

## **Victims—Is it really just black and white?**

**Anthony Dillon (with Dr Phil Harker)**

*The victim status is a powerful one. The victim is always morally right, neither responsible nor accountable, and forever entitled to sympathy. (Zur, 2005)*

*The common perception in Australia is that all Aboriginal poverty can be explained in terms of white racism or past or present racial discrimination. (Pollard, 1988)*

I want to talk about some of the beliefs, attitudes and assumptions that support the systems, philosophies and government programs that—despite stated good intentions to the contrary—are actually contributing to what we observe as the problems facing many Indigenous people today. Before commencing this discussion, I would like to establish the premise that it is not necessary that one personally spend lengthy periods living in remote communities in order to be made aware of the poverty of body, mind and spirit that many of these people endure. My experience in dealing with many Indigenous people in a range of settings and the wide coverage the conditions of these communities are given in the media leave me in no doubt regarding the ‘reality’ of the prevailing situation.

I should note upfront, that some people may hold the comforting view that because I am Indigenous I am therefore more likely to possess some special knowledge, skills, or insight that enables me to better understand the problems faced by Indigenous people. This is not true. Whilst I believe that I do have some valuable insights to share with you (of which you the reader will be the judge) I do not believe that I have these insights because I am Indigenous—and this, I might add, gives a clue to one of the dangerous attitudes and beliefs I will discuss that are retarding the progress of Indigenous development. On the contrary; what I have to say has arisen out of the simple fact that I am a human being who has thought long and hard about the problems Indigenous people face, and the potential solutions. If my Indigenous heritage has played any part at all in what I have to say it has simply been in the extra motivation it has given me to understand these problems, and to do so in the light of the best thinking that I can gain access to—no matter what its source or history.

That Indigenous people are not sharing in the same standard of living as the general population in this country is obvious. One only has to be open to the wide spectrum of media information to realise that Indigenous people rate poorly on most social indicators of prosperity and quality of life. It is all too easy to cast this dilemma (or maybe it is more appropriately called a national disgrace) as a racial problem, and indeed that seems to be the prevailing framework for understanding ‘why’ this situation is allowed to continue. However, one should realise that the constant presentation of the ‘Indigenous problem’ in a racial framework—although viewed by some as a comforting relief from any sense of personal responsibility for change—does not provide an explanation of ‘why’ the situation has been allowed to continue over such a long period, or why Indigenous people feel so disempowered.

When seen as a ‘racial problem,’ the root cause of the conditions is merely rationalised as a ‘clash of cultures’ with one race seen as the ‘victim’ and the other as the ‘victimizer’ (more about this shortly). The ‘victim’ race is often presented in Indigenous circles as the only valid group that can ‘really understand’ what the problem is—but being so devoid of ‘real power’ are powerless to do anything about it. The ‘victimizer’ race are more or less presented as the ones who cannot possibly understand because they are ‘not Indigenous’—but are the ones with all the ‘real power’ and are simply unwilling to relinquish that power or use it to the betterment of the Indigenous people. But is the problem really that simple? Is it really just black and white? I don’t think so. Sure, the players are either black or white, but racial explanations are not as helpful at revealing the real ‘mindset problems’ that go well beyond mere racial differences.

Indeed, the idea of black or white is increasingly becoming more debatable, as the significant amount of intermixing between members of this nation’s first people with the descendents of the Europeans has resulted in people who can claim both Indigenous and non-Indigenous heritage—sometimes placing the emphasis where it gives the greatest personal advantage at the time. Interestingly though, many with mixed genetic heritage choose to go exclusively with the status of being Indigenous. And regarding genetic heritage, I am myself part Indigenous and part non-Indigenous, however I am one of those people who is content to simply accept both without the need to identify exclusively with either; in fact, given the history of crazy nationalism and the ‘wars’ that have been waged under this form of insanity I now prefer to view myself simply as a ‘human being’! And if that expression ‘part Indigenous’ upsets some readers, it is not intended to do so. But it seems pointless to get bogged down in such a trivial matter of whether it is politically correct to use the term ‘part-Indigenous’ as it merely diverts one’s attention from the more significant issues—those I plan to discuss in this paper.

