

THE SOFT BIGOTRY OF LOW EXPECTATIONS

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What is 'the soft bigotry of low expectations'?

In my view it is the most important idea in race relations since the advent of civil rights and the rejection of racial discrimination. If the fight against discrimination was the most important development in the cause of human dignity in the second half of the twentieth century, then the soft bigotry of low expectations must be the most important in the first half of this.

Australia and the world needs to wake up to it. This form of prejudice wreaks a massive toll on the marginalised and perpetuates great social injustice. It is as bad, and I would say, even worse in its effects than its better known counterpart.

It is now 16 years old, and yet the reaction to my one-paragraph mention in my remarks at the launch of Troy Bramston's biography of Paul Keating¹, shows the idea is completely foreign to thinking people.

It is the most important insight if we are concerned with the downtrodden and marginalised in our society, and how we might seriously try to make

¹ *Rhetoric, Imagination, Power* Remarks at the launch of *Paul Keating: The Big Picture Leader* by Troy Bramston (Scribe, 2016), Gilbert & Tobin, Barangaroo, 21 November 2016, <http://capeyorkpartnership.org.au/news/noel-pearson-rhetoric-imagination-power/>

poverty history and truly diminish the misery that mires communities of the underclass, and the lower classes generally. Not the least, black Australians.

It is the most powerful cultural and ideological barrier to social progress. If the hard bigotry of prejudice and discrimination is a *wall* that keeps the marginalised out of the opportunities of the social and economic mainstream, then the soft bigotry of low expectations is a *prison*. A prison maintained by people who think they are socially progressive. It is the compassionista's prison, having nothing to do with true social progress.

While proponents of hard bigotry are said to come from the cultural and political right, soft bigotry is from the left. The wall of hard bigotry is well recognised, no black Australian can fail to see it – we rail against it every time we see it – and we have laws and institutions that declare aspects of this hard bigotry unlawful and unacceptable in our society. Because hard bigotry hurts people and is unjust.

But what about soft bigotry? We do not even recognise it as a phenomenon. It is virtually unknown and unrecognisable. Not even black Australians or other lower class Australians affected by this bigotry, understand we are in a *prison of low expectations*.

And yet I contend we now live in a country where the scourge of hard bigotry has been long overtaken by its softer counterpart. It is an ideology harboured by greater numbers of people than the old variety. Its perniciousness lies in the fact that the purveyors of this bigotry believe themselves compassionate, sensitive, respectful, empathetic and morally correct. And the objects of this bigotry take this soft bigotry as benign and sympathetic, not knowing it is a poisoned pill.

The strangest thing is that this profound insight came from George W Bush, when he was on the presidential campaign trail in 2000. How could such profundity come from such a notorious mangler of the English language and someone many rate such a poor president? Nevertheless he is the provenance of this crucial idea.

From the beginning of his presidency Bush was on his way to becoming what might have been the greatest education president in the history of the US when he conceived the *No Child Left Behind* policy as the central platform of his administration. This was the policy and politics of the radical centre *coming from the right*. Here was a republican president whose premise was that every child in America deserved a good education. He had conceptualised a platform for social justice through school reform that not even Bill Clinton had the gumption to tackle.

Alas, as with Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, war intervened and the focus and treasure needed to prosecute such large ambitions, was lost. One of the great ironies of 9/11 was that at the very time Dubya was told of the terrorist strikes, he was in a classroom reading a small Direct Instruction booklet to young students called 'The Pet Goat'². No kidding.

From that moment *No Child Left Behind* was doomed. The implementation, the adaptations and necessary adjustments based on what works, and the necessary relentless push from the president, and peace through education equality was overtaken by war on terror.

² See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rj6NODKktM4>. See also <http://www.zigsite.com/EdWeekResponse.htm>, and <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2004/07/26/the-pet-goat-approach>

In July 2000 Bush spoke to the country's leading civil rights organisation, the National Association for the Advancement of Coloured Peoples (NAACP) at their 91st annual convention³. It is an extraordinary speech, with school education for America's most disadvantaged children its focus. It really is worth reading again, because its fundamentally correct grasp of the challenge, its moral purpose, and what needs to be done, has never been better put. Strange thing to say right?

