

Chapter Three

Australia's Aborigines and Australian Civilization: Cultural Relativism in the 21st Century

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I would like to begin by reading to you an editorial written by my own newspaper some 45 years ago. It has the title: Not the Chosen people of Australia.

"Widespread public misgivings in Australia at the entry of Jewish refugees into this country are not without a justification that should command a more conservative attitude from the Ministry of Immigration. This public objection to Jewish refugees is not because of any lack of humanity or sympathy for European refugees, but because Australian experience of the flow of Jewish refugees from Europe immediately prior to the outbreak of war has not been wholly happy. In the large metropolitan areas of Sydney and Melbourne, Australians are finding themselves being brought into a state resembling economic servitude to Jewish interests. Where black markets and illegalities flourish, the experience is that Jewish refugees are plentifully in evidence. Australians, particularly ex-servicemen, are finding themselves elbowed away by the money power which the refugee class exercises, and Australians find themselves being exploited by all manner and class of snide business tricks which have been introduced to this country. Moreover, the historically proven experience that Jews are incapable of governing others and unwilling themselves to be governed is being repeated in the lack of Australian sentiment by this class of immigrant.

"The overwhelming feeling of the Australian people today is that much more discrimination should be shown in the selection of this class of immigrant, and that their number should be strictly controlled in relation to other classes and nationalities of new arrivals.

"Apparently, much more care is exercised in selecting British migrants than in the case of Jewish immigrants, and there is no comparison between the two if or when regard is had to their relative capacity to become good Australians."

I have chosen this appalling specimen from our own files, because a number of points about it could be relevant in a modern debate about what can and cannot be said in discussion of topics that involve people's sensitivities.

I cannot find any evidence that its publication caused a flood of condemnatory letters to the Editor, or calls for his resignation, even from a number of public offices he held, not least of the ACT Advisory Council, or from the YMCA, Rotary or the Canberra Chamber of Commerce. The Prime Minister of the day did not abuse or chide him. No bodies barred his entry, and no noises drowned him out if he went anywhere to speak.

There was then no racial vilification law, no Human Rights Commission or Office of Multicultural Affairs. There was a law capable of dealing with such a sort of utterance: the sedition laws then, as now, purport to forbid the excitement of disaffection against any classes of Her Majesty's subjects, but I should not think that anyone gave even a passing thought to using it. Sentiments like that were unexceptionable in those days.

I should not for a second like to suggest that Arthur Shakespeare, the Editor of the day, condoned or advocated the use of violence against Jews. I do, however, think that it is entirely fair comment to say that the manipulation of sentiments of the sort he expressed, in a different place but around the same time, led to the greatest ethnic genocide of the history of Western man.

One can believe, as I more or less do, in perfect freedom of political discourse, including discourse of the most absurd or hurtful bunk, believing that the best antidote to bad ideas is their exposure to public debate: that the sunlight is the best disinfectant for them.

But it would be quite wrong to think that the only sanction against the expression of views is the law, or, if there is one, that the only exercise of expression which can be condemned is that which breaches it. Far from it. There are manners too, and there are conventions about what can be said and where. There are even laws of logic.

Indeed, the more that the law permits open debate even of silly or pernicious ideas, the more vigorously should people exercise the option to use it to repudiate them.

We are living in an age where, as some of us are becoming too painfully aware, some are seeking to rewrite both the manners and the conventions – in some cases for improper purposes. There are, nonetheless, quite legitimate sanctions against those whose views clearly breach any acceptable limit.

I think anyone would find the words I quoted offensive today. Even those who might think that the author had a right to say them would agree, I hope, that they should be allowed to be repudiated with at least an equal amount of vigour, even if it included abuse of the writer as much as of his ideas. One might even shun and avoid him or encourage others to do so. Some people with associations with him might reasonably wonder whether the mind-set revealed, or the wisdom displayed, raised far wider questions about the man's mind or sense of judgment: whether, for example, he was either fit to hold a public position or whether he was the sort of person one would prefer to have representing one. These sorts of consequences can flow – indeed they quite reasonably do flow – in vigorous debate, without there being any necessary element of proscription of what is said, or feeling that one should not be allowed to say things.

