

**Decolonising the discipline: Is a less colonial political science possible?
Presidential Address**

Australian Political Studies Association Conference 2019

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To begin I would like to acknowledge Kaurana people, upon whose unceded territory we are holding this conference. Our place on this territory is a reminder that we are still engaged in colonial and colonising relations with the First Nations of this continent, and that these relations have material implications for a discipline such as ours.

Each president of the Australian Political Studies Association has a year to focus on an issue in the Association that is of concern to them. For me, this has been the complete absence of Indigenous members in the organisation and, more broadly, the fact that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander politics is only given sporadic attention at our conferences, in our journal and in our discipline as a whole. One of the appeals of taking on the presidency of APSA was the opportunity to take some small steps in addressing these absences and silences, through some minor structural changes—such as removing fees for prospective Indigenous members of the Association and creating a First Peoples’ Politics Forum, which met for the first time today, and which will function much like the Women’s Caucus has done over many years. I’ll come back to both of these initiatives later.

I have also used my time as president to engage in some wider reflection on why it is that our discipline has neglected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander politics. In part this work has occurred through a related project over the last year or so, working on the recently published AJPS symposium - “Whose politics and which science? Rethinking the discipline in the context of Australian settler colonial relationships”, with the wonderful Liz Strakosch from UQ.¹ In our proposal for that symposium Liz and I committed that the papers we published would also provide the basis for this presidential address, and so I will be drawing on some of those in what follows.

¹ The papers from this symposium were developed at a workshop funded by the APSA workshop program in 2018.

I am not the first to reflect on these issues in Australian political science, and our discipline's positioning of Indigenous people as subjects and objects rather than as equal interlocutors in the governing of shared territories is certainly not new. In his Presidential Address to the 24th Australasian Political Studies Association conference, held in Perth in August 1982, Peter Loveday observed that despite an 'extensive literature' on Aboriginal people that focused on issues including 'art, culture, traditional society, contemporary issues, the impact of white society and so on' there had been very little study of 'the politics of Aboriginal society, except incidentally.' There was, Loveday suggested, 'no systematic consideration of what the politics of Aboriginal society might be.' Loveday's address outlined a disciplinary focus on 'problems' and 'issues' that is 'not so much about Aboriginal politics as about *white* politics as it affects Aboriginal life' (1983: 2, original emphasis). The idea that the First Nations of this continent might have had a sustaining and generative politics that predated the arrival of the British was then, and remains, a very marginal idea, with which very few non-Indigenous political science scholars have engaged.

There have, of course, been efforts within the discipline to begin to make sense of itself in relation to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. In our article in the AJPS symposium, Sana Nakata and I acknowledge the work that has been, and continues to be, done by Australian political scientists, particularly by those working in political theory and in public policy. Australian political theorists, more than many others, have sought to critically engage with key concepts that circumscribe Indigenous peoples' relations to the modern settler-state: concepts such as sovereignty, reconciliation, recognition, forgiveness, conflict, territory, jurisdiction, and identity have been given various treatments that have investigated, challenged, and complicated the idea of a singular, sovereign and new nation on these territories (Iverson, Patton, and Sanders 2001; Muldoon 2003; Schaap 2004; Muldoon 2005, 2008; Schaap 2008; Iverson 2017; Little and McMillan 2017).

There is much richness, too, in how political science scholars have sought to engage with the formulation and implementation of Indigenous policy in contemporary Australia. Of all the sub-disciplines within political science, it has been the work of public policy scholars that has perhaps most extensively sought to reveal, challenge and repurpose the problematic dynamics of Indigenous-settler relations. There is some evidence in the public policy literature of attention to the structural and foundational challenges that the settler state presents for

Australian Indigenous policy-making (Maddison 2009; Curchin 2015; Strakosch 2015; Moran 2016; Howard- Wagner 2017; Markham and Biddle 2017). Yet this attention is, of course, not unproblematic. As Alissa Macoun, Kristy Parker, and Liz Strakosch (2019: 388) point out in their article in the AJPS symposium, while policy is certainly ‘a primary field of Indigenous-settler relations in Australia’, the settler state’s ongoing history of denying Indigenous sovereignty means that public policy can also be ‘an incredibly depoliticising disciplinary framework’ in which Indigenous people are understood not as ‘rights claiming subjects’ but as ‘objects of expertise and concern.’ If we understand the purpose of policy studies as being to help the state to ‘govern more effectively,’ then it is not so surprising that the bulk of this work occurs at the expense of efforts that might generate and support Indigenous sovereignty and autonomy.