A republican president in a den of civil rights lions, Bush's speech is impeccable in how he sought to bridge the gulf of historic conflict and antipathy. He said:

“For our nation, there is no denying the truth that slavery is a blight on our history and that racism, despite all the progress, still exists today. For my party, there is no escaping the reality that the party of Lincoln has not always carried the mantle of Lincoln.”

“Recognizing and confronting our history is important. Transcending our history is essential.”

He went to say that “America must close the gap of hope between communities of prosperity and communities of poverty. We have seen what happens ... when African-American citizens have the opportunity they've earned and the respect that they deserve. Men and women once victimized by Jim Crow have risen to leadership in the halls of Congress.”

How was this to be done? Bush said “this begins by enforcing the civil rights laws.” He was open about the ongoing prejudice faced by black Americans:

“Discrimination is still a reality, even when it takes different forms.

Instead of Jim Crow, there's racial redlining and profiling. Instead of

³ <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/onpolitics/elections/bushtexto71000.htm>

separate but equal, there is separate and forgotten. Strong civil rights enforcement will be a cornerstone of my administration.”

This we can now call “hard bigotry”, because he then introduced its counterpart saying: “And I will confront another form of bias: the soft bigotry of low expectations.”

He turned to America’s schools:

“While all can enter our schools, many – too many, are not learning there.

“There's a tremendous gap of achievement between rich and poor, white and minority. This, too, leaves a divided society.

“And whatever the causes, the effect is discrimination.”

The reform principles he championed started with the need to “expect every child can learn” and “to blow the whistle on failure” and “remember the role of education is to leave no child behind.” He referred to at-risk schools that had been turned around, explaining that “at-risk means you’re not supposed to learn” and where this assumption was challenged he claimed “I've seen these schools and principles bring new hope, inspiring new confidence and ambitions.”

He then states:

“See every child can learn... And every child in this country deserves to grow in knowledge and character and ideals. Nothing in my view is more important to our prosperity and goodness than cultivated minds and courageous hearts.”

He obviously had a great speech writer, but nevertheless the words went out under his authority. Before leaving Bush I want to finally quote this

stupendously correct principle: he said:

“My friend Phyllis Hunter, of Houston, Texas, calls reading the new civil right. Equality in our country will remain a distant dream until every child, of every background, learns so that he or she may strive and rise in this world. No child in America should be segregated by low expectations, imprisoned by illiteracy, abandoned to frustration and the darkness of self-doubt.”

Reading is the new civil right. Reading is indeed a basic human right. In my work with Good to Great Schools Australia, our instructional coaches and school leaders continually send me stories and evidence of student learning in the schools we work with. Around June I received this short iPhone video of Layne, a young prep student at the Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy in Coen. The video was taken by instructional coach, Kiriana and Layne is reading with her principal, Glenn.

[Show iPhone video of Layne, June 2016]

You can see Layne putting all of the component skills of reading together for the first time. Phonemic awareness and phonics coming together, to allow her to start decoding her story. This is the joy and privilege of my work: to see magic like this.

The insight that low expectations is a fundamental cause of educational disparity with disadvantaged classes and racial minorities like African Americans and Indigenous Australians, is actually 50 years old. Researching my Sir Keith Murdoch Oration for the Victorian State Library⁴ on Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s famous treatise on *The Negro Family*⁵, I read the famous

⁴ <http://blogs.slv.vic.gov.au/news/noel-pearson-delivers-the-2016-keith-murdoch-oration/>

⁵ <http://web.stanford.edu/~mrosenfe/Moynihan's%20The%20Negro%20Family.pdf>

critique from social reformer and Harvard academic, William Ryan, whose riposte, *Blaming the Victim*⁶ was published in 1971.

