ON LEADERSHIP – INSPIRATIONS FROM THE LIFE AND LEGACY OF DR. CHARLES PERKINS[1]

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I grew up in an era that was very much shaped by Charles Perkins. I was part of the first generation of Aboriginal children who finished high school and went straight to university. This access to education that was open to me had not been open to my father's generation – who was a peer of Charles Perkins – and it was through the advocacy of the civil rights movement of the 60s and 70s that the doors that had been closed tightly shut due to racism began to creep open.

So the opportunities I have had in my life are a legacy of the advocacy and leadership of people like Charles Perkins. I remember hearing him speak at so many community meetings and public rallies and for the purpose of this tribute to his life and legacy, I want to concentrate on the vision I heard him speak of and the aspects of his style of leadership because there is much that we can learn from that today.

What I always admired about Charles Perkins was the way in which he had a clear vision. He had a vision of where Aboriginal people ought to be going and he worked towards it his whole life. He worked both at the barricades but he also moved, when the moment called for it, to work within the system. Whether he was marching on the street or negotiating in the back rooms with politicians, he never lost sight of what he believed in. Even when he was working within the system, he never gave away his principles.

This current era in Indigenous affairs is one of quick change, lack of consultation with Aboriginal people and is driven by the ideology of mainstreaming, assimilation, individualism and economic rationalism. In our current climate, a time of change, uncertainty and disempowerment, a vision of where we should be going is essential. It takes strong leadership to do that, and perhaps not since Paul Keating's Redfern Park speech, have we seen a moment at the national level where the vision of where we should be going on issues of reconciliation and Aboriginal social justice has been clearly articulated. For the Aboriginal community, Charles Perkins' vision is one that still offers inspiration today.

> Charles Perkins' vision was one that highlighted the importance of an even playing field – of equal rights and access, freedom from racial discrimination. And he knew that this was not going to be possible unless Aboriginal people were able to steer that process themselves, that is, there needed be self-determination. And he also understood that, underpinning this, there had to be land justice and, in this land justice, he saw the key to economic self-sufficiency. He could inspire people with this vision because it was sensible, practical and resonated with Aboriginal people because it addressed the issues and struggles faced by Indigenous families in their

[1] Charles Perkins Oration 2005 at Sydney University on 27 October 2005.

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everyday lives.

And he could also inspire people with this vision because you knew that he believed it. He had conviction and he had done the hard yards – from the freedom rides, his unwavering pursuit of the recognition and protection of Indigenous rights and working within the system as Australia's leading Aboriginal bureaucrat. And people believed his conviction because – although he sought to negotiate and agitate in order to achieve the vision – he never compromised the vision itself.

I. The Vision

It always struck me that the three key elements of the vision that Charles Perkins worked towards – equality, self-determination and sovereignty and land justice – had the same key elements that have been woven through advocacy and activism by Aboriginal leaders since colonisation.

In particular, I see a strong comparison between his vision and that of William Cooper's. Cooper's activism was driven by his own frustrations at the racist barriers that prevented Aboriginal people participating in Australian society and he was particularly committed to gaining land grants to Aboriginal people. Having worked in the pastoral industry, he could not understand why Aboriginal men – who were fit and knowledgeable in the industry – were prevented from owning the means by which they could be self-sufficient. Cooper, like his peers, advocated for a mix of citizenship rights and equal rights and he fought for land justice. He also understood the need to ensure that Aboriginal people were at the steering wheel of their future.

That the same elements – equal rights, self-determination and land justice – appear in both the vision of Charles Perkins and William Cooper highlights the unchanging nature of that political agenda. It is not surprising that it remains a vision for many Aboriginal people today. This current era of conservatism in Australia has made Aboriginal issues unpopular with the electorate. This has been a social trend picked up by social commentators such as Hugh Mackay and by economists like Michael Pusey. Mark Latham, in his diaries, noted his own observations about the changes in the mood of his electorate towards social issues, including reconciliation and it was telling that his response was to move away from pushing them as part of the Labor platform. They weren't, to use his term, vote winners.

It is times such as these, when vision is lacking, and Paul Keating's speech at Redfern Park is fading into the mists of Australian history, that this vision that has been passed from people like William Cooper to people like Charles Perkins can still provide a lighthouse for us today.

II. Lessons on Leadership

On a practical level, I think it is possible to distil some characteristics from Charles Perkins' leadership style that point to the kind of leadership that is needed in Aboriginal communities today in order to represent our interests.

Charles Perkins was able to create a feeling of a shared identity, a shared vision, a shared agenda. He was able to generate this feeling across the country, uniting Aboriginal people across the north-south divide that has occurred as a result of native title and with the continuing reallocation of resources to remote Aboriginal communities while the rest of the Indigenous population is pushed further and further towards mainstream services. Born to the desert country, but as at home in the metropolis as he was in the bush, Charles Perkins had the ability to ensure that his agenda was relevant to black people wherever he went. The ability to bring people together is one of the hallmarks of his leadership style and reminds us of the political leverage that we lose when we allow fracturing between north-south, east-west, urban-rural-remote, to tear us apart. We need to remember that we share the vision, even though we may implement it differently according to the circumstances of our own communities.

