



Consensus-action agreements can change the world and heal our Planet: and why empowering the powerless is vital to the welfare of future generations

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the global crises that pose a threat to human existence. It identifies western colonial knowledge and practice (WCKP) as the cause of the crises.

WCKP is identified as emerging from the practice of agriculture, which led to the formation of human hierarchies, herding, metal extraction, industrialisation and colonialism. The hypothesis proposes that the Indigenous tradition of consensus provides a solution to the crises. The literature looks at the UN's GEO-4 Report (2007) along with other works attesting to the destruction caused by agriculture and WCKP. Indigenous works are examined and the (unrecorded) Indigenous discourse (Dreamtime to present) is also relied on to close the gap in knowledge. Consensus is identified as an appropriate practice for action learning and participatory action learning. A global forum is proposed that will have the potential to empower powerless people by forming a financial institution functioning by participation of members, and capable of reducing the power of WCKP structures.

Key Words and Phrases: Creative writing; empower the powerless; participatory; action; learning; relationships; consensus; Indigenous discourse; global; future generations

I. INTRODUCTION:

The land is a sacred entity, .. it is the Great mother of all humanity. . The two most important kinds of relationships in life are, firstly those between land and people and, secondly, those amongst people themselves, the second being always contingent upon the first. The land, and how we treat it, is what determines our humanness. Because land is sacred and must be looked after, the relation between people and land becomes the template for society and social relations. Therefore all meaning comes from land.

(Mary Graham, 1999: Some Thoughts about the Philosophical Underpinnings of Aboriginal Worldviews)

Throughout this work I will attempt to describe an Indigenous way of being human that validates the above words of a respected Southport elder. In doing so, I will outline problems, and propose viable solutions encapsulating the broad aims and philosophy of participatory action learning. I argue from the understanding expressed in Mary Graham's words: the Planet (land) is the fundamental fact that allows humanity to exist. Hence, regardless of various philosophies and social relationships, people are born with a custodial responsibility to land. To deny this fact is to negate our humanity. The heading to the above quote reads: **The Land is the Law.**

This paper is an exercise in creative writing. It introduces an Indigenous perspective to the discourse on crises that threaten humanity. The crises are caused by human activity and include over-population, extinction of essential species, degradation of land and global warming. WCKP has evolved from agriculture and includes the emergence of human hierarchies, domestication of animals, extraction of metals, industrialisation and colonialism. To maintain stability within society through the ages, WCKP evolved a pyramid structure resistant to other knowledge not consistent with its concepts of power, profit, progress, competition, warfare and hierarchy. The success of WCKP in controlling and directing knowledge is manifest in the global dilemma now confronting humanity and our Planet.

The gap in knowledge between Indigenous lifestyle and that of WCKP is significant and appears daunting. On one hand the Planet is ravaged, and on the other, Creation is honoured. **My hypothesis is that consensus-action agreements can empower the powerless to develop self-sufficient lifestyles, thus leading to sustainable relationships between humanity and the Planet. The empowering needs to occur at the base of the pyramids of power (because higher levels are designed to require complicity in the function of WCKP).**

I approach this problem from the perception that all, or most people have good will towards future generations and want them to inherit clean air and water on a healthy Planet as natural birthright. The realisation that people aspire to be perceived as honourable ancestors by their children and grandchildren was conceptualised by Maureen Watson (my older sister, deceased), and to my mind confirms the belief that human beings are more good than bad. Thus, despite its success in subjugating the masses, the drivers of WCKP have never been able to totally subvert human nature. Trade unions, campaigns for recognition of rights and justice by colonised peoples, green movements and various human rights charters and committees within the UN and its membership attest to the indomitable character of the human spirit.

Empowerment of powerless people is important. Having been reared in the bush, I am now saddened each time I walk where trees grow. To the person with no experience of the multitude of species inhabiting country (any country that is healthy), the 'bush' may appear natural to them as it now is. To me when I walk in the bush (whether in my home country, or travelling between towns and cities, or Toohey Forest/Mt Cootha/Coast) I notice immediately the silence and stillness (apart from the noisy crows and swooping magpies) – many types of ants, insects, spiders and lizards are almost gone – and these things are essential to the food chains that generate for the larger species, their interaction resulting in our clean air, water and food. The unknowing eye sees a few birds, a few dead roos, and the occasional goanna or python and thinks everything is as it always was. Not so. Our country is dying. The bush should be alive with the little crawly things, the smells of dead little bodies being recycled by ants and birds, and the scents of fresh plants and tiny blossoms – all the little things that work together continually recycling (assisted by cool-weather patchwork burn-offs) and generating anew, producing fresh air and filtering clean water, the essential birthright for future generations.

