

The Circumpolar Women's Conference: A View From the South

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Where I live in Brisbane, Australia, is a long way from Whitehorse, and just about as far removed from the Arctic as possible. Here, negative temperatures are unheard of and we have no need for central heating or fur-lined boots. Consequently, it was armed with borrowed parka, gloves and scarf that I set off last November on my first trip to the northern hemisphere. The trip from the sub-tropic to the sub-arctic is quite a journey, both geographically and conceptually, and I arrived in the Yukon feeling very out of place. I was pretty sure I would be the only person at the Circumpolar Women's Conference who had never seen snow before.

So, as another Brisbane woman whom I met in my travels asked me, "What's a girl from Brisbane doing at a Circumpolar Women's Conference?" To most people in the southern hemisphere the Arctic seems remote and empty, and I often find myself having to explain what is meant by "circumpolar". Thus, part of my objective has been to answer this question for people here and, while it may differ in emphasis from how I might address an Australian audience, it is also the question I want to answer for you. I believe that the Arctic and northern women have much to teach the world, and that these lessons are particularly relevant to a country like Australia. What you are doing

is important, and its implications are global.

I want to share with you some of my impressions from an Australian perspective, what I see as some of the main themes of the conference, and what can be learnt from them. These lessons particularly concern the benefits of cooperation—of learning from and helping one another, both inside and across national borders—and the results that are possible when strong bodies work together, acknowledging similarities and celebrating differences. While we can learn as much from the spirit of the Arctic and the Circumpolar Women’s Conference as from any specific achievements, there are also successful models to be studied and mistakes to be learnt from.

As an outside observer and first time visitor to the North, I have been conscious of the unique difficulties of my position. I am cautious about jumping to conclusions or making broad generalisations from such a brief experience (after all, Whitehorse is not the Yukon, and the Yukon is not the Arctic) and realise that much of the significance of certain events has by-passed me in this unfamiliar context. To the extent that experience is simultaneously interpreted in light of previous experience and knowledge and thus mutually constituted, and recognising that what you look for determines in part what you find, my perceptions of the conference are inevitably influenced by my own background and areas of interest. Thus, considering the conference’s understandably strong local focus, my background in political science and current research interest in indigenous women, many of my observations and impressions concern the differences in indigenous/non-indigenous relations in Canada (and elsewhere) and what Australia can learn from them, in addition to lessons more broadly.

An important lesson for Australia and the world to learn from the Circumpolar Women’s Conference concerns the benefits of regional and international cooperation. The theme of “Different Lives, Common Threads” is

relevant more broadly, and can be extended to a global perspective. I was deeply impressed by the conviction of the need to learn from and assist one another, and to work together for mutual benefit. Such cooperation is a two-way learning process, and enriches and broadens the perspectives of those involved. The attitudes of and reactions to the Russian women present particularly demonstrated the importance and strength of these beliefs. While communication can be difficult due to distance, lack of access to technology and language barriers, if the will is there, these problems can be overcome.

It is significant that Arctic peoples have mobilised around and dealt with contemporary issues of concern, such as the environment and indigenous rights. As the pressures of globalisation intensify, the world will increasingly need to work together and seek common solutions to common problems. This is hampered at the moment by our inability to work together across national boundaries. Your work in the Arctic region shows the world the possibilities for cooperation in spite of what are sometimes substantial differences. It illustrates the need for a long-term vision and acknowledgement of common interests beyond narrow national concerns.

It is also significant that this cooperation is occurring both in and outside official bodies at a grassroots, sub-state level, as exemplified by the Circumpolar Women's Conference. Through this, the Arctic is forging its own sense of identity and emerging as a vibrant community. The energy being generated is advancing the region far in the world, and contributes to an emerging notion of global civil society. The world should take notice.

Australia in the world, and indigenous and remote communities within Australia, face the same problems of distance and communications as circumpolar regions do. One of the achievements of the conference and Arctic cooperation has been to overcome a sense of isolation brought on by physical distance. Australia needs to overcome its insularity and actively foster such

linkages if it is to enjoy the benefits of international cooperation and feel part of a global community. In particular, we should pay attention to advances made in indigenous politics in the circumpolar countries and to the benefits to be gained from regional and international indigenous cooperation, studying successful models to be adapted and applied in our own context.

