

**The Samuel Alexander Lecture
18 May 2006
Melbourne**

The Role of Education in Reconciliation

“If you insist that to name an injustice is divisive then you are endorsing the injustice...It is not about *mea culpa* it is about accepting responsibility. “

-Inez McCormack Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission

Firstly, let me acknowledge the Traditional owners of this part of the Country the Kulin Nations and I wish to offer my respect to their present and past leaders.

I want to thank Dr Helen Drennen, the Principal of Wesley College and the Wesley College Council for the invitation to make this address in honour of Samuel Alexander.

I must admit I had not heard of Samuel Alexander until invited to deliver this talk. This extraordinary thinker was born in an Australia at a time when the not yet Federated Colonies were better known for producing wool and wheat and not brilliant minds.

He went to Wesley College and went onto attend Melbourne University achieving several distinctions before going to England and ultimately becoming Professor of Philosophy at the University of Manchester.

In my endeavour to understand the nature of the man whose achievements are remembered tonight I came upon a reference to his Gifford Lectures at Glasgow in 1916-1918 entitled: “Space, Time and Deity”.

Now the vague stranger has become a welcomed addition to my album of admired thinkers.

I discovered his works are for those with a thirst for metaphysics and for challenging contemplation about questions concerned with the abstract and real nature of what is or is not.

It is for the intellect that seeks understanding and meaning of the now and becoming beyond the superficial and the popular views as to what can be reasoned as well as understood. His reasoning and arguments about concepts like Space Time rather than Space and Time would not fit well with the way news and information through the public media is delivered to us about complex issues. He has a disciplined orderly approach to his inquiry into issues. Because of his context he is able to grapple seriously and layout clear argument about competing positions.

At this time of the year, where I come from, the season is moving from the wet to the cool times of the dry season. The cyclones have brought rain and their destruction to certain parts of Northern Australia.

It is the time to move about on the land and the sea, to go hunting for the salmon, stingray, and goanna, to visiting sacred places and reassure the spirit beings that we have not forgotten our privileges, benefits and responsibilities. It is the time for generally mapping out the new directions for the rest of the year. Normally a peaceful and positive energy exudes from nature and man's place in the universe is regarded as a good.

This is the time when the rains have washed the earth and provided for the life for all living things. A time of gratitude for what Creation provides through nature and man's place within it. It is a time to see literally and metaphysically through one's own eyes rather than someone else's eyes – especially if they only see fear, suspicion and terror.

For us Yawuru People in the concept of the beginning time, the Bugarrigarra, we see time, place and existence as linked. . In our thinking, Time and Place are married together such that Existence is entwined in the mystery of the present, the past and the continuing into the future. This in practice often means necessarily situating information into a context about what is observed as well as the spiritual and moral imperatives that are founded in the principles of our law.

The Christian notions of The Trinity, the Incarnation, the Conception of Christ and the Transubstantiation of bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ are more often than not matters of belief or faith rather than reason. I do not mean any disrespect but.

Reason often enables sufficient knowledge and intelligence for the believer to trust what is presented for belief. The magnificence of the mind, spirit or soul does indeed require our admiration. It is the quality of the education one receives that has often over the years caused many different interpretations and views about such concepts. The role of education and learning is critical in this context as it is in other moral and ethical challenges. Discipline and openness are two qualities that Samuel Alexander would bring to such challenging concepts.

It is almost as though the metaphysical distinction that Samuel Alexander spoke of as Space Time, rather than Space and Time has a similar meaning for us Yawuru as it did for him in his philosophic reasoning.

Through metaphysics we are able to make existential and ontological challenges intelligible and thus provide for us meaningful frameworks that help to deliver clarity and understanding for our lives and for the cosmos in which we exist or are transiting out of one existence and into another.

The notion as to whether we are static beings or in the process of becoming something more is probably a topic most of us spend little time on for all sorts of good reasons but maybe at certain times in life it maybe a good idea to have a crack at trying to unravel the issue and any of its consequent

implications for our life as well as that of others. Often what meanings we discover in such a search has a lot to tell us about ourselves but also about others and the values that underpin the lives we lead.

It is not as if we Yawuru live outside of time and the events that happen on a daily basis. We are capable of being co-existent with events that have taken place in some past period whilst being enmeshed in those actions taking place at the moment to which our consciousness relates.

The meaning of this and other things is to be found in the dynamism of the land, the law and the people. Education about such dynamic realities is ongoing and is often centred upon ceremony and place. The teachers are both senior people of the law and the existence of the law itself in the country of the people. The validity of the living oral cultural tradition of teaching and learning is that it engages the whole person and not just their intellect.

