The struggle for identity

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The Aboriginal communities of northern Victoria are battling for their identity in the long shadow of brutality and neglect, says Neville Atkinson.

We have occupied this region since time immemorial. Our occupation of this land is something that is central to our being and inseparable from the hardship that continues to be endured by the indigenous people of the Goulburn Valley.

I am not trying to paint Aboriginal people as victims, but if we ignore our history then we are doomed to repeat it. Our history since European settlement has shaped our present generations and it will shape the next.

From our written history and from our oral tradition, we have a rich knowledge of our past. We know that the Europeans entered the Yorta Yorta nations in the 1840s and overtook the country of the Kalithavan, Walithica, Bangarang, Yalapa Yalapa, Ulupna, Kwat Kwat and Noorialum Nga Roong peoples.

Until then, we had a rich countryside and a prosperous and sustainable lifestyle and culture. We had effective and enduring methods of managing those assets available to us, of sharing our wealth between us and preparing our future generations for the joys and responsibilities that lay before them. We had an elaborate and well-tested method of maintaining law and resolving disputes.

We had profound and worthy traditions of respecting and sharing the knowledge and learnings of our predecessors, and for respecting the wisdom that comes with age, and holding as sacred our
responsibilities to family and the community.

We were a successful and sustainable nation. It is ironic that mainstream society is increasingly looking to Aboriginal traditions for recreation, art and spirituality.

Despite the advanced nature of our community, the prevailing conventions of the time were discarded by the so-called frontiersmen from Europe. Our common law right of existing ownership under European law was wiped out by the falsehood of terra nullius until Mabo came along 150 years later, and 150 years too late. The disease and lawlessness that the European settlers brought with them killed about 90 per cent of our people.

We didn't take any of this lying down. Our history records our attempts to redress the wrongs that had been imposed upon us. However, we were outgunned - literally - and we had no defences against the imposing force of the occupying government.

Within 50 or so years of meeting the Europeans, the majority of our surviving ancestors were rounded up and installed in the Cummeragunja Aboriginal reserve. We were deprived of our independence, and plundered of the wealth that the Earth had shared with us for centuries. In the modern context, Cummeragunja would be compared with the Woomera detention centre. But in our day there were no busloads of protesters to plead our case.

After 50 short years, we had been left with less than one-tenth of 1 per cent of our traditional lands. We had lost the majority of our people and we were confined to a gulag under European supervision.

When the conditions became intolerable at Cummeragunja, many Aboriginal people walked out, from about 1939, and began living in camps on the Goulburn River. They had returned to their traditional lands, this time as fringe dwellers on the settlements that had assumed ownership of the country. The river had a tendency to flood and so our people moved up to the areas surrounding the rubbish dump in Daish's Paddock.

Life in Daish's Paddock generally meant living in humpies constructed out of flattened kero tins, and it meant carting water from the river. It meant illness and it meant hot days and many cold nights. Despite this, our community was able to continue our cultural heritage to some extent. These camps were poor, but they were orderly and organised.

The camps caused consternation to the state government and local authorities at the time. But rather than concerns about our welfare, the real concern was the impending royal visit by the young Queen Elizabeth in 1954. Many Aboriginal families were moved onto the land now occupied by the Rumbalara Co-op. Those who remained were surrounded by a temporary fence that was covered by hessian, so that the regal eyes were spared the sight of unseemly dispossession. Out of sight and out of mind - at least until the hessian frayed.

From the late 1950s, the first concrete homes were established for Aboriginal people on the land now occupied by the Rumbalara Co-op. These were rudimentary homes without sewerage or cooking facilities; more like stables.
Throughout the 1970s, our people continued to converge in the Shepparton area, returning to the land that had nurtured and protected them for many years before. Aboriginal people began developing a capacity for more effective and organised advocacy and this gradually led to the formation of the Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative in 1980. The co-op has since become the major Aboriginal service provider in the region, co-ordinating public housing, medical services, a birthing service and a tremendous range of health and community services for Aboriginal people.

I raise these issues not for the purpose of complaint but because it is important for us to remember just how far we have to go to recapture a standard of living for our community anywhere near the one we used to enjoy as of right.

Five years into the 21st century, the Aboriginal community in Shepparton experiences unemployment that a recent Ganbina report estimated to be as high as 77 per cent. This is when the local mainstream community has unemployment rates as low as 6 per cent. School retention rates for our young people are as low as 26 per cent when the remainder of the Goulburn Valley community operates at more than 70 per cent. Our share of the documented wealth of the community is less than two-tenths of 1 per cent of the total, even though we make up about 10 per cent of the community.

The Aboriginal people of the Goulburn Valley share the same economic disadvantage of Aboriginal communities in northern Australia - the same shortened lives, appalling levels of diabetes and heart disease, blood pressure and renal failure. However, ours is a silent scream drowned out by political indifference and regional prosperity. This situation has not occurred because we have invited it, nor because we have sat on our hands and done nothing.

The entire political process is based on the reality that Aboriginal people must wait - even though there is no orderly process for advancing in the queue. There is no doubt in my mind that this is the product of institutionalised racism.

I don't think this is a form of malicious or deliberate racism. I think politicians, bureaucrats and business people have simply lost the ability to be surprised by the extent of Aboriginal disadvantage. Our mainstream community's leaders have come to accept that Aboriginal disadvantage is, of itself, acceptable. They have accepted that our voice and our concerns must be heard at a discount to the voices and concerns of other Australians. Sadly, we are regarded as a second-class people consigned to second-class lives.

All around us we see hugely successful models of community development and growth funded by the richness of Aboriginal ideas, partnerships and participation. The Rumbalara Football and Netball Club is a stunning example of community development that is quoted as an example all round Australia.

There is ASHE - the Academy of Sports Health Education established in partnership with the University of Melbourne. We have the Koori Leadership Program and the Koori Resource and Information Centre. The Rumbalara Co-Operative has the Koori Birthing Program and programs for community elders, programs for family services and housing as well as a major medical service. These activities are indicative of what we can achieve if we are allowed to drive past the political
roadblocks.

Many critics of Aboriginal people deplore our so-called dependence on welfare, but in fact the reverse is true. I believe governments are addicted to keeping Aboriginal people dependent because they are unable or unwilling to make the leap of faith into a better life and better future for our people. This amounts to abandonment. We are locked into a lifestyle that costs our people their lives and enjoyment and at the same time costs the economy hundreds of millions of dollars. Everybody loses.

We saw the same losing scenario with the Yorta Yorta native title claim when, after 10 years of legal fighting, and millions of dollars in legal expenses, our identity was effectively declared null and void. Much of that came about because we could not share some of the most secret and valuable aspects of our traditional knowledge, handed down faithfully from generation to generation. While every other cultural group is entitled to confidentiality and respect, we were expected to conduct our private business as though we lived in the Big Brother household.

While the Federal Court may have rejected our identity, we know better. We are here on our traditional lands and we are determined that the traditional values of our Aboriginality are entirely compatible with our responsibilities to contribute to, and participate in, the mainstream life and prosperity of Australia.

Does that mean that we have to become more assertive? Yes. Does that mean that we have to shrug off any sense of defeat, and demand the rights and opportunities of Australian citizenship? Of course it does. Does that mean that we have to break the cycle of dispossession for future generations? How can the answer be anything but yes?

Neville Atkinson is chairman of the Rumbalara Aboriginal Co-operative. This is an edited extract from his speech at a recent dinner marking the co-operative’s 25th anniversary.