

# Breaking the Australian Silence

John Pilger

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## 2009 City of Sydney Peace Prize Lecture

### **Breaking the Australian Silence**

John Pilger

*Speech delivered at the Sydney Opera House, 5 November, 2009*

Thank you all for coming tonight, and my thanks to the City of Sydney and especially to the Sydney Peace Foundation for awarding me the Peace Prize. It's an honour I cherish, because it comes from where I come from.

I am a seventh generation Australian. My great-great grandfather landed not far from here, on November 8th, 1821. He wore leg irons, each weighing four pounds. His name was Francis McCarty. He was an Irishman, convicted of the crime of insurrection and "uttering unlawful oaths". In October of the same year, an 18 year old girl called Mary Palmer stood in the dock at Middlesex Gaol and was sentenced to be transported to New South Wales for the term of her natural life. Her crime was stealing in order to live. Only the fact that she was pregnant saved her from the gallows. She was my great-great grandmother. She was sent from the ship to the Female Factory at Parramatta, a notorious prison where every third Monday, male convicts were brought for a "courting day" -- a rather desperate measure of social engineering. Mary and Francis met that way and were married on October 21<sup>st</sup>, 1823.

Growing up in Sydney, I knew nothing about this. My mother's eight siblings used the word "stock" a great deal. You either came from "good stock" or "bad stock". It was unmentionable that we came from bad stock – that we had what was called "the stain".

One Christmas Day, with all of her family assembled, my mother broached the subject of our criminal origins, and one of my aunts almost swallowed her teeth. "Leave them dead and buried, Elsie!" she said. And we did – until many years later and my own research in Dublin and London led to a television film that revealed the full horror of our "bad stock". There was outrage. "Your son," my aunt Vera wrote to Elsie, "is no better than a damn communist". She promised never to speak to us again.

The Australian silence has unique features.

Growing up, I would make illicit trips to La Perouse and stand on the sandhills and look at people who were said to have died off. I would gape at the children of my age, who were said to be dirty, and feckless. At high school, I read a text book by the celebrated historian, Russel Ward, who wrote: "We are civilized today and they are not." "They", of course, were the Aboriginal people.

My real Australian education began at the end of the 1960s when Charlie Perkins and his mother, Hetti, took me to the Aboriginal compound at Jay Creek in the Northern Territory. We had to smash down the gate to get in.

The shock at what I saw is unforgettable. The poverty. The sickness. The despair. The quiet anger. I began to recognise and understand the Australian silence.

Tonight, I would like to talk *about* this silence: about how it affects our national life, the way we see the world, and the way we are manipulated by great power which speaks through an invisible government of propaganda that subdues and limits our political imagination and ensures we are always at war – against our own first people and those seeking refuge, or in someone else’s country.

Last July, Prime Minister Kevin Rudd said this, and I quote: “It’s important for us all to remember here in Australia that Afghanistan has been a training ground for terrorists worldwide, a training ground also for terrorists in South-East-Asia, reminding us of the reasons that we are in the field of combat and reaffirming our resolve to remain committed to that cause.”

There is no truth in this statement. It is the equivalent of his predecessor John Howard’s lie that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction.

Shortly before Kevin Rudd made that statement, American planes bombed a wedding party in Afghanistan. At least sixty people were blown to bits, including the bride and groom and many children. That’s the fifth wedding party attacked, in our name.

The prime minister was standing outside a church on a Sunday morning when he made his statement. No reporter challenged him. No one said the war was a fraud: that it began as an American vendetta following 9/11, in which not a single Afghan was involved. No one put it to Kevin Rudd that our perceived enemy in Afghanistan were introverted tribesmen who had no quarrel with Australia and didn’t give a damn about south-east Asia and just wanted the foreign soldiers out of their country. Above all, no one said: “Prime Minister, There is no war on terror. It’s a hoax. But there is a war *of* terror waged by governments, including the Australian government, *in our name*.” That wedding party, Prime Minister, was blown to bits by one of the latest smart weapons, such as the Hellfire bomb that sucks the air out of the lungs. In our name.

