

Bridge over troubled indigenous waters

January 25, 2010

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Somehow it comes as no surprise this Australia Day that a struggle over Aboriginal heritage involves crossing the Jordan River.

Burdened as we are by 222 years of tragic failure and hard-fought gain for the first Australians, biblical references always seem to set a case starkly.

(Just ask the film-makers of Samson and Delilah.)

Out beside the Jordan, a gum tree-lined trickle through dry country north of Hobart, the Promised Land of full reconciliation is definitely yet to be reached.

For months, Tasmanian Aborigines have protested a highway project following the discovery of aboriginal artefacts there.

As is so often the case, at first blush this set them against majority wishes.

Nearly every Tasmanian wants the Brighton Bypass built to unclog a tedious section of the main north-south-highway, and the Rudd Government stumped up \$173 million for it.

So when grizzled Aboriginal activists, who first found the spotlight nearly 30 years ago, turned up and started getting arrested in front of bulldozers, sympathies were at best mixed.

The government had gone through the usual processes to assess the route's history.

Aboriginal Heritage officers had a look, and specialist archaeologists did their surveys.

Little was apparently found: eight artefacts in 300 holes, Premier David Bartlett said.

Section by section, permits were issued for most of the 10 kilometre route.

Tasmanian Aborigines thought differently.

They found artefacts lying on the ground over much of the route, but focussed particularly on a site beside the Jordan. Here it is said there is evidence of 10,000 years' of human habitation.

"There may have been around 600 or 800 Aborigines living there at any one time," said the activist lawyer Michael Mansell, who saddled up again for this fight. "There would have been corroboree, births, marriages and deaths."

A stand-off with Bartlett ended last week when the two sides agreed on a process for talks over the route.

An Aboriginal community ban on their heritage officers working on the site was lifted, and Bartlett promised to protect artefacts that were uncovered.

Mansell suggested options for bridging the river be canvassed and said: "For our part, we are open-minded about where the Jordan is crossed. It depends on what is found."

For the past week Prime Minister Kevin Rudd has barnstormed the country making Australia Day speeches. Each has begun with these words: "I acknowledge the First Australians on whose land we meet and whose cultures we celebrate as among the oldest continuing cultures in human history."

Aboriginal Tasmanians have a unique place in this history. Cut off at the last ice age, they were isolated from the rest of humanity longer than any other known culture on the planet.

So the remains of those pre-colonial times have a special global value, and part of it, however great or small, lies out on the Jordan River bank.

As he reflected on Australia Day, Mansell said: "The values of European heritage are as entrenched as ever, and I think that's good. But the Aboriginal heritage is not.

"The best way to erase from Tasmanian society's memory thousands of years of Aboriginal existence is to destroy physical signs of its existence," Mansell said.

"Not only Aboriginal people, but Australians generally, to me, are the losers."

Source: smh.com.au

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