**University of Newcastle**
**Human Rights / Social Justice lecture.**
***Walking an ethical fault line: Where is Australia headed?***
**September 4th 2003**
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Thank you. It is a great privilege to have been invited to give the third Human Rights /Social Justice lecture. I am delighted to be here.

I am also delighted that this university is demonstrating the importance of human rights and social justice issues in this public way.

Universities, like all large organisations, are under great pressure to perform these days. And it is of course, reasonable for the community to expect excellence, high quality outcomes and accountability.

However, problems arise when performance is measured almost entirely within a framework of economic rationalism.

And this is especially true when we examine areas that are fundamentally about people and the quality of their lives.

We know, for example, in the area of health, that doctors and nurses feel that they do not have time to talk to patients – even though this could well be the most helpful aspect of their treatment.

We know that in education, teachers feel overwhelmed with the many demands on them.

Despite all the ideals of achieving each child's maximum potential (intellectually, creatively, socially and morally) – teachers often feel that in reality, they will be judged on the exam results they can achieve.

In universities, we have seen the decline of subjects that explore questions of social justice and human rights – subjects such as philosophy, politics and sociology.

And we have seen university students under enormous pressure – to find the money to attend university, to work and study at the same time, to pass exams and to compete for scarce jobs.

Their lecturers too are under pressure – to obtain research funds, tap into potential overseas opportunities and to graduate as many students as possible.

It is perhaps not surprising in this climate that issues of social justice and human rights take a back seat.

In fact, I am sure that it is 'core business' of a highly conservative government – to ensure that these issues **do** take a back seat.

Think of Margaret Thatcher for instance, with her statement "there is no such thing as society".

I always had the feeling that she might as well have added: "There is **only** the stock exchange"!

And look at our own political situation at the moment.

We have a Government which won office on the basis of a scare campaign.

A campaign that was made up of lies and half-truths.

The ‘children overboard’ lie was a scandalous affront to the people of Australia.

And perhaps even more scandalous is the fact that there has been no censure or consequence for the Government as a result.

In fact, a senior politician was rewarded with an executive overseas position for his part in the story.

And, the Government has been widely represented and accepted as ‘being strong’ in the general community.

The slogan “*We will decide who comes into this country*” was a carefully crafted and cynical attempt to suggest that we were in danger of being taken over – or losing control.

It was – and is, nonsense. The Government has always decided who comes into the country – and nobody has ever suggested that it should be otherwise.

Rather, what was called for was a fair and humane process – consistent with ethical, human rights obligations.

There are people who have been locked behind razor wire in the middle of the Australian desert for over 5 years – their only crime being a desperate fear for their lives.

People who speak up about these sorts of issues are often dismissed as being “bleeding hearts”, “losers”, “dinosaurs” or the “Chardonnay set” – labels that are designed to render them irrelevant.

What is regarded as important (in fact the main game) is winning.

Winning is a value that is reflected everywhere.

It is so culturally entrenched that it is almost regarded as a given. Being successful in contemporary western culture is an end in itself.

It is often more important to have the symbols of success than it is to be doing something socially useful.

And we see people everywhere driven by this hope of being a winner.

Part of this syndrome can be seen in the attempt to form identity and values through consumerism.

Anything, from what is fashionable to eat, to where to go on holiday, becomes a marker of who you are – and perhaps just as relevant, who you are seen to be.

It is interesting to observe how universal these consumer symbols are in first world nations.

If we visit the fashionable shopping strips in any modern city, for example, we find the same brand names being offered in the same designer shops.

A smart shopping strip in the north shore of Sydney is likely to be more similar to a smart shopping strip in Rome, than it will be to a local shopping area in Newcastle or Wollongong.

Ideas about identity have become confused in these ways as a result of global economics.

And one aspect of the confusion is that we lose touch with what it means to be human in relation to other human beings.

It is incredible for example, that privileged Westerners are encouraged to fret about which brand of running shoe is currently in vogue – rather than the fact that it is slave labour off-shore that is producing it.

Now I am not attempting to make you feel guilty about your shopping habits.

I have to confess that I am often very uplifted myself by a good bit of retail therapy!

But what I am deeply concerned about is that we are being encouraged to dissociate from our common humanity.