During the first world war, the British prime minister David Lloyd George confided to the editor of the *Manchester Guardian*: “If people really knew [the truth], the war would be stopped tomorrow. But of course they don’t know and they can’t know.”

What has changed? Quite a lot actually. As people have become more aware, propaganda has become more sophisticated.

One of the founders of modern propaganda was Edward Bernays, an American who believed that people in free societies could be lied to and regimented without them realising. He invented a euphemism for propaganda -- “public relations”, or PR. “What matters,” he said, “is the illusion.” Like Kevin Rudd’s stage-managed press

conferences outside his church, what matters is the illusion. The symbols of Anzac are constantly manipulated in this way. Marches. Medals. Flags. The pain of a fallen soldier's family. Serving in the military, says the prime minister, is Australia's highest calling. The squalor of war, the killing of civilians has no reference. What matters is the illusion.

The aim is to ensure our silent complicity in a war *of* terror and in a massive increase in Australia's military arsenal. Long range cruise missiles are to be targeted at our neighbours. The Rudd government and the Pentagon have launched a competition to build military robots which, it is said, will do the "army's dirty work" in "urban combat zones". What urban combat zones? What dirty work?

Silence.

"I confess," wrote Lord Curzon, viceroy of India, over a century ago, "that countries are pieces on a chessboard upon which is being played out a great game for the domination of the world." We Australians have been in the service of the Great Game for a very long time. Do the young people who wrap themselves in the flag at Gallipoli every April understand that only the lies have changed – that sanctifying blood sacrifice in colonial invasions is meant to prepare us for the next one??

When Prime Minister Robert Menzies sent Australian soldiers to Vietnam in the 1960s, he described them as a 'training team', requested by a beleaguered government in Saigon. It was a lie. A senior official of the Department of External affairs wrote this secret truth: "Although we have stressed the fact *publicly* that our assistance was given in response to an invitation by the government of South Vietnam, our offer was in fact made following a request from the United States government."

Two versions. One for us, one for them.

Menzies spoke incessantly about "the downward thrust of Chinese communism". What has changed? Outside the church, Kevin Rudd said we were in Afghanistan to stop another downward thrust. Both were lies.

During the Vietnam war, the Department of Foreign Affairs made a rare complaint to Washington. They complained that the British knew more about America's objectives than its committed Australian ally. An assistant secretary of state replied. "We have to inform the British to keep them on side," he said. "You are with us, come what may."

How many more wars are we to be suckered into before we break our silence?

How many more distractions must we, as a people, endure before we begin the job of righting the wrongs in our own country?

"It's time we sang from the world's rooftops," said Kevin Rudd in opposition, "[that] despite Iraq, America is an overwhelming force for good in the world [and] I look forward to working with the great American democracy, the arsenal of freedom ...".

Since the second world war, the arsenal of freedom has overthrown 50 governments, including democracies, and crushed some 30 liberation movements. Millions of people all over the world have been driven out of their homes and subjected to crippling embargos. Bombing is as American as apple pie.

In his acceptance of the 2005 Nobel Prize for Literature, Harold Pinter asked this question: “Why is the systematic brutality, the widespread atrocities, the ruthless suppression of independent thought of Stalinist Russia well known in the West while American criminal actions never happened. Nothing ever happened. Even while it was happening it never happened. It didn’t matter. It was of no interest.”

In Australia, we are trained to respect this censorship by omission. An invasion is not an invasion if “we” do it. Terror is not terror if “we” do it. A crime is not a crime if “we” commit it. It didn’t happen. Even while it was happening it didn’t happen. It didn’t matter. It was of *no* interest.

In the arsenal of freedom we have two categories of victims. The innocent people killed in the Twin Towers were worthy victims. The innocent people killed by Nato bombers in Afghanistan are unworthy victims. Israelis are worthy. Palestinians are unworthy. It gets complicated. Kurds who rose against Saddam Hussein were worthy. But Kurds who rise against the Turkish regime are unworthy. Turkey is a member of Nato. They’re in the arsenal of freedom.

