are currently seeking around half of this funding to come from State Government\textsuperscript{14}. The Port also received a $7600 Community Heritage Grant in 2006\textsuperscript{15}. Most recently it also attracted a $150,000 funding grant from The Minister for Transport, Mr Peter Batchelor to reconnect the ‘historic’ railway link between the Echuca Station and the Port\textsuperscript{16}. Already the Port of Echuca has gained at least $665,600 of government funding and if the investment strategy which was produced with the help of the Victorian Government is successful they could expect to see up to another $10.5 million heading their way. This level of funding highlights the Victorian Government’s commitment to European heritage focused tourism development. This commitment in itself is fine except when it comes at the cost, or coupled with an almost complete disregard, for tourism acknowledging the Aboriginal history of Victoria. Through their recent research and publications regarding the state of tourism in Victoria it is clear that the government is aware that Aboriginal tourism is underrepresented. The government has also repeatedly claimed that the development of Aboriginal tourism is a priority, but until it begins providing financial support for Aboriginal tourist ventures these claims are hollow. In its most recent budget the Victorian Government has dedicated $13 million over four years to support tourism and local events in regional areas\textsuperscript{17}. Once again there has been no indication that the Yorta Yorta can expect any of these funds to be allocated to the restoration of Dharnya.

\textsuperscript{14} Media Release – 20\textsuperscript{th} July 2005, ‘Port of Echuca Strategy Progress Report Highlights Future Opportunities’
\textsuperscript{16} Media Release – Monday, 29\textsuperscript{th} May, ‘[vic] gov grant Echuca’, \url{http://www.railpage.org.au/ausrail/00may/msg03293.html}, accessed on the 24\textsuperscript{th} of May 2008.
\textsuperscript{17} Victorian Budget 2008, \url{http://www.budget.vic.gov.au/}, accessed on the 20\textsuperscript{th} of May 2008.
One of the hardest aspects when facing or investigating cases of institutional racism is its covert and insidious nature within structures. Ironically it works in a similar way to white ants, quietly boring away and undermining the integrity of bodies which outwardly can appear sound and reliable. If the Federal and State Government outwardly appear to be sympathetic to the cultural and economic needs of Indigenous Australians, unfortunately the internal mechanisms to deliver on policies aimed at addressing these needs is lacking. If we follow this analogy a little further, (although trying not to get too carried away with the comparison of government to a colony of insects that cause irreparable damage and are best treated with extermination), the heart of the structure which should provide the most support is the local government, in this case the Shire of Campaspe. In 2004 the Shire of Campaspe produced a document titled Organising for Prosperity: Campaspe Economic Development and Tourism Review. It is an 82 page guide about “delivering better economic development, tourism and marketing functions in Campaspe Shire” and it states that “roles, relationships, communications and resourcing are critical to success in economic development and tourism…” [their emphasis]\(^1\). This publication is available on the council’s website and one can only assume that is was produced to be relevant and inclusive of all people within the shire. Despite this there is not one mention of Aboriginal tourism. There are 82 pages outlining the future for tourism within Campaspe and the words Aboriginal or Indigenous are virtually written out of the document-they do not appear once. On the council website there is also a link to information about tourism within the region, once again there is a complete absence of any mention of Aboriginal people or tourism\(^2\).

Despite the fact that institutional racism is a covert form of prejudice and discrimination Dharnya provides an obvious example of neglect and discrimination as a result of institutional racism. The government organisations neglected their responsibility towards Dharnya and this resulted in significant

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disadvantage, both in terms of their cultural connections and economic capacity, to the Yorta Yorta people. The incompetence and neglect of the DSE and Parks Victoria displays a lack of respect for and understanding of the Yorta Yorta’s culture and education and employment needs.

If Kevin Rudd’s inspiring words about equality for all Australians have any hope of being realised, it is imperative that situations like Dharnya are simply not allowed to occur. Dharnya has the potential to be a valuable space that the Yorta Yorta people can utilise to maintain their heritage and connection to their land. It can also allow the Yorta Yorta people to offer a unique educational and tourism facility of national and international status that would provide employment and economic opportunities for the Yorta Yorta community. It is inexcusable in 21st Century Australia that white ants and institutional racism be allowed to deprive the Yorta Yorta community of these opportunities.

References


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