

RICHIE HOWITT BOOK LAUNCH

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Dr Bill Jonas speaking at the media launch of the 2001 Social Justice and Native Title reports.

Thank you so much for inviting me to launch this very special book. I would like first of all to acknowledge the Wallumattagal people, the traditional owners and custodians of this land where we are meeting today.

I am going to begin this launch by being a little downbeat but I will move on to being much more upwards looking and positive, and Richie's book actually has a lot to do with that transformation from down to up.

I currently hold two positions with the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission. I am Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner and this is the substantive position to which I was originally appointed. In addition to this, I have now, for more than two years, been Acting Race Discrimination Commissioner. Well, with Indigenous social justice, and race issues, in Australia, I have a very challenging task, to say the least. I also find the work that I do possibly the most satisfying of all that I've done in my professional life.

But challenging and satisfying do not mean happiness at all times and there are periods of extreme frustration and even times of depression.

And, I have to say, I have recently been feeling very down. The reasons for this are many and they are often interrelated.

My Race Discrimination Unit and I spent a lot of time and energy preparing for the UN World Conference Against Racism (and Xenophobia) which was held in Durban in late August/early September. This preparation had included consultations about racial discrimination with civil society at over twenty places around the country, a national summit on racism, a youth forum, meetings with focus groups, some major publications, establishment of a web site and electronic bulletin board, and several quite arduous preparatory committee meetings and workshops overseas. Well, the world Conference itself was a debacle with much of the main agenda being hijacked by other issues and there were times when the conference was a decidedly unpleasant place to be. Then in the middle of the conference the Tampa issue blew up and both of the major political parties obscenely and despicably used the human tragedy of asylum seekers for domestic political purposes. And the majority of the Australian population – by far – were reported as agreeing with this. Then we had those appalling terrorist attacks in New York, bringing with them grief, horror and uncertainty. And this also involved one of the lowest political acts that I've seen in Australia, the suggestion that some of the asylum seekers risking their lives on leaking boats may be terrorists, followed by the further demonisation of these people with the allegations of children being thrown overboard. All of this of course led to attacks on Muslim people in Australia and some very ugly racist incidents.

Meanwhile – we have been commemorating the fact that it is ten years since the Report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, knowing that the appallingly high incarceration rates for Aborigines (the main reason that so many Indigenous people die in gaol) have not been reduced and more Aborigines died in Gaol in the ten years since the report than in the decade before it which had led to the enquiry taking place. We are preparing to celebrate next year the Mabo decision while native title issues remain as complex as ever, the racially discriminatory amendments to the Native Title Act remain in place, and genuine title to country for Indigenous people remains as illusory as ever. Genuine reconciliation appears to have been stalled, derailed or murdered. The media and unscrupulous politicians beat up a false dichotomy between Aboriginal rights and welfare dependency and for all of the talk about practical reconciliation, Aboriginal people continue to die twenty years younger than the rest of the population.

So, sometimes I am not happy. And it was in such a frame of mind that I responded to a query from Richie, about whether my copy of the book had arrived, with an email that said something like “no, it hasn’t. Send me a copy quickly because I need cheering up”. The book arrived and I have to say it has had the most positive, cheering and energising effect on me. Some of the reasons for this are no doubt personal, as I will explain, and some of the reasons are to do with the sheer excellence, timeliness and relevance of the book itself.

Let me elaborate on the personal aspects to start.

At one level this book is pure Richie Howitt, the Richie who was a student of mine almost thirty years ago and who, after an incredible journey, is today one of our leading geographers.

When Richie came to Newcastle University as a Geography student it was an exciting time for geography and for geographers and, I like to think, for geography students like Richie. We had passed through the Quantitative Revolution, when we had tried to become more scientific and less descriptive, and we mastered the multivariate techniques which we thought allowed us to do this, only to realise that the techniques were OK but they were not ends in themselves. What was lacking from our work was social meaning so we embraced the Relevance Revolution. Those of us who had worked in underdeveloped countries, and there were quite a few of us, were a little bit holier than thou on this issue, secretly and sometimes publicly proclaiming that in the Third World the relevance revolution was irrelevant, but we went along with the search for more socially worthwhile issues to research and for more adequate explanations of that ‘real world’ with which we were concerned. Perhaps also because of the time (end of the Vietnam war, increasing number of Sociology courses in Australian universities, perhaps) we turned to Marxism as our saviour. And for a while we all became very intense Marxist geographers.. And in all of this debate about what we were doing and where we were going, and sometimes ahead of his teachers, was Richie Howitt, always questioning, questioning, challenging accepted authority and wisdom, talking about new ways of seeing the world, taking part in movement for change, being at the centre of the action, and always realising the need for questions to be clearly articulated and for evidence to be the best available from as wide a range of sources as possible. I think Richie was the only student I ever taught in pre-personal-computer days who had his own personal filing cabinets at home and these contained newspaper clippings, photocopied materials that were not necessarily from textbooks, and a mass of other stuff which he thought would be useful.