The Rudd government justifies its proposals to spend billions on weapons by referring to what the Pentagon calls an “arc of instability” that stretches across the world. Our enemies are apparently everywhere -- from China to the Horn of Africa. In fact, an arc of *instability* does indeed stretch across the world and is maintained by the United States. The US Air Force calls this “full spectrum dominance”. More than 800 American bases are ready for war.

These bases protect a system that allows one per cent of humanity to control 40 per cent of wealth: a system that bails out just one bank with \$180 billion – that’s enough to eliminate malnutrition in the world, and provide education for every child, and water and sanitation for all, and to reverse the spread of malaria. On September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the United Nations reported that on that day 36,615 children had died from poverty. But that was not news.

Journalists and politicians like to say the world changed as a result of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks. In fact, for those countries under attack by the arsenal of freedom, nothing has changed. What *has* changed is not news.

According to the great whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg, a military coup has taken place in the United States, with the Pentagon now ascendant in every aspect of foreign policy.

It doesn’t matter who is president – George Bush or Barack Obama. Indeed, Obama has stepped up Bush’s wars and started his own war in Pakistan. Like Bush, he is

threatening Iran, a country Hillary Clinton said she was prepared to “annihilate”. Iran’s crime is its independence. Having thrown out America’s favourite dictator, the Shah, Iran is the only resource-rich Muslim country beyond American control. It doesn’t occupy anyone else’s land and hasn’t attacked any country -- unlike Israel, which is nuclear-armed and dominates and divides the Middle East on America’s behalf.

In Australia, we are not told this. It’s taboo. Instead, we dutifully celebrate the illusion of Obama, the global celebrity, the marketing dream. Like Calvin Klein, brand Obama offers the thrill of a new image attractive to liberal sensibilities, if not to the Afghan children he bombs.

This is modern propaganda in action, using a kind of reverse racism – the same way it deploys gender and class as seductive tools. In Barack Obama’s case, what matters is not his race or his fine words, but the power he serves.

In an essay for *The Monthly* entitled Faith in Politics, Kevin Rudd wrote this about refugees: “The biblical injunction to care for the stranger in our midst is clear. The parable of the Good Samaritan is but one of many which deal with the matter of how we should respond to a vulnerable stranger in our midst .... We should never forget that the reason we have a UN convention on the protection of refugees is in large part because of the horror of the Holocaust when the West (including Australia) turned its back on the Jewish people of occupied Europe who sought asylum.”

Compare that with Rudd’s words the other day. “I make absolutely no apology whatsoever,” he said, “for taking a hard line on illegal immigration to Australia ... a tough line on asylum seekers.”

Are we not fed up with this kind of hypocrisy? The use of the term “illegal immigrants” is both false and cowardly. The few people struggling to reach our shores are not illegal. International law is clear – they are legal. And yet Rudd, like Howard, sends the navy against them and runs what is effectively a concentration camp on Christmas Island. How shaming. Imagine a shipload of white people fleeing a catastrophe being treated like this.

The people in those leaking boats demonstrate the kind of guts Australians are said to admire. But that’s not enough for the Good Samaritan in Canberra, as he plays to the same bigotry which, as he wrote in his essay, “turned its back on the Jewish people of occupied Europe” . .

Why isn’t this spelt out? Why have weasel words like “border protection” become the currency of a media crusade against fellow human beings we are told to fear, mostly Muslim people? Why have journalists, whose job is to keep the record straight, become complicit in this campaign?

After all, Australia has had some of the most outspoken and courageous newspapers in the world. Their editors were agents of people, not power. The *Sydney Monitor*

under Edward Smith Hall exposed the dictatorial rule of Governor Darling and helped bring freedom of speech to the colony. Today, most of the Australian media speaks for power, not people. Turn the pages of the major newspapers; look at the news on TV. Like border protection, we have mind protection. There's a consensus on what we read, see and hear: on how we should define our politics and view the rest of the world. Invisible boundaries keep out facts and opinion that are unacceptable.

