

## A GOVERNMENT OF PROFESSORS

In many world cultures, people are conditioned into thinking about government in a pyramidal, military command type of structure. A General is at the top, underpinned by a handful of Majors and so on down to a section of foot soldiers led by a Sergeant. This idea of a pyramidal command structure is also subtly reinforced by the pervasive legendary idea of the 'Warrior King'. Someone with a hereditary right to power, or who otherwise seizes the throne by force, then wields an absolute sovereign power.

It is however, entirely unhelpful to make such structural assumptions when thinking about traditional Aboriginal society. It is probably more helpful to think instead in terms of a de-bureaucratized university, where each specialist area of knowledge is governed by an Emeritus Professor, supported by a team of Adjunct Professors.

That is, each area of knowledge and expertise in traditional Aboriginal society was controlled exclusively by a 'Knowledge Keeper'. Each knowledge keeper had an unchallengeable status that had been achieved solely by merit alone, and was not related to family lineage or political alignment.

In Kulin languages for instance, this status as a knowledge keeper was reflected in the title of Ngurungaeta (ung-uh-rung-eye-tuh). This title has usually been translated inadequately as 'Headman'.

However, as already indicated, this translation has the hidden assumptions, of being at the top of a militaristic pyramid. The implicit idea of a 'warrior king', which is so strong in many world cultures, had no place in Aboriginal culture. Being a great fighter only earned you a personal reputation. It gave you no entitlement in political decision making in the tribe. This was even if you were the chief law officer and tribal executioner, like the Kidney-Fat Man.

But just like there is the Chancellor of a university who controls the administration, there was also a tribal role that was effectively the 'Co-ordinator of Knowledge Keepers'. This is the role that has in the past generally been interpreted as a military style 'Headman'. However, the main qualifications for this role, apart from a prodigious memory for complex detail, were the ability to articulate different aspects to a problem and to weave consensus.

The essential point is that for all knowledge keepers, including the co-ordinator of keepers, they all had to first satisfy the two key criteria for elevation to Eldership. These were knowledge and character. In traditional Aboriginal society anyone caught in a lie was reviled, so people with tendencies toward duplicity or manipulateness were either weeded out very early, or succeeded in honing their skills into the more subtle arts of diplomacy.

Perhaps the best illustration of how this system worked in practice is to discuss the situation of William Buckley, the convict who escaped in 1803 and spent 32 years with the Kulin people. His tribal name was Murrangurk. After Buckley had settled into tribal life and

become fluent in the local languages, he began telling them about his experiences in the Napoleonic Wars, and the guns, cannons and carnage involved. This was a product of not just the weapons of war, but the uncompromising attitude to human life that accompanied it.

Pretty soon, Buckley was involved in a sell-out tour all over central Victoria and beyond, in what could be styled as 'A Night at the Theatre with Murrangurk'. His audiences were spellbound as he warned that white men would someday come and take their land and that they should never kill a white man, because it would provoke indiscriminate revenge on the innocent.

In 1888 William Barak himself graphically told of his own experience as a child when he heard Buckley speak. It was plain that Barak and all the others in the audience had been scared witless by what they heard.

It is a matter of historical record that Buckley was given the status of Ngurungaeta and that pointedly, in times of intertribal conflict, he was placed in safety with the women, children and elderly. Mind you, this is despite Buckley being over 200 centimetres tall, powerfully built and having military experience. He was instead shielded by his status as a knowledge keeper and was not allowed to fight.

So, what was his expertise that qualified him as a knowledge keeper? There was of course only one thing in which Buckley had a singular and unchallengeable expertise, and that was about white men. Therefore, instead of thinking about Buckley's tribal status as a 'Headman' in terms of a militaristic command, his status and title should be interpreted as being 'Headman for Education about Whitefellas'.

More than that, as a knowledge keeper his word became Law. As William Barak later disclosed, Buckley's sage advice to the Kulin had been to never kill a white man, because 'If you shoot one white man they will shoot you all down like kangaroos.' The plain fact is that obeying 'Murrangurk's Law was ultimately a key factor in the survival of the Kulin.