We are taught to think that we are not implicated and that indifference is acceptable – perhaps even normal.

There is a fixation in first world countries on the idea of “the individual”. It is represented in the newspapers everyday with stories of individual achievement or failure, or stories about celebrities.

There is a popular social belief that whether people are doing well or not is dependent on their individual efforts and virtues.

And what follows is also the belief that individuals therefore deserve their own circumstances.

It is a very dangerous myth that denies social, political and historical realities.

And it supports the idea that people who are struggling must have asked for it in some way.

And of course, that people who are privileged are virtuous and deserving.

This is reflected, for example, in the language used about anyone who is seen as different.

Asylum seekers are often described as being in some way criminal – or at the very least undeserving opportunists.

Aboriginal people are often characterised as either hopeless, or scheming in their land claims.

People in many Middle Eastern countries are viewed with suspicion as potential terrorists.

The list could go on, but my general point is that there is a climate (encouraged by conservative governments) that promotes:

- An inward (rather than a social) perspective
- A suspicion of people who are viewed as different
- A lack of trust
- And, a general anxiety about security, safety and the future.

What I will put to you this afternoon, is that the climate I have described makes it more important than ever to take up a social justice agenda.

And further, that given the lack of political leadership in this arena, it becomes an urgent ethical issue for each individual to make a decision about – to take a stand on.

I have called this lecture “Walking an ethical fault line” because it evokes for me this sense that we are all treading a fragile, unstable and dangerous pathway.

And it is vital that we think about where it is taking us.

One recent direction has been right behind the world’s super power. As I said earlier – being on the winning side is everything!

But it is not the ethical – or even the most practical pathway for us.

President Bush, Prime Minister Blair and Prime Minister Howard have adopted a stand that claims the moral high ground for the world.

They have hijacked the idea of human rights to suggest that they have a moral duty to civilise the less civilised.

It is, apart from anything else, breathtaking in its arrogance!

And it reminds me of the colonial mentality of over two hundred years ago in Australia, where there was an assumption that civilising original inhabitants was a moral duty as well a divine right.

This assumption, of course, needs to be challenged. But even if we were to accept the idea of certain world leaders taking a moral position against tyranny, surely we would want some evidence of their own human rights track record?

I am afraid the track record of our own leaders is not encouraging.

In fact, if we were thinking in terms of literal track records and horse racing, I think we have some very questionable long-shots in the frame!

The issue of Reconciliation in our own nation is a case in point. One that is, of course, very dear to my heart.

I would like to offer you some sense of its personal importance to me by making just a few brief comments about my own story, and the ways in which my life has been affected by discriminatory policies of the past.

As some of you would know, my brother, three of my sisters and I were removed from our mother and our homelands and taken to a United Aborigines’ Mission, Colebrook Home.

Initially I was at Quorn and then I was taken to the Colebrook Home at Eden Hills, near Adelaide.

I was only two at the time and was not reunited with my mother until I was in my mid 30s.

And then, tragically, language differences made it virtually impossible for us to communicate.

About two years ago there was some very hurtful, sensationalist and inaccurate reporting in The Adelaide *Advertiser* and in a Melbourne tabloid paper, about my personal family circumstances, and whether or not I saw myself as **stolen** or **removed.**

I now know that this reporting was part of a larger concerted campaign to discredit Aboriginal people and the *Bringing Them Home* Report – the report about the Stolen Generations of Aboriginal people.

I decided at that time to make a journey back to my homelands to try to piece together some of the missing pieces of the jigsaw of my early life.

I was accompanied on this journey by another journalist – this time a responsible one, Stuart Rintoul – who documented my story in the *Weekend Australian Magazine*.

This journey back to my homelands – the Yankunytjatjara land of Central Australia - was the most difficult and most confronting experience of my life.

There were moments when I was not sure that I was up to it. It is still very difficult to talk about.

I didn't succeed in piecing together all the missing bits of the jigsaw.

I didn't get answers to all those questions asked in a childhood spent in an institution.

Questions like:
*Who am I? Who's my mother? Who's my father? Where do I come from?*

But I did stand for the first time on the land where I was born – at Agnes Creek on De Rose Hill Station, at a place my people call *Kantja.* It is Dog Dreaming country.

And I know that I would have loved to have grown up there – it would have been a good place to be a child.