This is actually a brilliant system, requiring no instructions, no self-censorship. Journalists know *not* what to do. Of course, now and then the censorship is direct and crude. SBS has banned its journalists from using the phrase "Palestinian land" to describe illegally occupied Palestine. They must describe these territories as "the subject of negotiation". That is the equivalent of somebody taking over your home at the point of a gun and the SBS newsreader describing it as "the subject of negotiation".

In no other democratic country is public discussion of the brutal occupation of Palestine as limited as in Australia. Are we aware of the sheer scale of the crime against humanity in Gaza? Twenty-nine members of one family -- babies, grannies -- are gunned down, blown up, buried alive, their home bulldozed. Read the United Nations report, written by an eminent Jewish judge, Richard Goldstone.

Those who speak for the arsenal of freedom are working hard to bury the UN report. For only one nation, Israel, has a "right to exist" in the Middle East: only one nation has a right to attack others. Only one nation has the impunity to run a racist apartheid regime with the approval of the western world, and with the prime minister and the deputy prime minister of Australia fawning over its leaders.

In Australia, any diversion from this unspoken impunity attracts a campaign of craven personal abuse and intimidation usually associated with dictatorships. But we are not a dictatorship. We are a democracy.

Are we? Or are we a Murdochcracy.

Rupert Murdoch set the media war agenda shortly before the invasion of Iraq when he said, "There's going to be collateral damage. And if you really want to be brutal about it, better get it done now."

More than a million people have been killed in Iraq as a result of that invasion -- "an episode", according to one study, "more deadly than the Rwandan genocide". In our name. Are we aware of this in Australia?

I once walked along Mutanabi Street in Baghdad. The atmosphere was wonderful. People sat in cafes, reading. Musicians played. Poets recited. Painters painted. This was the cultural heart of Mesopotamia, the great civilisation to which we in the West owe a great deal, including the written word. The people I spoke to were both Sunni and Shia, but they called themselves Iraqis. They were cultured and proud.

Today, they are fled or dead. Mutanabi Street has been blown to bits. In Baghdad, the great museums and libraries are looted. The universities are sacked. And people who once took coffee with each other, and married each other, have been turned into enemies. “Building democracy”, said Howard and Bush and Blair.

One of my favourite Harold Pinter plays is *Party Time*. It’s set in an apartment in a city like Sydney. A party is in progress. People are drinking good wine and eating canapés. They seem happy. They are chatting and affirming and smiling. They are stylish and very *self* aware.

But *something* is happening outside in the street, something terrible and oppressive and unjust, for which the people at the party share responsibility.

There’s a fleeting sense of discomfort, a silence, before the chatting and laughing resumes.

How many of *us* live in that apartment?

Let me put it another way. I know a very fine Israeli journalist called Amira Hass. She went to live in and report from Gaza. I asked her why she did that. She explained how her mother, Hannah, was being marched from a cattle train to the Nazi concentration camp at Bergen-Belsen when she saw a group of German women looking at the prisoners, just looking, saying nothing, silent. Her mother never forgot what she called this despicable “looking from the side”.

I believe that if we apply justice and courage to human affairs, we begin to make sense of our world. Then, and only then, can we make progress.

However, if we apply justice in Australia, it’s tricky, isn’t it? -- because we are then obliged to break our greatest silence – to no longer “look from the side” in our own country.

In the 1960s, when I first went to South Africa to report apartheid, I was welcomed by decent, liberal people whose complicit silence was the underpinning of that tyranny. They told me that Australians and white South Africans had much in common, and they were right. The good people of Johannesburg could live within a few kilometres of a community called Alexandra, which lacked the most basic services, the children stricken with disease. But they looked from the side and did nothing.

In Australia, our indifference is different. We have become highly competent at divide and rule: at promoting those black Australians who tell us what we want to hear. At professional conferences their keynote speeches are applauded, especially when they blame their own people and provide the excuses we need. We create boards and commissions on which sit nice, decent liberal people like the prime minister’s wife. And nothing changes.