In an article this week, P P McGuinness defended the right of Henry Bosch to say what he thought about Aborigines. Padraic, I think, accurately characterised the Bosch view as "objectionable and repellent". He said that he would not tolerate in his house anyone who engaged in filthy, abusive or bigoted speech against Aborigines, Jews or any other group commonly abused, nor would he maintain social contact with such people. But he vigorously defended Bosch's right to say what he did. And he vigorously disapproved of the Government's effective sacking of him, regarding it as an assault on principles of free speech.

To my mind, however, his argument was weakest in suggesting that government had no right to choose not to have as its representative, in a purely grace and favour position, a person whose broad social outlook it found objectionable and repellent. That is not quite the same thing as prosecuting. Padraic went on to suggest, with a typically McGuinness flourish, that what had happened was censorship, spelled the end of free debate or independence of mind in public service.

In any event let me get back to Arthur Shakespeare. By all accounts he was a decent, well-respected person regarded in his time as being on the small 'l' liberal side of social issues.

Perhaps I should not be so condemnatory of him. Perhaps I can only judge him by the standards of his time. It would, of course, be highly culturally relativist for me to do so – there is no difference in principle between the insistence of the relativist that one can only judge a culture in its own terms and the argument that one can only judge it in its own time.

Six months ago, I spoke at a conference on the media and Aboriginal affairs about how I, and the media generally, had reported on Aboriginal issues over the years. Most of the conference was, as I had expected, the usual sort of finger-pointing by Aborigines, and the usual sort of breast-beating by those of the media who put in an appearance.

I am sick of this sort of nonsense. I make no secret of my broad sympathy for Aborigines and their aspirations – and I have worked in and for Aboriginal organisations. But I think that many

trends in Aboriginal affairs are quite disastrous, and that some of the blame—allocating, and some of its meek acceptance, is an obstacle to making hard analysis, hard choices and hard politics. Moreover, I said that some of the blame for this situation lay with liberal journalists like myself, who had acquired a bit of a habit of ignoring or excusing the bad things which were occurring. They were doing Aborigines no favours by their well-intentioned suppressions, I argued: indeed they were often helping to perpetuate a failed and failing system by their failure to do their job. I instanced a host of things which no one was willing to have discussed. I might, briefly, summarise some of them.

I said that Aboriginal concepts of religion and social organisation were treated these days, often, even by professional sceptics and agnostics, with a degree of reverence nowhere accorded to fundamental ideas in Western society, and going well beyond what was required by concepts of respect for other cultures. Half-understood and half-baked and often flatly wrong descriptions of such cultures were often reported uncritically. The tendency to romanticise Aboriginal life, a tendency to blame any deficiency on others or to deny any Aboriginal responsibility for things which had gone wrong, and a sullen public silence about issues such as family breakdown, violence and dishonesty did not help Aborigines, though it did help some of those, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, who oppressed them.

Statistics were routinely abused to draw the wrong conclusion. The most obvious example is the use of State imprisonment rates to prove how the criminal justice system consciously discriminates against Aborigines. It does not: it reflects a more serious problem – the fact that poor, frustrated and powerless people are more likely to commit crime.

I spoke of how many imagined solutions to problems in economic affairs operated without regard to laws of economics, and of how we were sustaining communities dependent upon a high technological base where there was no real work to be had, and no prospect of it, but where we had played a part in creating expectations that someone would indefinitely pay the bill. One cannot have economies based on everyone taking in each other's washing.

I spoke of the addiction of welfare bureaucrats to petty cooperatives and participatory structures which had everywhere failed to work, and which often led to major bureaucratic tyranny. And of how the system actively discouraged petty capitalism, personal initiative and the discipline of risk or the pride of personal possession.

My argument was not that my analysis was necessarily correct. Rather it was that issues of this sort ought to be being discussed, but that Aboriginal sympathisers feared to discuss them lest they inadvertently harmed Aboriginal interests, and that no one else dared to. Those few who did ran the risk of being torn apart, either as wittingly racist and divisive, seeking to advance their own interests by attacking the helpless, or as foolish for failing to realise how they were playing into the hands of the former.

