Use of Colonial History in YYNTC

Would like to reflect on some of my own experiences in choosing history as an academic discipline. Look at some factors that I believe saw many Indigenous people choosing to study history as a means of challenging the dominant colonial history and as a tool for pursuing rights and reforms in Indigenous Affairs. Will use this as basis for examining the outcome of Indigenous people gaining greater equity within the discourse of historiography and raising some issues for discussion in the workshops.

Speaking of the importance of the historic dimension in strengthening the hitting power of Indigenous arguments in the 70's, Charles Rowley offered some important challenges to Indigenous people. Rowley claimed that the impact of our arguments was often diminished by the lack of the common fund of historical knowledge.

Too often, the arguments themselves, for the want of precise information, lack the hitting power and conviction, after the remedies advanced in vague and general terms, show little appreciation of the
considerable historical and other differences between situations in different regions of Australia, or of changed circumstances, which render earlier ideas of compensation obsolete (Rowley, Destruction of Aboriginal Society, 1970:8-9).

Similar challenges were also offered by American Indigenous scholars that were aimed at Indigenous students becoming more versed in the discipline on comparative colonial history.

Vine Delori Jnr, a Sioux American Indian of the University of Arizona in Tucson urged his students to master the discipline of history. He emphasised that Indigenous students needed to acquire the knowledge of history so that they could be better than the white man-a beating them at their own game approach (Oversees Study Report "A Look at American Indian History Programs-Some Ideas for Aboriginal Programs in Australia" 1982:9,23).

These were the challenges that saw many Indigenous people including myself choosing the path of history as an academic discourse and as a means of providing an Indigenous viewpoint which up to that point was largely dominated by non Indigenous historians.

Taking up the challenge was fine but I believe the empowerment of Indigenous historians has seen a major shift in the value of Comparative Colonial history and in the process of historiography. That is once Indigenous students became more versed in history and certainly used it to articulate their cause the concept of black armband history was quick to emerge. To use another analogy once Kooris started to tell it as they saw it from the other side of the coin it created a state of denials that many historians and political leaders found hard to accept.

That is essentially what has arisen from Indigenous assertions of their history, particularly on the politico-legal front, which is further illustrated in the YYNTC. Justice Olney not only dismissed the historic knowledge that was presented by my people, (54% of the transcript) but regarded our analysis of the past as ‘righteous indignation’.

The following passage from the Judge's decision reflects this position.
the unfortunate aspect of much of the applicants' evidence was frequent, and in some instances, prolonged, outbursts of what can only be regarded as the righteous indignation of some witnesses at the treatment they, and their forebears, have suffered at the hands of the colonial, and later various State, authorities (Para. 21).

Quote here:

These are my views on the use of Colonial History in the context of those challenges discussed and in light of where that has taken us in relation to the representation of history.

Will leave it there as issues for discussion.

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