We certainly don’t like comparisons with apartheid South Africa. That breaks the Australian silence.

Near the end of apartheid, black South Africans were being jailed at the rate of 851 per 100,000 of population. Today, black Australians are being jailed at a national rate that is more than five times higher. Western Australia jails Aboriginal men at eight times the apartheid figure.

In 1983, Eddie Murray was killed in a police cell in Wee Waa in New South Wales by “a person or persons unknown”. That’s how the coroner described it. Eddie was a rising rugby league star. But he was black and had to be cut down to size. Eddie’s parents, Arthur and Leila Murray, launched one of the most tenacious and courageous campaigns for justice I’ve known anywhere. They stood up to authority. They showed grace and patience and knowledge. And they never gave in.

When Leila died in 2003, I wrote a tribute for her funeral. I described her as an Australian hero. Arthur is still fighting for justice. He’s in his sixties. He’s a respected elder, a hero. A few months ago, the police in Narrabri offered Arthur a lift home and instead took him for a violent ride in their bullwagon. He ended up in hospital, bruised and battered. That is how Australian heroes are treated.

In the same week the police did this -- as they do to black Australians, almost every day – Kevin Rudd said that his government, and I quote, “doesn’t have a clear idea of what’s happening on the ground” in Aboriginal Australia.

How much information does the prime minister need? How many ideas? How many reports? How many royal commissions? How many inquests? How many funerals? Is he not aware that Australia appears on an international “shame list” for having failed to eradicate trachoma, a preventable disease of poverty that blinds Aboriginal children?

In August this year, the United Nations once again distinguished Australia with the kind of shaming once associated with South Africa. We discriminate on the basis of race. That’s it in a nutshell. This time the UN blew a whistle on the so-called “intervention”, which began with the Howard government smearing Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory with allegations of sex slavery and paedophile rings in “unthinkable numbers”, according to the minister for indigenous affairs.

In May last year, official figures were released and barely reported.

Out of 7433 Aboriginal children examined by doctors, 39 had been referred to the authorities for suspected abuse. Of those, a maximum of *four* possible cases were identified. So much for the “unthinkable numbers”. Of course, child abuse *does* exist, in black Australia and white Australia. The difference is that no soldiers invaded the North Shore; no white parents were swept aside; no white welfare has been “quarantined”. What the doctors found they already knew: that Aboriginal children *are at risk* -- from the effects of extreme poverty and the denial of resources in one of the world’s richest countries.

Billions of dollars *have* been spent – not on paving roads and building houses, but on a war of legal attrition waged against black communities. I interviewed an Aboriginal leader called Puggy Hunter. He carried a bulging brief case and he sat in the West Australian heat with his head in his hands.

I said, “You’re exhausted.”

He replied, “Look, I spend most of my life in meetings, fighting lawyers, pleading for our birthright. I’m just tired to death, mate.” He died soon afterwards, in his forties.

Kevin Rudd has made a formal apology to the First Australians. He spoke fine words. For many Aboriginal people, who value healing, the apology was very important. However, the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a remarkably honest editorial. It described the apology as “a piece of political wreckage” that “the Rudd government has moved quickly to clear away ... in a way that responds to some of its supporters’ emotional needs”.

Since the apology, Aboriginal poverty has got worse. The promised housing programme is a grim joke. No gap has even begun to be bridged. Instead, the federal government has threatened communities in the Northern Territory that if they don’t hand over their precious freehold leases, they will be denied the basic services that we, in white Australia, take for granted.

In the 1970s, Aboriginal communities were granted comprehensive land rights in the Northern Territory, and John Howard set about clawing back these rights with bribery and bullying. The Labour government is doing the same. You see, there are deals to be done. The Territory contains extraordinary mineral wealth, especially uranium. And Aboriginal land is wanted as a radioactive waste dump. This is very big business, and foreign companies want a piece of the action.

It is a continuation of the darkest side of our colonial history: a land grab

Where are the influential voices raised against this? Where are the peak legal bodies? Where are those in the media who tell us endlessly how fair-minded we are? Silence.