The contextual reality of the learning situation requires participation in what might appear simple undertakings but in fact carries deeper meanings that are embedded in the spiritual lessons from the Bugarrigarra.

The stages of a persons life was directed to the attainment of knowledge and understanding that enabled a person to comprehend the relationship between the past, present and the future. In the Aboriginal society thinkers and seekers of an understanding of the complexity of our existence were critical members of our society.

In their understanding lay the bedrock of our society's confidence in the future and understanding of the past.

It made us a settled people able to deal with the day to day complexities of life as hunter gatherers in an environment with which we were in complete union. Our society had a beginning, a being and a becoming again.

This was the nature of our civilisation and the keepers of the wisdom and interpreters of the knowledge were critical to our survival and respected by our society for the role which they played.

Such should be the case in every civilised society. Every gift and skill of every member of the society must be allowed the opportunity to develop and nurture their skills, seek a greater understanding of their social, spiritual and physical environment and to have every contribution recognised as valid and worthy of recognition.

This is a fundamental responsibility of every educator and every school, college, university and more critically every government in this country. Prior to the arrival of Arthur Phillip and the First Fleet in Sydney Cove in 1788 it was not only the responsibility of the Native Tribes of this continent it was an absolute priority central to the survival of our civilisation.

The arrival of Phillip and those that followed him had devastating consequences for the Aboriginal people. The dispossession of our lands and the denial of our political sovereignty resulted in the destruction of our

indigenous economy and the undermining of our community social authority to the point of near complete eradication in some areas of the continent.

We had a social political structure that had guaranteed our rights as human beings, as defined by our society for millennia. Its existence was denied by the colonisers and rejected as primitive and inferior by a people who thought the theft of a continent was reasonable if it was only stolen from people that they were incapable of understanding.

As unjust as the initial invasion in 1788 may have been the real injustice in the relationship between the Aboriginal people and those who followed Phillip in the coming generations is the denial by them and the governments that they established of our rights to participate equally in the future of the continent that we had sustained and managed successfully for millennia.

Instead the land was stolen not shared; our political sovereignty replaced by a virulent form of serfdom, our spiritual beliefs denied and ridiculed by a people who had several versions of their bible and had fought with their neighbours for hundreds of years over whose bible was the holder of the truth.

Our system of education was undermined by our removal from our lands and the deliberate destabilisation of our Peoples. We were no longer able to inculcate our young people with the complex knowledge that could only come from intimate engagement with the land, sea and waterways of our cultural estates.

Our traditional medicines and healing practices were no match for the range of diseases that periodically had decimated swathes of Europeans societies over the centuries. Our capacity to fulfil our religious responsibilities was restricted by our inability to interact with the land, the sea and the native flora and fauna because of the competing requirements of pastoralist and farmers or the societal demand that learning take place in buildings or churches.

Yet despite this avalanche of social destruction our people did not fail to recognise the political reality of an imposed regime of foreign laws and structures of governance so alien to our own.

The reality demanded that the institutions and instruments of control of the soon to be dominant society imposing themselves on our previously sovereign existence must in some way be accommodated and where possible aligned with our own aspirations for the future.

Our leaders understood the circumstances with which they were now confronted and endeavoured to accommodate their new neighbours' interests while protecting and sustaining their own cultural integrity.

But these new neighbours were an ungracious people driven by the imperatives of gospel, glory and gold. They gave no recognition to the values and skills of our indigenous society.

They were incapable of reaching any accommodation of a shared continent. They had arrived and their sense of racial and intellectual superiority was so profound that they sought no accommodation with our society.

They denied our sovereign rights and appropriated our land and resources as their own while expecting our people to labour and live at the whim of their new colonial masters' edicts whose spiritual and economic values were so contrary to our own. We were to be used and discarded.

It was not only because of the superiority of the weapons and the alien nature of the diseases imported to us or the industrial societies' capacity for cultural genocide that began the cycle of slavery, dispossession and attempted destruction of our society.

It was the policy of racism and enforced biogenetic practices that manifested itself in the removing of children from their mothers, segregation of kin on the basis of their skin colour and an education system that attacked the values of the culture and society while demanding our conformity and compliance to behaviour and thought of the mainstream.

A new world was carved out where the power and control over our lives resided in the police, the Native Affairs superintendents, teachers, missionaries, pastoralist and of course the politicians who relied one way or the other on the vested interests within their electorates. – A process that continues to this very day.

During my period as Chair of the Reconciliation Council there were many different views about what was the meaning and purpose of Reconciliation. Very few ever asked why in the wisdom of the Parliament were we as citizens of this nation given a ten year window to work our way through those issues that have been the source of division and discord between aboriginal peoples and a significant number of the Nation.

