

How we talk about Aborigines

John Hyde

"Newspeak" is language shorn of all capacity to convey ideas inimical to the prevailing ideology. In Orwell's imaginary England of 1984, and in real iron-curtain countries, it is used by officials to keep the proles in line. In their mouths it is mindless nationalism. In Australia in 1988, it is also officially sanctioned, but here it is being used to deny the existence of all that is best about our nation. It is undermining confidence in liberal democracy. Newspeak is an abomination intended to make lies sound truthful and pure wind sound profound. It makes real political debate impossible.

Newspeak is so common we don't always notice it. Nevertheless, the apparently serious statement that white settlement destroyed Aboriginal civilisation invites a protest.

Let us acknowledge our imperfections but let us not, in the process of baring our soul, forget that Australia is a liberal society of political equals. Or that it is our responsibility to keep it that way. Waffle and lies which belittle the ideas and the self-esteem which uphold liberal society will, if unchallenged, eventually destroy it. The language we use now to describe ourselves, and which distinguishes us from less savoury societies will, in large measure, determine what we become.

Some people who want a more statist, less liberal, society attack the vital ideas directly; they can be answered directly. The more dangerous threat comes from people who, when clarity does not suit their purpose, reduce what we read, say and believe to verbal mush. They abolish key words from relevant contexts---I must not advertise for a 'married' farmhand; or they strip essential words of meaning---what do 'left' and 'right' mean today?

Language develops by borrowing and by invention, but not by calling black, white. Fraud and politics excepted, the prime purpose of language is to convey meaning. When the essential words are bastardised, ideas becomes impossible to communicate, and the ideas themselves are lost to popular understanding.

The bicentenary celebrations make much of "culture". Since language is the most important item in the bag of goodies and baddies we glorify with that word, we might

reasonably ask the powers that be to encourage the use of culturally established language. This is a fair request when our political culture and history are being given a bicentennial stroking. In particular, the meanings of abstract nouns, such as democracy, liberty, equality, honour, justice, morality and peace should be preserved. And so should their ugly sisters---power, tyranny, injustice etc.

Back to "aboriginal civilisation": Some Aborigines have sometimes been treated badly by whites---not least by those who gratuitously disparage aboriginality. However, by no established use of the term, was the culture prevailing in Australia prior to 1788 a "civilisation". Unless we, including aborigines, want to be barbarians we must appreciate what a civilisation is. That which never was, therefore, cannot have been "destroyed".

Contrary to popular assertion, whites did not destroy aboriginal culture either. Aboriginal culture changed when most aborigines selected items from European culture. Although it may not have pleased the elders, the main way that change occurred was by individual blacks adopting those elements of the new culture which suited them---flour, tobacco and the dole for instance. From the beginning, individual aborigines sought the security of white culture. Tribal aborigines reinforced their sexism with nulla-nulla and spear. George Fletcher Moore, a settler on the Swan River, wrote in 1834---only five years after first settlement---of how several aboriginal women fled from their own race to take shelter in his house.

Newspeak has other victims. Among the more extravagant claims being made by black activists and hair-shirted whites is the claim that Europeans made slaves of the Aborigines. That is not true of aborigines, even though Kanaka labour in the last century was slavery. Aborigines have not been forced to work. Such few as were held in custody by Europeans, except as punishment imposed by due legal process, were held illegally and the whites were punishable.

Europeans are accused of genocide---the deliberate extermination of a racial group, such as the attempted extermination of the Jews. Influenza, measles, alcoholism, syphilis, and leprosy which so drastically reduced the Aboriginal population, and for which the white man is sometimes blamed, are not the tools of genocide.

Another example: the verb "to exploit" once had an honourable meaning, namely "to make use of"; but it has been changed in some people's minds, by Marxist rhetoric, to mean "to take unfair advantage of". In both senses of the word, whites have exploited blacks; but also in both senses of the word, blacks have exploited whites. Both ways, exploitation in the former, honourable, sense is much more significant than exploitation in the latter.

Another misuse of language is the use of the word apartheid to describe white treatment of blacks today. Aborigines are entitled to work, dwell, travel, marry, enjoy social security benefits and vote by the same rules as

Europeans. All of the essential elements of apartheid are missing.

Australia suffers some racist people but it is not a racist society. In fact, with the exception of land rights for aborigines, Australian law does not discriminate between races. Only our labour markets are particularly illiberal and these are equally illiberal for whites.

In spite of land rights, Aborigines have not prospered by European measures of prosperity. This could be because they have innate or cultural values and aptitudes which are different from, sometimes superior to, whites'---after all they were isolated for 10,000 years. Because such differences are contrary to prevailing ideology, and the attitudes of some Europeans are indeed objectionable, newspeak changes the facts and denies that Australia is a liberal society.

The danger is that, by denying the existence of the best in us, we may come to adopt the worst.

ENDS