

Watershed

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There were two things wrong with last Wednesday's watershed "Sorry" Day. The first was that Brendon Nelson was asked to speak at all. The second was a stubborn residue of condescension which remains to be thought through.

1. Nelson was put in an impossible situation, forced to speak in contradictory directions at once. His very inclusion was a symptom of the only disturbing thing about the otherwise excellent Rudd. Kevin Rudd dreams of absolute inclusion, of having the entire country in unanimous agreement on this one issue. This is both naive and narcissistic. It's not possible to get 20 million people to agree on any one thing, and there will always be those who cannot catch up with a history which is moving too fast for them (such as Wilson Tuckey). Brendon Nelson squirmed in his chair when Rudd made his magnanimous gesture of including him on the panel of his new committee. His squirm was a squirm of skepticism, because at that point he knew that Kevin Rudd was in what the good old existentialists used to call bad faith. Rudd was in part doing the right thing, but he was of course also engaged in a power-play. But at the same time he was masking this move from himself, because he has blocked self-reflection on this front in advance. Healthy self-confidence verges here on narcissism because it dreams that it can do without opposition, that it can incorporate the other side as part of itself. But the other side can't be incorporated: that's what makes it the other side.

2. The second side to this same coin was manifest in the exclusive concern with *improving* black Australia, with "closing the gap" between white and black health, lifespans, and infant mortality rates. The one and only concern was how the blackfella could be helped to *catch up*. The thought that Kevin Rudd in particular and Australia in general is yet to think is that indigenous Australia has anything to offer the empire's errant offspring, wandering lost in the crisis of the global desert. The narcissism of non-Indigenous Australia is that the best thing that can happen to Aboriginal Australians is that they become *the same* as rest of us, and that this is obviously what must happen. This immature assumption is closely connected with the well-know phenomenon of our cultural cringe. This is of course not to deny that the health discrepancies must be redressed on many levels. It is to say that that is not *all* that needs to be redressed.

The cultural cringe was inevitable as Australia grew into long pants on the world stage through the course of the 20th century. The traumas of its infancy in the 19th century now inevitably return to haunt its coming of age in the 21st. Those of us for whom our 21st birthday is a distant memory well know how things that seemed minor at the time can be recognized in retrospect to be huge and decisive turning points, on which there can be no going back. An outpost looked at another way is a research frontier, and a fringe can be a cutting edge if looked at in the right light. Translated to the historical level, Australia is making decisions at this point which may not currently seem to be very important to all of its inhabitants. But those who understand know that we actually need to think about what we now do about as hard as we can think. This shall only make sense in retrospect.

Watershed is a funny word. For many years I'd wrongly assumed that it had something to do with pumping-stations or storage tanks, which made the phrase make half-sense at most. But in Old English, the verb "scheid," (like the more-or-less identical word in Modern German, and also the "cide" in the more-or-less Latin word "decide") means to cut, to divide, or to otherwise distinguish or sort things out. A "waterscheid" is a line which runs through every water-catchment region. The water falling on the terrain drains one way or the other. On one side of a hill, the water drains into the valley on that side of the hill, and on the other, the corresponding valley on the other side. As we reach the top of the hill, the dividing line between these two flows becomes apparent. At some point drops falling on one side of that point flow off in one direction, and on the other side of that point, they flow off in the opposite direction. The long row of these fuzzy points along the crest of the ridge form the line called the "waterscheid," an old word which shed its "i" and its "c" in the sixteenth century to become the modern term *watershed*.

So the "shed" in watershed has more to do with snake skins than with the iconic Aussie out-house of masculinity. The metaphor is not that of reaching an oasis at which we can rest, but of a moment of decision, at point at which things are delicately balanced and could go either way with only the slightest of nudges. This is what chaos theorists have called the butterfly effect. But the point is that not just any old butterfly flapping its wings brings about hurricanes on the other side of the world. The point is that a very small force *in the right place at the right time in the right way* can amplify its influence into a relatively massive change.

Australia is too small a country to do any leading of the world by force or by strength, in an

economic, a military, or a political sense. The most Australia can hope for and the least for which it should aim is to be a kind of model country. Like a model farm, or a model aircraft in a wind-tunnel, models are able to rehearse small-scale solutions to big-scale problems, and demonstrate how these problems can be solved so that these solutions can be scaled up to solve those big-scale problems. Australia has been very good at understanding this in the sporting and artistic arenas. We have produced model sports-people, model musicians, model painters and actors, and of course not a few model models. We are rightly proud of all these achievements. But our culture as whole has a long way to go before people the world over start to see ours as a unique and model country in any way other than those listed above. The realization that the opportunity to make some major progress in this direction is currently dawning in the fields of energy technology, politics and most importantly of all, indigenous affairs. Why this last is so important shall only be understood in the future. But the anxieties of a two-hundred year old sapling in regard to the massive rock of one hundred thousand years in which it has taken root are in the end ill-placed. "Sorry" is a first step in understanding why we soon will arrive at "please" - followed eventually one distant day, if we're lucky, with "thank-you." This is not a romantic image of Aboriginals; it's an honest assessment of non-Indigenous Australia.