It was also a time to take stock of the achievements we had made to that point of our history. It was an invitation for the members of our society to identify the common ground between us so that we might go forward understanding our weakness but building upon our strengths.

It was a national opportunity to begin a process in which we might build a nation that could take pride in having grappled with difficult and complex issues and found mutually respectful ways of accommodating our differences when there were times that we could not agree.

This was the recognition that there was unfinished business between our peoples and that the Parliament of this country would oversight the completion of the negotiation between our peoples and in doing so would be bringing together the strands of Reconciliation into an unbreakable bond between us based on equity, acknowledgement and respect.

The extent of the gulf between our two societies was well documented if little understood by many Australians.

Prior to the beginning of the formal process of National Reconciliation in 1991 we had been apprised of the underlying issues that give rise to the extraordinary levels of deaths in Custody and the disproportionate high levels of incarceration of Aboriginal people in the nation's prisons and police lockups.

Indeed the Royal Commission's Final Report called for the Government to promote a process of reconciliation as a means of reducing the levels of deaths but more importantly of redressing the social, cultural and economic causes for the awful over representation in custody.

Central to such a process was for public education to play a greater role in assisting the Nation to develop the mutual respect necessary between us so that we might develop a shared responsibility for the way we could shape our future.

Schools and Institutions were encouraged to play their part in this exercise of learning about the intertwined history and the causes for the social disadvantage and the contemporary political challenges of public policy toward land rights, protection of cultural heritage, treaties and national political representation for Aboriginal peoples.

The emergence of a Peoples' movement with high hope for achieving such laudatory aspirations for a Reconciled Australia culminated in the marches over the Bridges.

Sadly Reconciliation today has become a public sector program focussed on better social outcomes for the public outlays. It has shifted from a Nation reconciling within itself those consequences of its unsatisfactory History, Policies and Practices to what must the Aborigines do to again become assimilated within the mainstream Society under the new rules of economic rationalism and the demands of globalisation on the Nation.

We had three other significant National stories and lessons for our learning and challenge. Well-marked signpost that we failed to heed and their significance on our journey remains unheeded.

The first unread and ignored signpost was the High Court decision that Terra Nullius was a lie and that the Common Law imported into Australia a legal right called Native title.

This decision came down in the first year of the Reconciliation Councils existence and is more popularly referred to as the Mabo decision.

There were some people of vision in the Nation who saw the judgement as an opportunity to restart the relationship between the Nation and Aboriginal peoples having legally clarified what Aboriginal people had been telling the Nation for most of the previous two hundred years - that is that this land was occupied and owned by Aboriginal people before the British arrived and was not a vacant no-man's land.

The Nation was again reminded that the British had been instructed by the crown to take possession of the lands with the consent of the Natives which of course never happened.

But there were very powerful interests in this country who on the other hand did not welcome the High Court's decision in Mabo. The first cries of "wolf" rang out in the press and the institutions of racism.

Civilisation as had been defined by the British was about to end, private property was about to be repossessed by the Natives. Sovereign risk was about to descend upon Corporations and as a consequence prosperity and development of the primary resources would stop and the Nation would plunge into poverty beyond that of any third world Country.

Clearly none of these fears came to pass but citizens were successfully made to fear not only the judgement but Aborigines again.

The existence of the Racial Discrimination Act 1975 had to deal with leases granted before 1975 so that their validity was confirmed against any native title interest.

The first mass extinguishment of the new Native title had begun sadly with our own acquiescence. Yet even then there were those who called for the repeal of the Racial Discrimination Act itself as though the very notion of an Act of Parliament that was passed so as to bring us in line with other members of the United Nations in our rejection of racism might be perceived as some instrument of the denial of the property rights of non indigenous Australians.

The legislation that eventually passed the Federal Parliament to provide legislative basis for the High Courts decision barely reflected the moral integrity of the Full Bench and the subsequent so called Wik amendments turned the Native Title Act into an administrative nightmare that returned the Aboriginal people to the status of applicants.

The second contemporary opportunity to confront our past and challenge the future came with the Inquiry into the Removal of Aboriginal Children under the auspices of the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission chaired by Sir Ronald Wilson, which delivered its final report in 1997.

The report popularly known as "The Bringing Them Home" report highlighted the infringement of the UN definition on Genocide and called for a National apology and compensation to those Aboriginal people who had suffered under these valid laws for the destruction of Aboriginal societies and the sanctioning of the biogenetic modification of Aboriginal people by breeding us out of our Aboriginality.

