

LIBERATING ABORIGINAL PEOPLE FROM VIOLENCE

This essay by **Sara Hudson** is based on a speech **Stephanie Jarrett** gave at the launch of her book; extracts of her speech are reproduced here with her permission.

At the launch of her book *Liberating Aboriginal People from Violence*, Stephanie Jarrett talked about the event that motivated her to research and write about violence against Aboriginal women:

In 1991, I saw the David Bradbury movie *State of Shock* about an Aboriginal man who killed his partner in a drunken rage. His lengthy prison sentence was later reduced due to a judge's sympathy for his harsh and troubled life, and he was released after only two years. The movie persuades the audience to be sympathetic to this 'hero,' who was also guest speaker at the movie session. Indeed, my first response was one of sympathy. I asked one of my Aboriginal students what she thought of the film. She said:

What about the woman? She's dead now. He killed her! I've travelled 2,000 kilometres to get away from that kind of violence in my family, and I find it upsetting to see films like that teaching people to feel sorry for Aboriginal men who are beating and killing the women!

A few years later during my thesis fieldwork, I began to wonder whether the violence among Aboriginal Australians had connections with a different culture. At an Aboriginal women's venue, the weekend's violence was a regular conversation topic. White women spoke about violence but not often, and more from concern. Among the town's Aboriginal women, young to

middle-aged, it was a topic of amusing conversation, or to join in blaming the victim. Here are some examples:

[He] couldn't go out fighting on Saturday night! He had a sore wrist and hand so he had to stay home!

And the women laugh as the storyteller gesticulates a sore wrist for all to see.

[He threw] boiling water over [her] on the weekend. She got just what she deserves too, leaving such pretty little girls like that. I'd do the same myself to her!

There were three men involved in the act, but the girl, well, she was one of those ... and you couldn't call what happened to her rape.

I found listening to these conversations physically upsetting, and I wanted to leave.



Dr Stephanie Jarrett undertook her Politics-Geography PhD at the University of Adelaide in the mid 1990s, with a focus on critically assessing policy and judicial responses to Aboriginal domestic violence. She also has a Graduate Diploma in Environmental Studies, University of Adelaide.

And I wondered whether I was witnessing a different cultural norm about violence.

Jarrett described some of the reactions she encountered in her project to document the pre-contact origins of Aboriginal violence, particularly against Aboriginal women. Reactions ranged from puzzlement to shock: 'She's doing WHAT?'

I must admit to feeling a tad uneasy while reading Jarrett's book. I was concerned that her description of the violence in traditional Aboriginal society could be misconstrued. My concerns were justified when Queensland's child protection commissioner, Tim Carmody, after reading an extract of Jarrett's book in *The Australian*, said that

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'violence is almost a cultural value' and implied we need special approaches to deal with the violence in many Aboriginal communities.* A hypothesis at odds with Jarrett's central tenet of integration and the abandonment of race-based separatist policies.

The high rate of violence among many Aboriginal communities is the legacy of failed government policies, which under the banner of Aboriginal self-determination have failed to integrate Aboriginal people into mainstream society. Instead of educating Aboriginal people on adapting their cultural practices to fit the social norms of a Western liberal democratic society, government policies have promoted a culture of separatism. Cultural relativism has allowed Aboriginal people to sit outside the law,

to practise 'pay-back' and 'marry' child brides. Judges have used culture as a mitigating factor in court sentencing, and most Australians continue to turn a blind eye to the horrific levels of violence in many Aboriginal communities.

Jarrett describes her background in feminism and social justice as having helped sustain her for the 20 or so years of dealing with the seemingly intractable issue of Aboriginal violence. She hopes the polarisation that dominates Aboriginal affairs can be put aside to focus on Aboriginal violence and its causes, arguing that both sides of mainstream politics bring important values to the task.

The Right in this country hold dear the liberal-democratic principles of freedom, universal individual human rights, non-relativism regarding violence, and freedom of speech. The Left in this country hold dear to speaking out against injustice and oppression by the powerful, including against male domination and violence against women.

She describes how she has never voted Liberal in her life, but has received crucial support from the Bennelong Society, a group associated with the Right. Indeed, politics should take second place to addressing the high rates of violence in many Aboriginal communities, and Jarrett is to be applauded for trying to bridge this divide. Yet, it remains to be seen whether those on the Left of politics are willing to remove their rose-tinted glasses and acknowledge the devastating impact of cultural traditions and practices on the high rate of intra-familial violence in Aboriginal communities. Still, as Bess Price acknowledges in a speech she gave at the launch of the book, Jarrett is 'one very brave whitefella' for speaking up about the level of violence in many Aboriginal communities today.

* Roseanne Barrett, 'Carmody refers to violent kinship,' *The Australian* (17 January 2013).

The following is an edited version of the speech Bess Price, Member for Stuart in the NT Legislative Assembly, gave at the launch of Stephanie Jarrett's book in Sydney and is reproduced here with Price's permission.

In the lifetime of my parents and my white parents-in-law, a police party led by a First World War veteran went through my people's country and shot dozens of men, women and children in response to the murder of one white man. They were not punished. In the early days, white station bosses could flog Aboriginal workers in my country with whips and get away with it. That frontier violence happened in my country much more recently than it happened down here in New South Wales. We still remember those times. Our parents lived through them and saw these things happening. Every Australian should know this history. Many still don't, or don't acknowledge it, or don't want to talk about it, especially on Australia Day.

Now all of that frontier violence is gone, although it seems to us that sometimes some police, in some places, can still kill our people and get away with it. There are those who have said to me that I shouldn't talk about Aboriginal violence because it will encourage racists. It will make Australians forget the white violence that we suffered. It will mean that we will lose some of our rights.

