

Interview of Jeff McMullen by Murrumu Walubara Yidindji

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Murrumu Walubara Yidindji: Jeff, if you could just say where you're from.

Jeff McMullen: Jeff McMullen. I'm a journalist of 50 years experience and a world wanderer.

Murrumu: Jeff, Thanks for your time today to speak with Black Lore, Tribal Edition. A lot of people are speaking of sovereignty. What is your opinion of sovereignty. You've heard a lot of black stories. How is it seen by the mainstream public?

Jeff: I think white Australia is confused about the multiple perspectives on First Peoples. The old sense of sovereignty was the conqueror took sovereignty, lived sovereignty and wrote sovereignty into any document. Any law was built on this notion of conquest that delivered sovereignty. But we know that under international law going back to the times when such conquest happened, that this is a sham. Most Australians have not read enough history and certainly not enough law to really understand what it is. So in the eyes of average middle Australia sovereignty is a word that looms as a threat to the status quo, to all that they know. And you can bet that as the sovereignty movement asserts its rightful authority that there will be a backlash and that all the slogans will be brought out to say that these people will take your back yard in Perth, Sydney or Cairns. It will not be in reasonable terms of discussion. The truth is that most Australians don't understand the longer timelines of history. There is great ignorance as to what sovereignty is.

Murrumu: You could say that about land rights, native title, Mabo. Any inkling of black land rights or sovereignty has always been met with fear. The truth fears nothing but concealment. So who is controlling the information? That is why we have programs like this. People like yourself, story-tellers, have a curious and questioning nature. Why is it so hard for Australian's to learn from our standing?

Jeff: To learn the truth is deeply unsettling to White Australia's view of itself. Why is the response to Treaty, Sovereignty, Justice, all of those attempts to find a language that says "Let's be reasonable here" so deeply threatening to Australia is because the long delusional thinking that has gone on would be over suddenly. That psychological guilt still hangs around in Australia. That cleansing and truth has not yet arrived. We haven't got the political maturity to see that until we recognise all of this, that's the real recognition that is required. The truth of things. And that means that people would have to go back and do the work and find out at the time that those white sails came into the harbour or even that the Endeavour went up the coast, what was the international law? The law of this continent and the accepted law between all of these conquering powers? Then you start to see the sham of the so-called modern nation that is written into the

whitefella constitution is all on shifting sand to say the least. It's deceitful, built on slight-of-hand, misconstrued and lost-in-translation. My own view is that there is this psychological unease in White Australia largely based on guilt because then you need to acknowledge invasion, execution, massacre, injustice and ultimately, responsibility. I still think Kevin Gilbert was right. The aboriginal writer that had the foresight to say that the Whitefella will never do this. I don't see the country awakening to this. But there are legal minds in White Australia, including the former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser, that have actually advised aboriginal people to tell White Australia, "Get out of our face!" In Fraser's words he said ' If I were you, I'd just say to government, "Get stuffed!" ' I can't recall a Prime Minister ever speaking that way. I think there are white Australians that have an inkling of what sovereignty is but I want to come back to the black view of sovereignty and say that part of the confusion is white eyes is created by the fact that people who have been part of the constitutional recognition discussion have minimised the importance or the possibility of sovereignty and that sows further division. Instead of patiently explaining to White Australia how self-determination is another word that is misunderstood. If you see these things as fundamental human rights people wouldn't argue about it. That is written into every covenant on earth. All people have that right to determine their own destiny. And then the assertion of what kind of state you are going to fashion. Not every people would say they want nation status. Some people want to amalgamate so they can form their legal agreements but you have a coherence and a clarity going back to how did this get started, instead of what we have done in Australia. We muddled it incredibly, right from the beginning of those white sails on the harbour.

Murrumu: Furthermore, I think that the Commonwealth Constitution of 1901 clearly doesn't mention, acknowledge or recognise the Aboriginal or Torres Strait Island people. From my limited understanding of constitutional law, if we are not included in that founding document then how can the executive arm of government force it's law upon a people yet to be recognised? These are some of the questions that are not being covered by the constitutional recognition crew that are spruiking the government line.