Again, despite the horrors described and the evils exposed to us, we as a nation proved incapable of confronting our past and dealing with its consequences. That failure alone should have seen us condemned for a lack of courage and a denial of justice. But no, that wasn't enough for some in our community who proceeded to shoot the messengers.

The integrity of the decent Australians who produced the report was assailed and crude aspersions cast upon their honesty and professionalism. What Mick Dodson, at that time the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner and co author of the report, called “The Saddest of All Stories” was described as myth and fantasy by those whose moral blindness made them incapable of accepting the evidence before the nation’s eyes.

The third major event was the High Court decision in Wik. This judgement talked of native title co-existing concurrently with the rights of a pastoral lease holder but yielding if there is a conflict between the two rights.

Here was a judgement that above all others signalled to a nation that there is a practical way of achieving reconciliation and an opportunity to genuinely share our national resources.

Instead it was turned into an opportunity for our deputy Prime Minister at that time to demand “bucket loads of extinguishment” and promise to the nation that in future we would have “a conservative High Court with a capital C”.

We had managed to turn three opportunities for healing the past, for confronting the future and gifting our children with a reconciled nation into symbols of division and discord.

Undoubtedly some of our politicians see these outcomes as a sustaining of the natural order of the dominant society and its institutions. However there are others in our society who understand that the unjust assertion of the power of one section of our society over a less powerful group will ultimately diminish us as nation and as Australians I believe we are deserving of something better from our leaders.

Sadly it proved beyond us and the views of those who thought there was no need for any process either because they believed no wrong had been done or because they did not hold any responsibility for what had happened to Aboriginal peoples over the period from when the colonisation began to the establishment of the Modern Australian State.

What is needed to take us forward?

There was the meaning centred in the purpose and function of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act that established the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation which talked about a process of Reconciliation that might result in a document or documents of reconciliation.

These were to be a document or documents that formalised the relationship between our peoples into the future.

Documents that we could hold up with pride to the world and more critically to future generations of Australia’s children and demonstrate that their parents had the courage to confront the past and provide a future where racism was no longer our scourge and justice was the hallmark of our society.

The Aboriginal leadership must be able to convince our governments that an agreement between us is not about division but about bringing the nation to a greater enhancement of its own values and worth.

For some time now we have had clear evidence that many Aboriginal people have been abusing and misusing the gifts from the Western society in relation to alcohol, drugs and amphetamines.

We are reaping the consequences of this – violence, sexual abuse, premature deaths, suicides and corruption of what is decent. Before we jump to what solutions are necessary we need to ask the question why? These same abuses are happening in the mainstream society and we need to ask the same question why? We generally recognise that depression and hopelessness are strong factors and that intervention is required.

In the case of Aboriginal people the use of police and incarceration might provide a short term fix bringing some relief but it will not answer the question why this is happening to our societies.

There is no desire to abuse customary law in our case. What is required is to not just see these manifestations of abuse from a monoculture perspective but to weigh the significance of a people whose trauma and anxiety is not just about Identity and meaningful existence in the western world.

It is at an ontological level concerned with unresolved tensions that arise at the social and cultural interface with mainstream. Certainly it is compounded by the loss of social capital in trying to establish a true dialogue about the cause and origin of the perceived social disintegration of my people.

Without serious consideration popularist responses simply for the sake of doing something will only increase arrests and incarceration rates. Neither of which has delivered rehabilitation or improvement to the fundamental ontological dilemmas.

We do come from different cultures and do have different laws but ultimately we have a common humanity and it is our respective uniqueness that offers us the opportunity for reconciliation if we have the courage to engage in the dialogue and not just deliver more of the same.

The Social Reform Agenda demanded by government has to start giving evidence that responsibility in addressing the challenges of social dysfunctionality is being transformed more and move into the hands of Aboriginal families and groups at the local and regional level with adequate resources to address the challenges.

The COAG Trials aimed at practical social outcomes for better public sector dollar outlays has to start showing evidence of improved public sector policy initiatives that are delivering improvement to the outcomes in health, education, housing and employment.

There needs to be clear evidence that Federalism can work for the benefit of Aboriginal people and not just confirm the rivalry between Commonwealth

State relationships. The mainstreaming of Aboriginal Affairs should not automatically reduce the need for the special measures approach to equity and equal quality of life access for Aboriginal people.

If mainstreaming of Aboriginal Affairs is used to replace the special measures approach to equity and equal quality of life opportunities for Aboriginal peoples then the onus is on governments to deliver the outcomes and citizenship entitlements that are enjoyed by the vast majority of Australians. To date these fundamental rights have been denied to thousands of Aboriginal people and their communities.