I am not a traditional woman. I have lived almost all of my life in urban environments.

I've had to come to terms with a white man's world.

And I use ***man's*** quite intentionally, by the way!

I've been very privileged to be able to succeed in this world, and to be able to devote my energies to engaging with powerful mainstream institutions to work for the rights and welfare of my people.

But I also know that the loss of my connection with my homelands and family, the attempt to sever my roots, have produced ongoing anguish in my life, and left wounds which I will never be able to fully heal.

There will always be an empty place in my heart for the mother I never really knew, the family I never had, the country, the language and the culture that were lost to me.

We can quibble about semantics all we like, but whether we use the word *stolen* or *removed*, I know that my Aboriginal mother would have had no legal recourse nor any moral support in resisting our removal.

I also know that her grief was unbearable.

So, not only has my life been affected deeply by the discriminatory practices of the past.

It is also unfortunately true that there is **still** a culture alive and well in Australia that seeks to discredit my people.

And of course I'm one of the lucky ones. Many of my people's lives have been totally ravaged by the arrogance and discrimination of past policies of forcible removal of children.

As reports such as the *'Bringing Them Home'* Report have clearly documented, my people live with the consequences of European settlement every day of our lives.

The consequences of these discriminatory practices and policies are still felt in the day to day racism that we experience.

And let's be quite clear about this. The policies **did** seek to discriminate and to place a higher value on the rights and welfare of one group of people over another. This is called **racism**.

And this racism is still deeply embedded in structural ways within the systems of our society.

It is felt in the ongoing assumptions of white superiority.

It is felt in the shattered connections with family and culture and land.

It is felt in the hardship that our people suffer in every sphere – whether in health, housing, education, or employment.

It is felt powerfully in economic disadvantage.

It is demonstrated in the lack of political representation at all levels of government.

And, it continues to be felt in terms of what is currently happening to our young people, many of whom are still being institutionalised or feel alienated from their families and communities.

It is a legacy that continues to impact on each successive generation, causing immeasurable grief and trauma and loss of culture.

I have consistently argued that we cannot simply see the atrocities and discriminatory policies of the past as something that happened in the dark ages.

Yet many senior politicians do see it this way. Because it is convenient. It lets them off the hook.

To truly acknowledge the ongoing tragic legacy of the past would not only encroach on their comfort zone – but would also require them to change their priorities.

The Government, in response to the situation of Indigenous people, talks about offering "practical reconciliation".

And of course practical outcomes are desirable. But I want to make some comment about this idea of practical reconciliation.

My first point is that practical action such as providing education, housing, health and jobs is exactly what governments are there for.

It is not a special initiative. It is their core business.

My second point is that we went through a ten-year, government initiated process of Reconciliation.

The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation delivered documents and identified clear recommendations back in the year 2000.

However this Government has quite deliberately shut down debate and failed to respond adequately.

The key issue that they fail to grasp – (or deliberately choose to ignore) is that Indigenous disadvantage is broadly based and interconnected.

It is not enough to attend to bits and pieces. There needs to be a cohesive whole-of-government approach.

And to use its own lingo – we need *performance indicators* that match the standards of wellbeing that are expected for all other citizens of the nation.

I fear that an Indigenous under-class is developing in Australia.

And there is a very real danger that this under-class will become permanent, their deprivation and poverty perpetuated by neglect, institutionalised racism and the tunnel vision of governments.

It is interesting to note that Minister Ruddock, who is both the Minister for Immigration, Multicultural **and** Indigenous Affairs, said recently, that he regarded Indigenous Affairs as, and I quote, "the recreational part of his portfolio".

I'll resist making a full response to such a comment right now… though I'm tempted!

Enough to say that it is right up there, as one of the most offensive (and revealing) comments he has made.

Though I admit, it might be hard to pick the prize-winning remark from this man… there are so many to choose from!

Alongside Reconciliation, one of the biggest social justice challenges facing Australia today is our treatment of asylum seekers.

A climate of fear and populist prejudice has been created around the refugee crisis.

Fear and ignorance are very potent forces. They allow some groups of people to demonise other groups of people. They provide a rationale for racism and ultimately, for warfare.

What we are talking about here is a major issue of human rights – and it is an issue that is going to increasingly confront us in this politically volatile world.