Jeff: The constitution of 1901 and the Federation period itself is so oozing of white supremacist thinking, it's "White Australia". It is the constitution for the White Australia Policy. And therefore, the exclusion is intentional. It was meant to deny or look right through the First Peoples. Not only with the Terra Nullius cruelty, but to say that even now "You don't exist". "You are not part of the discussion". That exclusion is so profound. It's ongoing. The limited degree of inclusion or recognition that people are discussing is largely to mop up the stain of racism, discrimination, denial and exclusion. But it doesn't address the fundamental injustice of what occurred in the beginning. It does not go to the question of sovereignty. But going back to the first appointed government expert committee, when you get to the end of their report, the committee tries to explain why they say this is not to deny the possibility of further discussion of treaty and sovereignty, but then they have all sorts of qualifiers that say that if you had local autonomy that may not be necessary. There is a lot of dissembling or "blah, blah, blah" in the last part of the report that avoids the discussion of the reality that most aboriginal people are saying: What matters most is the health and well-being that they know is about relationship to country. The essence of what it is to be here is being

denied. I hear some strong prominent voices that say “Well, take the small incremental step”. But that’s like saying “Let’s get rid of a little piece of racism, one little part of discrimination”, without recognising what will be required to really see the truth. It’s the immaturity of the discussion. The same government that is handing out knighthoods to Prince Phillip is talking about recognising the First People? No! Seriously not!

Murrumu: It’s an interesting point that you raise. It has to come down to the people that you are seeing today. The sovereign people. To these people to put the case to the people of Australia. The Yidinji people. We are not about kicking people out of their homes. Far from it. We want you to be part of our lands. Our creator and we see it as a blessing. Being on our land. Those views are being put across strongly within the Yidinji. But to the wider nation that may not be happening. I wondering now, “Where do you see the leadership?” “Is there leadership in the Australian parliament?”

Jeff: I think there is no real change in the heart and soul of the government. And even society has not shown the willingness to change. I’m cautious in saying that because I don’t want it to be cynicism, but realism says at the moment that the government can’t find any words to describe why this is important. They are still really playing with very patronising ways to make people calm down. The government is more focussed on changing the language of discussion, of finding distractions from a serious, mature discussion. I don’t see that changing. I think the only course is for the First Peoples to assert it, to live it, and to be grounded in that whole well-being that comes with knowing who you are. And then allowing the rest of this stumbling circus to go it’s merry way. I think Malcolm Fraser had a certain kind of raw logic in saying “If necessary, tell the government to get stuffed!”

Murrumu: You’re listening to Black Lore – Tribal Edition, right across the country, thanks to the National Indigenous Radio Service. Thanks to regular listeners in Europe and overseas, in New Zealand. Before you leave this planet, what do you want to see for your kids and their children?

Jeff: My yearning is that the whole of humanity will see the wisdom of the most ancient intellectual system of knowledge. The whole science of the 21st century is in fact the ancient reason of the First Peoples. We have the unbroken story of the longest living culture. All those expressions are really saying there is a wise way to live. Now if we don’t awaken to that soon, clearly with 7 billion people the earth is under unprecedented pressures. We are going through extinction of species. We have a choice to be the custodian, sentient beings, or to be this predatory force. We require the thinking, the philosophy, the way of being in tune with all things. It is our role but it’s also possible that we will abandon this role. If we do, we almost certainly limit the time of our species on earth. We have not come close to being around as long as the whale, old man ‘roo, all of these clever species that have adapted because of their understanding of their place in this scheme of things. The central question for humanity is bound up in how we use this knowledge. So much of the learning that has shaped this thought has been given to me by Aboriginal people, who don’t see humanity as broken up into tribes, who see that we are an enlightened species. This is not romanticising past ways of living. It is saying that for

our future, for the health and wellbeing of all connectedness and living creatures, it requires us to be sentient custodians and that is what we need to practice and to put into our everyday, not just our theoretical approach to things. The destruction of species is bound up with so many things that are out of kilter. As an older person I have tried to be open to that. I have learned from people in the Amazon, the frozen parts of the world, from Jacques Costeau. And truly the elders have wisdom. It is all connected.

Murrumu: You're right there. There is a saying that 1788 is fast becoming 1984. When you look at the prisons, the corrections facilities, juvenile incarceration, poor health and many other things, when it comes to the bloodline and the hereditary of this country, there is a systematic genocide taking place in front of us. A lot of people can't see that.