I actually thought I was being quite provocative and politically incorrect to say this. Yet I must say that the reaction has been generally very positive. Many Aborigines have made it quite clear that they agree with me. I have been asked to discuss my comments at a number of other Aboriginal gatherings. I have had my hand warmly wrung by a number of quite unexpected people. And, even outside of Aboriginal affairs, I do not think I have said or done a thing for quite a while which has produced such a response – from critics of directions in Aboriginal affairs as well as people who simply want things to be better. It, or at least the extracts of it published in *The Independent Monthly* even, I think, got me invited here.

I believe that the interests of Aboriginal Australians, individually and collectively, are best promoted by public debate, in which all members of the public can participate, and in which public opinion and the national will can have some impact on policy and administration.

There are many people who disagree with that. Some say that it is for Aborigines themselves to decide what the problems are and what should be done. That may be so, at least in the sense that how Aborigines organise their lives is only a wider public issue if the way they do so puts their rights and interests into collision with those of others. But the public is involved nonetheless because public money and resources are involved and all citizens have a keen interest in ensuring that they are well used.

Some others resist the idea of an open debate because they fear the people. They fear deep racism running through Australian society; they fear, they fear a witting or unwitting stirring up of tensions, to the great disadvantage of Aborigines.

They fear, no doubt, that a debate may incite some meanness in tough times which might tighten the tap; they fear that some of those with interests which are in definite conflict with Aborigines may dominate the debate, and manipulate some of the tensions within the community to the disadvantage of Aborigines.

There is a very elitist principle at the root of this problem. Those who support the current status quo captured the rhetoric and the dogma of Aboriginal affairs after a long struggle 20 or so years ago; their canon is now generally accepted in the higher halls of government, of political parties and amongst the political intelligentsia, even if it has not been successfully sold to the population at large. They do not trust the good sense of the population at large, and they either do not trust that their arguments will win on their merits, or do not believe that we live in a society where arguments are won on merits.

The fear that the consensus cannot be sold is deep. Moreover, the consensus was won both at a time when there was a more generous impulse within the Australian community, when confidence in the capacity of government to achieve results was higher, and in better economic times. An open debate, some fear, might go rather differently now.

I have a rather more optimistic view. That optimism is, however, in the best solutions being those which are honed in debate, which are under continual review, and which are open to and capable of dealing with criticism. It is not necessarily in an affirmation of the current status quo. Indeed, I profoundly doubt that much of what now occurs can be defended on its merits.

What I do suggest, however, is that many of the counter-models in much of the current criticism could not win the debate either. What is missing in the debate is a middle, the reasonability of ordinary Australians being brought to bear. So heavy are the social and political proscriptions for getting involved in the debate at all that only the most foolish, the most brave, or the most extreme, or those with very great stakes in different outcomes will trouble themselves to get involved. And even then, often, they have to speak very loudly and very provocatively to get a hearing.

I think, for example, that one could expect that the sentiment of most Australians is that they want to see programs which improve the material wellbeing of Aborigines, which allow them to live in dignity and to make their own choices as citizens about how they face the world.

Whether as some function of guilt about an old history, or some recognition of the actual and material disadvantage under which Aborigines live, I think that most Australians accept that the material advancement they want for Aborigines can only be achieved with special programs which redress some of the current disadvantage, whether in education, in health, or whatever.

A good debate does not necessarily mean that there are not ritual exchanges of abuse, least of all when vested interests on either side are under attack. Nor does it mean that remarks will not be trivialised, or that some important things said will not be heard if the speaker is silly enough to say silly things as well – Abo for example – or uses words which suggest some fundamental lack of respect for, or hostility towards, Aborigines.

The observer of such a debate can easily make the appropriate discounts. The press, which is usually conscious of the baggage people carry, and which in any event regards it as its duty to comfort the afflicted and to afflict the comfortable, is often more interested in reporting the gaffe than the substantial, but often predictable, remark.

