

REVISITING NEOLIBERALISM: ABORIGINAL SELF-DETERMINATION,
EDUCATION AND CULTURAL SUSTAINABILITY IN AUSTRALIA

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we discuss the ways in which successive governments have addressed Indigenous affairs¹ and we argue that the Australian approach is still firmly rooted in colonial attitudes and discourses. Although self-determination is a core concept of neoliberalism, the dominant political ideology for both Labor and Liberal parties in Australia since the 1980s, it does not extend to Indigenous affairs, which is firmly couched in colonial frameworks. In this paper specific examples of education and cultural sustainability (including language development and sustainability) are used as case studies to explore what genuine self-determination would mean in an Australian context. Overall, it is argued that an honest and real neoliberal approach takes political courage and vision, but would place the power to control Indigenous affairs in the hands of the people whose affairs we are actually talking about.

Keywords: Aboriginal self-determination; neoliberalism; cultural sustainability; Aboriginal language development; Aboriginal education

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we discuss the way in which successive governments have attempted to address Indigenous affairs and continue to do so. We argue that the Australian approach is still firmly rooted in neoliberal ideologies, which in some ways can be seen as a continuation of colonial attitudes and discourses. However, the paradox is that while neoliberalism could offer some benefits to Aboriginal communities, and indeed has some parallels with the concept of self-determination, it is not actually applied in the context of Indigenous affairs, which instead is still firmly rooted in colonial paternalism. In simplified terms, neoliberalism is based on free market capitalism and starts from the premise that human beings are rational economic actors advancing their

own interests under the banner of self-determination and choice. It is thus accompanied by a sense of individual responsibility and in theory, tries to minimise the role of the state in individuals' affairs, while at the same time minimising their taxes so they can get on with the business of progressing their own interests. In Australia (as in many Western nation states), neoliberalism has long been the dominant political ideology for both Labor and Liberal parties. However, as noted above, this does not extend to 'Indigenous affairs', which is firmly couched in colonial frameworks whereby the state decides 'what is good for the natives'. In response, some Indigenous leaders, like Noel Pearson for example, have argued for some time that Aboriginal communities should control and take responsibility for their own 'affairs'. Pearson does not call this self-determination, but rather 'seriousness', and his key question is: 'Do we have the seriousness necessary to maintain our languages, traditions and knowledge?' (2011, 16) He links this directly to education, when he argues that 'our hope depends on how serious we become about the education of our people' (Pearson 2011, 16).

Pearson and a group of other Aboriginal Australians and non-Aboriginal associates may have made a positive start to this idea of self-determination via the recently announced Aboriginal initiative 'Empowered Communities', representing eight broad regions of Aboriginal Australia. The Jawun Indigenous Corporate Partnerships, a newly formed NGO, proposes to appoint secondees from over 20 leading Australian companies and government agencies to work with selected organisations as a way forward in improving the interface between Indigenous Australians and government (Jawun, n.d.). In addition, the current Abbott government has appointed an 'Indigenous Advisory Council' of local Indigenous leaders with a view to achieving Closing the Gap targets more quickly, even though this Council has no real authority. In this paper, we shine a critical light on the agendas and discourses that inform such political initiatives.

Neoliberal frameworks continue to provide justification for governments and other authorities to control Indigenous agendas and affairs, albeit in contradictory ways. For example, Marcia Langton's attack on what she calls the 'old Left', with its 'need for perpetual victims' (2007, 2), is couched in a critique of welfare dependency, and essentially calls for individual responsibility, which in turn is the foundation of neoliberalism. Her arguments are closely aligned with Pearson (2011) in this respect. However, neither of them considers a widening of the idea of neoliberalism to allow for the possibility of self-determination on a community level, rather than an individual one, even if Pearson's idea of 'seriousness' moves in that direction to some extent. Langton provides prob-

ably the clearest example of this in her Boyer Lectures (2013), as well as in her continued collaboration with mining magnate Andrew Forrest for the Forrest Review (2014).² Indeed, Langton explicitly ridicules the idea when she argues: ‘To expect that people who reel from one traumatic event to another can enjoy the much-lauded Aboriginal “rights to self-determination” while their own community and the larger society repeatedly fail them is an indulgent fantasy’ (2007, 15). However, in this paper, we will use the specific examples of education and cultural sustainability, which include the issues of language development and sustainability, as case studies to explore if and how a more community-based notion of self-determination would translate to an Australian context. Overall, we argue that the current Australian approach to Indigenous affairs is a mere extension of a colonial model, and therefore destined to fail, as colonial history has shown time and time again. An honest and real neoliberal approach takes political courage and vision, but would place the power to control Indigenous affairs in the hands of the people whose affairs we are actually talking about.