Yet even with these problems, at least some policy scholars have demonstrated sustained engagement in the politics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Beyond these two subdisciplines, there is a general absence of political science scholarship that seeks to engage directly in understanding (if not destabilising) the colonial foundations to Australia’s Indigenous-settler relations (Nakata and Maddison 2019: 415). This assessment is also reflected in Will Sanders’ 2015 review of Indigenous politics published in the *Australian Journal of Political Science*. Despite an ongoing interest in topics such as a land rights and mining, and social policy, across a nearly fifty-year period, Sanders was unable to identify any full-length article written by an Indigenous Australian scholar. What is clear across this analysis is that, at least as represented by the journals of the Austral(as)ian Political Studies Association, the engagement of the discipline in Australia with Indigenous experiences and perspectives of political life is minimal. Efforts to engage with Indigenous issues, in whatever context and analytical treatment, have been driven by a handful of scholars against the relative disinterest of the discipline as a whole (Nakata and Maddison 2019: 417).

In their forthcoming chapter in *the Oxford Handbook of Australian Politics*, Morgan Brigg and Lyndon Murphy draw on Stanner’s well-known framing of ‘the great Australian silence’ to describe the dominant scholarly approach to the study of Indigenous politics in Australia as one of ‘structured inattention’ towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and political life. Brigg and Murphy write that ‘Mainstream political science’ has maintained this pattern of inattention by

...following and reflecting upon dominant political and policy dynamics and developments. Indigenous people tend to be registered not as agents of sociopolitical order and jurisdictional authority, but as players (more or less malleable depending upon the era) in evolving European-Australian political commitments to Christianising, civilising, advancement, progress, and development.

In the article that Morgan and Lyndon co-authored with the Kombumerri philosopher Mary Graham in the AJPS symposium (Brigg et al 2019: 423), the authors point out that the study of Indigenous politics in Australia remains ‘largely derivative of British colonial ideas and forms of governing’ meaning that, like the majority of Australian political science, it remains ‘aligned with settler state governance, methodologically individualist, and statist.’ This has left our discipline blind. As Morgan, Lyndon, and Mary go on to argue, this individualist, statist version of settler political science

...renders invisible a core plank of Indigenous existence – the capacity to produce socio-political order aside from the imposed order of the coloniser. Instead, political science scholarship wraps Indigenous people within European–Australian commitments to advancement, progress and development that shift with evolving public administration policy phases in Indigenous affairs (Brigg et al 2019: 426).

Of course, our disciplinary blindness has not been without sustained challenge from Indigenous scholars. In recent decades, Indigenous critical scholarship and accounts of ongoing (rather than historical) colonialism have taken legal and political contestation into academic spaces. This work has become increasingly influential in the wider academy, most notably in history and anthropology. Yet the Australian political science discipline has been slow to respond. In our introduction to the AJPS symposium, Liz and I note that, unlike similarly located disciplines such as anthropology, and unlike political scientists in other countries, in Australia our field is still not subjecting itself to sustained academic self-examination nor discussing how it might contribute more effectively to both scholarly and public debate in this domain. In the United Kingdom and America, political scientists are involved in intense conversations about the implication of the discipline in racial and colonial hierarchies and the need to decolonise universities across the global north (Bhambra, Gebrial and Nisancioglu 2018: 1). In the

contemporary ‘post-race’ world, these interventions insist on the importance of naming and challenging both ongoing inequalities and the role of disciplinary knowledge in maintaining them. In the United States in 2016, Kennan Ferguson asked in *Perspectives on Politics* ‘Why does political studies hate American Indians?’ Earlier this year, in Britain, *Political Studies Review* published two articles on the need for and possibilities of decolonising political science pedagogy in the context of empire and race (Begum and Saina 2019; Emejulu 2019). The chair of the Political Studies Association in the UK responded in the same issue, acknowledging that ‘these two pieces challenge the discipline to be better at inclusivity’ and that ‘this issue is a key concern for political science’ (Wilson 2019: 207).

While I would—and will in a moment—contest this assumption that what is needed from the discipline is mere *inclusivity*, I think this growing level of attention is significant. In Australia, political science generally continues its long running approach of positioning Indigenous people as subjects and objects to be known and problematised by the settler-dominated discipline. Beyond the small but growing number of Indigenous scholars who have carved out space in our universities, or those high-profile commentators anointed by the mainstream as Indigenous leaders, rarely are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people seen as producers of knowledge let alone as members of unique sovereign polities. Australian political science remains overwhelmingly white. More than this, our discipline remains based in the study of colonial institutions.

