

Prejudice and intolerance in today's Commonwealth

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One of the supreme principles of the Commonwealth, whose heads of government meet on Friday in Nigeria, is the right of all peoples to self-determination. The modern Commonwealth's core beliefs were expressed in the Singapore Declaration of 1971, which affirmed, 'We oppose all forms of colonial domination and racial oppression and are committed to the principles of human dignity and equality.'

How strange, then, that despite this rhetoric the old Colonial Master's prejudices against the 'backward' and 'primitive' are alive and well today. And is it not even stranger that these sentiments seem to have been absorbed by many of those populations whom the British once despised as inferior and incapable of ruling themselves, and are now being turned on perhaps the most vulnerable of all groups in today's world, the 150 million surviving tribal people?

The Victorian belief in 'progress' as an inevitable force arose in large part from the work of Charles Darwin. He himself foresaw that the theory of evolution through natural selection could be applied not just to the biology of animals and plants, but also to human society. In 'The Descent of Man' he wrote, 'At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world.' These notions came along at a highly convenient time for the British and other Europeans, busily staking their claims over ever-increasing areas of the globe.

'Social evolution', as its champions soon named it, provided the colonisers with a justification for their empire-building: they were bringing the poor, benighted heathens, who lived on too low a scale to be able to govern themselves, all the benefits of Western civilisation, as well as seeking to plunder as much of their property as possible. Discussing the local American Indian population in 1882, a Massachusetts clergyman neatly encapsulated all the arrogance of the day, 'We have a full right... to dictate terms and conditions to the Indians; to use constraint and force; to say what we intend to do, and what they must and shall do... The Indian must be made to feel he is in the grasp of a superior.'

Allied to this notion of the innate superiority of all things European was the belief that those living a different way of life needed to be assimilated

– by force if necessary – into the ‘mainstream’. Perhaps nowhere was this applied to more devastating effect than in Australia, where whole generations of Aboriginal children were taken from their homes and families and raised in mission stations and government boarding schools. The recent film ‘Rabbit Proof Fence’, based on the book of the same name, told the true story of one such family, and brought home to white Australians the devastating effects such policies of forced integration had on those at the receiving end.

And yet, tragically, many of those who have freed themselves from the shackles of colonialism seem not to have learned the lessons of history. Rather, they appear hell-bent on repeating the same old mistakes.

How else does one explain the attitude of the Botswana government towards that country’s ‘Bushmen’, to take just one example? The Bushmen, who are the indigenous inhabitants of southern Africa and have lived there for many thousands of years, have recently been forced off their land and sent to resettlement camps. The President, in unashamedly pseudo-Darwinian terms, said of them, ‘How can you have a Stone Age creature continue to exist in the age of computers? If the Bushmen want to survive, they must change or otherwise, like the dodo, they will perish.’

Today’s indigenous people express astonishment that such prejudices have survived for so long. Doris Pilkington, Aboriginal author of Rabbit Proof Fence, said recently that it was ‘incredible’ that ‘the forced assimilation of indigenous peoples like that once suffered by the Aborigines is not over, and some governments still openly support and practice such policies.’

One Canadian indigenous leader, on hearing of the Bushmen’s persecution, was so moved he wrote a public plea to the Botswana government. Referring to Canada’s attempts to forcibly assimilate his own people, he said, ‘Over a span of perhaps 20 years, we were reduced from self-reliance to a situation of almost total dependency. I would ask you to learn from Canada’s mistakes, and end the misguided policy of trying to forcibly integrate the Bushmen into your cultural mainstream. Canada has shown the world that this doesn’t work. It will only result in generations of shame and misery for everyone concerned.’

The Indian authorities have been almost as guilty as Botswana of continuing the assimilationist work of the colonial age. Nowhere does the continuing prejudice towards the ‘primitive’ express itself more clearly

than in the Andaman Islands. Under the British, the population of the islands' tribal people was reduced by 90%. Apparently unconcerned by the devastating impact of 'civilisation' on the islanders, the post-colonial authorities have enacted much the same policy. The Union Tribal Welfare Ministry has been working on a plan to, 'reform the tribals and assimilate them with the mainstream' (despite a High Court order banning any attempt to assimilate them), whilst the Minister himself said in October, 'It is not right to leave them as is.'

Perhaps we should not be surprised at such naked displays of intolerance. The prejudices behind the Minister's comments run very deep, after all, for they stretch back almost two centuries, and now inhabit the minds of many of those who were themselves once stigmatised as 'primitive' and 'backward'. Today's tribal peoples will be hoping that tolerance and understanding may one day finally replace contempt for ways of life that may be different to our own, but are not inferior. Unless this happens, many will be destroyed.

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