NEOLIBERALISM AND ABORIGINAL SELF-DETERMINATION IN AUSTRALIAN CONTEXTS

The modern interpretation of neoliberalism, for the purposes of this paper, is essentially about non-Aboriginal people making money out of Aboriginal lack of political position and autonomy within the Australian social contract. Broadly, while non-Aboriginal neoliberal views might see the market as the epitome of democracy and freedom and a synonym for capitalism, this might not sit comfortably or be the same experience for Aboriginal peoples. Indeed, institutional and structural racism is more the experience that is hidden under the cover of neoliberalism, as it is obscured by an emphasis on individual responsibility without any regard for the historical and ongoing impact of colonisation and colonising practices. Individual autonomy and private ownership, whilst at the core of neoliberalism, were once foreign concepts in Aboriginal societies. Aboriginal people are now expected to forego long-held socio-cultural systems and values and, instead, adapt to and embrace neoliberal, market-driven economic and social imperatives. As Giroux notes: ‘Neoliberalism not only dissolves the bonds of sociality and reciprocity; it also undermines the nature of social obligations by defining civil society exclusively through an appeal to market-driven values’ (2005, para 4). In the Australian Aboriginal context, neoliberalism also means a growing authoritarianism through the Closing the Gap³ and A Better Future for Indigenous Australians⁴ political agendas and an even more determined commitment of non-Aboriginal gatekeepers to rigidly maintain control, instead of a relaxation of the dominant status quo.

The political rhetoric of the state in Australia (via a string of successive Labor and Liberal governments) is firmly couched in an apparent neoliberal ideology. However, the Closing the Gap ‘grand narrative’ is the most recent in a continuous story of colonisation and state control over Indigenous affairs, which is being implemented via the policy mechanism of a National Indigenous Reform Agreement (NIRA) (Council of Australian Governments, 2011), one of six national agreements that frame the task of Closing the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage (Altman 2010). As McRae-Williams notes, ‘a key assumption in Western [neo]liberal or mainstream economic development discourse is that individualism and economic development are intrinsically related to one another’ (2014, 85). This in turn exposes the ‘gap’, which then logically extends to a ‘deficit discourse’, which is ‘most frequently based on non-Indigenous understandings of advantage, and developing a sense of the “Aboriginal problem”’ (Guenther 2013, 158). The political approach to this ‘problem’ is cyclical and goes through waves of responses that have occurred, and then reoccurred, and still continue to recur, in different guises; but the approach is essentially characterised by an attempt to colonise the minds as well as the land of Aboriginal Australians. Aboriginal Australians should continue to resist these new world orders and work collectively to bring about the collapse of the type of neoliberal ideology that sees them as the most important commodity in an ‘Indigenous’ capitalist industry that in its current forms will continue to deny full self-determination.

As Altman (2010, 268) notes, the NIRA is not evidence-based but instead ‘highly ideological and formulated on clearly articulated neoliberal logics of economic deregulation, welfare state retreat, and a cultural trope of individual responsibility, while at the same time it locks in billions of dollars of public funding for a decade for Indigenous advancement through a series of National Partnership Agreements targeting initially just 28 priority communities’. Altman goes on to identify three main reasons why the NIRA is of concern, and these reasons align well with our concerns and arguments in this paper:

The NIRA articulates ‘principles’ to incorporate those in remote locations into mainstream education and training and the market economy, and to promote personal responsibility and behaviours consistent with positive social norms.

The NIRA renders complex development problems ‘technical’, both in financial input and statistical outcome terms; it is all just a simple equation, dollars in, statistical gap-closing out.

The NIRA locks in resources for a decade, siphoning them away from those who may be in greatest need just because they live in other than the nominated communities.

The neoliberal foundation of this approach becomes clear when we look closely at these three points, and by extension the [neo]colonial project of mainstreaming Aboriginal people into a market economy. As Bourdieu has argued, 'neoliberalism is just a program for destroying collective structures which may impede pure market logic' (1998, cited in Altman 2010, 269). Thus, the 'Closing the Gap' project's success, from the state's point of view, can be measured in terms of mainstream neoliberal market numbers and principles, such as (mainstream) educational qualifications, employment figures and individual income statistics. Measured in these terms however, and as noted above, the gap will never be closed, if only for the fact that no one appears to be concerned with whether and how Aboriginal people would measure their own success. But this is precisely the point, as projects like these lock Aboriginal people into dependency on the state, especially when it comes to education. Unfortunately, the opportunity that arose with the Rudd Government's apology quickly faded into business as usual. As Corntassel and Holder note, 'linking this historic apology to a longer-term process of decolonisation and [I]ndigenous self-determination would [have] further [distinguished] it from the "cheap reconciliation" policies of the past and initiate a genuine process of reconstitutive justice' (2008, 478).