I do not wish to be didactic, but readers need to be aware of problems identified within Indigenous discourse (Dreamtime to present). I list, without absolute knowledge of the order of quantitative scale: foxes, feral and domestic cats, cane toads, sheep, cattle, the stinging bee, herbicides, insecticides, bulldozers, cash-crop production making water muddy, ignorance, mass denial, hot-weather bush-fire infernos. Yes, the land can be managed better, and the trends reversed. The Planet does not have to die. People do not have to over-populate. Our lives have to change drastically, but not overnight. No bloody revolution is necessary, because it's senseless to validate the methods of oppressors and bullies. Most people have good will towards future generations, and want to leave a healthy place with clean air and water. We need to teach our children to face the challenge of becoming self-sufficient in our own households and communities – or as close as we can. And to inform ourselves better than our education system does.

Because traditional Aboriginal society locates history in the visible health of clan and country (as opposed to honouring various past rulers and individuals), much of the literature informing my position is

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drawn from within WCKP that forms the competing hypothesis to my position. Graham (1999) and other Indigenous sources keep me grounded and strengthen my argument.

The United Nations Environment Programme's *Global Environment Outlook – 4* (GEO-4) (2007) was prepared by '390 experts and reviewed by more than 1000 others across the world' (GEO-4, Media Brief), and is explicit:

'... much of the 'natural' capital upon which so much of human well being and economic activity depends – water, land, the air and atmosphere, biodiversity and marine resources – continue their seemingly inexorable decline'

(GEO-4. Launch).

The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) began monitoring the health of the Planet through its Global Environment Outlook project from 1995. The report confirmed that climate change is 'happening' and is 'unequivocal' according to the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (GEO-4, Launch, Remarks). Part of the media brief says 'Increased understanding of how people relate to biodiversity, and how to move towards greater stewardship of biodiversity, may be the biggest question the world must answer' (GEO-4, Executive Summary for Journalists, Chapter 5).

The mention of stewardship makes Graham (1999) relevant here: 'The sacred web of connections includes not only kinship relations and relations to the land, but also relations to nature and all living things (112). David Suzuki (1993) confirms this relatedness in his book *Time to Change*, when discussing the Declaration of Interdependence (xv) in the David Suzuki Foundation. He refers to the 'place in the web of life and our responsibilities to it and to all future generations' (9).

GEO-4's Press Release says, 'climate change is a "global priority", demanding political will and leadership. Yet it finds "a remarkable lack of urgency", and "a "woefully inadequate" global response' (GEO-4, Global Press Release). This 'woefully inadequate' response is despite the fact that **GEO-4 is 'the most authoritative compilation and peer reviewed publication of the best data available'** (GEO-4, Launch, Remarks).

When discussing the political system, Suzuki (1993) says most politicians have backgrounds in law and business (106), and he has been informed 'often' by 'members of all three political parties' that 'the demand for immediate action' in response to the ecocrisis is "just not politically realistic" (109).

In a joint publication, *Wisdom of the Elders*, Suzuki and Peter Knudtson (1992) express sincere respect for the knowledges and spiritualities of the world's Indigenous peoples. The many stories within, all demonstrate that 'The Native Mind is imbued with a deep sense of reverence for nature', and 'traditional Native knowledge ... tends to view all ... including the earth itself, as inherently holy rather than profane, savage, wild, or wasteland' (13). Knudtson and Suzuki (1992) cite Deborah Bird Rose who discusses the Yarralin community in the Northern Territory: '*What we do matters so powerfully that to evade our responsibilities is to call down chaos*' (40). Such are my own feelings and beliefs as a Kungulu man – in fact the words accurately describe my own motivation in undertaking my project. Similarly, according to Levi-Strauss (1962) in *The Savage Mind*, systematic ordering of information is typical of people the westerners call 'primitive'. He quotes Fletcher who says 'All sacred things must have their place', and if removed 'the entire order of the universe would be destroyed' (10).

Sveiby and Skuthorpe (2006) in the joint publication *Treading lightly: the hidden wisdom of the world's oldest people*, are informative about the lifestyles of Indigenous Australians. They find it strange that scholars should question why Australian Aboriginal people 'never developed agriculture' (92). Although wild cereal was harvested, the 'method neither changed the nature of the cereal, nor the soil's ecology'. Thus the natural habitat was not changed and animals and other vegetation were not affected and the Nhunggabarra were able to fulfill 'their mission to keep all alive' (170). The people also replanted the tendrils of yams to allow for re-growth, and left seeds of fruit to grow around campsites and among the

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ashes of fires. What they practiced was ‘knowledge-based ecofarming... Caring – not exploiting... Fire was the most important ecofarming tool’ (86).