But it is not as if Australia lacks the tradition of vigorous debate into which such a discussion about Aboriginal affairs can fit.

But some things fall outside the limits. That which is thought to will produce a heightened level of abuse, far more explicit calls for social, or perhaps legal sanctions against those who say it, and far more explicit questioning of their motives.

In this respect, the two gravest social sins are fairly clear. The first minefield is in ascribing to groups of people, on the basis of some secondary characteristic such as race, negative generalised characteristics, particularly of some intellectual inferiority or disqualification from some consideration. Frank racism, simply, is out. I think most people agree about this, even if they cannot quite agree on exactly what is or is not racist.

The second minefield falls into the cultural relativism area. Holding a universally optimistic view of every person's potential does not mean that one has to accept as intrinsically worthy, or reasonable, or unjudgable, everything which they may think or believe. It certainly does not mean that one has to accept that things can only be judged from within their own lights.

Ideas are fair game. But there is a difference, however subtle, between attacking the idea and the sense of self-worth of the person who, however foolishly, believes in the idea. Respect for others is a rule of good manners which has little of itself to do with any notion of cultural relativism.

It is not even particularly culturally relativistic to say that good manners require that this respect be more assiduous when one is dealing with sensitive issues, or with minorities. The things which people hold most sacred, in short, are particularly the field in which one must play the ball and not the man.

There is no shortage of people who will cock their ear and very carefully parse every utterance made when it is clear that someone is straying into the minefield. In this deconstructing age, it is also quite clear that every nuance will be caught and seized upon, and that some will find implications which are said to cross the line, even when the actual words are incapable of bearing them out.

It is, incidentally, not even true to say that the spiritual home of such parsing is the women's movement, the gay movement or any other self-defined oppressed subset of the middle-class. In fact it is Phillip Street, in Sydney. Anyone who has had any experience of the NSW defamation law, and of the ingenuity of its practitioners in drawing up lists of imputations, would not accept for a second that word fascism is a purely American product.

It would be idle to deny the success of such groups, both for good and, more than occasionally, for bad. We have all had our fun with political correctness. It would be silly, however, to be too intolerant about it. Political correctness has always existed, not least at the service of the State. It was once enough to demolish enemies by calling them witches; we have lived in times when it was almost enough to label them Bolsheviks.

Moreover, however boring, tedious or oppressive we may find some of the outpourings of some feminists or some other groups, we have as a society, I think, immensely benefited by acknowledging that women, say, are full operating members of our society and are not to be casually demeaned. That the commonplace ignorances or stupidities of a decade ago are no longer regarded by many people as tolerable is no necessary bad thing, even if a few people or a few things have been monstered in the process.

I say this because I think that some of the counter-reaction to these trends borrows too freely from the analyses of other places, particularly the United States.

The US is not only the spiritual home of political correctness and cultural relativism, but of its counter-reaction. It seems to me that in Australia we have only rarely reached the peaks of the trends, having as we do, stronger factors holding us together than pushing us apart. Equally not all of the counter-claim is applicable. We have had our own absurdities in Australia but are by no means under serious siege here.

Moreover, whatever we might imagine to be the desire of some of the sillier proponents of multiculturalism, the Australian experiment in it, which began of course long before the word was invented, is still largely a success. It has neither atomised our society nor led to unsatisfiable clamours for group rights and separatisms. The mainstream culture has acquired far more than it has lost.

Going back to Aboriginal affairs, it is too much, of course, to demand of every person who wants to participate in the debate that they be motivated only by a sincere desire to advance Aboriginal interests. Even within my good manners parameters, there is nothing wrong with anyone joining in for the simple reason of defending their own interest.

It does not, however, follow from that that their contribution must focus on demeaning or belittling Aborigines to build themselves up. It does not follow that one can only advance the remorseless logic of one's claim by denying any legitimacy whatever to the counterclaim. It is not even good debating or good politics.