It will encourage people like Pauline Hanson and her followers. The people who talk that way are not losing their loved ones. We are burying our children and even our grandchildren. Our young men are filling the gaols. We need to talk about the reasons for that, and when the problem is our own then we need to admit that and do something about it ourselves.

My people do accept violence more than whitefellas do. In Australia, only the police are allowed by the law to use violence to keep order, to protect citizens from crime. And they have to be very careful they only use it as a last resort according to the rules. Not long ago, in my parents' lifetime, my people didn't have a police. Everybody had to learn to use violence to protect themselves and their families. There was nobody else to do it for them. All small-scale, hunter-gatherer societies are like that. Whitefella society used to be much more violent than it is now. My people were violent not

because they were black or Aboriginal but because they were human with no other choice.

My people have kept up that tradition of the use of violence. We all learn to fight and we all feel justified to fight when we think that we, or our loved ones, have been insulted or are in danger. We are still taught that men have the right to beat their wives. Women do not have equal rights under our customary law. The grog and the drugs and the petrol that whitefellas have brought into our country have made all of our problems much, much worse but they are still our problems.

There is much more violence now than ever before. Whitefellas are not killing us anymore; we are killing ourselves.

I have lived with this violence all my life. Too many of my loved ones have been killed, have killed themselves, or have lost their freedom because they have used violence on others. I carry too many scars on my body and on my soul to deny that my people are violent. Those who say violence, especially against women, is not part of our culture don't know what they are talking about. It has been part of every traditional culture, including whitefella culture in the time of my parents. We are part of the human family; we have problems with our traditional culture just like everybody else.

Now we Aboriginal people have to give up the willingness to use violence. To do that, we need a cultural change. This is up to us and we can do it. After a long, hard fight we became Australian citizens. We asked for equal rights. We can't now deny those rights to Aboriginal women to preserve our culture. We want the same rights that all other Australians have.

On Australia Day, I sat at Olympic Park with a big crowd of very excited and happy Sri Lankans. Most of them were also Australian citizens. There were Sri Lankan and Australian flags waving about. We watched a ritual battle going on. Sri Lanka won. I was surrounded by extremely happy, warm, welcoming people the same colour as me. They have a completely different culture and language.

I wanted Australia to win but I was also very happy for all those happy Sri Lankans. It meant so much to them to win for a change. And they seemed very happy to have my husband and me sitting with them. They certainly made us feel welcome. I was very happy on that Australia Day to be an Australian.

When I think of Australia I think of those Sri Lankans, of the Scotsman who loves my daughter, of the Sudanese

who guard our airport, of the Thais whose wonderful cooking I ate at a restaurant last night—and I think of my parents born in the desert out of contact with whitefellas and the rest of the world. I don't just think of the white policeman who murdered my people all those years ago. We live in a society where people from every culture on Earth can be citizens and live by Australian law while keeping their language and those parts of their culture that don't interfere with other people's rights.

To make our society work everybody, including whitefellas, have had to make changes. Whitefellas have had to become less racist and more tolerant. It is only in my lifetime that women have won equal rights in whitefella culture. All those people with different cultures have had to give something up to become Australian to gain the benefits Australia gives them. I am asking the same of my people. I want my people to give up violence because it is hurting our own people and nobody else. I am asking for equal rights for women because it is right and just, and our women and girls have suffered enough.

The Australian law that everybody else lives by is a good law if it can stop the violence in our communities and give us women equal rights.

I am now a lawmaker in the Northern Territory. I have four Aboriginal colleagues in the new Territory government. One of them is a Koori from this country down here. We've adopted him as a Territorian now. We were invited by political conservatives to join them in government. We were elected by the people of the Northern Territory in all their wonderful cultural diversity. We know we can help make laws that are good for all Territorians whatever their culture and skin colour. We have to give it a go. We Aboriginal people can accept change because we can make it happen ourselves. Australia is asking us to do that, to work it out for ourselves in partnership with all other Australians.

That's why I am so happy to support what Stephanie Jarrett is doing. She is one very brave whitefella. The same people who have insulted and attacked me

because I have said things about my own people in public that they don't agree with will attack her. Most of those people will be white or they will be of Aboriginal descent but know nothing about my people's history, politics, culture or problems. Their ignorance will not stop them from attacking her, and her whiteness will make her an easy target for them. Some of them will be from my part of the world, my people who disagree with me. That's democracy. Aboriginal people argue with each other as much as any other people do. We don't all think the same like some kind of cultural robots.

I know Stephanie. She is doing the work she is doing because she cares about the victims of violence as I do. She is not willing to sacrifice the lives and well-being of our young women and the freedom of our young men to preserve our culture or to fight racism. We Aboriginal people can determine our own future but only if we are prepared to accept the truth. We need the honesty of people like Stephanie to remind us of what that truth is. We already know but it is necessary that we are reminded from time to time by someone as decent and compassionate as Stephanie is.

I encourage Aboriginal people everywhere to read this book. If you disagree with what Stephanie has said, then debate with her and with me. Don't demonstrate, wave banners, shout insults, and burn flags. We're past that stage now. We need to talk politely and with wisdom. We can discuss and debate like adults and we can work out solutions to our problems with other caring Australians. Australia needs our help to solve these problems. The people of the Northern Territory have accepted that by giving us Aboriginal members of their government the chance to take part in making their laws. We should take up this challenge like caring, intelligent adults, not like cranky, immature adolescents.

We will get rid of the violence that is destroying our communities but there's a lot of hard work to be done first, and I thank Stephanie Jarrett for helping us to get on with that job.