The establishment of the NIRA comes on the back of the continued rhetoric of an 'emergency' in the Northern Territory. However, while an 'emergency' suggests the need for a short-term response to overcome it, Arabena (2007, 38) argues that this is a wrong assessment of the situation, which in fact should be called a 'chronic emergency'. A 'chronic emergency' is one that 'occurs over a long period of time for a group of people (often in rich nations) in which a belief exists that someone will sort it out'. The chronic element is the colonial structures of power, which have not changed in any significant way. Moreover, the current (global) neoliberal project, if mainstreamed as it is in Australia, is an almost seamless continuation of the older colonial project of actual colonisation, and Arabena identifies two pivotal points that are bound up with this project: 'Firstly, the government is trying to negotiate access to property rights in order to exploit our land. Secondly, the intensification of the social conditions in which those who are first exploited and then left exploited for many years serves to contribute to the colonial regime' (2007, 30).

Education is a powerful tool to engage in the second part of this colonisation

project, under the guise of a neoliberal approach, where education is held up as the way in which individual Aboriginal people can ‘pull themselves up by their boot straps’ and the ultimate measure of success is individual participation in the mainstream economy. As Keddie et al. (2012, 91) point out, ‘a key concern within western [education] policy discourse relates to raising the schooling participation and achievement of marginalised groups’, in which achievement is measured according to mainstream criteria. Conversely of course, this means that those who are not ‘pulling themselves up’ are seen as responsible for their own failure. Essentially, this is also the Noel Pearson position, which is focused on individual responsibility in a mainstream neoliberal economy, albeit in somewhat contradictory ways. Pearson draws on Thernstrom and Thernstrom’s book *No Excuses: Closing the Racial Gap in Learning* (2003) for his own version of ‘no excuses’ schooling. The most important target audience for this approach is educators, and ‘the fact that some of our children come from disadvantaged, and even dysfunctional, backgrounds, will no longer be an excuse for educational failure’ (Pearson 2011, 28). This then forms the basis for his advocacy of ‘explicit instruction’ and a vigorous critique of what he calls ‘culturally appropriate’ education, which according to Pearson is an ‘ideological catch-cry for the Aboriginal educational professionals, black and white, [...] to carve out an area of expertise and unaccountability for standards’ (2011, 79). Of course this raises the question of whose standards we are talking about.

As Moreton-Robinson (2009, 70) notes in her comprehensive critique of the broader Pearson position (which includes his neoliberal critique of welfare dependency):

Pearson’s explanation for the existence of poverty and inequality is the ‘problematic’ characteristics of Indigenous people, not patriarchal white society’s right to disavow Indigenous sovereign resource rights. Indigenous people are perceived and talked about as the undeserving poor who lack effort, proper money management skills, a sense of morality, the ability to remain sober, the ability to resist drugs and a work ethic. Pearson [and indeed successive Labor and Liberal governments] has staked a possessive claim to patriarchal white sovereignty in his welfare reform agenda, which seeks to discipline and produce the good Indigenous citizen who is perceived as having no inherent sovereign right to their resources, which were illegally appropriated by the Crown.

Of course, within this colonial framework no one stops to consider, or indeed ask, whether people actually want to be integrated into a mainstream

economy, which would indeed be the first question in a framework of genuine self-determination. Furthermore, the link between sovereignty over land and resources on the one hand, and cultural and general wellbeing, including Aboriginal language use, on the other, is effectively severed in the neoliberal discourse of individual responsibility, with serious consequences. However, the rhetoric of emergency (as opposed to *chronic* emergency) continues to blame Aboriginal people for their own failure to ‘get on with it’ and integrate into the neoliberal marketplace, whilst foregoing their sovereign rights to their land in the process. This rather transparent agenda is ‘cushioned’ by political rhetoric that talks about ‘respect’ for, and ‘valuing’ of Aboriginal cultures, without ever explicitly spelling out what that actually means. So we find a particular focus on ‘Indigenous marginality and the role of education in valuing the histories and cultures of this group’ (Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training and Youth Affairs 2008, cited in Keddie et al. 2012, 92), or a concern with providing ‘Indigenous students with positive role models within schooling environments that reflect greater autonomy for Indigenous groups’ (Queensland Department of Education and Training 2011, cited in Keddie et al. 2012, 92). The idea of autonomy and its implications are never spelled out, thus creating the impression of rather hollow rhetoric, especially in the context of an apparent ‘emergency’.