This is not, in short, an invitation to get out of the debate or to withhold from it a vigorous denunciation of error. There never was an issue, and hardly ever was a time, in which a debate was more needed, and in which the widest possible contribution was not demanded. Most of all, frankly, the debate needs some exposure to some radical ideas – ideas which, for some time, have been coming from the right rather than the left of politics. The ideas are particularly needed in defining a role for the individual as well as for the State, and in defining the field in which State aid can actually help improve things, rather than, as it all too often does at the moment, further entrap people in their poverty and their powerlessness.

But the chance of those ideas getting an airing, or to mix the metaphor, of their taking root, may require a climate in which those who would have to hear such ideas would not think that they were being belittled or abused.

There is evidence to which I could point which indicates that many Aborigines are anxious and eager that a wider debate occurs.

Even official government reports occasionally evidence some fundamental anxieties. Not all are as repetitive in their descriptions of the problems, or as complacent in the assumption that these problems will go away if only there is more money for the same programs, and more peace and goodwill as, say, the report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. Could I commend, for example, a reading of the 1985 Miller Report into Aboriginal Employment. Or ask that some take note of a strong line of assertion from a number of Aboriginal leaders, not least Charles Perkins, that only Aborigines can liberate themselves, and that dependence on government and a culture of complaint is positively standing in the way.

It is, of course, now argued that the resolution of the Mabo issue is the perfect springboard for redressing everything which is wrong. If Mabo is a solution, it is not entirely clear what the problem was. I do not myself believe that the writ of Mabo runs very wide, or that it has any great capacity, of itself, to upset settled legal relations between citizens, or to create long-term uncertainties about the ownership of private property.

Indeed Mabo, as a High Court decision, is more about dead ends than it is about legal opportunities for Aborigines: without a doubt, the clear thrust of the High Court's decision was to reject the idea that the overwhelming majority of Aboriginal Australians had any continuing claim, based on law, to land.

In doing so, the High Court made new law, and unsettled old law, by affirming that the rights which Aborigines had to land at the time of settlement was recognised by the law, and that, in certain very narrow circumstances, those rights could persist up to the present day. There are some remote parts of Australia, which have never been colonised by, or alienated by government, and where there may be some possibility of continuing rights. Indeed, in Western Australia, I expect that there are. Almost by definition the only problem which this causes, however, is to miners. Their problem is not insurmountable, provided that they know who they have to deal with, and provided they can negotiate agreements with certainty and expect contracts to be honoured. It is not a fundamental problem.

When Mabo was decided, I wrote that whilst it seemed to open no legal doors for most Aborigines, it provided them with political opportunities to reopen broad issues of land rights and compensation. The decision, I must say, was always welcomed by many ordinary Australians, including myself, for righting a historical untruth, albeit in a way with few continuing legal implications.

I adhere to my view that the Mabo decision, by itself, is a very narrow decision of limited effect, and that much of the abuse currently being directed at members of the High Court will prove to be nonsense. This interpretation of its width was, in fact, the view of most legal advice going to Aboriginal interests after the decision was handed down.

It was alarms sounding from the mining industry, not logs of claims filed by Aborigines, which persuaded government that Mabo bristled with problems of public policy, and which put it on the political agenda.

Somewhere along the line people became persuaded that only complete alienation of land, explicitly overriding Aboriginal interests, might be proof against Aboriginal claim, raising the spectre that all interests in land falling short of freehold were now in doubt.

Moreover, possibilities explicitly rejected by the High Court – for example, that a reversion of land to the Crown on a resumption or the expiry of a leasehold reopened issues of title – were to gain sway.

The most absurd interpretations of the decision have been allowed to circulate unchallenged.

Coupled with some absurd claims – for example, by Aborigines to the Brisbane central business district or to the Australian Capital Territory – some perfectly reasonable and not in the least racist Australian citizens were given ground for serious concern about the security of their possessions.

The hysteria which has occurred was not whipped up by extremists – even if some have benefited from it. The Federal Government, indeed, owes a considerable share of the responsibility for the alarm. It is to be noted that at no stage has it ever published its own view of the breadth of the decision. Even allowing for some areas of uncertainty, it has at all times been open to it to make a clear statement about what was clearly out, what, if anything, was clearly in, and what fell into the zone of uncertainty.