### *Does the past determine our future?*

Let me reveal a vital premise to what I am about to say by asking some pertinent questions. Did the invasion by the Europeans disrupt what was generally a peaceful, harmonious, and healthy way of life for the Indigenous people who lived here; a way of life that was more peaceful and healthy than that now experienced by those Indigenous people who have somehow adapted to the realities of today’s world? Was that ‘way of life’ sustainable in the face of a world that was in a state of global change and development (not necessarily for the better, and not kind in manner, but largely inevitable and unstoppable)? Well, it appears the jury seems to be still ‘out’ on this one. Did the Europeans kill thousands of innocent Indigenous people? Yes. Did they wrongfully take Indigenous babies and children from their mothers? Yes. There can be no doubt that these historical facts changed the direction and development of Indigenous society forever. Is the white man responsible for the breakdown of the pre-colonial lifestyle of Indigenous people? Absolutely, yes.

Having accepted these ‘facts of history’, there is a far more important question to ask. Once history headed in the direction it took—for whatever reasons it did, and whoever was originally responsible for the path it took—whose responsibility was it for getting Indigenous people back on track? Before answering that question, let me

quote from a book titled *Man up! Nobody is coming to save us*. It is a book about race relations between blacks and whites in America.

When you clasp your hands together tonight, may I ask that you ask the Lord to protect us from us? No one is doing a better job killing Black men than Black men. Willingly, we eat the worst food. Happily we consume some of the most potent liquor.... Both Black men and boys are committed to the most dangerous legal behaviors and for that we are dying. The only white sheets involved in this assault on the Black community are the ones used by the coroner to cover our decisions to forgo common sense.... Please say no to deadly behaviors and yes to life. (Perry, 2005, p. 84)

And this was written by a black American! The situation can be compared to what we find here in Australia. My point is that while Indigenous people are not responsible for what happened to them in the past, they do have a choice today in how they as individuals respond to the hand that life has dealt them. It is the Indigenous people (and sometimes the opinion 'leaders' themselves who make the decisions for other Indigenous people, supposedly as their 'voice') who are killing (both metaphorically and literally) Indigenous people in far greater numbers than are killed by 'the white oppressors'. And if they are not killing them, they are, it would seem (even whilst stating otherwise) at least working from an agenda that would keep the majority of Indigenous people trapped in poverty and dependence—i.e., dependent upon 'their' Indigenous leadership. To this end, Pollard (1988, p.10) aptly notes:

The interest of the political parties in maintaining an Aboriginal problem is compounded by the existence of a small group of Aboriginal activists whose vocation is confrontation, who generally derive their own income from governmental sources, either directly or indirectly and who must have poor Aborigines to point to in order to have a *raison d'être* themselves.

The assertion that these leaders are more concerned for their own well-being than that of others has never been more clearly demonstrated than with the recently publicised interventions to address child abuse and neglect in some Indigenous communities in the Northern Territory. Rather than focus on the immediate needs of the children, some Indigenous leaders were protesting their concerns about 'paternalism' and their need to be consulted before action could be taken. Where was their 'concern' before the Government action was taken? If they were genuinely respected Indigenous leaders, what had stopped them taking the initiative before the Government authorities took it from them? When children are being abused and neglected, swift intervention is needed, not community consultation with Indigenous leaders who have already failed in their duties of leadership. That 'small group' referred to by Pollard in the above quote need to do some serious soul searching regarding their real motives—is it the motivation of genuine concern for their Indigenous brothers and sisters, or just concern for their own 'place' in the larger status quo. Perhaps they need to move on and get a real job, a real job being more than just signing cheques for the land council.

I think it is fine to look at the past and see what we can learn so as we do not repeat the same mistakes—but let's not dwell on the past. Dwelling on the past does not help anyone. Let's focus on the present, for if we do so, the future will take care of itself.

## *Power of the present*

Where does blame finish, and responsibility begin? The answer to that question contains within it the seeds of individual self-determination.<sup>1</sup> Self-determination is simply the process whereby individuals take responsibility for their own well-being—and that must start with their own psychological well-being; and this, in turn, will never happen within a ‘mindset’ of eternal victimhood. It does not mean that as individuals we need to do everything ourselves, but it does mean taking initiative. When we take initiative and accept responsibility for our lives, we will then be in a position to join with the Psalmist and say: ‘This is the day that the Lord has made, I will rejoice and be glad in it.’ Surely the good Lord would not give such an instruction if He did not equip us to fulfil it. Unfortunately, this is not the message that many Indigenous people are hearing from the Indigenous leaders, despite repeated claims that Indigenous people are a spiritual people.

