

**Online launch of *Tribalism's Troubles: Responding to Rowan Williams* edited
by Damien Freeman**

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My gratitude to Magdalene College for this opportunity. I heard Rowan Williams's lecture, and have been pondering, and learning, from its wisdom in the year since.

The proximate drivers of the polarisation that worries public discourse, are well rehearsed: the rise of social media, its debasement of open democratic debate, and so on.

I will recapitulate just three aspects in order to explore what lies underneath this febrile rancour in the new century.

First, the culture wars. We should be clear about the reason for its adoption by the contending parties and their fellow travellers in the US with the rise of the New Left in the 1960s, and the corresponding rise of the New Right – and consequently in all the Anglosphere and Western liberal democracies that take their cues from the US: the Culture Wars were and are a proxy for the old class wars that became passe for the Left and a convenient diversion for the Right. Better to fight over guns, sex, religion, language and identity than the political economy of inequality, unemployment and poverty.

Australia's incomparable historian and art critic, Robert Hughes' lectures for the New York Public Library, published as *Culture of Complaint* in 1992, remains the finest explication of the two PCs that came to dominate discourse from the 1980s: Political Correctness from the Left and Patriotic Correctness from the Right. Leftist PC was a political Godsend to its opponents, its excesses affording much ammunition to lambast the Left for its absurdities. Much electoral return was yielded over three decades – not least during the Howard Government's ascendancy from the mid-90s through to the mid-2000s in Australia. PC is a dead cat whose malodorous carcass can be reliably mobilised as a substitute for real public discourse. Meanwhile that other PC against which Hughes was equally scathing – Patriotic Correctness – went unnoticed.

The new programs *against* Identity Politics and *for* Western Civilisation – are just new phases of this Culture War. As the Leftist discourse evolves and mutates, so does its

Rightist response. And whilst the Leftists have indeed succeeded in long marching through the institutions, the Rightists always succeeded in fighting on their favoured ground of culture rather than economy. Of race and gender rather than class. Of the morality of religion and sex rather than the morality of our political economy.

Second, the rise of the permanent campaign. This is a short point. Simply observing that our democratic politics evolved so that elections no longer represent the resolution of partisan contest over policy for power, whereby partisans come together and accept the newly elected government has a mandate from the people to govern for all. Rather the campaign starts the very day after the last poll. On the part of the newly elected seeking to cement their place in power and on the part of the opposition, looking forward to the next election.

Third, the rise of the media business model as a complement and amplifier of the Culture Wars. This too is a short point, and not new. Partisan conflict has long sold media, but it seems to me Roger Aisles broke new ground with his creation of Fox News: a remarkably lucrative media business model whose very value proposition is centred on tribal conflict and the Culture Wars. However egregious Fox News is, its commitment to the cultural and political right is no different to the Australian public broadcaster – the ABC’s – commitment to left-liberal culture and ideology. The same can be said, as I understand it, of the BBC.

Australia is as roiled by this polarisation as the US and the UK: we imitate and replicate the ideas and political methods that underpin the Culture Wars of America. How might we transcend this dismal discourse? Let me turn to this question in the Australian context over the past decade: the recognition within the Australian Constitution of the country’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

This belated project is long overdue and of long standing. Its culmination will require a referendum of the Australian people where a majority of voters in a majority of the states say yes. In a country where indigenous peoples constitute 3% of the population, this will require something special from the 97% as it will from the 3%.

Australia’s mutual recognition project is susceptible to controversy and partisanship as a consequence of the very polarisation that we speak of now, that convulses the wider culture.

Representatives of Australia's indigenous communities met at a Constitutional Convention in 2017 and published an invitation from the 3% to the 97%, called the Uluru Statement from the Heart. It said:

We, gathered at the 2017 National Constitutional Convention, coming from all points of the southern sky, make this statement from the heart:

Our Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the first sovereign Nations of the Australian continent and its adjacent islands, and possessed it under our own laws and customs. This our ancestors did, according to the reckoning of our culture, from the Creation, according to the common law from 'time immemorial', and according to science more than 60,000 years ago.

This sovereignty is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or 'mother nature', and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with our ancestors. This link is the basis of the ownership of the soil, or better, of sovereignty. It has never been ceded or extinguished, and co-exists with the sovereignty of the Crown.

How could it be otherwise? That peoples possessed a land for sixty millennia and this sacred link disappears from world history in merely the last two hundred years?

With substantive constitutional change and structural reform, we believe this ancient sovereignty can shine through as a fuller expression of Australia's nationhood.