Not only has it not done that, but there have been times when the Commonwealth has had a clear political interest in seeing the potential effect of the decision exaggerated – at whatever risk, particularly to Aborigines, of stirring up some undesirable community passions. The Commonwealth's initial approach to the Premiers, for example, was based on panicking them into combined action.

The political problem of Mabo is that the Commonwealth has picked up the occasion of the judgment to decide to make policy of its own, policy which may or may not be desirable, but is not mandated by the High Court, however much it has suited the Government to have it thought otherwise.

Paul Keating showed no interest in Aboriginal affairs until he became Prime Minister. Even now, he has very little direct interest or involvement, let alone passion, in what is actually happening. He has come, however, to that time of a political life where he wants to make a personal mark on our history, to be seen as statesmanlike, and to seek to harness some common ideals which fit in with his broad philosophy of our nationhood and ourselves.

I do not think his impulses are unworthy; there is, in fact, a certain nobility in them which it would be wise to recognise.

Mabo itself cannot serve as the vehicle of his generous impulse to solve the problems of Aboriginal affairs in one fell swoop; it gives no land and no rights to most Aborigines, and rejects the idea of compensation for those who miss out. Mr Keating has, however, seized the occasion to say that dealing with Mabo provides the opportunity to solve the wider problems, picking up on the way an agenda of compensation, of needs-based land claims, and of a formal reconciliation process, whatever that may be.

He genuinely believes that the doing so will be a mark of Australian political maturity and coming of age: it is no coincidence that he has wrapped Mabo, and aboriginal reconciliation, in the republican flag.

But the nature of Australian politics is not such that change occurs once a Prime Minister becomes morally convinced of the necessity of it. That might be a starting point, but change has to be sold, the press has to be squared, the middle-class prepared, and so on. There has to be a debate. It has to be based on information. Any debate can be expected to bring into the field those whose interests may not be served by change, and their views have to be dealt with.

But Mr Keating has shown a marked reluctance either to take the nation into his confidence or even to consult with Aboriginal interests, other than those whom he himself has appointed to represent them. Sincere or not, those people have no power to deal with him. Mr Keating has resented any suggestion of debate, and attacked anyone who has put their head up. His calls for statesmanship from his ordinary political opponents are either calls for silence or for applause.

The Tim Fishers, Marshall Perrons, Richard Courts and Hugh Morgans – even Henry Boschs – of the world can look after themselves, but Mr Keating has even attacked ordinary citizens who have expressed concern or alarm, even though their ignorance, if they have displayed it, has been a result of impressions he himself allowed to be created.

For all of his manifest political abilities, not least some courage and capacity in promoting difficult points of view in debate, he has been too impatient or too lazy to do the real hard work on this one.

My mention of Tim Fisher, Marshall Perron, Richard Court and Hugh Morgan reminds me that one does not have to be a cultural relativist to find many of their contributions unhelpful to a real debate on directions in Aboriginal affairs.

This is for two reasons. First, they often, to my mind, posit an Aunt Sally to attack – the idea that most Aborigines are pushing for separatism and that their demands for some respect and dignity, or economic improvement will, if granted, in some way, undermine our own sense of culture and civilisation, or diminish our own estates. I cannot see that that is generally true.

Allied with this seems to be an assumption that the moral claim which Aborigines make is based upon history, and that, if one can upset their version of that history, the claim disappears. Thus we have people setting out either to disprove the history, or to personally absolve themselves of any role in it, or to argue that even if the history is somewhat unpleasant it followed some deterministic rule of dominance by stronger cultures.

I am not a cultural relativist. I believe myself quite capable of judging cultures – my own as much as others' – by my own lights. That does not mean, however, that one cannot appreciate other cultures, or appreciate the significance of what other cultures do, within their own lights, or

that appreciation cannot strengthen my capacity to judge them within my own. Still less do I see the intersection of cultures either as some competition for supremacy in which there can only be one winner, or as some necessary clash of ideas by which only one can be right, and by which, by definition, each other is a heresy to be identified and eradicated.