Almost all Indigenous people have a spiritual foundation for their understanding of life (and, of course, I don’t equate the spiritual with the religious, but something much deeper in substance than mere outward ‘form’); and it may be that the greatest ‘robbery’ of the Indigenous people has been the robbery done to their minds with the removal of the sense of ‘oneness’ of all life. When this oneness of all life was replaced with thoughts of individualistic and competitive survival perhaps it was inevitable that the Indigenous ‘mindset’ would degenerate into one of continuing ‘victimhood’—‘they have it and we don’t have it’. And perhaps it was inevitable that this victim status would eventually become the main tool to manipulate, through guilt, the majority power group into the ‘welfare compensation package’. This did indeed work—but it became a two edged sword that cut back into the mind of the victims increasing and further necessitating their inner sense of victimhood at the hands of the majority group.

We are not ‘victims’ of our unchosen world! We are victims of the interpretation we give to that world—and it must be long past due time to change that interpretation. All perception is an interpretation. We do not see the world as ‘it is’ but rather as ‘we are’—and we can do something directly about that. But this can only happen if we give up the (albeit attractive and rather useful) role of ‘passive victim’ and take on the role of ‘active determination’ to do something about those things that are within our direct control. Self-respect does not come from how we are treated, but from how we react to how we are treated—and this starts with us. I would even go so far as to say that, rather than constantly pleading for an empty ‘sorry’ from the children’s children of the original invaders, we could take the initiative and extend the hand of forgiveness in order to bury forever the past and build a new foundation on the ‘high moral ground’. A rather shocking idea I know, but one that would change forever the rules of engagement. This would take years, but the time will pass whatever view we take. The essential question is ‘do we wish to address the present, or only ever see the present in terms of the past’?

All too often I hear Indigenous people say that they are a very spiritual people, but what does this mean? Is it only about the Indigenous connection with the land, or does it include the connection between all people who, without any choice in the matter, simply find themselves placed upon the earth; leading separate and often fear-driven lives and trying to do the best they can. Indeed, I see Indigenous people (and sad to

say, most prominently Indigenous leaders) promoting the message that Indigenous people are victims of history and white government. And this message is often cloaked in a superficial spiritual sounding rhetoric (e.g., ‘We have been disposed from the land—our mother earth and our spirits are grieving.’). As I have said before elsewhere, *we are never victims of our past, but rather, victims of our view of the past and consequently the response we make to the present in terms of that view*. Further, if there is a spiritual connection with the land (and, of necessity, all other fellow human beings, none of whom chose their heritage), that leads to a universal oneness, and if that connection is truly spiritual (that is, all emanating from the same great source of all life), then I don’t believe the connectedness can ever be broken by the failing actions of human beings who, having lost this connection, have acted in the callousness that arises from the fear driven mind. To be spiritual is to recognise the oneness of all of life, and to forgive those who, thinking they were separate and special, acted in the blindness of their fear-driven lives by trampling upon others. It seems to me that freedom from fear and its associated fear-driven behaviour, can only ever come where there is freedom from any sense of ‘specialness’ and ‘separation’. Separate interests vs shared interests? This is the questions facing all people today.

I am not denying that Indigenous people don’t have a *right* to claim the victim status (that is not the question), but what I am claiming, is that we (and I say ‘we’ because this includes me) are not victims of the non-Indigenous people. *Indigenous people are the victims of their own self-defeating beliefs; and those beliefs have too often been (wittingly or unwittingly) promoted and reinforced by Indigenous leaders for their own ends of ‘power and control’.*

### *Choosing the victim status*

So why is being a victim so appealing? According to the black American author McWhorter (2000), being a victim feels good. That’s right, it feels good. Take a moment to digest that claim. He further adds that being a victim is an expression of insecurity which compensates for inner self-doubt by calling attention to the faults of others. How does this self-doubt arise? Simple. In the case of Aboriginal people, when self-appointed Indigenous leaders constantly make decisions on their behalf, it should come as no surprise that self-reliance is soon eroded and replaced with dependence. Add to the equation a readily available welfare ‘system’ and you have the perfect environment for self-doubt and reliance on others. In summary, being the victim pays dividends—and those dividends can be very attractive when the alternatives are ‘harder’ or not easily obtainable. It is only natural that people will take ‘the path of least difficulty’—even in the face of the fact that, in the long term, such a path is very difficult indeed! According to Dineen (1996, p. 21):

There are many incentives for acquiring, and even for seeking, victim status and, in the short term, there are some pay-offs. The tragedies, the failures, the hardships, the health problems and the disappointments of life become explained, relieving people of at least three of life’s natural burdens: dealing with complexity, facing things beyond their control, and accepting personal responsibility for decisions and actions. .... ‘Victim’ stories flow into conversations, becoming excuses for the embarrassments, regrets, limitations or failures of people’s lives.