Of course 'blaming the victim' became a great ideological meme in leftist discourse, resisting any attempt to tackle social inequality at the behavioural level. It became a reflexive rejection on the part of the left to any notion that personal responsibility and agency is necessary for social change. Everything is down to the structures of inequality, rather than also implicating the agency of individuals and communities. Reading Ryan I expected to find the wellspring of this dismal discourse but instead was struck at how rigorous and insightful Ryan's critique is. What the left made of *Blaming the Victim* in the intervening half century is a far cry from the sharp insights of Ryan's original analysis. Today I only want to focus on Ryan's insights into how low expectations characterized schools serving African-Americans. He referred to research showing that teacher and school expectations of individual students, and students of some ethnic or other class grouping, has a large bearing on how these students were treated in the classroom and ultimately their achievement. He wrote:

"This is the folklore of cultural deprivation as it is used in an ideological fashion to preserve the core of the status quo in urban education – to forestall any questioning about the fundamental problems of recruiting and training teachers, achieving racial integration, and in particular governing the school system. Waving this banner educationalists can advocate... changing or manipulating or treating the child. They fight to the death any proposal that implies that there might be anything at all wrong with the teacher or the teaching, and resist any exploration of, and intrusion into, the monopolistic control of public education by the teaching profession, particularly if it implies participation in

⁶ William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim*, Vintage Books, New York 1971

decision making by laymen from the community”.

I think I may be one of the laymen from the community and I suspect the resistance we have encountered is to be explained by Ryan’s insight. I will refer to another of Ryan’s clarity of thinking – he writes:

“...the middle class child is somewhat better prepared for the school experience than is the lower class child. But would it not be reasonable to present this proposition in its reversed form: The school is better prepared for the middle class child than for the lower class child. Indeed, we could be tempted to say further that the school experience is tailored for, and stacked in favor of, the middle class child”.

During the tumult of the Aurukun school closure earlier this year, a political leader of this state expressed the wish that Aurukun should look like “a normal state school”. Now think about that. What thoughtful person would think that “normal state schools” have been serving children like those in Aurukun in decades past? Normal state schools are routinely failing Aboriginal children. They are preparatory schools for too many indigenous youth moving onto lives of welfare dependency and economic exclusion, and worse, juvenile detention and adult imprisonment. We want schools that cater to disadvantaged students, and that do not leave them behind with low expectations. This is the low SES excuse for low expectations.

It is not enough for high expectations, there must also be effective teaching. Otherwise we end up exhorting students we have high expectations of them – but we fail to furnish these students with the means to meet these expectations. It is cruel to chant the mantra of high expectations without giving the child the means to meet them. And the means is effective teaching.

The operating principle of Direct Instruction is: “If the student has not

learned, the teacher has not taught”. Think about it: “If the student has not learned, the teacher has not taught.”

This is precisely the approach to schooling that removes all excuses. You can't use the student, her low SES background, her ethnic identity, her lack of books in the home, her disadvantage – as excuses for her failing to learn. She fails to learn because she has not been taught by her teacher. It is this principle to is so challenging to public education in particular, but unfortunately the middle class school model generally. Those having what William Ryan called the “monopolistic control of public education” don't want to accept the idea that learning failure is the consequence of teaching failure. But high expectations schooling is ultimately about high quality teaching. The esteem and pride will follow learning success.

Let me now finally turn to what I called the ABC's culture of soft bigotry. To be fair to them this soft bigotry characterizes the progressive media generally, and indeed is an expression of the false socially progressive culture in the wider polity. I think this bigotry is a problem with the national broadcaster because it is only matched by *The Australian* newspaper in its coverage of indigenous affairs, putting aside the SBS.

Before I put aside the SBS, let me opine that there is more insight in the reality television of its recent *First Contact* series than there has been in the ABC's investigative reporting on me and my schools work over the past two weeks. When reality television is more truthful than current affairs journalism, then something is going on.

People have misapprehended my critique of soft bigotry. ABC managing director Michelle Guthrie's response pointing to indigenous staffing and the new role planned for Stan Grant as head of some indigenous unit, and

heading up the Friday night slot of the 7.30 report – was just embarrassing. For someone who has made his own way through journalism, nationally and internationally, to be rolled out as evidence of indigenous employment and inclusive programming, means Guthrie just does not get it.

Many people have interpreted my criticism as opposition to the ABC or any other media exposing the misery and horrors of social and economic marginalization of indigenous peoples. No, that is not my objection.