Two specific examples may serve to illustrate this point. Just as Canada and Australia invite obvious comparisons given the similarities in their histories and political systems, the Yukon Territory can be compared to Australia's Northern Territory. Occupying a similar position in the federal system of each country, both are geographically isolated and have similar population compositions, with about a quarter indigenous. A brief comparison of language programs and justice systems in both territories demonstrates strikingly different attitudes to the similar problems that both face, and the potential benefits of learning from overseas experience.

Attending the conference workshop on Indigenous and Minority Languages, I was impressed to hear about the excellent indigenous language programs that are available and the work of the Yukon Native Language Centre. Language programs in the Yukon are premised on the belief that language is a basic right, and plays a fundamental role in the transmission of culture and values from one generation to another. As their web site states, "The Yukon Native Language Centre recognises the intrinsic positive value of First Nations Languages in contemporary education for both native and non-native students at all levels, from pre-school to adult education" (YNLC 1998). In contrast, funding for indigenous language programs in schools in the Northern Territory was cut in 1998. While the former minister responsible for instigating these programs in the 1970s protested the decision, he defends bilingual education only on the grounds that a firm grasp of the mother tongue enables speakers to learn English more easily. He made the comment that "It

might have preserved an aspect of Aboriginal culture but that was not the purpose” (in Bianco 1999: 6). The federal government’s equation of bilingual education with English literacy or ESL programs reflects a deeper notion of equality based on sameness, and a “logic that makes cultural assimilation a condition of ‘educational equity’” (Bianco 1999: 6). While the principle of bilingualism is more widely accepted in Canada, it is no less important in a multicultural society like Australia, and we would do well to study such programs.

Second, I was most impressed to hear of the Yukon government’s new Restorative Justice initiative—concerned with “Bringing justice closer to home . . . a healing process for victims, offenders and communities”, and thought at the time how dramatically this strategy differs from the Northern Territory’s mandatory sentencing laws. As the Restorative Justice initiative is explained, “Our underlying belief is that repairing the harm caused to the victim, community and offender that results from criminal behaviour can be most effectively done through locally developed solutions that resolve conflict in ways that promote healing, reconciliation and respect” (Yukon Justice 1999: 2). This idea has been thrown into stark relief by the February 2000 death in custody of a 15-year-old Aboriginal boy, jailed under the NT’s mandatory sentencing laws for a minor property offence. Mandatory sentencing, designed to combat a perceived wave of property crime, enforces compulsory jail terms for juveniles and violates Australia’s obligations under the International Human Rights convention and the convention on the Rights of the Child. This tragedy sparked national outrage and debate, with the Prime Minister resisting calls for federal intervention to repeal the legislation and formally repudiating the United Nations for taking an interest in the matter. Unlike Restorative Justice, mandatory sentencing does not attempt to address the underlying causes of crime or resolve conflict, and has a disproportionate impact on Aboriginal

communities. There are calls for more just and culturally appropriate approaches, with Tiwi elder Hyacinth Tungutalum quoted as saying “If they continue with this law, we’ll have more suicides We got to keep them out of jail and fix ‘em up our culture way” (Schultz 2000). The Yukon’s Restorative Justice program is a model that could be studied for adaption.

One of the things that I found most striking at the conference was the vastly different assumptions from which relations between indigenous people and governments in Canada are proceeding. Since coming to power in 1996, the conservative government of John Howard has effectively reversed many of the gains previously made in the area of indigenous rights. Compared to the current political climate in Australia, where relations are strained to the point of being virtually non-existent, the situation in Canada is characterised by a relationship of mutual respect. In all my conference sessions I found criticism directed at the government noticeable in its absence. Instead, while fully aware of the difficulties it entails, those involved with indigenous issues assume that governments are willing to negotiate with them and expect cooperation. Governments, on their part, recognise the importance of facilitation. I was highly impressed by the underlying assumptions of political will, and the many exciting initiatives and possibilities for change.