I want to mention two other reasons why Indigenous leaders want their ‘followers’ to see themselves as the victims of white Australians. Firstly, if you are a victim, then you need a rescuer. And there are no prizes for guessing who the rescuers are for Indigenous people. According to Peterson (2003), ‘...it is imperative for these leaders to continue creating problems even when none exist. If they don’t they’re out of business’ (p. ix). Secondly, if you see yourself as a victim of another, you will hate that other person. And if you can get a person to hate someone, you can control this person. Again, Peterson, who is a black American, at one time hated white Americans, blaming them for all his problems and reveals that ‘I became a free man for the first time in my life by giving up hatred. If other blacks could understand this, they’d be free, too’ (p. xii). I wish that Indigenous Australians could understand this also—the enemy is not ‘out there’ but in their midst. The source of the problem is much closer to home than what most Indigenous people realise—and so is the solution!

### *Where to from here?*

The victim/oppressor relationship can only exist when an individual (or group) sees another individual (or group) as being fundamentally different. The separatist view (that is, the belief that Indigenous people are very different from non-Indigenous people and can therefore, only be understood and helped by other Indigenous people) held by many Indigenous people is what fuels the victim cycle between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Abandon these false beliefs and you break the cycle. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people need to begin seeing each other as equals with ‘shared interests’, and not as ‘us and them.’ To do so, would be to embrace the spiritual concept of life that traditional Indigenous Australians embraced.

Finally, there is another issue that needs to be addressed if we are to see Indigenous people advance and partake in a lifestyle comparable to the general population. Indigenous people often claim that they embrace an ‘holistic’ view of life. Use of this term needs to be closely examined. Like the claims of spirituality, it sounds nice, but does not seem to benefit anyone in practice. The reason being, is that the use of the word ‘holistic,’ like ‘spirituality’ is empty, and is only ever used to promote the myth of separatism. How can a person (whether they be Indigenous or non-Indigenous), claim to have an holistic view of life (that is, they are able to view the ‘big picture’ and know what it means to be fully human) when they are only ever overly focussed on their Indigenous status, which they believe explains nearly everything they do in life? To divide Australia on the basis of Indigenous status benefits nobody. In fact it only causes harm. Though often misunderstood and misused by the very religions that preserved the ‘words’ an old book of mystical wisdom stated, ‘... a house divided against itself, shall not stand.’ (Matthew 12: 25). Indigenous status is only one aspect of a person’s life, and it is by no means the most important aspect. This is a self-evident truth to anyone who embraces an holistic view of life. They see people as ‘whole’ people, and not just in terms of one or a few attributes.

I am not suggesting Indigenous people give up or even compromise their cultural heritage. I am proud of my Indigenous heritage, but I also recognise that we live in the 21st Century. Let’s be practical and recognise that current methods, policies, and interventions are not working. The time has come to closely examine how we deal

with Indigenous affairs if we are to see an improvement in the lives of Indigenous people. It will mean making decisions that will be unpopular with many. While I am saddened by what has happened in the past and continue to happen in the present, I am 'gladdened' by what could be the future. Unfortunately, there are too many who are 'sickened to death' because they see no way to escape the grip of the past. Maybe it is time to promote a 'new way of seeing' that can bring about renewed psychological and spiritual health that will become a solid foundation for physical and social health.

I welcome any feedback—and should you strongly disagree, I only ask that you first respect my 'right to be wrong' before offering me your views for only in that way you will present them in a fashion that will make it easier for me to learn from them. Should you agree, let me know and we can support each other in building a new future.

### *Note*

1. For a more complete explanation of what is meant by 'individual self-determination', refer to my paper on 'Separatism', available [here](#).

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### *About the Authors*

**Anthony Dillon** is an educator having qualifications in Mathematics, Education, and Psychology. He has been involved in a regular 'dialogue' regarding 'psychological issues' with his long-time family and academic friend Dr Phil Harker for more than 20 years. It was through this contact that he became deeply interested in the psychological and social problems facing not only Indigenous people but the wider community in general.

**Dr Phil Harker** is a registered Psychologist who has spent the last thirty years lecturing and practising in the fields of organizational, clinical, and educational psychology, both as an academic at the University of Queensland, Queensland University of Technology, and Griffith University and as a consultant and clinician. He has a practice in clinical psychology and a personal counselling service, with over two thousand clients from private, business, educational, and family settings. Phil presented as a regular weekly guest psychologist with compere Richard Fidler—on ABC Radio in Queensland Australia.