Both the Rudd and Gillard governments, and the current Abbott government, have continued the rhetoric of an emergency, with significant consequences. This rhetoric effectively renders Aboriginal communities dependent on the whims of successive government ministers, in particular in economic terms, which has a flow-on effect to all other areas of development, including education. This became rather explicit when Tony Abbott declared himself ‘Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs’ during the 2013 election campaign. But as Graham (2013) notes, there is just one problem: ‘no one, including within the media, ever stopped to ask Aboriginal people if they actually wanted a “Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs”, and in particular whether or not they wanted Abbott’. This is nothing new. We are still firmly locked into colonial structures, whereby the mainstream is treated as individual citizens/consumers in a neoliberal sense with individual roles and responsibilities, while Aboriginal people are in a double bind of being deemed ‘not ready’ for such neoliberal individual responsibility, and therefore in need of being governed, or indeed ‘micro-managed’. This is what Langton rails against, and she channels her contempt to argue that Aboriginal people must succeed in the mainstream economy, and that Aboriginal private accumulation will finally deliver Aboriginal development. This is a rather one-sided view, which she acknowledges when she mentions the ‘growing difference between Indigenous populations of the south and those

of the north' (2013, 46). As Veracini suggests, 'her emphasis on the emergence of an Aboriginal middle class should be accompanied by an awareness of the persistence of an Aboriginal underclass' (2014, 120).

Regardless, the above-mentioned micro-management fits very easily into colonial discourses that see Aboriginal people essentially as 'children' in need of benevolent white governance. Moreton-Robinson (2009, 68) summarises this as follows:

The individualism of neoliberalism informs the discourse of pathology within the race war, enabling the impoverished conditions under which Indigenous people live to be rationalised as a product of dysfunctional cultural traditions and individual bad behaviour. In this context, Indigenous pathology, not the strategies and tactics of white patriarchal sovereignty, is presented as inhibiting the realisation of the state's earlier policy of self-determination.

This is very far removed from the idea of genuine self-determination – 'where a distinct people choose their own leaders, make their own laws, govern their own lives. It is, however, the only solution that has ever worked for nations facing the same problems we face – the displacement and brutalisation of a First Peoples' (Graham 2013). In other words, genuine self-determination would mean that Aboriginal Australians decide who their own leaders are, how their children are educated, what languages they are educated in, and what happens to their own lands. This concept does not follow a simple binary structure 'where it is assumed that an individual needs to be a member of a particular group to authentically represent the interests of the group' (Keddie et al. 2012, 95), but it does mean that it should be up to Aboriginal Australians to decide who represents their interests.

Self-determination is not a new idea. As Kowal identifies in the Australian context, 'self-determination has been the dominant trope for expressing the aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders since the late 1960s' (2008, 338). This coincides in an academic context with the rise of postcolonial theory, and a commitment to Aboriginal self-determination 'is a key part of postcolonial logic: a belief that Indigenous people must be in control of efforts to improve their lives, with non-Indigenous people and the state providing adequate support' (Kowal 2008, 341). Kowal goes on to argue that the Northern Territory Intervention is likely to kill off the discourse of self-determination, and she implies that experiments with it have basically been a failure.⁵ Kowal attributes this to what she calls the 'vague and symbolic relationship between

the two poles of postcolonial logic [which] leaves plenty of room for slippage between sanitized and unsanitized alterity' (2008, 345). In other words, the colonial binary between 'orientalism' (unsanitized alterity in the form of 'the Other') on the one hand, and what she calls 'remedialism' (sanitized alterity, to be achieved through assimilation) on the other, creates too much ambiguity, and consequently room for slippage, for it to work. However, her argument is actually firmly sealed into colonial logic, and buys into its binary structure almost wholesale. For 'adequate state support' should mean a relationship of genuine trust, rather than conditional support based on criteria designed by the state to measure success, and such genuine support has never really eventuated. To imply therefore that self-determination has failed is difficult to maintain if you recognise that it has never been allowed a genuine chance.

On a global level, a memorable definition of the 'neoliberal' process came out of the August 1996 *Encuentro Intercontinental por la Humanidad contra el Neoliberalismo* (*Inter-continental Encounter for Humanity and Against Neoliberalism*) in Chiapas by Subcomandante Marcos: 'what the Right offers is to turn the world into one big mall where they can buy Indians here, women there' (cited in Martínez and García 2000). Those same neoliberal ideologies and processes that Latin American Indigenous peoples criticise and shun, and the ongoing colonial 'goodwill' forced onto Aboriginal Australia, quell the drive, and indeed cripple the aspirations, of self-determination: what we need is *not* a great big melting pot of policies and ideas, but a genuine commitment from Labor and Coalition governments to the idea of real self-determination.

When we begin to look at specific areas to which political self-determination applies, such as education and cultural sustainability, we can ask the question: education and cultural sustainability for whom? Mainstream neoliberalism in this context means the preservation and perpetuation of a pathological paternalism/maternalism and welfarism that continues to cripple most, but at the same time assists in the creation of a growing 'bourgeois black' class, or what Rata (2011) in the New Zealand context calls a 'tribal elite'. There is nothing wrong with being a 'bourgeois black' as long as you do not crush your own people in the process of climbing your way to the top of the free market capitalist ladder. In other words, it is not an either/or equation, and there may very well be room for a black-branded neoliberal approach if this is deemed appropriate by whoever have the power to set the agenda at the community and/or local level, as long as it is one which is not propelled and measured by the dominant paradigm and direction. This might also mean recognising and accepting variations of, or indeed conflicts within, the decision making process, driven by self-determination.