As Alissa, Kristy, and Liz (2019: 378) note in their article in the AJPS symposium, our discipline is not located outside of the foundationally flawed political relationships between settler and Indigenous peoples but is, in fact, imbricated in these relations. They argue that:

...the discipline is implicated in racial and colonial hierarchies in Australia, contributing to the maintenance of settler sovereignty through its production of its subject matter and itself as authoritative in a depopulated, empty space. In its work, it regularly fails to locate the institutions it analyses – including Australian parliaments, policy structures, and international relationships – as involved in producing problematic relationships, and as dependent upon the occupation of Indigenous land, lives and resources. In its own institutional dynamics, it is yet to acknowledge the extent of its connections to one side of the settler Indigenous conflict. Our analysis of the discipline of Australian political studies positions it

as an institution that has been closely aligned to the interests, epistemologies and investments of non-Indigenous people but which proclaims its universality.

In a workshop held last year to develop the articles for the AJPS symposium, we participants pushed one another on a number of such issues related to the study of political science in settler colonial societies. Most importantly, as Alissa Macoun noted on the day, we challenged each other to acknowledge the many ways in which our discipline ‘does violence.’ This violence is not merely symbolic but implicates each of us in the continuation of colonialism and coloniality on this continent. As Brigg and Murphy argue in their *Oxford Handbook* chapter, ‘the dominant scholarly approach to Indigenous politics facilitates ongoing colonialism.’ Or as Morgan argues with Lyndon and Mary in the AJPS symposium,

Political science has assisted settler-liberalism to claim jurisdiction over the Australian continent for more than two centuries. It has helped settler-liberalism to hold fast to its ontological commitments and informed governance and administrative practice in Indigenous affairs. It has shaped the thinking and aspirations of many Indigenous and non-Indigenous thinkers and reformers (Brigg et al 2019: 432-33).

Rather than merely a lack of disciplinary attention, then, political as a discipline has helped to deny the legitimacy of Indigenous political claims while asserting itself as neutral (Macoun et al 2019: 390) and simultaneously asserting the institutions of the liberal democratic order as natural and even inevitable.

Studying colonial political institutions as though they are historically and ontologically neutral, ignores the fact that their very existences authorises and perpetuates colonial authority. Our discipline effectively naturalises settler colonialism and its political institutions, rarely questioning the sovereignty of the settler order or the authority of colonial power to make decisions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Goenpul scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2006: 389) has argued that academic disciplines such as ours have ‘operated as normalising modes of rationality that facilitate procedures of Indigenous subjugation and mask non-Indigenous investments in relations of patriarchal White sovereignty.’ The institutions we study, and the legislation and policy they produce are, of course, not neutral. Yet, as Liz Strakosch has argued, it is the unquestioned authority and even

the very familiarity of state bureaucracy that allows colonial authority over Indigenous lives to be naturalised and invisibilised on the assumption that Indigenous peoples have *already been incorporated within the settler regime* (Strakosch 2015, 9, 51). This is a form of violence.

A further violence occurs in the framing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as a problem to be solved through the application of politics and policy. In mainstream media and political analysis Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are framed always in terms of deficit. Poor statistical indicators are conceptualised only as an issue of disadvantage, rather than as a problem stemming from the political relationship between Indigenous peoples and the state, which in turn continues to shape the social determinants of Indigenous health and wellbeing (see Carson et al. 2007). This framing relies on what Palawa sociology scholar Maggie Walter (2018: 258) describes as ‘5D Data’: data that focuses on difference, disparity, disadvantage, dysfunction and deprivation rather than on the lived experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and it directs policy attention only towards Indigenous lives and behaviour and away from the structural reform they seek (Davis 2018).

As Sana and I argue in our AJPS article (2019: 408), this deficit paradigm has received increasing critical attention, and with it, new efforts to reframe Indigenous research through the lens of success and strength have emerged. Yet the critique of deficit discourse has not been enough to break the deficit/ success binary out of its discursive political prison, and leaves the problematisation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples unchanged. Whether the critique leads to greater recognition of Indigenous peoples’ successes and strengths on their own terms, or whether it remains wedded to the elusive achievement of ‘closing the gap’, the positioning of Indigenous people as subjects of domestic policy remains unchallenged. In other words, a critique of the deficit approach has not been enough to unsettle the settler state’s assertion of sovereign authority over Indigenous peoples. The settler state continues to conflate Indigenous affairs with concerns about crime, delinquency, and neglect (Wolfe 2016: 37–80), while political debate focuses on Indigenous wellbeing (or lack thereof), allowing governments of all persuasions to represent their policy initiatives as forms of goodwill and benevolence (Strakosch 2015: 52). As I have argued in my recent book, *The Colonial Fantasy*, in continuing to render Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples as a problem to be solved, or a gap to be closed, the Australian settler state continues to be accepted as the solution to black problems rather than the originating source of such problematisations. This, too, is violence