Another aspect of Charles Perkins leadership style was that he was consultative. He would put his ideas into the public arena and discuss them with others. He sought to influence people in this way and he brought others – black and white – along with him because he would always front and argue his points. But I also noticed, when I saw him in forums, that he would also sometimes take a back seat and listen to what others were saying, informing himself of what others were thinking, engaging in their ideas as well.

One of the other key aspects to Charles Perkins leadership style was that he built trust with people. He was reliable, he was consistent and he had been in the game for the long haul and through this display of commitment he was able to build a reputation for reliability. People trusted that he would not sell them out.

There was flexibility in Charles Perkins' leadership style. He did not try to be all things to all people. He had an intuition for when he should lead and when he should let others take the reins. He also knew when to get advice from others and when to get his hands dirty. This flexibility – and a developed intuition on how to use it – meant that he knew the time to march in the street, he knew which moment to shout at the barricades and he knew at which point to move from confrontation to negotiation. It is a sign of real leadership that a person remains relevant and adaptable to new eras, new circumstances and new moods. And, with Charles Perkins, this flexibility was always exercised in order to reach the vision, not to compromise it. He taught us that leadership responds to change but does not bend to it.

III. The Relevance of the Perkins Vision in the Era of Practical Reconciliation

Charles Perkins never wavered from the importance of recognising the rights of Aboriginal people. Like William Cooper, he understood that the rights to education, work, own land and participate in the decision making that would affect Aboriginal people was part of the key to changing the socio-economic situation of Aboriginal people and for rebuilding Aboriginal nations.

During this era of conservatism, the use of the language of rights is

dismissed as an irrelevant conversation conducted by elites. This thoughtless dismissal of the rights agenda fails to appreciate the real impact that rights protection can have on people's day-to-day lives. Tell the man who turns up to a medical service with epilepsy but is assumed drunk by the nursing staff and sent to the police station that his right to access health services and freedom from racial discrimination do not need to be protected. Tell the mother of the child who dies at birth, contributing to the infant mortality rates in Aboriginal communities that compare to third world countries, that her right to adequate health care would not make a difference if it were properly protected. While the federal government underspends on Aboriginal health by $750 million, the universal rights to adequate health services and freedom from racial discrimination will have relevance to the every day lives of Aboriginal people across Australia. And the aspects of the Aboriginal political agenda that seek recognition and protection of rights will have relevance too.

For me, the goal of the rights agenda can be expressed as follows:

> All people are entitled not to starve, not to die from preventable disease, to strive to better their economic condition, to access knowledge and to participate in the decisions that affect their lives.[2]

It is of increasing concern to me that I hear people, with years of experience working in Aboriginal issues; say that 'self-determination' doesn't work. This is a view that buys into the rhetoric of the government when it tells us that the experiment of ATSIC was a failure. For this is a view that oversimplifies the performance of ATSIC and confuses the inherent right of 'self-determination' with a government policy cynically given the same name that was often interchanged with the word 'self-management'.

I have written about the demise of ATSIC and what has been lost in its abolition elsewhere and I do not want to go over that ground in detail here. But I would like to make the following point. The parliament, the general community and a substantial number of Aboriginal people did not appreciate or understand what ATSIC's mandate was. As a government statutory authority with an elected arm on top, the duality of its role caused tensions and there was a failure to appreciate its constraints and limitations. When ATSIC criticised federal policy – particularly the failure to protect human rights and native title interests – it became an enemy in the eyes of the government and the attempt to silence it began. Charles Perkins joined ATSIC because he saw its potential. He also recognised its need to evolve, but he also recognised that such a body was the best that Aboriginal people were going to get within government. He recognised the need to support ATSIC, but to agitate for reform and improve it. He was not around to see the abolition of ATSIC, but he would not have been silent about its execution.

I would argue that there is no evidence that self-determination as a right has failed in Australia because it has never been recognised or protected for

[2] The Human Rights Council of Australia Inc. *The Rights Way to Development: A Human Rights Approach to Development Assistance*. January 1995, 43.

Aboriginal people in this country in the way the concept is understood by Aboriginal people or international law. And there is no evidence that, were it to be implemented in practice, self-determination would fail, in fact evidence from other countries points to the contrary.

'Self-determination' as an Indigenous aspiration involves the participation of Aboriginal people in decision-making that will affect their lives. With the abolition of a national representative body, especially the dismantling of the regional councils, there is no structure in place through which governments – federal and state – that make policies and deliver services can negotiate with communities about their priorities.