Proportionally, we are the most incarcerated people on the planet. We are not an innately criminal people. Our children are alienated from their families at unprecedented rates. This cannot be because we have no love for them. And our youth languish in detention in obscene numbers. They should be our hope for the future.

These dimensions of our crisis tell plainly the structural nature of our problem. *This is the torment of our powerlessness.*

We seek constitutional reforms to empower our people and take a *rightful place* in our own country. When we have power over our destiny our children will flourish. They will walk in two worlds and their culture will be a gift to their country.

We call for the establishment of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution.

Makarrata is the culmination of our agenda: *the coming together after a struggle*. It captures our aspirations for a fair and truthful relationship with the people of Australia and a better future for our children based on justice and self-determination.

We seek a Makarrata Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations and truth-telling about our history.

In 1967 we were counted, in 2017 we seek to be heard. We leave base camp and start our trek across this vast country. We invite you to walk with us in a movement of the Australian people for a better future.

The project to recognise Australia's original peoples could not avoid the question as to what is Australia and who are the Australian people. This question the nation has never really answered. And yet even as the 97% might recognise the indigenous 3%, who are the 97% and who are the Australian people?

Mutual recognition underpins an idea first put forward by Damien Freeman and Julian Leaser in 2015: that the people of Australia may adopt a Declaration which, like the American Declaration of Independence, might set out some ideas about our past and our future, around which Australians could unite.

My poor articulation here should be taken as traversing the subject matter of a potential declaration, rather than its substantive poetry.

The text begins:

WHEREAS THREE STORIES MAKE AUSTRALIA: the *Ancient Indigenous Heritage* which is its foundation, the *British Institutions* built upon it, and the adorning *Gift of Multicultural Migration*:

It recites part of the Uluru Statement in dealing with Indigenous heritage, which I will not repeat here:

And whereas Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander tribes were the First Nations of the Australian continent and its islands, possessed under ancient laws and customs,

according to the reckoning of culture, from the Creation, according to the common law, from time immemorial, and according to science for more than 65 millennia. This is a spiritual notion: the ancestral tie between the land, or mother nature, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who were born therefrom, remain attached thereto, and must one day return thither to be united with their ancestors. We recognise and honour the First Nations who discovered Australia as their sovereign possession, the oldest continuing civilisation in the world.

It then deals with the country's British Heritage:

And whereas those who sailed the First Fleet landing at Sydney Cove carried upon their shoulders the common law of England, when the sovereignty of the British Crown was proclaimed. The rule of law, parliamentary government and the Australian English language have their provenance in Britain. From eyes on board ship, this was a settlement, and from eyes on shore, an invasion. We recognise the eve of the 25th and the dawn of the 26th January 1788 as a profound time for all of us, when Ancient Australia became the New Australia. We recognise and honour the Britons and Irish – convict and free – who founded our institutional heritage, making our Commonwealth from 1901, a great democracy of the globe.

And the country's migrant heritage as follows:

And whereas peoples the earth over brought their multitude of cultural gifts to Australia. That we celebrate diversity in unity makes us a beacon unto the world. We recognise and honour our New Australians. When we renounced the White Australia policy, we made a better Commonwealth. We show that people with different roots can live together, that we can learn to read the image-bank of others, that we can look across the frontiers of our differences without prejudice or illusion.

It urges mutual recognition in the following terms:

NOW THEREFORE, with earnest and open hearts and strong desire to fill the lacuna, after more than two centuries, we make this *Declaration of Australia and the Australian People*, to see our reflections in each other, and recognise one and all:

And seeks to deal with the country's troubled colonial history as follows:

OUR HISTORY IS REplete with shame and pride, failure and achievement, fear and love, cruelty and kindness, conflict and comity, mistake and brilliance, folly and glory. We will not shy from its truth. Our storylines entwine further each generation. We will ever strive to leave our country better for our children.

It commits to Indigenous peoples in the following terms:

WE WILL HONOUR the Uluru Statement from the Heart and make good upon it. Whilst English is the shared language of our Commonwealth, mother tongues name the country and sing its song-lines – and we do not want for them to pass from this land. They are part of the cultural and natural wonder of our country that is the campfire of our national soul, and the pledge of care and custody we owe our ancestral dead and unborn descendants.

And then sets out some fundamental values that mark us as Australians:

AFTER THE BATTLES of our frontier wars fell silent, diggers from the First Nations joined their Settler and New Australian comrades in the crucibles of Gallipoli and Kokoda, and there distilled the essence of our values:

- That our mateship is and will always be our enduring bond.
- That freedom and the fair go are our abiding ethic.
- That our virtues of equality and irreverence give us courage to have a go.
- That we know we can and always will count on each other.

Three stories make us one: Australians.