

Interview by NIALL McILROY with Dr Bill Day - author, anthropologist and activist. Perth, May 2007.

NM: Tell me about 'Bunji' and about what you've been doing most recently.

BD: Well, it's the story of a young Perth guy, I was 29, and I'd never had much contact with Aboriginal people, I didn't even know they spoke a different language. I hitch-hiked up the coast to the north west of WA first, and then onto Darwin. I got a political consciousness by working on the wharves there. But I helped get Charles Court elected because I used to sit next to Barry Court and used to give out his pamphlet through the letter boxes, I come from a conservative sort of family. The wharfies led the fight for Aboriginal rights, just simple things like voting rights, camping rights, and citizenship rights and so I learnt a lot about the history and was, sort of, politicized a bit. Then I was introduced to some of the traditional owners of Darwin, as Aboriginal people called themselves and was shocked that they were living pretty much as I imagined people were 100 years before. Nothing had changed, as you said, they lived in little humpies and not just them but the various stockmen that came into town had no facilities whatsoever and were living in leaking sheds. So we just thought we'd try and do something about it, ask them what they'd like to do, would you like to, because the Gurindjis had started their campaign in the 1960s but it was a bit far away for the media to cover. So it was something in town that was sure to get media attention, because television was just starting in the Northern Territory, so we did some dramatic protests and the people got right behind that.

NM: So that was with the native owners of Darwin?

BD: Yeah, and their supporters. The Gurindjis dropped in and said hi, we were closely connected with them but this was something that was a bit new in those days it was even before the embassy – Aboriginals in an urban environment. People had this image – they're out there in the outback we wanted to show that they were still in an urban environment as well so we raised up a flag and claimed back Darwin. I get quite a bit of criticism because I say 'we', 'we' did that, because I'm not Aboriginal.

NM: Who does the criticism come from?

BD: White people actually. It hasn't happened for years. Aboriginal people don't criticize me [for saying that]. They are very accepting people.

NM: What year would you say that was, Bill?

BD: This is in 1971, 1972, and then Labor came into power – there was a little window of opportunity there. Then various things happened, cyclone in Darwin, and so on. So as a result we'd changed the map of Darwin because today you'll find areas that belong to Aboriginal people right in the city of Darwin. The idealism of that time somehow got a bit lost when money came into it.

Comment by Niall Mcilroy:

During his time in Darwin and the Pilbara, he has seen first-hand evidence of Aboriginal communities resisting attempts to assimilate them into the rest of society. Day first travelled to Darwin in the early 1970s. He was struck by the squalid conditions that Indigenous people lived in and he was appalled at the lack of respect afforded to them by the rest of the community. This inequality inspired him to help the Indigenous community make heard the grievances it had against the discrimination it suffered. Day publicized these efforts in a regular newsletter called 'Bunji' which was sent to subscribers throughout Australia. Years later, he knitted these accounts into a narrative which laid bare the struggles of a proud people tired of being downtrodden and repressed.

Whilst assimilation is not the answer Day acknowledges that many of the stolen generation that ended up at places like Sister Kate's went on to have successful careers. But this has often come at a price.

"Part of their healing has always been to go back and discover where they came from and confronting the sadness of not knowing their mother as she has probably died by now," Day said.

These members of the Stolen Generation that do go looking for their roots are invariably welcomed with open arms. "They are always accepted. I know one man who was working up north. He didn't even know where he came from but some Aboriginal people said, "I know who you are, I know who your mother is" and he was reintroduced to his family just like that," Day revealed.

Day believes that much of the fighting on trains, drinking, and glue sniffing is an attempt by Aboriginals, particularly the young, to distinguish themselves as non-white, as resisting, as not belonging. He thinks that many only partake in anti-social behavior because they are told not to. In effect, to behave is to conform. "It is another form of resistance. They are saying we're Aboriginal, you can get stuffed," Day said.

He contends that society must stop expecting Aboriginals to live white lives. He said that the notion of family has an all pervading influence on Aboriginal life. Whilst acknowledging that Aboriginals are capable of 'nine to five' type jobs, Day has heard of many cases where the pressure to work rigid hours, spending time away from loved ones has decimated a family and caused a descent back into poverty.

However Day's views do differ from those of General Sanderson when it comes to building a more stable future for Australia's Aboriginal people. Day says that Australia must apologize to its Aboriginal citizens for crimes committed against them in the past. He believes any attempts to help Aboriginal people will appear insincere and thus be inadequate unless they are based on an acknowledgement of the injustices Aboriginal people have suffered.

This apology must come from the highest level – from the Prime Minister. The chances of the word 'sorry' being uttered by the incumbent are remote, one of Mr Howard's legacies is his reluctance to reconcile directly with the Indigenous population.

Governments, apologetic or not, can spend as much money as they like in trying to make the lives of Indigenous people better but Day said the citizens of Australia can play their own part in reaching out to the Aboriginal community. "If everybody could have an Aboriginal friend that would certainly help," he said.