There needs to be greater evidence of the partnerships between corporate, governments and Aboriginal entities in both the welfare reform agenda and the new private enterprise approaches that are aimed at higher private home ownership and greater privatisation of community held lands. Such new policy experimentation should not be at the expense of the free and informed consent of the holders of communal trust lands.

It is not obvious that such experimentation will necessarily lead to greater economic growth for the Aboriginal individuals or their communities.

Ultimately there needs to be an agreement to stop the ideological wars over history and public sector policy merits.

We should consider the creation of a Responsibility, Rights and Opportunities Commission to oversight and guide the process of reform and reconstruction necessary in Aboriginal Affairs. Such a Commission would work to avoid the mistakes of the past, help clarify what Rights and Responsibilities are and can be exercised and what needs to be done to improve them as well as develop consensual strategies and policies while aiming to achieve true and lasting reconciliation as Australians.

Recently, I launched a book by Quentin Beresford "Rob Riley An Aboriginal Leader's Quest for Justice."

I highly recommend it to you as a seminal work on the politics of the period from the 1960s until his death by suicide in 1996 at the age of 41 years.

Amongst the many things it covers it highlights the various political campaigns Robert along with others was involved in and in most of them there was failure to achieve anything like the expectation he may have shared with his colleagues.

It is the reasons for these failures, and what lies beneath them that needs to be studied by students at secondary and tertiary levels and not just those with an interest in Aboriginal Affairs.

The importance of such a study should be to grapple with the less than generous responses from Governments on behalf of the Nation to issues considered as injustices by Aboriginal people.

For instance a question that could have had disastrous consequences for this Nation was when in order to win its way in Parliament over Native Title Amendment voters ought to know and understand why a political party would threaten to mount a race based election. The use of fear and half truths in a political contest over differing positions may be a tactic commonly used but when it is used so constantly against Aboriginal leaders to thwart the redress of historical and contemporary injustice this must be a concern to anyone who values the principles of a democracy that espouse free speech and a fair go for all.

Education that simply reinforces the prejudices and racism in our Society ultimately does the Society a great wrong.

The struggles for Land Rights did not always reduce incarceration rates or achieve better educational and higher skill outcomes or greater support for the sustaining of Aboriginal languages and cultural values or the protection of sacred sites. The Aboriginal leaders who struggled for these outcomes were unable to overcome ignorance, racism and the politics of fear. Their failures were also those of the Nation.

We need to ask ourselves the question - when does the continual denial of our need to have our values and interests enshrined in the National set of values and interests with equal standing and worth to all Australians cease?

These struggles will and must go on but governments have removed our only National Representative Organisation and they must now accept their responsibilities to provide the citizenship rights that ATSIC were wrongly accused of failing to deliver.

The challenge to institutions of education in this country and particularly the secondary and tertiary levels is to unpack why the Aboriginal leaders over the years have not been successful in the quest for justice, respect and recognition.

In this regard I must congratulate the Wesley Community, the College and the Staff and Students for entering into a partnership with the Fitzroy Valley Aboriginal Community in the Kimberley. Seeing students from this College meeting, discussing and interacting with our people has exposed them to our richness, our weaknesses and faults. In the future I hope both groups will do what is required in relation to matters of Reconciliation and in a meaningful way contribute to bettering this Nation.

The failure to confront the injustices of the past and the failure of current generations to demand a just future for our indigenous people will only have one outcome.

We as Australians will be a diminished people and the divisions of equity and denial will continue to cast a shadow of moral cowardice over the nation.

The Indigenous people of this country will not go away as Oliver Cromwell sought with the Irish when he offered them the option of, "...to Connaught or Hell".

Future generations of Australians may decide to remain blind to the truth of our past but our Indigenous people will continue to demand their place in the nation as a unique people with unique rights and responsibilities.

I for one am not prepared to see future generations of my people begging at the gates of our National Estate nor am I prepared to condemn non Indigenous people from never enjoying the gifts that I believe are possible from the achievement of National Reconciliation.

In the spirit of this lecture in honour of Samuel Alexander should the populist views of either side of the debate about such seminal issues be sufficient or does his legacy demand we delve further to analyse and discover why we have been incapable of achieving better outcomes to such challenges and in doing so come to a deeper understanding of why the reconciliation of our Peoples is necessary and consequently beneficial rather than a diminishment of us all.

The opportunity remains for both our Peoples to be a settled nation at peace with itself and our past. If we avoid the issues of National Reconciliation and a completion of the unfinished business between us then the monster of racism and denial we have created will devour us and our children will be left a flawed legacy.

Kulia