**Sloppy Journalism Reinforces White Myths**

*AM* is an influential ABC morning radio program broadcast nationally every day. The journalists on this program are proud of the credibility it enjoys in mainstream political reporting in Australia. One knows this by the assertive and authoritative tone that its reporters adopt in its presentation. On its own ABC website it states that, *AM is Australia's most informative morning current affairs program. AM sets the agenda for the nation's daily news and current affairs coverage.* So one should expect that professional journalists working on this program would ensure that the statements they make are factual.

But this clearly wasn’t the case when Tony Eastley sat before a microphone in an ABC Radio studio on the morning of 13th of February this year. In introducing a report from Canberra, Eastley blandly stated,

*“It is five years today since Kevin Rudd as prime minister made the landmark apology to Indigenous Australians for the grief, mistreatment and suffering endured since European settlers landed two centuries ago...”*

Whilst this simple statement was absorbed by most listeners without question, it was deeply disturbing to me. As a historian I am probably a bit obsessive about ensuring that an accurate understanding of history not only be presented, but that it also be a reasonably honest interpretation and account of past events. It therefore aggravates me when I see or hear a major, mainstream, respected news outlet being sloppy on historical fact. The fact is that Tony Eastley not only got his facts wrong, but he did so in a way that helps to perpetuate the false understanding of history that so many Australians cling to.

So it is equally important not only to know why Tony Eastley’s assertion is factually wrong, but also to know how such subtle statements such as his make their way into the public consciousness and help create a false understanding of history.

Eastley’s assertion is constructed in a way to suggest that Rudd’s apology was ‘landmark’ because **all** Aboriginal people were being apologised to for *grief, mistreatment and suffering endured since European settlers landed two centuries ago.* **This is simply not true**. Kevin Rudd’s apology was directed to the Stolen Generations, for their treatment at the hands of governments. The Stolen Generations are not all Aboriginal people. The Stolen Generations represent a minority segment of the Aboriginal community. So Kevin Rudd’s apology was clearly not an apology to the majority of the Aboriginal peoples who had suffered at the hands of the Australian State. That is the fact that is on the historical record. Whilst no doubt the apology was necessary and accepted by many members of the Stolen Generations, it nevertheless did not apply to all Aboriginal people.

Yet ever since Rudd’s apology most media reports continue to misconstrue this important point of history and have created a new myth of Australian history. I have no doubt that the majority of Australians (including many blackfellas) believe that Rudd’s apology was to all Aboriginal people. This myth has been born and grown before our very eyes in the space of just five years. As such it is a perfect illustration of how history can be misrepresented and distorted to the disadvantage of Aboriginal peoples.

Myths such as this enable white Australians to reassure themselves that “the Abos got an apology, what else do they want?” It assists them in their desire to construct us in their eyes as being lazy and ungrateful, as well as the alcoholic welfare cheats that they already believed we were. This enables them to engage in subconscious denialism of their own history. Clearly these sorts of notions are indicative of the great Australian ignorance, but we must remember that ultimately racism is borne of ignorance and fear. And false reporting such as Tony Eastley’s feed into the ignorance that generates the fear.

To understand why the historical inaccuracy of Eastley’s reporting is important in the broader context, we need to look at the phenomenon of token gestures. By that I mean token gestures on the part of politicians and governments over the past 50 years that have been designed to achieve two things. Firstly to placate the more demanding and assertive generation of Aboriginal political activists of the 1970s and 80s, and secondly to appease the collective white guilt of Anglo-Australians.

This has always been a delicate balancing act for Australian politicians. In the days of the McMahon, Whitlam and Fraser Governments the Aboriginal rights movement reached its peak in political effectiveness. This caught Governments of all political persuasions off-guard. Confronted with articulate, politically-savvy and internationally well-connected Aboriginal political activists, politicians trembled in fear and sought a range of ways to throw oil on troubled waters.

Whitlam sought to create a nationally elected Aboriginal representative body when his promises for Land Rights were not delivered. This was a diversionary tactic, as was the event he is mainly remembered for in relation to Aboriginal policy, the pouring of sand into Vincent Lingiari’s hand. The myth created is that Whitlam was a good guy for Aboriginal people, rather than just one of many Prime Minister’s to sell us out on Land Rights. And it should be remembered that whilst the NT Land Rights Act that had been drafted by Whitlam, it was ultimately passed by Malcolm Fraser in 1976. This was the only bright spot for Fraser during his Prime Ministership, because he had been frequently harassed by Aboriginal Rights protestors throughout his term.