Although the federal government claims it is negotiating with communities through the shared responsibility agreement process, it remains unclear as to who the community is, who is representing the community in the negotiation, who is bound by the agreements and what avenues communities have if the government fails to keep their end of the deal. While communities have been able to negotiate for services or facilities that were needed as a result of these shared responsibility agreements, this *ad hoc* arrangement that trades infrastructure or services for behavioural change cannot constitute self-determination nor can it constitute sustainable positive development. I believe that the recognition and implementation of self-determination for Aboriginal people requires real participation, that is, participation which can exert influence and share control over decisions and resources that affect our lives. For this reason, I believe that the recognition of self-determination must include the following:

- It requires the establishment of a national representative structure that is the result of consultation with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Such a structure must have regional representation that recognised existing representative structures;
- It needs the development of regional planning processes that are driven by Aboriginal people to identify priorities and appropriate strategies for implementation. This involvement is about developing governance structures at a regional level;
- It requires the rejection of the blind ideology of mainstreaming and instead must create strategies to target specific socio-economic needs of the Aboriginal community. This means the development and funding of Aboriginal medical, legal and educational services and advisory bodies that can participate in service delivery, policymaking and advocacy on specific Indigenous issues.

Self-determination in practice also means greater participation of Aboriginal people in the public service. One of the many negative impacts of the abolition of ATSIC has been the loss of numbers of Aboriginal people from the public service, particularly at the SES or senior level. This has meant a loss of corporate knowledge and capacity that seems to undermine the government's rhetoric about working more closely with Aboriginal

communities. The loss of a representative structure and the loss of Indigenous expertise within the public service have meant that this has been a new era where Indigenous policy is made for Indigenous people by non-Indigenous people.

The third cornerstone of Charles Perkins vision was land justice. It is important to remember that when he was involved with the land rights campaign, he never saw the return of land *per se* as being the quick answer to all of the socio-economic problems facing Aboriginal communities. But he did understand that a land base was a foundation for economic development and self-governance.

There has always been a tension between how to create and protect a land base, a communal asset, and ensure that there are benefits flowing from that asset to assist Aboriginal people. Land rights and native title regimes have rarely been able to provide both. Native title is often a very weak interest in land and some communities have been able to negotiate good deals that will provide economic opportunities – usually in the form of jobs – for their nations. However, to date, the failure to provide benefits to Aboriginal people is not because holding land fails to give a base for economic activity – it does – but because the legislative regimes that set up native title or land rights often limit the way in which those land holdings can be used.

Let me emphasise from the outset that any initiative that seeks to generate wealth and asset accumulation for Aboriginal communities must be pursued and supported. However, the importance of getting results from such initiatives mean that they have to be considered and analysed carefully.

It is of concern that a part of the new rhetoric around the impetus for changing land rights and native title legislation at the moment is to use the failure in the past to provide benefits as a reason to focus on offering home ownership opportunities. This focus on home ownership now comes at the expense of redressing the limitations put on communal title in the current legislative regimes. It is natural to be cautious about government driven changes to native title and land rights legislation as, in the past, it has been most often propelled by the need to guarantee certainty and access to non-Aboriginal interests.

The push for home ownership seems vague on detail so it is not clear how providing someone with an opportunity to buy a home on say Redbank Mission where no-one will want to buy it will generate wealth for an Aboriginal family who is then required to pay a mortgage for an asset that at the end of the day may be worthless. Furthermore, overseas experience in both the United States and Canada shows that privatising and individualising land holdings leads to the carving up of communally held land and the loss of the asset in less than a generation, ensuring no economic base for future generations. Home ownership schemes for Aboriginal people would work on land that is not communally owned, that is, if they provide capacity for Aboriginal families to buy into competitive housing markets if they want to.

On communal land, a different strategy needs to be thought about. And rather than speculating about home ownership schemes on communal land that

are long on rhetoric or short on detail, we could look at mechanisms that *have* worked in North America and Canada; that have provided an economic base on communal land for Aboriginal nations and; through that wealth creation, have allowed those nations to set up their own tribal councils, policing, schools and cultural centres.

What has worked overseas – and would work here – is to pass the interest in natural resources with the title and to provide a jurisdiction to Aboriginal people on their own land – which would allow tax free status and self-government. On any reserve in North America where tribes or bands are wealthy, it has not been from home ownership but through the ability to leverage off the natural resources on their lands. In other countries, the control over the natural resources on Aboriginal controlled or owned land or tax-free status and jurisdiction on those lands are the proven ways to give real wealth to Aboriginal communities. This option works but would require a redistribution of wealth that Australian governments would not contemplate because they are not serious about allowing Aboriginal people the tools by which to be economically self-sufficient and they are not serious about exploring proven options for generating wealth on communally-owned land.

IV. Conclusions

Charles Perkins understood the need to remain faithful to the enforcement of the rights of Aboriginal people, he understood the importance of participation through the exercise of self-government and sovereignty and he also understood the need for land justice and its role in the creating economic self-sufficiency for Aboriginal people. His was a holistic vision that remains as relevant in providing a strategy for improved socio-economic outcomes for Aboriginal people, their families and their communities. He understood that, when fighting for this vision and the rights that are contained within it, he was not fighting for empty words, mere ideals and platitudes. He was fighting for the very tools that Aboriginal people would need to take control of their own destiny.

In our current political climate, where so much of what he worked for and believed in is under attack, in an era where we seem to be sliding backwards rather than marching forwards, it is important to remember what he taught us with his leadership: we might need to change our tactics to deal with the rising conservatism and the ebbing of public interest in Aboriginal issues, but we cannot compromise on the vision.