Undoing this violence, or even limiting its impacts is a challenging task for a discipline that continues to centre European knowledges and political institutions in its work. Undoing the violence of settler political science means more than just adding on or including Indigenous voices or perspectives to our work, and much more than studying the policy and politics produced in and through colonial institutions. As a discipline we need to engage with, even to centre, Indigenous knowledges as a source of philosophy and theory. The field of critical Indigenous studies has systematically challenged the ‘certainty’ of the disciplinary knowledges produced in the twentieth century, in times when ‘the study of Indigenous peoples was largely the domain of non-Indigenous scholars’ (Moreton-Robinson 2016: location 174; see also Moreton-Robinson 2015, Tuhiwai Smith 2012, Watson 2015). Yet in the discipline of political science, the racialised, coloniality of knowledge that arrived with the British invaders has barely been displaced. A reappraisal of what can be centred in Australian political science also suggest what might be pushed to the margins. This is as it has always been for Indigenous philosophers and knowledge-holders. As Morgan, Lyndon and Mary suggest,

being on the outside of mainstream political science is to be on the inside of a larger venture of knowing the dynamics of Indigenous-Settler relations, governing, and the long-term political dynamics of the Australian continent. Settlers, rather than Aboriginal people, are different. Indigenous people are at home as original owners and runners of Country on the Australian continent. Indigenous systems of political ordering governed the continent for tens of thousands of years prior to colonialism; it is Settlers are new and who are attempting to establish themselves here (Brigg et al 2019: 428).

Yet we newcomers barely acknowledge that there have existed, on this continent, for tens of thousands of years, knowledge systems and political practices that sustained a complex set of international relations between hundreds of First Nations, including trade with each other and indeed with other countries, and that sustained the landscape and ecosystem of this continent for tens of thousands of years in pristine condition. Given that in a mere 230 years of settler presence we have turned the place into a dumpster fire of environmental destruction and impending climate disaster might we perhaps pause to understand the knowledge systems that come from this place?

To do that work, however, we need Indigenous political scientists. It seems likely that the complex knowledge systems that govern and give life to Indigenous political knowledge systems will remain, in some fundamental ways, *unknowable* to non-Indigenous scholars. And perhaps properly so. But this does not let our discipline off the hook—far from it. If we are to allow Indigenous knowledges to displace or unsettle the institutionalist, individualist, liberal and statist tenets of our discipline, we must bring these two knowledge systems into dialogue with one another. This is difficult if there are no Indigenous scholars who locate themselves within, or at the very least choose to engage with the political science discipline.

The last survey of the APSA membership, reported in 2017, revealed that the Association had exactly zero Indigenous members. Since dropping membership fees for Indigenous scholars that number has climbed to thirteen. Today the APSA First Peoples' Politics Forum met for the first time to begin to map out some of the ways in which these (mostly younger) scholars might be sustained in a discipline that, to date, has not felt like home. More significant—and difficult—still will be the task of enabling Indigenous knowledge and scholars to unsettle our settler assumptions about our discipline. We must take care with these moves towards Indigenous inclusion and be wary of reading these as 'a 'progressive' solution to remedy past inattention and exclusion' in order to 'enact and reproduce disciplinary claims to innocence' (Macoun et al 2019: 390). Greater inclusion is a powerful thing, but it should not be read as a means of helping the discipline to evade our ongoing complicity in violence and colonialism (Macoun et al 2019: 391). Indeed, quite the opposite is true.

In my introduction to this address I did not compare the intended work of the First Peoples' Politics Forum with the APSA Women's Caucus lightly. In our AJPS article, Sana and I compare the work that needs to be undertaken in Australian political science with the work undertaken by feminist political scientists. Much as political science once studied political institutions as though they were universal and ungendered, so too has Australian political science thus far evaded any comprehensive engagement with the challenges posed by Indigenous peoples and knowledges. In recent decades, through the efforts of feminist scholars (and here I acknowledge those women who kicked in the doors of our discipline so that women like me could today have a seat at the table) feminist political science has advanced a discipline-wide critique of the impact of male-dominated and masculine political institutions on the lives of women. As a result of this labour, it is now understood that all policy, indeed all political institutions, are gendered and have gendered effects. The feminist contribution to political

science has not just been to give attention to women, or to add them into existing political institutions and practices, but to reveal the gendered character of politics itself. There has not, however, been a concomitant Indigenous political science that has subjected settler institutions to the same critique. If politics is what it is, because of women's relations to it, then what might it mean to also understand politics as something that is what it is because of Indigenous relations to it (Nakata and Maddison 2019).