Bargh (2007) argues that neoliberal agendas and policies are akin to colonisation and can aptly be described as re-colonisation. The practices are not new and indeed, they are long-standing Western practices, all of which came from, and are related to, Western perspectives. In Australia, this applies especially to the education system, which continues to prove inappropriate and inadequate in many Aboriginal contexts, simply because the values and ideas underpinning neoliberal perspectives contribute to narrow perceptions of Aboriginal peoples as dependent and subservient (passive), rather than positioned in decision making roles (active). Mostly those perceptions and attitudes tell the Western neoliberal educator, trainer, policy developer, or curriculum designer that Aboriginal peoples are incapable of properly governing, indeed educating themselves, thereby necessitating a 'remedial' approach to the 'problem' (Guenther 2013); again, this perpetuates the pathological paternalism/maternalism mentioned above. Furthermore, the Western neoliberal might talk about cultural sustainability, but the coloniser, whether espousing to be a neoliberal or not, struggles with the colonial mindset that Aboriginal cultures are obstacles to development, again necessitating a 'remedial' approach. In a more cynical view, but one that is widely held by the colonised, and one that strips neoliberalism to its fundamentals, many colonisers are seen to be only interested in Aboriginal people if they can get something out of it. In other words, if colonisers can't own it, eat it, exploit it, or sell it, they are not interested. As Giroux frames it: 'Under neoliberalism everything is either for sale or is plundered for profit' (2004, 495).

The reality is that most Aboriginal peoples attempt to survive, not co-exist, in white patriarchal capitalist sovereignty, which is a context in which 'black people are always having to renew a commitment to a decolonizing political process that should be fundamental to [black] lives and is not' (bell hooks, cited in Leonard and McLaren 1992, 146). In a context that lacks self-determination in the sense that we have discussed above, Aboriginal lives are governed by ever-changing, and often inappropriate and ineffective policies. Policy after policy is developed, all targeting what are usually described as essential Aboriginal programs, but few are remembered, creating an 'ever revolving groundhog day scenario' (Pearson 2011, 36). Nevertheless, policy serves at the same time as a legitimating charter for the techniques of administration and as an operating manual for everyday conduct. Policy documents in relation to Aboriginal educational agendas and programs are the essential manuals in every teaching and learning environment, and are far more important than curricula. To put it differently, they are instruments of control.

For some time now the reach and quality of the 'Aboriginal education' agenda,

as a basis for creating opportunities for educational advancement for entire communities, has mostly failed miserably, and continues to result in the lowest national levels of education (Langton 2007). It has failed because the neoliberal vision for 'Aboriginal education' was, and perhaps still is, more about a political logic driven by a flawed capitalist system. What hope is there for the survival of Aboriginal academics, educators and students within the prevailing non-Aboriginal, neoliberal and authoritarian 'Closing the Gap' narrative? While the majority of Aboriginal players struggle to assist each other in harnessing their own powers (as individuals and as social agents) to re-claim values that are not market-driven, but that are vital to cultural survival (such as community, caring, trust, and courage), it is an almost impossible task to swim against the neoliberal tide of market-driven individualism that engulfs them. As Fredric Jameson reminds us, 'it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism' (1994, 12). Within this 'neoliberal' context, Aboriginal education is reduced to a simple market model of supplier and customer.

Experts on policy development and implementation such as Levinson and Sutton (2001) point out that in the scholarly discourse around policy, there is little evidence of the sociocultural perspective – that is, a locally informed, comparative account of how people make and/or engage with policy. Further, in the process of policy formation, the needs of individuals and societies become subject to authoritative definition of whoever has designed the policy. The power to design policy that suits your own social, cultural and political context is therefore a fundamental element of self-determination. Among public policy arenas, educational policy is unique in that it has the power to determine who has the right to become an 'educated' person, and therefore potentially a future power broker. Any honest analysis of policy that governs the Aboriginal education agenda to this day, will show that mostly Aboriginal people are not involved in policy development, and this is cited as the main reason for continuing policy failure – yet the same trend continues. As Giroux notes, 'knowledge has become capital to invest in the economy but has little to do with the power of self-definition or the capacities needed to expand the scope and operations of freedom and justice' (2004, 497). In other words, the question in Aboriginal contexts becomes one of who owns, controls and/or appropriates the knowledge. While self-determination affects all areas of policy development and application, we are focusing here specifically on education, and more precisely on Indigenous language development and sustainability, because education is the key process through which languages are normalised. Issues around Indigenous language maintenance and development are a key area where 'Indigenous affairs' are foregrounded and highlighted in the Aus-

tralian context, primarily because of the severe threat that many Indigenous languages face. Indigenous languages, like the people who speak them, have long been the target of colonisation. In what follows, we will revisit historical colonisation to explore Aboriginal language maintenance, development and sustainability as a case study.

