

27 August 2013 – Open Letter to the incoming Liberal Government, with a request for action to restore freedom of artistic expression and the rights of Australian non-Aboriginal artists to create art without censorship, as well as the rights of Australian archaeologists to explore the past without political interference.

To: Mr Tony Abbott and Mr Warren Mundine, media representatives and other public and private agencies and stakeholders.

From: Vesna Tenodi, on behalf of ModroGorje artists and participants in the DreamRaiser Project

Request to the incoming Liberal Government

Dear Mr Abbott,

I am an archaeologist with a Master's Degree in prehistory, artist and writer. I worked for various Australian Government departments and agencies for 25 years, in various capacities, including as a community development worker.

As an archaeologist and artist I am interested in ancient cultures and the Australia's deep past.

In 2009 I wrote a book "Dreamtime Set in Stone", in collaboration with Aboriginal elder Goomblar Wylo, as a tribute to Aboriginal people. We both wanted to tell the truth, as we both agreed that neither reconciliation nor "closing the gap" can be built on lies. We were both attacked by a group of violent Aborigines. My artists Gina Sinozich and Benedikt Osváth, who created "Wanjina Watchers" artworks, were also attacked.

We had our lives and reputations destroyed, our gallery trashed and our art repeatedly vandalised throughout 2010 and 2011. We were terrorised by all those tactics that Mick Gooda, in his social justice yearly report, listed as being common practices in intra-racial or lateral/horizontal violence in Aboriginal communities. It seems these same tactics are now being applied against non-Aboriginal people as well. Local residents, as well as Aboriginal people in the Blue Mountains – who loved and supported our work – were also threatened with violence.

Most people would agree that such negative attitudes and violent behaviour should be changed.

To this end we have, over the last four years, submitted a number of open letters, media releases, and information material. We urged both the party in power and the opposition to revise the existing indigenous policy and take into account its impact on non-indigenous Australian artists. We believe that racism has turned into reverse racism and that ill-conceived policies have resulted in injustice for non-indigenous people, especially non-Aboriginal artists and Australian archaeologists.

On 7 September, the Liberal coalition will take over and, we hope, liberate Australian people from the Labor Government and its tyranny.

We urge the incoming government to restore democracy, re-establish Australian people's right to free speech, and protect the human rights and civil liberties of all Australians.

We urge you and the incoming Government to address the problem of Aboriginal violence as a matter of priority. And in particular, to reassert the rights of Australian non-Aboriginal artists to create art without fear of Aboriginal violence, and of Australian archaeologists to explore the past without interference from bureaucrats and lawyers. We urge them to defund those organisations and individuals who have destroyed our freedom of expression, and who are violating our human rights, promoting unlawful censorship, and encouraging Aboriginal violence.

We have great hopes that the indigenous advisory council, under the guidance of Warren Mundine, will be able to restore some balance and help in resolving the Gordian knot created by misconceived Labor policies. To that end, we propose the following measures:

1. For the Liberal Government to establish a dedicated Art Centre specifically for non-indigenous Australian artists harassed by Aborigines or vilified and censored by bureaucrats and taxpayer funded lawyers. This could be implemented without any expense, just by re-assigning one space in any of the major galleries or museums. For example, in the NSW Art Gallery, Museum of Contemporary Art, Casula Powerhouse or Australian National Gallery. One room could be dedicated to non-Indigenous artists who reinterpret ancient designs or reference their work to motifs in the public domain. We would be happy to be involved in such an initiative.

2. For the Liberal Government to initiate an inquiry into corruption within taxpayer funded organisations, agencies and individuals who form part of the “Aboriginal industry”, and Aboriginal-specific positions in the public service.
3. For the Liberal Government to establish a mechanism to monitor taxpayer funded Aboriginal organisations and other bodies within the “Aboriginal industry”.
4. For the Liberal Government to establish a complaint mechanism to investigate grievances of non-Aboriginal artists and other non-indigenous people, who have been targeted by either Aboriginal objectors or by taxpayer funded organisations.
5. For the Liberal Government to re-examine the practice of titles which are abused by violent segments of Aboriginal community. Terms such as “traditional owner”, “first people”, and “sacred tradition” among others are constantly being used to justify violent behaviour.
6. For the Liberal Government to ensure the police can do their job without political pressure.
7. For the Liberal Government to stay vigilant and monitor Government programs in the Aboriginal affairs area.