And so, it is up to people who recognize the humanity behind the "issues", to demonstrate that it is not in our nation's interest – or anyone's interest – to take the stance that Australia has taken.

I do not claim that we should have open borders. At this stage of our political evolution as nation states, that would be unthinkable.

Nor do I claim that there is no need for any processes to be in place to respond to people who arrive desperately seeking safety on our shores.

But I do feel very strongly about several issues in relation to this:

- People do not need to be detained behind razor wire in detention centres, for months and years on end, for health and security checks to be carried out. It should be possible to achieve this in a matter of a couple of weeks.

- Children should not be in detention at all.

- Privileged nations like Australia should not tolerate abuses of human rights in any circumstances or for any reason.

- Huge sums of Australian money should not be spent bargaining with other countries to detain refugees on our behalf – especially where this money would otherwise have been spent on Aid programs.

- People intercepted on their way to Australia should not be treated as cargo to be diverted and dumped elsewhere.

- And, people should at all times be treated with dignity and respect and be given appropriate support and access to services.

These are not outrageous claims. In my view, they should be the baseline of common decency.

It is a myth that asylum seekers would escape in their droves, if they were housed properly in the community.

They desperately want connection and links with authorities, in order to get their visas and arrangements sorted out.

And it is a myth that asylum seekers represent a threat to Australia's sustainability in terms of their numbers. In South Australia, for example, the Government is trying to increase our population by enticing overseas students to stay.

We do not take in very many refugees at all compared to other countries in the world.

And, there are far greater numbers of unauthorised residents in Australia who came in the first place on tourist visas from Europe, and then simply stayed on.

It is interesting that this group of “illegals” cause no comment at all from our political leaders!

And it reminds me of a talk by Tim Costello I attended recently. It was called “*The Power of Questions*”.

One question he raised was particularly potent and provocative. It was and I quote:

*Do you think that if the asylum seekers who arrived on Australian shores on the Tampa had been white South African farmers, they would have been turned away at gunpoint?*

I will leave you to reflect on that.…For me, the answer is very clear!

I’m sure it was clear to Tim as well – and it also raised for him, big questions about how political leaders, who claim to be “confessing Christians”, could have behaved in the way that they did.

All of this relates to questions about what it means to be fully human – and about how we retrieve compassionate humanity for ourselves as individuals, and as a nation.

I am sure that this question is going to be at the heart of many ethical and political issues in our future.

It is commonplace these days to hear that we are a global village. And this may be true, but as I said earlier, this is usually only thought of in economic terms.

There is not the same sort of social connection when it comes to questions of our global responsibilities.

We are not encouraged, for instance, to think much at all about the conditions of the workers who produce our global brand names.

There is little public debate about the responsibilities of first world countries towards the millions of people in the world who live with poverty, hunger and fear.

And, if our country’s response to asylum seekers and refugees is anything to go by, there is more interest in putting up the barriers and protecting what we’ve got – than seeing ourselves as part of a much bigger community.

It is for all of these reasons, that I see the question of our personal and national ethics as urgently in need of review and response.

I know that there is enormous goodwill from people ‘on the ground’. It is ordinary people from all walks of life in Australia who have come together to work for justice.

People have worked for change in all sorts of diverse ways in their workplaces, in their professional associations, in local government and in sporting groups.

In my public life I have been asked to address the police force, the defence forces, doctors, health workers, teachers, community groups and even dentists!

And everywhere I go I see good people committing themselves to making a difference.

And it is this that gives me hope and inspiration.

In spite of overwhelming challenges, we need to reclaim our humanity and to make human rights and justice a priority in our lives, precisely **because** our leaders will not do it for us.

If Australia is to move into the 21st century global arena as a compassionate first world nation, committed to democratic principles of equity and justice, then we need a breadth of vision and leadership which is sadly lacking today.

And we need to demand this loudly.

Many sectors of the Australian public have been complacent, if not complicit, in walking with their Prime Minister along an ethical fault-line.

It is time to stand up and be counted and to vigorously reject the lies and half-truths we have been told in recent years, and to assert some control about where we as a nation are headed.

I am sure that people of good will such as you can make the difference.

As Margaret Mead once said, and I quote:

*Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.*

Thank you.