EDUCATION, CULTURE, LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND SUSTAINABILITY

It is an understatement to claim that language represents a significant element of our sense of identity and who we are. Through language, we articulate thoughts, construct interactions and constantly attempt to make meanings and/or sense of what is happening around us. It is a dynamic system through which our self and hence our cultural self is symbolised. It was thus no surprise or coincidence that Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf proposed the renowned thesis that language shapes the way we think and determines what we can think about, and that language is a reflection of how we view the world (Lee 1996).

Language vitality and sustainability are therefore part of a profoundly political agenda in the sense that they represent identity and ideology at the individual, community and national level. Among well-documented and spoken languages, such as English, Spanish and Japanese, for example, which have vigorous linguistic vitality, speakers of these languages (monolingual speakers and nations, in particular) do not often realise how language plays an important role in creating and presenting their (individual and national) identity and culture, as these languages are an unquestioned and unquestionable, 'normalised' part of their everyday environment. This is because their language status has not been blatantly threatened by other dominant powers (though this may have happened in the past), and usually there are governmental bodies or policies that protect and promote the sustainability of these languages in their current state.

Certainly in Australia, the experiences with establishing national language policies have only seen a short history so far since the birth of the National Policy on Languages announced by the Commonwealth government in 1987 (Lo Bianco 1987; 1990). Even then, the primary focus of this policy in maintaining languages was largely based on the economic future of Australia. As Lo Bianco states:

The statement stressed the economic aspects of the policy. It focused on the labour market and the ways in which tackling adult literacy

levels, extending English proficiency and teaching 'trade languages' would benefit Australia's economic performance. (1990, 2)

This policy has had a disastrous result in the case of multiple Aboriginal Australian languages, which have been systematically marginalized and undermined both in forms of colonial suppression and in the lack of substantive support from the language policies of successive governments. Before white settlement/invasion occurred in Australia, there were approximately 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait languages across the nation. However, the current status of Aboriginal Australian languages is that only about 145 languages are surviving and spoken, out of which 110 are critically endangered (National Indigenous Languages Survey Report 2005).

The white colonisation of Aboriginal land and people severely threatened the linguistic (along with the overall human) rights of Aboriginal language speakers. The vigorous assimilation policy pursued by successive Australian governments undoubtedly and inevitably went hand in hand with the critical loss of Aboriginal languages, and continues to do so. In other words, assimilation (and its contemporary variant of mainstreaming) equals language loss (Crawford 2007). As Aboriginal Australians were made to feel ashamed to use their own traditional languages especially in public domains, and were forced to acquire the coloniser's language (Malcolm 2013; Walsh 1993), their languages began to diminish. In terms of the impact of policy, 'government policies of the past have been, in part, responsible for the decline of Indigenous languages', and the government 'actively repressed the use of Indigenous languages by Aboriginal people' (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs 2012, 46).⁶ This has caused the current deep-rooted issues of language maintenance and sustainability in Australia.

Especially since the 1960s and 70s, there have been consistent demands for endangered Aboriginal languages to be maintained, documented and revived. The Australian government has initiated and 'intervened' to invest large sums of funding to maintain and revive Aboriginal languages. In 2011, the Indigenous Languages Support (ILS) policy was announced under the Office for the Arts (OFTA) Department of Regional Australia, and Local Government Arts and Sport, whereby \$11.98 million has been invested 'to support the development of community-driven and culturally appropriate digital and multi-media resources as a tool for the maintenance, revival and development of traditional languages' over four years. Given that the federal intervention, financial investment and moral support into Aboriginal language maintenance and revitalisation initially started back in 1973, one could be convinced that the Australian

government has paid much focus and attention to Aboriginal language affairs – at least on a financial level. However, this raises the question of how this approach aligns with Closing the Gap policies (outlined earlier), or indeed whether it aligns at all. The discussion around ‘Working with languages to Close the Gap’ under the National Indigenous Languages Policy seems to only highlight the importance of providing interpreting and translating services as part of the Remote Service Delivery National Partnership (RSDNP), which committed \$38.6 million towards its cause. Despite its statistical approach to measuring success, Aboriginal language development has not been adequately measured, if it can even be measured at all, while English literacy is obsessively measured as part of the National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN).

If such intervention as well as financial support have been appropriately invested in Aboriginal language maintenance, why are only about 18 of the original Aboriginal languages claimed to be healthily surviving and an alarming rate of Aboriginal languages are dying at the same time? (Standing Committee 2012). We do not claim that this is a simplistic problem which requires a straightforward solution; in fact, we acknowledge the complexity of issues that stem from years of accumulated misconduct and misunderstandings of Australian Indigenous affairs. In addition, we acknowledge that the complexity of language revitalisation is not unique to Australia.