But the dubious honour of creating the grandest and most meaningless token gestures must surely rest with the Hawke and Keating Governments. Last month I wrote about how Hawke killed Land Rights in collusion with corrupt WA Premier Brian Burke. After Hawke had dispensed with Land Rights he had a very serious problem. He had seen the effectiveness of Aboriginal protestors and the international media coverage they had gained when they staged large demonstrations at the 1982 Commonwealth Games in Brisbane. Bob Hawke now found that these impertinent protestors were threatening to disrupt the 1988 Masturbation of the Nation, the Bicentennial. So Hawke expediently sought to placate the Aboriginal groups with a range of diversionary tactics.

First he announced a $50million Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, which had the effect of silencing Aboriginal critics who had long been calling for such a Royal Commission. It also helped create the illusion that the Hawke Labor government was genuinely concerned about Aboriginal people. Thirty years later we can see how much the Royal Commission helped to alleviate Aboriginal imprisonment rates. Then the Hawke Government really confounded its Aboriginal critics by announcing that it was creating, out of thin air, a magical new body called CAR or Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation. This dodgy outfit was apparently meant to create greater understanding between the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities with a multi-million dollar budget and a ten year timeline. Which is another way of Hawke saying to Aboriginal people that white Australian racism runs so deep that we are going to have to spend a generation talking them around. By appointing Aboriginal ex-priest turned activist, Pat Dodson as chairperson of CAR, Hawke had cleverly further placated some of the more conservative activists whilst at the same time displaying his cultural sensitivity (and inactivity) to his constituent white community.

The notion of ‘reconciliation’ as dreamed up by the Hawke/Keating government was an even more remarkable concept in that it was an idea that had not evolved from any public demand from either the Aboriginal or Anglo-Australian communities. Instead it was born of pure political cynicism and opportunism with the intention being to divert Aboriginal activists from disrupting the 1988 Bicentennial celebrations. And because millions of dollars were handed to dodgy public relations companies to promote this unwanted idea, we have consequently seen ‘reconciliation’ come to assume the clothes of respectability and mainstream acceptance. Such is the way Australian mythology is manipulated into place and embedded in the public consciousness.

Later when Paul Keating delivered the Don Watson written Redfern Speech in December 1992, we saw another example of an Australian myth in construction. This after all was the Prime Minister who gave us the notorious Native Title Act, which deprived Aboriginal peoples of more rights to land than it actually gave them. Which in itself became one of the greatest myths of all time; *that the Native Title Act delivered land justice to Aboriginal peoples*. Nonsense! The Native Title Act was more about protecting and preserving white interests in land that had been stolen with no compensation payable. In fact in could be argued that the advent of the Native Title Act was the greatest single act of dispossession since Captain Cook illegally claimed the land in 1770.

In the same way that Anglo-Australians cling to their myths about the Whitlam, Fraser and Hawke governments being humane and compassionate administrations toward Aboriginal people, so these types of self-congratulatory myths continue to be manufactured. The case of the Rudd apology to the Stolen Generations being transformed into a general apology to all of us is just part of a long legacy of Australian governments looking to feel-good, token gestures that ultimately do nothing to address the real problems of dispossession, racism and poverty.

Time is a brutal judge and now long after grand meaningless gestures such as the Royal Commission, Reconciliation, the Keating Redfern speech, the Native Title Act, the Rudd apology, we can all see that little if anything has changed for the majority of Aboriginal Australians. The health statistics and imprisonment rates are largely the same or worse than they were 40 years ago. The same discredited policies are regurgitated constantly and the army of public servants consume most of the money in administration. So nothing changes.

Thus it is important that we learn a lot more about recent history if we are to be able to identify nonsense being peddled in our midst by the likes of ABC News radio. We need to be alert to the little discrepancies that creep into the political debate and subtly change the meanings of things.

We must be aware of what Don Watson calls ‘weasel words’ and we have a duty to keep ourselves better informed if we are to make a dint in the vast sea of Australian ignorance and to challenge the great Australian apathy. We need to be alert to and alarmed at any revision, sanitisation or falsification of our history.

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Picture of Tony Eastley attached: sourced from ABC website

<http://www.abc.net.au/profiles/content/s1857291.htm?site=canberra>