

The Tyranny of Experts – Challenges and Achievements in First Nations Education

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Every child has a right to health and a good education. While this is a given, you say, clearly after more than two centuries the top-down, assimilationist policies inflicted by a long line of Australian Governments and technocrats have failed miserably to create even the opportunity for equity, let alone excellence, for so many of our poorest children. The *Children of the Sunrise*, First Nations children, are trapped by the poverty within our affluent nation and by the policies of Governments and vast bureaucracies that lack the essential knowledge to design or implement a successful education strategy. The evidence I will share with you indicates that any progress towards equality in education will not come from what the New York University economist, Professor William Easterly calls “the tyranny of experts”¹ but rather from extending to the First People of this land their full rights and freedom to shape their future, including languages, Culture and other learning agendas for their children. Government and market forces have a role and a responsibility to contribute to the development of many essential social services, including education, but the wellbeing and rights of First Nations children are ultimately advanced most impressively by First Nations leadership, by community, family and individual responsibility, age old values of the world’s oldest continuous Cultures. I am not here to criticise teachers or education academics though some of you may hold varying views of the challenges and the achievements. I respect your opinion that there are many ways to learn but I will argue strongly that we must end the tyranny of so-called experts who learn nothing from history.

I have just returned from the Northern Territory where the First Peoples are hunkering down to await the full impact on their lives of the latest policy reviews that are amalgams of what governments want to hear and of what technocrats offer over and over again. The first thing one notices is that all such reviews by so-called experts have titles ringing with false optimism. Andrew Forest’s Review is entitled “CREATING PARITY”² and Bruce Wilson’s Northern Territory Education Review is headed, “A SHARE IN THE FUTURE”³. To put it succinctly, there is little chance of parity offered in these reports and the only share in the future will come when First Nations people are in charge of their own agendas. Like the previous review of Northern Territory Education in 1999, ironically titled, “LEARNING LESSONS”⁴, both the Forest and Wilson Reviews show that Australian Government has learned very few lessons on advancing education for First Nations children.

¹ Easterly, William. *The Tyranny of Experts*, Published by Basic/ Perseus Book Group. New York 2013.

² Forest, Andrew *et al.* *The Forest Review – Creating Parity*, Commonwealth of Australia. Canberra 2014. http://indigenousjobsandtrainingreview.dpmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/files/The_Forest_Review.pdf

³ Wilson, Bruce. *Review of Indigenous Education in the NT – A Share in the Future*. The Education Business. Melbourne 2014. www.education.nt.gov.au/.../Indigenous-Education-Review_DRAFT

⁴ Collins, Senator Bob. *Learning Lessons*. Independent Review of NT Indigenous Education. Darwin. 1999.

Both new reports are largely surveys of failed education, failed training and failed social engineering, failures that highlight bewildering changes in administration, the introduction of countless new programs that were soon abandoned, inconsistent and inadequate funding and a stunning inability to pay heed to the voices of the First Peoples with the knowledge to explain what does and does not work at the community level.

Here and there these reports offer the standard motherhood statements, for instance the startling discovery that early learning is the key to life long learning. While educators have been urging Governments to improve child-care and early learning for more than three decades, effective pre-schooling is mightily uneven in Australia and still not giving the youngest children in many communities the quality of support they require. Still the Wilson review rightly hails early learning as one of the few education areas where some progress is being made. But look closer. At the La Grange school at Bidyadanga near Broome, our Literacy Empowerment Program at Ian Thorpe's Fountain for Youth was involved in the community's development of a top-flight early learning program over the past decade. A skilled teacher and trained assistants produced a quality of education that was celebrated on then Prime Minister Julia Gillard's national website. This is a whole-of-school approach that includes first-rate professional training for the teaching staff, oral language work among the infants, a literacy and numeracy framework, and our Literacy Backpack program that engages families in learning and closes the space between the home and the school. The backpack is not merely a way of getting reading to all members of the family, books, magazines and newspapers that are not easily available in remote areas, but it is a simple mechanism to get families and schools working together. Despite a glowing report from ACER, the Australian Council for Education Research, on the impact of the Literacy Empowerment project, what did the Government experts do? They cut funding not only to this excellent Bidyadanga program but to all twenty of the specialised Indigenous Literacy programs around Australia. So while the Forest and Wilson reviews correctly identify early learning as the essential foundation for a child's successful education, these reports are commissioned and paid for by Government and ultimately they do not focus with any clarity or depth on Government failure, the failure of administration, the failure of sustained investment, the tyranny of experts.