Rationale for the above suggestions:

1. Australian artists who are inspired by ancient Aboriginal tradition are attacked and vilified by Aborigines and those working in “Aboriginal industry”. This has been happening for decades, ever since Margaret Preston used prehistoric patterns in her work. This is still going on and getting worse, with international artists being attacked as well. One such example was the case of the Polish designer Ewa Smuga earlier this year. Ewa was vilified for using a repetitive geometric pattern in her interior design. An Aboriginal artist tried to claim copyright over such repetitive triangle patterns and claimed that she must be asked for “permission” and receive royalties. The Arts Law Centre of Australia supported these ludicrous demands. Other artists were attacked for using motifs such as hand prints in their design, with claims that Aborigines hold a copyright, even though there is no copyright on prehistoric cave art. Hand prints or any other prehistoric patterns are common to all ancient cultures, and Aboriginal demands for royalties are met with shock and disbelief by the international community.
2. There are 119 Aboriginal Land Councils in NSW alone, and many more places such as Aboriginal Resource Centres and tribal councils. Their work should be transparent, but the only contact is most often just a P. O. Box number with no mention of any name or person responsible. This became clear to us when throughout 2009 and 2010 Aboriginal organisations as well as Aboriginal worker Brad Moore at the Blue Mountains City Council were unable to provide a single name for any official Aboriginal representative in the mountains. It was also confirmed in conversations with Aboriginal people, who themselves are unhappy with the lack of transparency and accountability of these organisations. Aboriginal-specific positions should be re-examined, in the light of Kerryn Pholi’s honest account of her own experience while working as a “professional Aborigine” [ABC website]
3. While conducting our research, it became apparent that it is common practice in obtaining funding to include excessive and unrealistic promises. Once the funding has been received no activities take place, but the funded bodies come up with a number of plausible excuses why the terms of agreement for funding could not have been reached. This practice of funding allocated on the basis of mere promises should be replaced with funding based on a demonstrated capacity to perform the specified tasks.
4. Our experience showed that the taxpayer funded Arts Law Centre of Australia advocates for unlawful censorship, encourages Aboriginal violence, and puts non-Aboriginal artists’ lives in danger. Apart from making false claims and legally unfounded accusations, their most dangerous practice is to declare any artist who “upsets” Aborigines as being “racist”.

The Arts Law Centre was originally funded to protect the rights of all Australian artists. It has turned into organisation which represents Aboriginal political interest, at the expense of non-Aboriginal

artists. It should therefore be defunded, or at least there should be a parallel organisation established, to advocate for non-Aboriginal artists and their rights.

5. Our experience has shown that any Aboriginal person can do just about anything and justify it by any of those misused terms. This includes people who declare themselves to be Aborigines as soon as that becomes politically desirable and profitable. We have had to watch people claiming to be “traditional owners” trespassing and vandalising our property in broad daylight and in full view of the public. They insulted our artists, abused our visitors, publicly humiliated us, and then threatened our supporters – including Aboriginal people who loved and openly supported our work – with violence.

6. Our experience has shown that the local police in the Blue Mountains are unable to do their job because of Government policy. Soon after the campaign of hate and violence against us and our artists started, the local police officers advised us to: “Cut and run. These people will never stop.” The full account of police frustration and helplessness in the face of Aboriginal violence is detailed in Part 2 of “Forbidden Art, Politicised Archaeology and Orwellian Politics in Australia”.

7. This would serve to avoid the mistakes of the past, when a number of initiatives were allowed to continue for decades before being abolished or defunded. Some very prominent and influential people seem to still be under the impression that Aboriginal people are downtrodden and disadvantaged. This is certainly not so in the case of urban Aborigines. The reasons for disadvantage and tragic conditions in remote Aboriginal communities have been well explained by Aboriginal leaders such as Warren Mundine, Noel Pearson, Marcia Langton, Mick Gooda, Alison Anderson, Bess Price, as well as by non-Indigenous people such as Louis Nowra, Gary Johns, James Franklin, Stephanie Jarrett, and Andrew Bolt.

