

## **Aboriginal difference and living the 'Australian way of life'**

The emphasis on the 'difference' between settler Australians and Aboriginal people and their cultural orientations has become dominant, and I suggest, here an obstacle to clarity and rigour in our understanding of the challenges in 'closing the gap' in the many areas of Aboriginal disadvantage. In the last three decades, the place of rational thinking, sound theory, such as development economics could provide, and policy on the place of indigenous societies in the Australian nation became side-tracked into the intellectual dead-end of the 'culture wars.' These so-called 'culture wars' had very little to do with Aboriginal people themselves. Rather, these 'wars' have everything to do with settlers—white people—positioning themselves intellectually, morally and politically around the central problem of their existence: can the idea of the nation be an honourable one? Can the history of the nation be the subject of reconciliation to enable the citizen to be free of the burden of the past? Similarly with the government-sponsored Aboriginal Reconciliation Council which urged Australians to undertake reconciliation activities, such as walking across bridges and joining discussion groups. White guilt for the past rather than cold rational logic about the Aboriginal present was the main concern.

I contend that many writers and thinkers, caught in the 'culture wars' as they were, have been unable to imagine Aboriginal life with all the normal trappings of modernity. Such a vision, such as the one proposed by Noel Pearson, discussed here, does not exclude 'culture', but it certainly does include life-enhancing circumstances. I am not arguing that all of those people who work with Aboriginal groups are privileging the pre-modern and ignoring the modern, but I am suggesting that, wittingly or unwittingly, they have participated in normalising the *subaltern* and normalising *disadvantage* as the state of affairs in the Aboriginal world. In my address, I discuss the implications of this in the ways that professionals and service deliverers engage with Aboriginal people, and explain how the emphasis on 'difference' leads to a neglect of professional standards, such as 'duty of care.'