Both the Wilson and Forest reports offer additional platitudes about the value of first languages. But neither report comes to grips with the truth that it is a fundamental human right of these children to be taught at the youngest age in their first language and that this indeed is a huge education asset. Both reports simply comment on the bilingualism controversy without examining how Government in its confused and contradictory style has undermined effective bilingual education for children who are clearly bicultural. For example, while the NSW Liberal Government was winning applause for supporting the teaching of First Nation languages, the Northern Territory Education Department was stumbling backwards from the policy disaster of requiring all lessons for the first four hours in school to be taught in English. In the Northern Territory between 85% and 90% of children learn to speak at home in a First Nations dialect or Kriol. Early learning programs should be utilising this asset, developing literacy in the first language and at the same time immersing children in their bicultural language so that they are equipped for a rich and rapidly expanding program of learning.

Currently as children arrive at remote schools with little early learning, as well as being limited by widespread hearing loss from Otitis Media and other learning disabilities, it should be no surprise to see the pattern of confusion, frustration and failure cited in the Wilson Report: two years behind by year three, five years behind by year seven, and by year nine, only about ten per cent can read and write well enough to be effectively educated in this system⁵.

Stand by children, if the Forest and Wilson reviews are taken up in earnest there will be many changes and contradictions to come. Secondary schools would be abandoned in remote communities. Homeland schools will be left in the 'too hard' basket because Government won't sustain essential service funding. The Master Plan, it has long been clear, is to attempt once more the social engineering that has been disastrous throughout Australian history and in fact in most First Nations lands around the world. In the Northern Territory families will be asked to voluntarily send children to boarding schools in half a dozen hubs. The so called 'growth towns' are the ones Government has chosen for development and they will have to contend with the complexities of social change when people, once more, are ushered from their tribal lands to live on the fringe of mainstream Australian life. Already the social problems in Tennant Creek, Katherine and Alice Springs are evidence that this forced assimilation in the name of modernization and rationalisation of resources is increasing dysfunction. On the other hand, the evidence from the Menzies School of Health is that children on the homelands are safer, have better nutrition and are exposed to far less risk to their wellbeing than the fringe dwellers.

If you don't attend school in the Northern Territory your family soon may find you are being punished. Andrew Forest, a mining billionaire, has seriously proposed that some 2.5 million Australians should be given national welfare cards and that if children are not attending school these welfare payments should be docked. Currently the federal Government's newly appointed school attendance officers do not yield this big stick but the Federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Senator Nigel Scullion said recently that he had come to believe that this punishment was needed in some cases. The evidence again shows the tyranny of experts. In the Northern Territory primary school attendance was down from 70% in 2002 to 68% in 2012 and only 50% of secondary school age kids were attending. During the peak of the political oppression of the NT remote communities during the first five-year emergency phase of the Northern Territory Intervention, Senator Scullion told me in Maningrida one day that if the Coalition came to power they would make the Intervention work because they would be much tougher. Really should anyone be surprised by the Abbott Government's disproportionate emphasis on squeezing the poorest people in our society. In that memorable conversation in Maningrida, Senator Scullion also scoffed at my view that local community organisations had the leadership and skills to be heavily involved the way in the development of their communities and in their children's health, education, employment and overall wellbeing.