We believe, however, that understanding the dynamics of Aboriginal history is an essential starting point in the Australian context. Aboriginal people have lived on this land over thousands of years, whilst white colonisation spans little more than the last 200 years. Although Aboriginal people have survived the radical, brutal and relentless processes of colonisation during this relatively short period of time, the consistent expectation of rapid assimilation and mainstreaming continues to threaten the survival of Aboriginal cultures and especially languages. Language revitalisation, development and sustainability require time and a holistic approach. A key understanding of the *Our Land, Our Languages* report is that Aboriginal languages are ‘inseparable from culture, and [they are] the foundation upon which the capacity to learn and interact productively with other people is built’ (Standing Committee 2012, 1). Most of all, language development and sustainability require Aboriginal agenda-setting and control over the process, because language is connected to all aspects of life and it cannot be treated as an isolated ‘maintenance’ issue, for then it quickly turns into a museum piece as something belonging to the past, rather than deeply embedded in everyday practice, communication, and therefore culture (Fishman 2007). Whilst there are undoubtedly good inten-

tions surrounding language ‘maintenance’ and ‘revitalisation’, and while we are not attacking such intentions, we do want to draw attention to the easy slip-page that occurs in the discourses surrounding language ‘maintenance’, which is why we prefer to use the terms language development and sustainability. For example, the *Our Land, Our Languages* report (Standing Committee 2012, 8) states that

It is important to emphasise that Australia is not a monolingual society. [...] The importance of learning and speaking English is not disputed. However, it is equally important for all Australians to recognise the several hundred unique Indigenous languages that were spoken for tens of thousands of years in Australia. These languages have not always received due recognition in the past.

The problem here is in the use of language, for what does ‘recognise’ actually mean? Recognising a language is perfectly fine, but it does not involve any responsibility on the part of the person who does the recognising. In other words, policies that ‘recognise’ Indigenous languages can function side-by-side with policies that mandate that only English is to be used as the language of instruction. Since 2008 this has been the case again in Australia’s Northern Territory, under the influence of the Northern Territory Intervention and after many years of bilingual education programs (Simpson, Caffery, and McConvell 2009). In short, the ‘recognition’ of Aboriginal languages has little practical effect in terms of their sustainability, if this ‘recognition’ is accompanied by an education system that mandates English only as the norm, and by extension positions Aboriginal languages as marginal. This actually *misrecognises* William Fogarty’s point, when he says that ‘while Indigenous languages policy is an integral issue in education, it is also fundamental for Indigenous identity, cultural reproduction and the aspirations for Indigenous economic and social development’ (cited in Standing Committee 2012, 45). Like the Intervention itself, the ad hoc decision to depart from bilingual education programs in a wholesale manner, brings into sharp focus the importance of self-determination when it comes to language development and sustainability, particularly in the specific context of education. Moreover, it shows the ever-present danger of governments reverting to colonial patterns of paternalism/maternalism.

Simpson et al. (2009, 10) identify three key issues at stake here, based on The *UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*, which Australia signed in 2009:

The right of children to receive an education which gives them ac-

cess to the dominant language, to literacy and to the wider society.

The right of communities to have a say in how their children are educated.

The right of communities, especially Indigenous communities, to keep and strengthen their Indigenous languages.

This is precisely the kind of self-determination that we are suggesting here, as it would have as its starting point the context in which education is provided, rather than being imposed from a centralised point without any understanding of the local context. As Simpson et al. (2009, 9) note, the great majority of education programs for Aboriginal students in the Northern Territory have been delivered solely in English, even for those students whose mother tongue is an Aboriginal language or a mixed language. These students often have very limited knowledge of English, which leads to a situation where students very often do not understand what English-speaking teachers say to them (Moses and Wigglesworth 2008). This has two main consequences: firstly, it positions these Aboriginal children as 'deficient' from the first day they come to school; and secondly, it erodes the status and therefore the sustainability of the language they have grown up speaking. Article 14.3 of the UN Declaration mentioned above not only suggests that Aboriginal people should be allowed to run schools in their own languages, but requires the State to help them (Simpson et al. 2009, 13). This would be real self-determination and it would be a form of genuine community-based neoliberalism.