Quarterly Essay published Robyn Davidson’s (2006) paper titled *No Fixed Address: Nomads and the Fate of the Planet*. She locates the beginnings of the practice of agriculture in Biblical times and identifies the natural progression from that time to the evolution of cities, unhealthy lifestyles and the emergence of material wealth and rulers/monarchs. The new knowledge of tilling the soil is mentioned by Cynthia Stokes Brown (2007) in *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present*. ‘From about 9000 BCE ... temperatures rapidly warmed around the globe’ (76). Brown (2007) believes that ‘Deforestation, caused by pasturing ... the need for fuel for heating and cooking and for charcoal for pottery and metallurgy, is the background for the development of all human society’ (123). In fact western lore and beliefs overwhelmingly appear to regard the adoption of agriculture by humans as progress/evolution/development (Brown, 2007; Knudtson and Suzuki, 1992; Lowdermilk, 1935, 1948; Suzuki, 1993; GEO-4, 2007; UNU-IAS, 2005). This belief persists in spite of the spectacular failure of agriculture across the globe. Hundreds of buried cities and towns in deserts are identified by Rust and Cushing (c2002) in *The Buried Silk Road Cities of Khotan*. P. B. Shelley (1818) wrote *Ozymandias* that can be interpreted as a comment on the futility of power and agriculture.

The practice of agriculture is examined in more detail by W. C. Lowdermilk (1948) in *Conquest of the Land Through Seven Thousand Years*. The US Department of Agriculture commissioned Lowdermilk to undertake an 18-month survey of the effects of agriculture in Europe and the Middle East shortly before the outbreak of WW11. The findings were a remarkable revelation of the futility of the practice and amount to a damnation of the prospects of life for future generations. Lowdermilk (1948) concluded that land clearing on hills and slopes results in the ‘problem of soil erosion, which ... became the greatest hazard to permanent agriculture and an insidious enemy of civilization’ (8). Lowdermilk’s emotional attitude to known hazards of agriculture and grazing, are echoed by Sylvester and Gutmann (2008) in *Changing Agrarian Landscapes Across America: A Comparative Perspective*. They examine agricultural trends in parts of the US. They find that ‘biogeography modified human agricultural systems slowly and agrarian landscapes were far from permanent’ (39). Their comments situate the landscape as being responsible for bad human knowledge and practice. Indigenous discourse (Dreamtime to present) identifies this attitude as a symptom of impotence typical in a society ruled by people.

In Palestine, from an aerial view, Lowdermilk (1948) read with ‘startling vividness the graphic story as written in the land, where soils have been washed off to bed rock ...and only dregs of the land are left behind in narrow valley floors ... to meager (sic) crops’ (10). He visited Jerash, once a city of 250,000; now ‘a village of 3,000 marks this great centre of culture’. The ruins are covered ‘to a depth of 13 feet with erosional debris washed’ (12) down from the denuded slopes. ‘Between Hama, Aleppo, and Antioch, French archaeologists, Father Mattern and others, found in this manmade desert more than 100 dead cities’ (13) – the cause of the desolation was soil erosion. Lowdermilk (1948) also found silt and silt accumulation served to destabilise land in more level country. The locations of Babylon and Babel were devastated through ‘the failure of their irrigation canals because of silt’ (5). Lowdermilk (1948) found the domestication of animals also contributed to the destruction of country: ‘over a large portion of the ancient granary of Rome we found the soil washed off to bed rock and the hills seriously gullied from overgrazing’ (22).

Lowdermilk (1935) gives useful information about the formation of deserts. He says:

As late as the rise of Mohammed Tripoli, on the north coast of Africa, had a population of six million. It was then clothed with vineyards, orchards and forests. It is now bare of vegetation. The streams are dried up and the population reduced to about forty-five thousand. ... Accelerated erosion is the direct result of destroying protective vegetable covering of soils, whether by burning forest or grasslands, by over-grazing, or by clearing and cultivation

(Lowdermilk: 412-3).

Lowdermilk's (1935, 1948) work is an example of tilling the soil being 'bad' knowledge. Lowdermilk (1948) composed a proposed 11th Commandment advising against over-grazing, land clearing and abuse of water supply. More recent writers on the topic of desertification provide varying explanations for the phenomena, and informed warnings are being published. Stephen Leahy (2008) is an environmental journalist who is aware of the situation. His article *The Silent Global Crisis* provides ominous statistics:

About five billion acres of arable land have been stripped of their precious layer of topsoil and been abandoned since the first wheat and barley fields were planted 10,000 years ago. In the past 40 years alone, 30 percent of the planet's arable land has become unproductive due to erosion...

(Leahy, 2008).

Leahy (2008) quotes Andres Arnalds, assistant director of the Icelandic Soil Conservation Service: 'Land degradation and desertification may be regarded as the silent crisis of the world, a genuine threat to the future of humankind.'