But let us not listen to their silence. Let us pay tribute to those Australians who are *not* silent, who don’t look from the side – those like Barbara Shaw and Larissa Behrendt, and the Mutitjulu community leaders and their tenacious lawyer George Newhouse, and Chris Graham, the fearless editor of the *National Indigenous Times*. And Michael Mansell, Lyle Munro, Gary Foley, Vince Forrester and Pat Dodson, and Arthur Murray.

And let us celebrate Australia’s historian of courage and truth, Henry Reynolds, who stood against white supremacists posing as academics and journalists. And the young people who closed down Woomera detention camp, then stood up to the political thugs who took over Sydney during Apec two years ago. And good for Ian Thorpe, the great swimmer, whose voice raised against the intervention has yet to find an echo

among the pampered sporting heroes in a country where the gap between white and black sporting facilities and opportunity has closed hardly at all.

Silences can be broken, if we will it. In one of the greatest poems of the English language, Percy Shelley wrote this:

*Rise like lions after slumber*

*In unvanquishable number.*

*Shake your chains to earth like dew.*

*Which in sleep has fallen on you.*

*Ye are many – they are few.*

But we need to make haste. An historic shift is taking place. The major western democracies are moving towards a corporatism. Democracy has become a business plan, with a bottom line for every human activity, every dream, every decency, every hope. The main parliamentary parties are now devoted to the same economic policies -- socialism for the rich, capitalism for the poor -- and the same foreign policy of servility to endless war.

This is not democracy. It is to politics what McDonalds is to food.

How do we change this? We start by looking beyond the stereotypes and clichés that are fed to us as news. Tom Paine warned long ago that if we were denied critical knowledge, we should storm what he called the Bastille of words. Tom Paine did not have the internet, but the internet on its own is not enough.

We need an Australian *glasnost*, the Russian word from the Gorbachev era, which broadly means awakening, transparency, diversity, justice, disobedience. It was Edmund Burke who spoke of the press as a Fourth Estate. I propose a people's Fifth Estate that monitors, deconstructs and counters the official news. In every news room, in every media college, teachers of journalism and journalists themselves need to be challenged about the part they play in the bloodshed, inequity and silence that is so often presented as normal.

The public are not the problem. It's true some people don't give a damn – but millions do, as I know from the responses to my own films. What people want is to be *engaged* – a sense that things matter, that nothing is immutable, that unemployment among the young and poverty among the old are both uncivilised and wrong. What terrifies the agents of power is the awakening of people: of public consciousness.

This is already happening in countries in Latin America where ordinary people have discovered a confidence in themselves they did not know existed. We should join them before our own freedom of speech is quietly withdrawn and real dissent is outlawed as the powers of the police are expanded.

“The struggle of people against power,” wrote Milan Kundera, “is the struggle of memory against forgetting.”

In Australia, we have much to be proud of – if only we knew about it and celebrated it. Since Francis McCarty and Mary Palmer landed here, we’ve progressed only because people have spoken out, only because the suffragettes stood up, only because the miners of Broken Hill won the world’s first 35-hour week, only because pensions and a basic wage and child endowment were pioneered in New South Wales.

In my lifetime, we have become one of the most culturally diverse places on earth, and it has happened peacefully, by and large. That is a remarkable achievement – until we look for those whose Australian civilisation has seldom been acknowledged, whose genius for survival and generosity and forgiving have rarely been a source of pride. And yet, they remain, as Henry Reynolds wrote, the whispering in our hearts. For they are what is unique about us.

I believe the key to our self respect -- and our legacy to the next generation -- is the inclusion and reparation of the First Australians. In other words, justice. There’s no mystery about what has to be done. The first step is a treaty that guarantees universal land rights and a proper share of the resources of this country.

Only then can we solve, together, issues of health, poverty, housing, education, employment. Only then can we feel a pride that comes not from flags and war. Only then can we become a truly *independent* nation able to speak out for sanity and justice in the world, and be heard.