⁵ Wilson, Bruce. *Review of Indigenous Education in the NT – A Share in the Future*. The Education Business. Melbourne 2014. www.education.nt.gov.au/.../Indigenous-Education-Review_DRAFT

One cannot understand Australian Government's approach to First Nations policy including education without examining the central tenets of the neo-liberal philosophy that has gained adherents in both major political parties. Neo-liberal thinking also illuminates the words and actions of a handful of highly visible and vocal Aboriginal neo-conservatives, Noel Pearson, Marcia Langton and Warren Mundine in particular. I have written about this extensively in the book, *IN BLACK AND WHITE*⁶, edited by our next speaker, Professor Rhonda Craven along with Dr Anthony Dillon and Nigel Parbury. Neo-liberalism connects the agendas of modernizing the Culture of First Nations people while vigorously exploiting the privatisation of their communal lands. Any crisis over child welfare, non-attendance at school or the perceived failure of remote secondary schools can be viewed in the context of an overall plan to socially engineer traditional groups away from their tribal and mineral rich lands towards growth towns where they will be assimilated. The nature of this 21st strain of market fundamentalism almost guarantees that this is not trickle down economics but will result in the upward redistribution of wealth to Twiggy Forest and the like. Neo-Liberalism enlists the government to actively redistribute national wealth, and in particular the mineral wealth from the lands of First Nations people. The British born social scientist, David Harvey⁷ argues convincingly that the re-distributive effects and increasing social inequality are such persistent features of neo-liberalism that they are structural to the whole project.

So think about these tenets of neo-liberalism and then turn again to the tyranny of experts. It is clear to me that reviews of education and training such as those offered by Andrew Forest and Bruce Wilson merely serve the Government's ideological agendas to which they mutually subscribe. Conversely, if a venture capitalist, like David Gonsky surprises the establishment by challenging this neo-liberal agenda by recommending a sustained investment to ease disadvantage and improve the education of First Nation children and others now marginalised unfairly, we all know where that broken election promise is taking us.

The fatal flaw in the Australian Government approach of this neo-liberal era, reflected in both the Forest and Wilson Reviews, is that the tyranny of experts eternally fixes the First Nations people as 'the problem'. One of Australia's greatest living elders, Rosalie Kunoth Monks, went to the heart of this issue on the ABC's Q&A program. When the former Quadrant editor, Peter Coleman, suggested that "the problem" could only be solved by assimilation, integration...as he put it, "the full Monty, not just schooling...but intermarriage, all forms of integration"⁸ there came a special moment as this nation was confronted by an important truth. Rosalie Kunoth-Monks displayed with a beautiful poise, passion and dignity her cultural essence declaring that she was not "Aboriginal" or "indigenous" but an Arrernte Alyawarre woman of this land, a "cultured woman". She said, "I am not something that fell out of the sky for the pleasure of somebody putting another culture into this cultured being."⁹ Another guest, Jane Goodall, then turned to Peter Coleman and with equal

⁶ McMullen, Jeff. *Dispossession – Neo-Liberalism and the Struggle for Aboriginal land and Rights in the 21st Century*. In *Black & White – Australians All at the Crossroads*. Editors Rhonda Craven, Anthony Dillon & Nigel Parbury. Publisher Connor Court.. Ballan. Vic. 2013.

⁷ Harvey, David. *A Short History of Neo-Liberalism*. pp 159-164. Oxford University Press. Oxford. 2005.

⁸ Coleman, Peter. *Q&A, ABC Television*, June 9th 2014.

⁹ Kunoth-Monks, Rosalie. *Q&A, ABC Television*, June 9th 2014.

calm and control asked, “Would you be prepared to be assimilated into Aboriginal Culture...because that’s what you are asking them to do?”¹⁰

In the studio audience my wife and I sat with Rosalie’s granddaughter, Amelia Kunoth-Monks who was bristling with anger at hearing her people described by Coleman as “the problem”. This 21-year-old woman, now a student at Batchelor College against the odds and so many obstacles, knows the truth: that many First Nations children have been excluded from an equal opportunity for a first rate education for more than two centuries. Amelia knows the sting and deep hurt of racism, the cold ignorance of people who treat you as someone less than fully human. When the Wilson report recommends giving up on secondary schools in remote communities, Amelia and other young people understand that they are not being afforded the same rights as other Australians. Haven’t we always used distance education, home schooling and later the internet to at least aim to give all of our children an adequate education. What about the extraordinary possibilities for connected classroom learning and the global trend to open-university learning?