Let's take Stone Age culture as a phrase, for example. Now there is no argument that the culture of pre-contact Aborigines was a Stone Age culture.

Those who wince when they hear the phrase – it is a cue political correctness phrase these days – do so not because of its reference to a state of culture, social organisation and use of tools, but for an implication that is sometimes present that those who come from such a culture have by definition some continuing diminished cranial capacity or incapacity to make it in the world.

I think that that was an implication which was actually contained within the words which Henry Bosch used eight days ago. I do not accuse Hugh Morgan or Tim Fischer of this – although what they have said is not beyond criticism – but the thought police are not necessarily drawing an enormously long bow in worrying both that some of the audience will make this inference and that, whether or not the speaker intended them to, he cannot but be alive to its possibility.

Any politician or important person in public affairs who plays in that game is going to find themselves attacked – not necessarily in a way that denies their right to say, if they want, anything they like, but for their wisdom, their judgment and their motives.

Since it is so often easy to make an attack, it is worth noting that those who benefit from doing so have in fact little to gain by actually being seen to suppress the words. The words themselves provide a wonderful platform for reaction and for comfortably restating tired platitudes.

They are also, of course, assisted by the fact that most observers do not see anything which such people say as being likely to be disinterested or motivated by simple desire to assist Aboriginal Australians, to correct a historical record for the sake of history alone, or simply to hold a bad idea up to the sunlight. The National Party may not be racist, but it is a party which has long represented interests at odds with Aboriginal interests. The interests of Hugh Morgan are reasonably transparent. The records of the Northern Territory or Western Australian governments in Aboriginal affairs have long been deplorable.

It is not unnatural, accordingly, that many people will discount much of what they say, and question motive – that they will even read into instant pronouncements things which have not been said at all. One does not have to be a cultural relativist to do that.

I have found many of the contributions which have been made by Hugh Morgan to be thoughtful and well-considered. I have found them to contain propositions which have enough of a basis of truth to make me squirm.

It is not the idols which he wants to tear down which excite my resentment, so much as the ones he would install in their places; not his rejection of cultural relativism, and his insistence that we can ascribe virtue to civilisation, so much as that concept of civilisation which he sees as its highest pinnacle.

I expect that he has to be extra-provocative even to get into the debate; he cannot, however, be surprised if people do not want to engage him on his own terms. One might be willing to die for his right to say something, but one itches to disagree.

One of the problems about Aboriginal affairs, of course, is that many of the problems of Aboriginal Australians are remote from most Australians. Until, moreover, some people became hysterical about Mabo, the advancement of Aboriginal interests had not been seen, by most Australians, as being at the expense of their own. Though it is true that in rural Australia there are some active resentments based on beliefs that Aborigines are thought to have rights or benefits not shared by others in the community – resentments which, on the whole, ebb and flow

with the economic situation, and which are, accordingly, running rather more strongly at the moment.

In the Aboriginal context, when Aboriginal spiritual values are posited to conflict with something like mining development, the automatic support that the Aboriginal claim will get in some quarters does not necessarily flow from nature-worship or cultural relativism per se. It sometimes comes from something within our own society – some feeling of spiritual emptiness and yearning for meaning which, for one reason or another, our own society is failing to satisfy. For some, the void created by the loss of triumphalism and self-confidence in the Christian Churches is filled by attraction to eastern religions or astrology. For many more, I think, the void creates some hard-to-shake respect for people who seem to have something to hang on to.

In this context, I think any attempt to demean Aboriginal spirituality is doomed to be counter-productive, not least for attacking one of the few assets Aborigines are seen to have. Theologically or evangelically based refutations, at least coming from without the Aboriginal community, are particularly bound to fail.

But it would be quite wrong to think that there is something especially odd or unfair about a political debate in which not all of the participants share common values, or agree about what is important and what is not. Surely that is of the essence of politics – arguing what weight has to be attributed to this or the philosophical significance of that. It is not even unknown for one to have to tread carefully: ask John Stone about sensible discourse on veterans' affairs.