By centring the study of settler politics and political institutions while marginalising Indigenous peoples and politics, Indigenous-settler relations also remain marginalised rather than understood as the foundation of contemporary politics itself. Our politics is literally not possible were it not for our occupation of, and relationship to, Indigenous territories and peoples. Yet mainstream political scientists have not considered an Indigenous politics as central to the study of political parties, electoral systems, federalism, political economy, or parliamentary politics. These absences rest on a number of problematic assumptions: Indigenous peoples are understood as unimportant minorities within liberal multicultural polities; Indigenous peoples' experiences are positioned as marginal to the functioning of mainstream politics; mainstream politics itself is understood in neutral liberal terms rather than as colonial and as still colonising; Indigenous political participation is seen as desirable but not essential, and only on settler terms; Indigenous political systems are rendered invisible and/or insignificant; the authority of settler political institutions in Indigenous lives is seen as appropriate and unproblematic rather than as a colonising practice that fails to acknowledge Indigenous sovereignties. Each of these assumptions leaves the practice of politics impoverished, while simultaneously doing harm to Indigenous peoples, yet the discipline of political science has largely not found itself moved to intervene and disrupt these assumptions. While Indigenous affairs policy is analysed and critiqued, the right of the settler state to make such policy is rarely questioned. While it is seen as desirable to elect more Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to settler parliament, the right of these parliaments to govern Indigenous lives is similarly unquestioned (Nakata and Maddison 2019).

It is beyond time for the discipline to decentre its presumed right to know Indigenous peoples and politics in favour of a new agenda focused on the centring of the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the state as foundational to the nation and fundamental to its contemporary politics. As we see the new form of intellectual frontier warfare take shape through the rise of the Ramsay Centres and their violent re-imposition of

Western knowledges as the only forms of knowledge of significance, it is newly important that we find ways to meaningfully and productively centre Indigenous peoples and their politics within the study of political science. As Alissa, Kristy and Liz argue in their article, ‘valuing Indigenous knowledge, scholarship and critique is to value work that challenges the continuing intellectual practices of empire (Tuhiwai Smith 2012) in a period when the imperatives of metropolitan scholarship appear to be becoming more rather than less intense’ (Macoun et al 2019: 389). Political science, as a site of critical reflection on our governing institutions and practices, should be at the forefront of discussions about the urgent political questions that confront us in this place. As a discipline, we can choose to respond to these emerging political and academic challenges in an active way, or we can continue to be complicit in the violence of our discipline.

I do not issue this provocation as an invitation to what Alissa Macoun and others working with her might consider a move towards recuperating some form of disciplinary innocence. As Alissa and her colleagues argue, our discipline is not ‘a neutral space to which Indigenous peoples are finally being invited’ through some form of decolonial gesture. Our scholarly role must go beyond paying attention to the transformation of colonial domination as though we are ourselves outside of these modes of domination and racialised power. As Alissa, Kirsty and Liz argue, ‘the conflict is “in here” (in our discipline and our own knowledges and practices) not “out there.”’ As scholars, and most especially as political science scholars, we will inevitably remain complicit in ongoing patterns of colonial violence, and in sustaining colonising processes and structures even as we work to unsettle and dismantle them (Macoun et al 2019: 382).

The theme of this year’s conference is ‘Shifting identities: Political change and the idea of the nation.’ The challenge that I am posing to the discipline is to think about how our work might help reshape the idea of *this* nation. The transformation of the Australian nation such that the full ambitions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as individuals and nations might be realised requires attention to new and different kinds of politics, and necessitates a research agenda that considers the dynamics and structures of Indigenous-settler relations as a matter of priority. As a discipline, political science must move beyond the study of settler institutions as though they are either neutral or benign, and begin instead to engage more comprehensively and rigorously with the colonial implications of these institutions in the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and in the relations between Indigenous peoples and the state

that they delineate and sustain (Nakata and Maddison 2019: 409). To pursue anything less is to serve the continued violence of the settler state against Indigenous peoples in Australia and around the world, and to do a profound intellectual disservice to the discipline (Nakata and Maddison 2019: 419).

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