At the very moment when the world is seeing the biggest shift from the traditional 19th century classroom to personally styled, so called ‘individual learning’, are we really abandoning the principle that all Australian children can be given a quality school education within a convenient traveling distance from their home? In the Northern Territory, of course, many families know that very young children in years seven, eight and nine, will not want to leave home for a boarding school. If the Wilson review recommendations for hub boarding schools are somehow funded in this era of budget slashing for the poorest Australians, it is certain that many young people, thousands of them, will stay behind in the homelands.

The tyranny of experts is sweeping this nation back to the mistakes of the past. There is nothing new about the nation’s extraordinary double standard and deeply offensive discrimination loaded into a recommendation to end secondary schooling in remote areas. In my mother’s day she asked her father why her Aboriginal playmates from the nearby shanty settlement on Redbournberry Hill near Singleton could not go with her to the one teacher schoolhouse. She knew it was wrong, just as my boy and girl can see the injustice today of communities where children are left to sleep in abandoned cars and houses crowded with twenty or more people. You cannot understand the community view of the institutions of society, including schools, without recognising that schools too excluded First Nations children until well into my lifetime. The relentless attempts to control, move and assimilate whole communities are a constant in the political oppression running through virtually all Australian government policy towards the First Peoples. Talk to the oldest and wisest elders, and read history at depth, and you will see that little has really changed when the technocrats of Government and its bureaucracies are administering policy.

As other speakers are demonstrating here today, it is when a one time Principal from Cherbourg, Dr Chris Sarra leads the reform of schools, administration and professional development, when a Sydney University graduate like Jack Manning Bancroft shapes a strategy for student engagement, attendance, pride in identity and achievement, or when a less well known community education worker is supported in

¹⁰ Goodall, Jane. *Q&A, ABC Television*, June 9th 2014.

bringing language and Culture to the classroom, then we truly see extraordinarily successful education partnerships. This is the process of enlightenment, the discovery of ‘one-another’ instead of ‘us and them’.

When there is genuine voice, leadership, power and influence from the First Peoples the approaches to learning are more often than not successful. The *Stronger Smarter Institute* which Toby Adams and Sharon Grose will discuss this afternoon and *AIME, Australian Indigenous Mentoring Experience*, that Jack Bancroft will talk about, offer solid evidence that for educational success you must have important knowledge that is absent or at best spread dangerously thin through Government bureaucracies. Non-Indigenous people regularly testify that the Stronger Smarter Institute has provided the most illuminating and important professional development in their entire education career. At AIME, the non-Indigenous people, including me, can only applaud when this organisation is ranked by Business Review Weekly as the 26th best workplace in the entire nation.

What marks successful programs like these is the clear conviction that First Nations students are capable of educational excellence. There is a respect for their identity. A healthy relationship with their peers, black and white, stands in sharp contrast to the polarisation and outright racism encountered by many other students. In this approach to education there is a shared power relationship, a shared process of discovery and a mutual pleasure and respect in learning.

I have watched this process close up working with the veteran Queensland educator, the Jirribal elder, Dr Ernie Grant. This wonderfully thoughtful Old Man earlier in life learned to fly a plane and run a coffee plantation, but it was his unique approach to education that has inspired so many black and white students and teachers. *My Land, My Tracks*,¹¹ Dr Grant’s seminal study of the relationship of the First Peoples to the land, language, Culture, time and place, evolved into the *Holistic Teaching and Planning Framework*.¹² This is pioneering education work that shows the interconnectedness of custodianship with modern earth science. It helps student and teacher come to understand the subtle and sophisticated intellectual knowledge system that more recently has been hailed in Bill Gammage’s outstanding work, *The Biggest Estate on Earth*¹³.