Because of the level of the damage done to Aboriginal languages, long-term solutions and a long-term commitment are needed rather than short term ones (Dundon 2004; Hinton 2001). Unfortunately, much of the current federal government funding scheme does not seem to allow for long term solutions. Among many language maintenance projects around the country, the lack of sustainable funding support is often noted as one of the reasons why these projects tend to fail in many cases (Coggan 2014; Nordlinger and Singer 2014). As with all government funding, conditions are attached to funding agreements, and outcomes are measured according to finite timelines on a short term basis, in true neoliberal fashion. As noted above, however, genuine self-determination would mean Aboriginal control over the agenda and the power to execute that agenda, including the power to determine how its success is to be measured. This does not equate to 'separatism' for it can involve partnerships with non-Aboriginal people, but only on Aboriginal terms. As Eades states, 'in Aboriginal society, knowledge is not a free and easily acquired

good. Knowledge is acquired or passed on as a part of social interaction and is subject to strong controls in many instances' (2013, 31). This is a key point in that Aboriginal control over the process is a crucial element, but it is sadly the factor that is missing, because it is about relinquishing control on the part of the coloniser – which is historically hardly the coloniser's strong point.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, we return to the idea of 'self-determination' being the central driving force behind any successful neoliberal society and economy. With regards to language revitalisation projects, to bring about successful and meaningful projects, the motivation and drive need to come from Aboriginal people themselves. As discussed previously, Noel Pearson claims that Aboriginal Australians cannot continue to live on and rely on a false 'welfare economy', because it was established by the colonisers to 'compensate' for what they have done in the past. A welfare economy builds on the idea that the colonisers still hold the power to determine what is needed for 'the natives'. Pearson is right on one level; however, he mistakenly thinks that self-determination is about individual responsibility *within* a neoliberal market economy. Our point is that self-determination goes much deeper than this level, in that it includes the *choice* to join a neoliberal mainstream market economy (or not, as the case may be), but regardless of what the choice is, the outcome is an agenda that is designed *and* controlled by Aboriginal people themselves, and is therefore much more likely to fit the hugely diverse contexts of Aboriginal Australia.

To some, it may be obvious that the very idea of 'maintaining' Aboriginal languages under the federal regime is precisely based on the concept of colonisation. There is an objective of 'achievement' from the imperial and colonial perspective, and we see that these language maintenance 'projects' are merely exploited. Any successful output of the language projects is destined to be acknowledged and showcased under the 'helping the natives awards' by the colonisers. The 'maintenance' of Aboriginal languages gives an impression that these languages are stagnant and need to be documented just as in the 'traditional' ways. The intended meaning of 'maintenance' fails to acknowledge that languages constantly change and evolve over time. We therefore believe that maintenance is not the right term to describe the sort of language/linguistic work that ought to be undertaken. If Aboriginal languages are to be revived in a true sense – if it was decided for particular languages to be revived in the first place, we need to celebrate both the traditional and contemporary status of these languages, bringing the whole community (generational: young and old; societal/situational: schools, public and home) together in a holistic way that

recognises the seamless linkages between land, law, language, kinship and ceremony (Standing Committee 2012). This very idea stands on the ground that Aboriginal people should and can determine themselves how their languages need to be revived (if this was decided to be necessary) and take responsibility for the design and directions of their language sustainability in the future.

Given the historical and continued failure of the coloniser to control Aboriginal language development and sustainability, we would argue that Aboriginal language revival and sustainability can only be achieved if it is driven from within at the local/community level, and if it is linked to a holistic agenda of self-determination, which includes education. Only with genuine self-determination would it be able to move beyond the current neoliberal context, and time is fast running out.

NOTES

- 1 In this paper we use 'Aboriginal' as our preferred term, but we do use 'Indigenous' in citations and in officially recognised contexts, such as Indigenous affairs, and names of organisations. Many Aboriginal people in Australia do not like the term Indigenous, because of its perceived connections to government agendas and rhetoric. Even though the term Aboriginal originates from a colonial context, many Aboriginal people have adopted the term, and it has become an important part of their sense of identity. Note that both our usage of Aboriginal and Indigenous are inclusive of Torres Strait Islander peoples and cultures.
- 2 Andrew Forrest, a mining magnate and friend of Prime Minister Tony Abbott, was appointed by the Prime Minister to provide a report on how to 'close the gap' and create 'parity'. The report is controversial as many question Forrest's credentials.
- 3 In 2008, the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) agreed through its 'Closing the Gap in Indigenous disadvantage' initiative to six ambitious targets to address the disadvantage faced by Indigenous Australians in life expectancy, child mortality, education and employment. In 2015, Closing the Gap is still very much part of the current government's agendas and rhetoric (Council of Australian Governments 2008).
- 4 This initiative was established in 2006-2007 in partnership with the Hope Vale community in Cape York to 'lay the foundations for welfare reform through combinations of stronger obligations on residents and incentives that encourage civic and individual responsibility' (Australian Government, Department of

Social Services 2007).

- 5 The NT Intervention or, as it is more correctly known, Northern Territory National Emergency Response Act 2007, was a legislative response from the Federal Government to the Northern Territory Government's Inquiry into the Protection of Aboriginal Children from Sexual Abuse, or 'Little Children are Sacred' report. The legislation received bipartisan support in the Commonwealth parliament. It continues in force (ABC Online Indigenous n.d.).
- 6 Hereafter referred to as 'Standing Committee'.

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