

Within Limits.

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In light of recent conversations on the topic of Rudd's watershed apology and the new flag idea, I need to clarify a few points.

I am not simply saying "give it back." This would be a thoughtless position akin to standing in front of a broken window, and saying "just put it back together." There are some problems which cannot be fixed that easily. What I am advocating is the restoration and development of autonomous indigenous culture wherever possible. This will require generational financial support, not some one-off quick-fix payment, scheme or invasion. This will require ongoing protection from multinational forces hostile to such developments (the international nuclear-waste disposal industry, for instance), and also require no less the scrutiny of indigenous land councils, prone like all councils to corruption when dealing with mining companies with millions to spend and billions at stake. But the sums required pale into insignificance compared to our military budget, or even our sporting budget. The support of existing and establishment of further indigenous language centers throughout the entire country would facilitate regular visits of local schoolchildren and adults to learn the regional dialect and cultural prehistory of their district. Such centers could be run as collectives by individual councils, tribes or clans. Trips to distant tribes in the outback (or the city as the case may be) would operate as school camps and excursions, broadening students exposure to indigenous culture across the country. The value of such a scheme is difficult to quantify without falsification, however its appeal to international students might be a considerable factor in its economic viability. But more importantly, the diversity and depth of our culture as a nation would be immeasurably improved by such a scheme.

A one-dimensional quantificational approach to value is reassuring in its simplicity. When faced with the difficult question of what something is worth, the simple-minded retreat quickly back into the easier question "how much does it cost?" Money simplifies the world: value has a simple quantity able to be represented as a number, and can easily be read off a price-tag. And most importantly, all are agreed upon what the price is. Even in a situation in which haggling occurs, an agreed procedure is in place for arriving at a determinate price upon which all agree. Money itself stands as a metaphor for this social situation, namely, the one in which all are in agreement. Of course prices change and people disagree over the proper cost of many commodities. The economy is the name of this dynamic of fluctuations driven by the complex balances of supplies and demands. The

economy itself stands as a metaphor for the social situation in which all are engaged in this dynamic of negotiation concerning costs.

What is not open for negotiation in the economy is the simple equation of worth and cost (understood in the sense of price). This equation simply goes without saying. This is parallel to the logical positivist in science, whose motto is "meaning is method of verification." Show me the experiment to verify something, says the positivist, and I'll admit that it is meaningful. But if you're trying to talk about something which cannot be verified, then according to the logical positivist you are uttering meaningless words and should remain silent. Likewise, the economic rationalist thinks only of the price of something, and can understand worth only in terms of a dollar value. Things whose worth cannot be quantified are simply ignored. In both cases, thinkers make the blunder of assuming that things which are invisible from their perspective simply do not exist, thereby becoming thoughtless. So carried away are they by the success of their metaphors for human society when used within the boundaries of their valid application, they forget to engage in the critical task of locating and respecting those very boundaries, and consequently end up straying across them, thereby leaving thoughtfulness behind, and ignoring many crucially important aspects of reality.

But thoughtful people know that there are ways in which worth works which cannot simply be reduced to a number. This is not to question the applicability of mathematics within its limits, nor to deny the remarkable power of quantificational thinking within those limits. Within its limits, counting is as useful a mental tool as any. But to think that any mind can be balanced with only one sense of value is like thinking that a tool-kit is complete with only one tool. Approaching a bolt with a screwdriver is an inherently frustrating experience. Approaching the questions of cultural evolution and social justice in twenty-first century Australia with a phalanx of lawyers and bureaucrats is no less frustrating for all involved. Of course economic compensation is necessary, and its quantity is a specific economic issue. But money is meaningful only to the extent that a stable life is possible, and value is in harmony with possibility. Mere economic compensation is thus not sufficient, and what *more* there is to reparation beyond economics is a crucial aspect of reconciliation. Quantificational thinking in general and economic thinking in particular is a tool which simply cannot grasp the whole task when it comes to ideas for righting wrongs spanning centuries.¹

¹ John Ralston Saul gives a clear example of the way in which a quantitative measurement systems such as GDP are about engineering clear consciences in the first world, and actually not about achieving a nuanced appreciation of the many qualitatively distinct factors in quality of life in the third, on page 23 of *The Collapse of Globalism and the Reinvention of the World* (Viking 2005). He traces the ways in which this scientific preoccupation has become a dangerous and damaging obsession throughout the remainder of his insightful book (see e.g. p. 51).

In the so-called "west," there is a crisis of values. Disoriented wills flail about, clutching at straws of hedonism² (at the root of both the obesity and the drug-addiction epidemics), narcissism³ (driving the fashion and info-tainment industries), and megalomania (the blind ambition for its own sake rampant in the business community, which now increasingly includes all institutions, private or public). Pleasure, self-esteem and success, each crucial in moderation, here over-grow into unhealthy imbalance because a healthy diversity of values is not maintained. To live for pleasure alone, or for praise alone, or for power alone - each in its own way falls into the trap of naively thinking that value can be reduced to a single principle. But having only one value is as crippling as having only one leg. A balanced mind requires a balanced ensemble of values each limiting and correcting the others. Pleasure is intensified if achieved through struggle; self-esteem is stronger when not corrupted by self-consciousness; success must be sustainable or it becomes mere greed. The thoughtful ideal is to balance the competing demands of all our instincts in one critically oriented whole.