Another aspect of the time I am talking about is also important and that is that I think Universities in those days were happier places than they are today. We did have more time to challenge ourselves, our peers and our students on issues which we thought were intellectually worthwhile even if they were not going to earn us promotions or employment. We did a lot of teaching and we did a lot of research, and some of us did a fair amount of what we would call administration, but we had time for reflection and we had time for interaction with our students in that intellectual-cum-social way that was such a valuable and often pivotal part of all of our training. Richie thrived on this and so did some of his fellow students and some of his teachers. So, there was a certain amount of nostalgia associated with reading the book for me, and not a pining for the past nostalgia but rather a memory of happy times and of the good aspects of teaching and learning which are reflected and evidenced throughout the book .

But this book is not locked into the past. It is as contemporary and as timely as one could wish for.

And what has really impressed me and cheered me up is the way in which this book is a breath of fresh air blowing through the often stagnant and fetid orthodoxy that poses as informed debate on issues surrounding Indigenous people and resource management. As Richie says: There should be no doubt that I am seeking to put forward a very strong, highly political and subjective position in the text, and that I believe passionately that the argument developed here needs to be taken seriously by others. The difference from many other textbooks is that I do not think it is possible to put forward simple ('textbook') answers to the extraordinarily complex problems that are within the compass of this book and the field to which it refers". And how refreshing it is to read (and how brave to write):

The pedagogical problems of accepting polyphony and displacing the 'expert' from the centre of our textual and educational narratives are relatively new issues in university teaching...My intention is not to undermine the value of expertise per se, nor the credibility of particular experts (particularly not myself as author). Rather I aim to open the foundations of this credibility to a critical gaze that is constructed in processes that extend beyond a narrowly defined academic or professional peer group and to encompass a much wider audience of human peers".

Richie does this by first of all turning some worlds, including our own, upside down and then having totally disoriented us he introduces us to

new ways of seeing the world, of thinking about the world, and of acting to change that world. His basic argument which is sustained and developed throughout this fascinating approach is that “we must rethink resource management in order to make resource management decisions more accountable to critical human values such as social justice, ecological sustainability, economic equity and cultural diversity”. His beautiful and often passionate prose is supported by some things which really warmed the heart of this old geographer : pertinent case studies and excellent diagrams. On this latter point, I was showing one of the diagrams to a colleague who commented “ If the Labor Party had presented knowledge nation like that they would not have looked so silly”.

So, the sheer excellence of this book continued me on my upwards path, but there are two other aspects of it that I must comment on.

Richie, we need this book, now and I suspect for some time into the future. There are, as you point out, lots of reasons for this and I would like to focus on one more. As you know the Council for Reconciliation presented, after ten years work, its report to parliament just on twelve months ago. The report contained suggestions for furthering and sustaining the reconciliation process. To date there has been no formal response from government to this report. We can speculate as to why this may be so but I believe that one very strong reason is that the report talks about things like Indigenous rights and self determination and we have a government, which like resource managers, prefers to treat the issues to which these relate, e.g., social justice, sustainability and human rights, as externalities – as someone else’s problems. If your book can, and I believe it can, influence current and potential decision makers to make the invisible visible and to see the perceived externalities as integral and internally relevant to their deliberations and actions, then at least some of the narrowness and mean-spiritdness of government may be overcome.

And finally I am heartened by this book because in a way it is a journey which, like its author, encourages us to be optimistic. For while the book is a critique, it is also a reconstruction. It is simultaneously a challenge and a guide . As Richie says :

I don’t see much value in seeking monuments to our individual work as a mark of our professional or human contributions. All any of us can do is what we are able to do and what we have the opportunities to do. Everything I have lived through, however, compels me to say that this is the driving imperative for action. If we are capable of contributing to humane change, to the creating of more preferable futures – and when

all's said and done, that is one of the characteristics of humans – then we are obliged to do so". How could I or anyone remain down in the mouth after reading something as profound or as eloquent as that.

Richie, Your book has recharged my batteries. It has brought back lovely memories, it has inspired me with its excellence, it has the potential to be a great force for change, and ultimately it helps us to look to a brighter future even while many aspects of our current world seem intent on dragging us back into darkness.

Ladies and gentlemen, a much loved person has written what I am sure will become a much loved book and I commend it to you all.

Thank you