Indeed The Australian and the ABC have a long and commendable history of this exposure and bringing the blight to national attention, when for the rest of the media “blackfellas just don’t rate, mate.” So let me not be taken to be opposed to investigative journalism, tough questions, scrutiny and expose.

Indeed the ABC has a proud record of excellent journalism through Four Corners, Australian Story and the 7.30 Report – which have been catalysts for public attention to neglect, abuse and suffering. I happen to regard the young David Marr’s Four Corners piece on the emerging grog crisis in Aurukun in 1990, *Six Pack Politics*, as a catalyst that shook me up about the social dimension to my emerging advocacy for native title. Only four weeks ago the Four Corners program on the industry that has been built around Child Protection in this country, was journalism at its finest. Completely relevant to indigenous affairs and so important.

My problem is not with the journalism exposing the problems. My problem lies with the journalism that deals with attempts to tackle the very problems about which this journalism constantly reports. Because it is in relation to the policy response that the culture of soft bigotry at the ABC (and other progressive media) comes to the fore. This is where the ideological and cultural bias of the institution colours everything. This is where the false

progressivism of the journalists as individuals and as a culture, comes in.

I have been in this reform business for 25 years. I am a keen observer of and player within the Australian political culture generally, and the media culture particularly. I have witnessed when this culture exposes attention to problems and then kills any response to these problems. Time and time again.

Indigenous reform is a Zero Sum Game, as a result. Three steps forward, two back. Two steps forward, three back. We just end up going nowhere. This is why we have policies and initiatives that seek to reduce imprisonment, keep children with their parents, give hope to juveniles, get indigenous children to succeed in schools, reduce “over-representation in the prison system” – and yet a couple of decades later the numbers are worse, there are more people in prison and we are heading towards half of children in protection coming from 3 per cent of the population.

I could point to the ABC’s news reporting that discloses the bias against reform. I have not done an analysis, but the reporting on Direct Instruction itself by the ABC will readily show a pattern of controversialising what should be, according to Australia’s foremost education expert, Professor John Hattie⁷, uncontroversial.

But this is a culture. This is when you don’t need an editorial line. You just need the culture to be allergic to ideas like: welfare reform, economic development and not just just conservation. Our defence of our land rights in Cape York against attempts by governments and the green lobby to impose environmental regimes like vegetation management and Wild Rivers,

⁷ John Hattie, *Visible Learning*, Routledge, 2009

without the consent of traditional landowners – of course brings into sharp conflict our rights with the culture of journalists like the ABC in respect of environmentalism. Of course they are disposed to one side of this issue, and guess which side?

If I asked which side of the line the ABC culture sits on a range of issues such as asylum seekers, immigration, coalmining, climate change, same-sex marriage – and so on – noone in this room would fail to answer the question correctly. There is no evidence-favouring neutrality in this, except for iconoclasts like Chris Ullman taking a stand on freedom of religion.

There is no way indigenous reform will succeed in breaking out of the Zero Sum game we are trapped in. We will die in the arms of the false progressives whom we mistakenly think are on our side, but they harbor a basic bigotry towards our humanity and oppose our dignity at too many turns.

This soft bigotry exists because its purveyors on the left fail to get over their relativism when it comes to indigenous people, and I must keep saying, the poor generally. This is a class aspersion ultimately, but which is particularly easy to associate with race.

The relativism appears to reflect an acceptance or sensitivity to ethnicity and culture, but in fact it cloaks double standards, where the progressive purveyors fail to ask themselves: what would I want for myself and my children if I was in the same circumstance? The answer that you would like to participate in economic development, have jobs, not be on welfare and so on – is not a question the purveyors of this culture ask themselves.

The greens who prioritise conservation over indigenous development needs, fail to confront their double standards. And at the end of the day these

double standards expose a basic hypocrisy.

This is the most fundamental challenge to indigenous reform in our country: will we confront and reject the soft bigotry of low expectations as surely as we confront and reject hard bigotry?

Let me close with young Layne Creek, five months later:

[Second Iphone video, Layne]

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