The reorientation of the will in this disoriented "first" world is not a task which the first world can achieve for itself. For the same reason that a ship at sea needs another point of reference to orient itself, a culture has a sense of itself only insofar as it is able to find a point of reference in a different culture. The Chinese invention of the compass avoided the necessity for a point of reference (be it land, another vessel, or the stars) to some extent, but the compass relates the boat to an entire field of reference other than the indifferent visual one of the ocean. What is important about the magnetic field is that it contrasts strongly with the visual field, and allows the vessel to orient itself in an otherwise disorienting situation. What is important about the contrast between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia is that through it we as a whole can find new ways to relate ourselves to the harsh realities of the environment in which we find ourselves.

In Australia, we have two worlds side by side. On the one side is the multicultural world of modern immigrants from about 150 or so cultures around the world: i.e. those who have arrived here in the past couple of hundred years, engaged in trying to get along with each other in a multi-cultural way, one of the most diverse microcosms of this truly global problem. And on the other side, a no less multi-cultural world, the world of the 150 or so Aboriginal cultures each with their own language scattered across this continent, and still in place after the best part of a hundred thousand years, trying

2 Worship of one's pleasure.

3 Worship of one's image.

to survive the massive disruption of colonization. These also form a microcosm of a different, yet no less global problem. The one and only way for the former to distinguish itself as in some sense globally remarkable is for it to appreciate that the latter are what is truly remarkable about this place, and to realize that the maintenance and growth of those cultures is equivalent to the promotion of its own identity as a distinct cultural entity on the global level.

In this way, Australia is at the same time both the youngest country and the oldest country. Nowhere else in the world is the sense of contrast greater. Hence nowhere else in the world is the potential for progress, and the possibility of long-distance orientation greater. We are in fact a kind of cultural compass: a small, carefully balanced and sensitive instrument which indicates the way in which a proficient but disoriented modern humanity and a directed but vulnerable ancient humanity are the two mutually indispensable elements in navigating our way through the treacherous waters of the twenty-first century, with its storms so clearly brewing on the horizon. These two worlds are currently so out of touch with one another that the modern is sliding into nothing but the neurotic and brutalized remnants of England's long-since outmoded social experimentation, and the ancient, into a demoralized and chaotic diaspora of cultural seeds cut off from their mother plants with no hope of pollination, spiraling out of control into the vices of substance abuse, sexual violence and physical decay with a gusto which would dismay even the hardened modern nihilist.

There is little realization that the two problems can only be solved in tandem. On the one hand, the multi-culture of the colonists, immigrants and refugees craves respect and recognition on the world stage. Our anxious use of the epitaph "world class" amply demonstrates that we have not yet finished growing out of our cultural cringe, as does also our inordinate veneration of sport, movie and pop stars who "make it" overseas, and the scorn we heap on those who don't. But like South Africa, the only way for Australia to graduate to full self-esteem on the international stage is for us to get our reconciliation right.

On the other hand, indigenous Australia obviously needs to be empowered to participate in the benefits of development in a very material sense - housing, medicine, and the creative prevention of violence being just the most pressing needs. But apart from these immediate problems, the greatest task which Aboriginal Australia faces is keeping the culture itself alive. An indispensable part of all culture is language. One politician recently lamented the fact that in Western Australia there are aboriginal children growing up never learning English. But even more lamentable is the fact that so

many Aboriginal children grow up never having the opportunity to learn their ancestral language and traditional ceremonies and music. Even though new ceremonies, new traditions and new music have been born, these new ways still always yearn to reconnect with the old ways. The nuns and priests and lay-people who worked as missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries had in most cases good intentions according to their own values, and many achieved great good according, again, to those same values. But if those values themselves harbor a secret virus of nihilism, then those good people acting in good faith and even bringing about material benefit remain unwitting troops in a war of genocide. The fact that these soldiers were unaware of the war they were in, and thought of themselves as acting otherwise than they actually were, only goes to show just how complex this struggle is.

The history of diplomacy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia began disastrously, England sending her worst to do the job, and continued disastrously throughout the twentieth century. If the importance of not only the preservation but also the renovation of traditional Aboriginal culture, language and music is to be understood by twenty-first century Australia, a tough task of diplomacy now lies ahead for English-speaking Aboriginals. For it is they who mediate these worlds in tension. Our future lies in a reconciliation which enables a creative co-operation which utilizes this tension without necessarily dissipating it. Reconciliation is not a competition won by one party and lost by the other. It is a situation in which we both win, or the country as a whole loses. Non-indigenous Australia must understand that what is currently perceived as the problem of reconciliation is in fact an opportunity to solve its own problems, not by absorbing and eradicating all difference, but rather by understanding the invaluable importance of contrast in developing self-identity. Indigenous Australians must be recognized as interpreters of the meaning of the land and bearers of the heart and soul of the nation, the source of the bond that unites us all, and of the wisdom which might be able to prevent us destroying ourselves. This is not to reverse, but is rather to reject the western attitude to the ownership of land, in favor of an attitude of sustainable co-operation with nature in achieving a balance between the passing and the permanent which remains in critical awareness of the limits of mortals.

If we do not lose ourselves in anger or despair or the ideology of certainty, society allows us to call upon the strength of community. That is the strength of the *other* whose reality confirms our own. (John Ralston Saul *The Collapse of Globalism* page 14)