Jeff: I hate to say it but I have seen the genocides up so close that I realise that my instincts may be dark. I see this because I went to Cambodia, to Guatemala, Rwanda - a million people killed in 100 days, it's astonishing what humans can do to ourselves when life is out of kilter. But another part of me found in those same places, the Maya Quiche (in Guatemala) showed me how they had the knowledge to restore the balance (even after that slaughter). We have those two aspects of human nature, that choice, all of the time. And I think that with reason, it's almost common sense to say that humanity existed here, in an unbroken story, for longer than anywhere else. Don't romanticise it. Draw the real lessons from it. What were the secrets of that resilience, and strength and that beauty. Multi-lingual. Multi-cultural. It had all of the aspects of diversity. It is about getting back. We were meant to move on the country. We were meant to listen to the country sing to us. We have lost that. We are as humans losing that closeness to country. But when you see people find it again, that is the natural way that we are meant to live.

Murrumu: We have been talking about those things. About how it wasn't some sort of sporadic tribal horde improvising. The Federal Court of Australia said that the Yindinji has its own land tenure. It has its own ability to hold court. Here before Captain Cook and still here today. Using the Crown's own paperwork the evidence is very clear that the tribal sovereign is still here today. We hope to share that. Do you think that there is a message to Australia that people want them to go back to England? Most of the people here want them to share the wealth and the benefit. Is that message getting out there do you think?

Jeff: I don't think it is at the moment. I think that people are wary because they haven't thought it through as yet, but you know that if you look at it another way most Australian's are almost cynical about federal, state, territory and even local government. They are certainly untrusting. They don't really think government is to do with their family and their daily decisions. ... I don't think that it is the thing that comes into their daily life and shapes their thinking and their family. It's just this controlling aspect. ... People get numb to the system, to the state. ... The country isn't awake to all of this as yet. Most of the words that we have been discussing can initially seem fearful. If you actually said you are talking about freedom, real freedom, a freedom that has responsibility that goes along with it, then you're talking about living in a way that makes sense, where you feel fully human, where family and community, relationship to other

living creatures, is all within a reasonable balance, I think you would find that people would come into a realisation that sovereignty is just the rightful balance. And that those that have been denied that for so long are really only returning things to their natural balance. So that instead it being just another twist to the dispossession story, people would see that they are not losing anything, they are being invited into a another different way of living. I don't think that that is being unrealistic but that takes patience to explain that in terms that people will truly understand.

Murrumu: Yes. I think that that is beautiful too. In terms of Yindidji, that is exactly what we are saying, we're saying look we are not the banks, we are not going to kick you out of your homes, but if you want to be part of the tribal way of life we should have the capacity to offer that to you and protect you under our laws. Whether you're from Europe or some other continent but living on our land. But if you want to be Australian that's ok too. Australians can look after their own land. So I hope that that message is getting out there. So what is your message of wisdom that you can share with us? Australians may be a little bit shy of immersing themselves in a tribal life. Or just asking for information, because most Australians have never had a relationship with an Aboriginal or a tribal person.

Jeff: On a day like this when you look around and you see the many shades of human being that are gathered, and all of the different languages and creativity there probably is an easy way to explain it, which is, in the longer timelines the First People here had greater diversity, linguistically and culturally, it was not one big conformist group living the same way across this huge land so the recipe for this people in the 21st century is there in the most ancient practice of the First Peoples and I think that if it were to be explained in that way it might suddenly open the door to thinking now in the 21st century. We are now, in the world, among a handful of places that has this true human diversity, and therefore the foundations of a 21st century Australia, are actually to go back to that older respect and acknowledgement of this kind of extraordinary difference, culturally, language, skin, ceremony, so varied around the country. There is a way to do that and therefore you give people freedom instead of forcing them into some sort of mainstreaming assimilation... into what ? Team Australia? Captain Tony on that ship of fools. That's not what most people in this modern society want. So there is a connection between the most ancient practices and what might give us a way to go forward. We've probably got to find new words because the old words frighten people. It's humanity now. It's largely about finding within this country ways to recognise that people may want to live quite differently in different parts of the country. We have a peacefulness here. That's the inheritance. Why did our First Peoples not follow the madness of other parts of the world with centuries and centuries of slaughter? We ought to see that. That is the lesson. That there is something here that is very important and that is different. And if we bring that out into the conversation maybe we awaken an interest in society and then they will see the strength and beauty.



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