The need for balance and spiritual healing was something that struck me as a recurring theme of the conference. Many participants stressed the importance of healing within First Nations communities, through the rediscovery of traditional culture and identity, and the important role that women play in this process. I was struck by the respect given to the elders, and found the extent to which women emphasised the importance of working with men to solve community problems noticeable from a white Australian background. Several speakers used the metaphor of a bird, which needs two strong wings working together in order to be able to fly. Connected to this is the growing

recognition that traditional culture is not irrelevant in the contemporary world, and can be incorporated in many ways into modern systems and structures. Thus, the validation of women's traditional knowledge was a particularly prominent theme of the conference, and I became more convinced than ever of the benefits of indigenous self-government in allowing indigenous peoples to reclaim their traditional autonomy and determine their own futures.

Aboriginal communities in Australia face similar problems including alcoholism, domestic violence and youth suicide, and it is likewise recognised that the solutions to these problems lie within the communities themselves. However, there is resistance to the idea that the traditional and modern are not necessarily incompatible and, unfortunately, all too often such acknowledgements provide governments with an excuse to shirk their responsibilities and become a case of "blaming the victim". As Lowitja O'Donoghue, one of the highest profile Aboriginal women in Australia and a respected leader, observes, the government's approach has been to "throw money at problems it barely believes can be resolved", while making no real effort to facilitate initiatives from within indigenous communities or to tackle preventable problems in areas such as health, housing and education.

Complementary to this healing within communities, it is necessary to recognise the injustices of the past before we can move forward. There is much talk in this country about "reconciliation" between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians, and how this might be achieved. The importance of acknowledging and dealing with the past as part of the healing process is a particularly important lesson for Australia to learn. For example, parallels can be drawn between Residential School Syndrome in Canada, and the continued suffering of members of the Stolen Generations in Australia. The Prime Minister fails to understand the immense symbolic value of saying "sorry", and his repeated refusal to issue a formal apology has exacerbated the situation

and undermines his professed commitment to reconciliation.

Former (indigenous) Fijian prime minister and “reformed” coup leader, Sitiveni Rabuka, has urged Australians to face the issue of reconciliation and come to terms with their multi-ethnic national identity. Remarkably, he invokes the same imagery of diversity and common threads, commenting that “I think it’s important that we have strong racial characters. When you have a strong fibre and you plait it with another strong fibre, then you have a very strong rope” (O’Callaghan 2000: 4). Having ignored its Pacific neighbours for too long, Australia’s reaction to recent crises demonstrates a lack of understanding of indigenous issues. We cannot preach democracy and human rights to other nations in the region with any credibility until we address the problems at home.

Finally, it is highly significant that this was a *women’s* conference, and that women are making their voices heard in the circumpolar region. I was struck by the general atmosphere of the conference and believe this can be attributed, at least in part, to the fact that it was an event for and by women. The tremendous enthusiasm of all present was contagious and generated an enormous energy. The spirit of goodwill was palpable, creating a comfortable, friendly environment in which I was immediately made to feel at home. Women felt safe to share their stories and experiences in such a supportive and inclusive environment, and I was struck by the eagerness to contribute and willingness to listen. They raised issues and expressed concerns that might have gone unspoken in a different context, but that are important to the well-being of all.

We can learn from the conference the benefits of sharing and listening, and the importance of women’s forums in fostering an environment that is conducive to producing those advantages. There are many benefits of women’s cooperation, and much strength to be gained and achievements made

by working together. The women's movement has long grappled with issues of difference within its ranks and the Circumpolar Women's Conference, with its accommodation of diversity, sends an important message. I was struck by the holistic view that this generated. The conference acknowledged and valued women's various roles and talents, and the contributions they make in all spheres. This should be an inspiration to women everywhere.

My lasting impression of the Circumpolar Women's Conference is overwhelmingly positive. The theme, "Different Lives, Common Threads"—strength in unity while celebrating diversity—was a healthy tension that really worked, and created a holistic perspective wherein lay much of the conference's broad appeal. I felt it was highly successful in bringing together a diverse range of women and bridging non/indigenous, non/academic, non/government divides. The conference was an amazing experience. I feel privileged to have been there and value the opportunity to have met so many multi-talented women. The Arctic and Northern women have much to teach the world, and it is important that the world hears your message. It is vital for us all that you maintain the momentum generated there.

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