

**Marcia Langton's** visionary Boyer lectures presented mining as something that happens in remote communities, often on "indigenous land". Mining's greatest expansion is now to be expected just west of the Great Dividing Range, not so remote after all, and on Crown leasehold and freehold land. Traditional owners have rights and privileges that non-traditional owners cannot claim. Under British common law "native" or "aboriginal" title is not extinguished by a subsequent claim, and therefore minerals occurring in land covered by native title do not belong to the Crown. Traditional owners have a right to negotiate with mining companies; whitefella landholders have a duty to negotiate. Holders of native title can drive a hard bargain; the rest of us cannot.

Professor Langton imagines Aboriginal entrepreneurship will transform the interior of northern Australia into self-sustaining communities that will outlast the mining boom. Aboriginal entrepreneurs have yet to take over the stores that for generations have served homelands, which, though owned by the community, are usually run by whitefellas.

Professor Langton celebrates the undeniable facts that "since 1967 the mining industry has built 26 towns, 12 ports and additional bulk handling infrastructure at many existing ports, 25 airfields and over 2000 kilometres of railway line". What she doesn't say is that when the payload has been shipped out, the towns, airfields and railways will all be stripped. What can't be carried away will be left to rot. The railways that cross Queensland's Bowen Basin are not built for passengers, but for coal. Despite the volume of coal being shipped out, there is no visible increase in economic activity along the roads.

With modern techniques of extraction, coal mining is not a major employer; workers are needed in numbers only during initial development. The laying off of thousands of workers in the Queensland mining industry is explained by the chief executive of the Queensland Resources Council, Michael Roche, as "a sad but inevitable consequence of a collapse in coal prices and rising production costs". Narrower profit margins do not constitute sufficient reason to cut the size of an operation; the jobs that have gone from Queensland mining were always going to go.

Years ago Twiggy Forrest boasted that Fortescue had jobs for 50,000 Aboriginal workers. (The claim now appears as part of the Australian Employment Covenant.)

Those of us who thought it was illegal for any Australian employer to reserve jobs for members of any ethnic group might find this strange, but the same strangeness affects Professor Langton's whole discourse.

"We Aboriginal people" in Professor Langton's version, speak with one voice; observers who are concerned Aboriginal corporations often operate in the interests of single clans rather than whole "communities" must hold their peace.

Professor Langton's Aboriginal heroes are Noel Pearson and Galarrwuy Yunupingu, universally

esteemed by urban whitefellas, less so by their own.

The corporatisation of Aboriginal communities offered individuals with entrepreneurial skills opportunities that were not available to the majority, for whom there have been no seats on the gravy train. Aborigines for the first time must get used to increasing inequality, the inevitable concomitant of their newfound capitalism.

Professor Langton excoriates us all for failing to address Aboriginal poverty, as if billions in taxes had not disappeared into the sand. For her, welfare dependency was a Machiavellian strategy, not the result of a desire to reduce suffering.

In her second lecture Professor Langton presented us with a clutch of straw men, namely "opinion leaders who hang on to the idea of the new 'noble savage'", "who tolerate Aboriginal people as caretakers of wilderness only" and "only tolerate Aboriginal people living on their land if they live in poverty and remain uneducated and isolated".

I have never met any such "opinion leader". I have met hundreds of whitefellas who have spent their lives working for Aboriginal peoples in remote communities, without so much as a Christmas card from any of the mining corporations.

It should make no difference to the validity of Professor Langton's argument that she has received significant amounts of funding from her friends at Rio Tinto, Woodside and Santos. She is the proof of the pudding. She has put her mouth where their money is, which is fair exchange.

For most Aborigines, that option is not available.

#### CITATION (AGLC STYLE)

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