In any political debate, Aborigines have both advantages and handicaps. On the one hand, they are relatively few in number and political clout and, of course, many live quite remotely from where most Australians live. Their capacity to organise even at the regional level is quite restricted and, often, quite compromised by the relationship of virtually all of their organisations with the State.

On the other hand, Aborigines benefit from a general goodwill from most Australians, and some degree of community willingness to put resources at their disposal.

Hugh Morgan has been known to ascribe some of the current ideas and their acceptance to some sort of Bolshevik agenda, but the beginning of the era of change in Australia owes more, I think, to a generational change which was occurring in the mid-1960s. The ingredients were a combination of material prosperity, some focus on rights and tolerance coming more from the United States than Russia, and some reaction against what was perceived as the spiritual aridity of the times, and the meanness of the State in deploying resources for those not benefiting from the general prosperity.

But until Mabo, public interest in and support for Aboriginal affairs had been waning. It has been for about a decade – since the election of Hawke. One of the reasons was deliberate. Many programs in Aboriginal affairs plainly had not been working as well as was hoped. The major reason which had been given was lack of proper or sufficient consultation with the affected Aboriginal people.

The response was that Government dropped out of many of the formal processes of Aboriginal development, appropriating instead a large sum of money to a body which is notionally Aboriginal-controlled, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission.

This has led to a number of problems. ATSIC is entirely a white artefact: in no way does it reflect the nature or structure of Aboriginal organisation, which is in any event very locally, not regionally or nationally focused. By any standards, the structure of ATSIC is very unwieldy and not adapted to efficient and effective action.

Establishing ATSIC put a focus on decision-making and control by Aborigines at some expense to another function – effective service delivery. Yet, whatever the manifest deficiencies in Aboriginal participation in the past, the abiding problem in Aboriginal affairs has been in service

delivery. This is not necessarily an issue of corruption, incompetence or mismanagement, as some of the critics would suggest, even if these are problems enough: some of the problems are welded to the structures of delivery.

The new structures are, if anything, now even more unwieldy and inefficient – even if, as I doubt, they better reflect the priorities of the recipients themselves.

Much more significantly, however, creating ATSIC has tended to depoliticise Aboriginal affairs. Government got what it wanted. Once all the applicants were clamouring at its door. They would appeal to public opinion if they could not get their way. Now, instead, they fight amongst themselves. The Government can say "not our problem: how the cake has been shared out is up to you". Even the size of the cake has not been an important issue. Outcomes are even more remote.

I think that all Australian citizens have a right to aspire to all of the goods and services, material and spiritual, which this society is capable of producing. Aboriginal individuals, their families, and their communities have a right, the same as all citizens, to live as they want to live, the only issue arising when the exercise of their rights or responsibilities comes into conflict with those of others.

The State has a role to play in providing resources and arming people with power to ensure that those who are disadvantaged within the system can compete on fair terms. But the State cannot liberate Aborigines. Only they can do that themselves. Assistance from government and the community can assist that process, but that assistance is not itself the liberating force. Indeed, at the end of the day, shrugging off some of the protective blanket which the State puts around them is the very beginning of the liberation process.

A lot of well-meaning sympathy for Aborigines has helped many Aborigines think themselves purely passive victims of oppression, relief from the suffering inflicted by which can only be achieved by the infusion of a massive flow of external resources.

It is right for the media and others to point to systematic disadvantage of Aborigines, to ways in which the political system handicaps their capacity to improve their situation, even to chide or monster some people who stand in their way. But it is frankly racist to deny that Aborigines are themselves actors in where they are now and where they are going.

As non-Aboriginal Australians, we too have a stake in that liberation, we have interests too, some of which may be in conflict with some Aboriginal interests, and all of which deserve to be heard, and weighed, in an ordinary political process.

Frankly, however, it is unlikely that consciously hostile contributions are going to be accorded much weight by those who must make some of the critical decisions.

This is not an appeal for political correctness, but for some sense of strategy. This does not mean that unpleasant truths need to be suppressed. It may mean, however, that those who cannot advance their views with courtesy may actually cement the status quo – a status quo which is disastrous for Aboriginal Australians, and which may be for all of us as well.