In contrast to the hegemony of WCKP, Sveiby and Skuthorpe (2006) provide positive methods of 'society building' and 'decision-making processes', while consensus was probably used to resolve 'very difficult and complex matters' (133). Consensus is said to be 'an unsurpassed conflict resolution mechanism and the ultimate power-sharing process; it ensures that everybody has a direct say in matters that concern them, which makes it "more democratic" than representative democracy' (134). Sveiby and Skuthorpe examine the evolution from 'tribes to chiefdoms', which is considered the 'crucial step in governance' (134). The process continued from there to 'centralised governments' and eventually to 'the democratic state', with the occurrence of 'tyranny, rebellions, civil war and conquests' (135). They identified a time frame of '7000 years from the advent of agriculture ... before the first version of representative democracy ... in Athens in 594 BC' (135). Other social arrangements including marriage laws and the custodial ethic as opposed to private ownership, helped to inhibit the centralisation of power amongst the Nhunggaborra.

Indigenous discourse (Dreamtime to present) fails to identify any Indigenous centralised structures of power in the country, apart from those established by WCKP governments. However, the tradition of consensus is still respected and practiced in many areas within and between various clan groups and families. Some elders are known to forbid youngsters to vote when deciding family or country business. This behaviour is contrary to western democratic practice and can be understood to indicate a society that had never experienced rule by other people. And it can be seen as an unknown unknown to hegemonic WCKP. W. H. Edwards' (1987) article 'Leadership in Aboriginal Society' in *Traditional Aboriginal Society* (Ed: Edwards) says that studies undertaken by early Europeans (without Indigenous collaboration) have found difficulty locating any significant indicators of Indigenous government or chiefs (174). In the same publication, L. R. Hiatt (1987), in 'Aboriginal Political Life', cites Sharpe who said 'A fixed hierarchy of authority is an impossibility' (184) regarding a Cape York clan. Hiatt (1987) and Edwards (1987) mention findings by Eyre (1845), Flanagan (1888), Stretton (1893), Berndt (1965), Strehlow (1970) and many other experts who appear to be interested in determining if Aboriginal people were ruled by people. However, Hiatt (1987) did mention a 'slender piece of evidence' that might be 'more in keeping with a secular polity structured around consensus than with a system geared to a hierarchy of command' (193).

Within Indigenous discourse (Dreamtime to present), anybody visiting somebody else's territory reads the history of the society with a glance at the health of people and country. Scarred, or destroyed land tells the observer that the people are not socially well, and that WCKP has most likely been imposed, disrupting the relationship between people and land. The failure of all the above-mentioned experts to focus on this relationship, and their obsession with smaller relationships between people is a comment on values and

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priorities within WCKP. However, the practice of consensus, if introduced into the society, carries the potential to strengthen more meaningful and honourable values and priorities.

A well-known feature of modern westernised countries is that ten per cent of the people own about 80 per cent of the wealth. To many minds, this implies that 90 per cent of the people living in those countries will appreciate new financial options. A global forum can be established to initiate discussion with the objective of identifying common goals leading to consensus-action agreements. Such agreements can promote and fund projects designed to establish self-sufficient lifestyles that have the potential to result in sustainable relationships between membership and the Planet.

If the initial consensus-action agreements (or pacts) include membership fees, a global fund can be established that can in turn underwrite the formation of a bank or financial institution dedicated to agreed aims. If all subsequent local and global projects require individual or group endorsement/contribution from relevant membership, the financial function of the proposed bank/institution can develop a participatory economy. This economy should have no leaders, just action-members.

To conclude this paper, it bears mention that the process of consensus is about relationships and individual commitment. Common aims need to emerge and be addressed. If early goals are universal in nature and include self-sufficient lifestyle networks that become sustainable, each person involved can protect the welfare of all our future generations. This can be done without leaders or rulers. Such goals allow people to cross the barriers of race, nationality, creed and place, thus ensuring every 'other' becomes 'another'.

The process of consensus brings out certain elements in participants that are necessary to achieve successful agreements in the relationships. These things include respect, which engenders responsibility, group and self-reflection, leading to accountability and reciprocity. And such qualities in relationships enhance the human-ness of all involved.

A final concern is that the structure of WCKP should not be attacked. If the pyramids of power topple, chaos will result. Any proposed financial institution/bank should fund projects seeking to employ mainly those at the base of those structures that must not be gutted, but humanised from the base.

In closing, this paper has attempted to address the global crises by identifying the cause and the gap in knowledge between WCKP and Indigenous discourse. The solution proposed has been practised in this country for tens of thousands of years. And the concepts of action learning and participatory action learning provide a good and appropriate venue for this paper. Thank you.

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