Despite our experience, I still hope that under the guidance of Warren Mundine, Aboriginal people will make an effort to find some way to co-exist with people whom they seem to hate so much. I hope and believe that the incoming Government can find a way to help them abolish their brutal customs and unending “payback” mentality.

It is my understanding that the indigenous advisory council will comprise both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. As a non-indigenous Australian myself, I do have an insight into how the indigenous policy affects broader society, and the impact of Aboriginal violence in urban areas. I know how in some quarters the sentiment towards indigenous people has changed from love and support to fear and resentment. I know what people really think, but are too afraid to say, especially when threatened with violence, as people in the Blue Mountains were threatened by our objectors.

I understand that social stability and openness are among Warren Mundine’s objectives. Neither can be achieved if people are forbidden to speak their mind and forced to comply with a party line. In order for the indigenous advisory council to work effectively, it may be useful to have an input from people with different views.

I would like to have an opportunity to provide an input as a critic of the Labor policy and to provide information about its disastrous consequences, especially in the area of art and archaeology. That policy, which decades ago might have started with good intentions, has ended up in dividing our society. The love and support that many have felt and showed towards Aboriginal people has turned into fear and resentment. As confirmed by people who participated in my research, it has turned into contempt for both – Aborigines who misuse the privileges given to them, and those who allow these privileges to be abused.

I would be honoured to contribute to the work of the indigenous advisory council. I feel I could assist in changing attitudes and I would be happy to provide information based on our experiences during the past five years.

Kind regards,

Vesna Tenodi, on behalf of the DreamRaiser group of artists

(02) 9567 0765

www.modrogorje.com



“Wanjina Watchers in the Whispering Stone” sculpture by Benedikt Osvath, before the vandalism, and viewed from the RSL club across the road – the locals and the tourists named the cannon and the sculpture “war and peace”



“Wanjina Watchers in the Whispering Stone” sculpture after having been vandalised

Some of the earlier submissions sent to Mr. Abbott’s office and also published on www.modrogorje.com include:

1. Request for enquiry into the conduct of the Arts Law Centre of Australia and Blue Mountains City Council, in relation to censorship of the *Wanjina Watchers in the Whispering Stone* sculpture by artist Benedikt Osváth and attacks on the “Dreamtime Set in Stone” book by Vesna Tenodi and “Wanjina Watchers” paintings by Gina Sinozich, November 2011
2. Complaint against discrimination, harassment and vilification of non-indigenous artists and other ModroGorje DreamRaiser Project participants and supporters in Australia, with a request for the Australian Government to enquire into the conduct of the Arts Law Centre of Australia and Blue Mountains City Council, January 2012
3. Request for de-funding the Arts Law Centre of Australia and Mowanjurn Aboriginal centre, and for scrapping of the Australia Council for the Arts “Protocols for producing Indigenous Australian visual arts”, March 2012
4. Letter of Support to Blacktown Council, for discontinuing the welcome-to-country ceremony and excluding the Darug tribe, having established that the Darug members are committing an “ethnic fraud”, October 2012
5. Submission to the National Cultural Policy committee, 2012
6. Part 1 of the “Forbidden Art, Politicised Archaeology and Orwellian Politics in Australia”, October 2012
7. Article by Donald Richardson and Vesna Tenodi: Aboriginal Violence against Australian contemporary artists, March 2013
8. Article by Donald Richardson and Vesna Tenodi: Aboriginal harassment of international artists and attacks on Polish designer Ewa Smuga, April 2013
9. Open Letter/Notice of concern sent to: 1. International Organisation of Rock Art Organisations (IFRAO) & Australian Rock Art Research Association (AURA) and 2. The Australian Archaeological Association (AAA), Re: Unethical proposals and false claims by both IFRAO and AAA, resulting in extreme Aboriginal violence and harassment of non-Aboriginal artists and archaeologists, June 2013