If teachers can bring this same interest and intellectual respect to other knowledge young people bring to school the relationship with your class and community may be entirely different. When teachers, nurses and doctors feel they are being cajoled into studying what are termed Indigenous issues they may well miss out on the joy of that revelation in understanding that comes when you begin to realise the depth of the Aboriginal way of seeing the world. This is the appreciation of Culture and it is there with open arms, inviting us to get close, to listen, to taste the country itself...and I will say it again, to understand what it means to be Australian. This is how we close that space between us and discover the great strengths and many shades of creativity in the diversity of all of our peoples.

¹¹ Grant, Ernie. *My Land, My Tracks*. Published by Innisfail & District Education Centre. Innisfail. Qld. 1998.

¹² Grant, Dr Ernie. *Holistic Planning & Teaching Framework*. Produced by Critical Mass Media. Qld. 2005.

¹³ Gammage, Bill. *The Biggest Estate on Earth, How Aborigines Made Australia*. Allen & Unwin. 2011.

At Minyerri, a remote community about 270 kms southeast of Katherine, I watched this open hearted engagement by an extraordinarily successful family of educators. Neil Gibson was a former AFL player and coach in that region and that may have given him a leg up as school principal, but it was his wife, Michelle, also a teacher, who perhaps shared some of the essential knowledge. Her father was an important Old Man who sat at the school and helped make it part of the community, not a gubba institution that was draining the strength of their identity and sense of place, but a place where learning came naturally. It was *their* school. Neil wandered the streets and knew the name of every child, 170 or so kids. My young son, Will, commented at the time that these children were stronger, smarter, healthier...they had a gleam in the eye. Neil Gibson would tell me that the knowledge at the grassroots level comes when you display that eagerness to seek out people and develop a real interest in what they know, how they see life and how they would tackle all of the challenges of remote community life. Many decades of teaching, a continuity of the principal and even assistant principal for seven or more years, these are important factors in the success of remote schools. With the right leadership, resourcing and quality of staff, it is possible to deliver first- rate schooling in isolated communities. But as Neil would tell you if he were here, for Years 10 to 12 the Minyerri kids still have to pack their bags and travel to a secondary school. Some will handle that journey and many won't. We must challenge the tyranny of experts to make sure that they don't forget about the thousands of students that choose to stay at home.

If we look at the Big Picture we should be encouraged. The World Bank tells us that global poverty and illiteracy are rapidly retreating¹⁴. In Australia's case we need to show more creativity and conviction to address the poverty and illiteracy that remains in the heartland. Another recent report by experts, the Abbott Government's report on the operations of the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery¹⁵, highlights the telling failure of all levels of Government in trying to coordinate six years of spending on Aboriginal development. Historians will look back on the period of extraordinary federal power over the lives of remote communities since the Howard years and the Northern Territory Intervention and see that billions of dollars have been wasted on a vast bureaucracy administering countless programs that have made very little material change to the lives of most people in these largely forgotten places.

The wellbeing of all Australian children, especially the poorest, is the single most important test of whether or not Australia becomes a great society. Having wandered most of this world for more than fifty years I am certain that Australia is closer to greatness and happiness as a society than anywhere I have been. We need to believe in our egalitarian tradition, our almost mythical sense of equality, because inequalities of all kinds, but especially in public education, undermine the health and wellbeing of our entire society. We need to use every breath to rise above the narrow self-interest of this political era and think of the shining talents in each and every one of our children...all of our children.

¹⁴ Kristof, Nicholas. *Poverty in retreat Worldwide*. The New York Times. October 2nd 2013.

¹⁵ *National Partnership Agreement on Remote Service Delivery Report*. Commonwealth Govt. Canberra August 2014.