

WHITE MAN'S DREAMING*

Australian Prime Minister John Howard has recently bowed to political pressure and has made a statement expressing official regret for past injustices committed against indigenous Australians. But the root of most people's indifference to the issue of interracial reconciliation - particularly as it relates to land rights - stems from white man's inability to realise the deep significance of land to indigenous people and culture.

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My father has always been a self-reliant sort of man. In many ways the typical tough Australian farmer. Both my mother and father are the kind of people that you have to admire. The years of hard work and hard times have made them very practical, resourceful and patient people - and absolutely honest.

I was just a boy when poor health and hard economic times caused my parents to sell the farm. The day they made that decision was one of the few occasions I saw my Dad cry. It was a decision that my parents made, in typical self-sacrificing fashion, for the good of the family. So why was this a tearful occasion?

Over years of living on and working the land my father developed a deep identification and connection with the land - his small piece of Australia. Selling the farm meant breaking away from something very near and dear to him. The land had become part of his identity. His connection to it could perhaps be described as spiritual. It was a connection that I had too, but one which I wouldn't realise until years later, and it was a connection which is profoundly important both to me and my children.

Today in Australia, as in other parts of the world, the debate is raging about land

rights of indigenous people. Indigenous people's connection to the land is similar to that of the farmer, but one which has grown deeper over numerous generations and is deeply intertwined with their beliefs. They've dug the earth with their hands and eaten the food that grows from it; they've hunted the animals that have grazed upon it and have learned its signs and seasons. The familiar places and landmarks become the subject of stories and legends and serve as memorials of important events in family or tribal history - they become 'sacred'.

Approximately 90% of Australians today live in urban areas and relocate, on average, every 5 years. Urban Australians are culturally conditioned for relocation and understand little of the grief that comes when people are torn away from the land with which they have cultural connections. Their identity revolves around their job or their possessions or their recreational activities. Whilst in East Africa I was amused to learn that a word for white man was 'musungu'. It is derived from a Swahili word meaning 'restless one' or 'one who wanders about'. Perhaps it's this characteristic of the European to 'wander about' that is at the root of our not being able to understand the deep connection that in-

digenous peoples have to their homelands. (One wonders if it is also at the root of our politicians inability to grasp the importance of providing adequate policies for the protection of farmers against the cruel onslaught of global economics.)

I later returned with my children to the 'sacred' land of my father. The current owners were kind enough to let us 'have a look around'. I walked back in time as we visited the places where I played as a boy. The large front lawn was still there where on summer evenings we had played for hours with our dear and long-departed dog - and laughed ourselves to exhaustion. I recalled to my children stories of cubby-huts, haystacks, billy carts and shearing sheds. They saw where my brother survived a snakebite and the place where the family gathered once a year to celebrate 'Guy-Faulks night' around a huge bonfire. My children listened transfixed as I described every detail of life on the farm as a child.

Even though much had changed many of the landmarks were still there: The front gate and the mail-box which my father had made were still in use; the big old familiar gum trees were still standing there like silent sentinels and patient witnesses to the passing of time; the front verandah

where we had so often gathered together to watch the awesome spectacle of thunder and lightning storms roll in.

It was a sacred and precious time which I was able to share with my 'tribe', and one that seemed to make my life snap into clearer focus. I left there feeling a little sad but deeply satisfied. I had recalled where I had come from and part of what defines me as a person. My children also came away with a clearer picture of where 'we' came from. To them it is 'the land of our fathers' - a land which they will never inherit but one which remains special in their lives as it is in mine.

Land rights and reconciliation are not just about the allocation of land. That's a very European way of looking at it. In many cases it may not be possible to restore all of the land which was taken from previous generations. Many of the original inhabitants are gone of those lands have now become the sacred homelands of later generations of new inhabitants. But reconciliation does demand the *acknowledgement* of what is culturally and spiritually important to *all* people and giving due consideration and just restitution to *all* who have been disenfranchised and displaced.

*The term 'Dreaming' is used by aboriginal Australian's to refer to their stories and traditions, their ancestral past, and their spiritual connection to the land.