

REFLECTIONS ON ‘SOCIAL JUSTICE IN THE FOREST’: Indigenous engagement with Australia’s forest industries

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Sue Feary’s paper argues that Aboriginal interests in public lands through land recovery regimes (e.g. native title, land rights) and cultural management, alongside structural economic change, such as land and labour shortage and emerging corporate responsibility values, when considered together, can enhance Indigenous participation in the forest industry.

In my response, I thought I would use this opportunity, although slightly unrelated, to reflect briefly on my own family attachment to the ‘forest’ and its industry. Beyond this reflection, my response will examine Sue Feary’s emphasis on economic outcomes to examine how economic participation has in different ways been wedded to land recovery and self-determination in Indigenous public policy.

I am really happy to have the opportunity to read and comment on Sue’s paper. Much of the account of the forest industry made sense to me. My mother’s family have a long attachment to the Pilliga scrub in north-western NSW. From family stories it’s clear the history of working on the timber mills and camp life in the scrub are recalled with great affection and is an ongoing renewed process of connection, such as through the maintenance of family graves and homage to remnant structures. This continues today as members of the Ruttley family have been involved with the negotiations over forest

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use and identification and protection of Aboriginal sites.² At the same time, Robyn Ruttley of Baradine Local Aboriginal Land Council, voiced strong opposition to the appropriation of the Aboriginal flag by anti-logging environmental activists in correspondence to the *Koori Mail* in asserting the importance of the mill in Aboriginal employment.³ I understand a complex mix of attachment to place enmeshed with the industry that the Pilliga supported and of pride at having been gainfully employed. I also wonder if the particular relationship to the Pilliga scrub contributed to a different experience of welfare authorities and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal relationships amongst the Pilliga scrub community. An old photo, taken in the Pilliga of my great-great grandparents (George and Emma Ruttley) with their 11 mostly adult children (including my great grandmother, Annie Ruttley) scattered around them also includes, in the outer circle of the photo, two non-Aboriginal people, noted on the reverse side as 'friends from the sawmill'.

My highlighting of the above points indicates my bias in understanding Indigenous engagement with Australia's forest. Sue Feary's paper similarly explores Aboriginal relationships with the Eden forests but develops this further to investigate the economic potential of Aboriginal people's engagement with the Forest industry. Feary acknowledges this is a contested proposition where different conservation perspectives and historical association continue to rupture this potential alignment or 'match'.

Feary suggests an 'ideal situation would be to bring together the three spheres of the Indigenous domain – maintaining culture, connecting to country and economic independence in projects that involve working on country to achieve social and environmental benefits' (p. 2). This was succinctly expressed by one research participant as, 'a place to look after, a place to live and a place to derive economic benefit from'.

Feary outlines some examples of this economic potential within the context of Indigenous priorities and differing values of 'nature'. Initially, ecotourism (e.g.

² For example, a recent media release by the Department of Environment and Climate Change outlined how Mervyn Sutherland (from Baradine) and Aboriginal heritage officers identified 30 more Aboriginal sites in the Pilliga nature Reserve. ('Aboriginal sites discovered in Pilliga Nature reserve', 'Media Release', Friday 8th June, 2007).

³ Ruttley, R., 'Insensitive use of the flag', Letters to the Editors, *Koori Mail*, 12th March 2003.

Umburra Cultural Tours) is identified but beyond this Feary surveys what she calls the 'extractive end' of forestry. For example, site surveys for Forest NSW and others has been a significant source of income for the Eden LALC which employs an Aboriginal Heritage Officer and several part-time sites officers. While the sites survey work alongside archaeologists and there is at times discomfort with how they in turn frame and prioritise Indigenous knowledge, the presence of Indigenous sites officers might also be seen as culturally affirming and developing *and* shifts the work of the archaeologist. The other examples Feary examines include plantations on Aboriginal land and the running of a sawmill by the Napranum community in west Cape York. These examples draw attention to the potential synergies around forest industry and Aboriginal interests in land.

I would like to highlight the emphasis on economic development and offer some critique. This is by no means a criticism of Feary's paper, but rather an attempt to understand the broader political rationalities that have influenced the administration of Aboriginal affairs. My suggestion here is that Aboriginal interests have been advanced when they have been aligned with the market economy. This is evident in two recent examples, but has a long presence in the administration of Aboriginal affairs. The Commonwealth's intervention in the NT was initially said to be a response to the report into sexual abuse of children in Aboriginal communities. As the emergency intervention unfolded it's been suggested organised paedophilia, chronic community dysfunction including alcohol fuelled violence, disorder and lawlessness characterise Aboriginal communities. Presumably, this would require a social welfare response, yet a key component of the intervention has been the appointment of a *Business manager* to the larger NT Aboriginal communities. Amongst other things, this intervention can also be viewed as following the trend of contraction of the role of Government in the social realm, or the conversion of the social and welfare role of the state to resemble that of the market. Noel Pearson (2000, 2007) has loudly and proudly mobilised this neo-liberal ideology in the Aboriginal domain. He argues the welfare state has engineered a toxic culture of dependency where states services are passively received and experienced as a destination rather than temporary support in between real economic participation.

Pearson's plan for his community involves redefining the relationship between Aboriginal people and the (welfare) state based on principles of reciprocity and real

economic participation. Where welfare equals poison, the real economy demands responsibility and reciprocity and therefore brings about different social and cultural behaviour where one can experience real freedom. His equating of 'The Economic is the Social' suggests there has been 'too much separation of the economic from the social' (2000:31). Pearson is suggesting that every economic relationship is also necessarily a social relationship therefore social problems connect up with economic relationships and issues. The deficiency of the welfare state as Pearson suggests, has been the focus on behavioural or social problems rather than economic.

While this seems to draw on a host of political theories to explain the world we live in, initiatives to create market participation and modernisation are not without precedent. The post-referendum appointed Council for Aboriginal Affairs (CAA) similarly configured Indigenous interests in terms of economic development. This can be seen in the Council's earliest initiatives, the creation in 1968 of the "Capital Fund for Aboriginal Enterprise" and later models for communities to become incorporated as self-funding economic units engaged in various commercial enterprises.

The recognition of land rights in NSW with the passing of the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act 1983* also configured Aboriginal communities organised locally as land councils on a loosely culturally accommodating model, as enterprising units. The ALRA established the three-tier community driven land council network, a fifteen year funding arrangement to support enterprises and sustain the network into the future and a mechanism for land recovery. The ALRA and the motto picked up by NSWALC is to 'Liberate and empower Aboriginal people of New South Wales through economic and social independence'. However, what has become clear in my study of the ALRA is that the enterprises established in the early period following the Act have for various reasons, including issues of capacity and skills, racism and exploitation by unscrupulous non-Aboriginal operators, failed. Recent amendments to the ALRA further compel LALCs to develop a 'Community Land and Business Plan' and in order to continue to support their community have to sell, develop or otherwise become entrepreneurial with their land assets.

I have had some interesting discussions with colleagues in my attempts to problematise the emphasis on economic development as the vehicle to address social and political

rights and the lived experience of chronic disadvantage. In one conversation, a colleague asked what the alternative would be: *dependency*? This isn't what I'm suggesting, rather, my intentions are to draw out the considerable emphasis on economic participation of Aboriginal people, organised as communities, in the various shifts and turns in Indigenous public policy. Sue Feary's article is continuous with this but also brings a new perspective in her discussion of 'cultural match' and synergies.