

Hostility to John Pilger's film a denial of nation's brutal past

Adam Goodes - The Sydney Morning Herald - 3 March, 2014



For the last few weeks, I've seen a film bring together Aboriginal people all over Australia. The buzz around Utopia - a documentary by John Pilger - has been unprecedented. Some 4000 people attended the open-air premiere in Redfern last month - both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians - and yet little appeared in the media about an event that the people of Redfern say was a "first". This silence has since been broken by a couple of commentators whose aggression seemed a cover for their hostility to the truth about Aboriginal people.

When I watched Utopia for the first time, I was moved to tears. Three times. This film has reminded me that the great advantages I enjoy today - as a footballer and Australian of the Year - are a direct result of the struggles and sacrifices of the Aboriginal people who came before me.

Utopia honours these people, so I think the very least I can do is honour Utopia and the people who appeared in it and made it.

It takes courage to tell the truth, no matter how unpopular those truths may be. But it also takes courage to face up to our past.

That process starts with understanding our very dark past, a brutal history of dispossession, theft and slaughter. For that reason, I urge the many fair-minded Australians who seek genuine prosperity and equality for my people to find the courage to open their hearts and their minds and watch Utopia.

There is a good reason why Pilger's film resonates with so many of my people and is the talk of Aboriginal Australia.

Put yourself in Aboriginal shoes for a minute.

Imagine watching a film that tells the truth about the terrible injustices committed over 225 years against your people, a film that reveals how Europeans, and the governments that have run our country, have raped, killed and stolen from your people for their own benefit.

Now imagine how it feels when the people who benefited most from those rapes, those killings and that theft - the people in whose name the oppression was done - turn away in disgust when someone seeks to expose it.

Frankly, as a proud Adnyamathanha man, I find the silence about Utopia in mainstream Australia disturbing and hurtful. As an Australian, I find it embarrassing. I also see an irony, for Utopia is about telling the story of this silence.

Some say the film doesn't tell the "good stories" out of Aboriginal Australia. That's the part I find most offensive.

Utopia is bursting at the seams with stories of Aboriginal people who have achieved incredible things in the face of extreme adversity. Stories of people like Arthur Murray, an Aboriginal man from Wee Waa, and his wife, Leila, who fought for several decades for the truth over the death in police custody of their son Eddie. Their quiet, dignified determination helped spark the 1987 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, a landmark inquiry that still plagues governments today.



Adam Goodes: "It takes courage to tell the truth, no matter how unpopular those truths may be." CREDIT: ROHAN THOMSON

Even before that, Murray led a historic strike of cotton workers and forced employers to provide better wages and conditions for Aboriginal workers. How is this achievement negative?

The film also features Rosalie Kunothe-Monks, a strong Aboriginal woman who proudly speaks of truth and a long overdue treaty.

The work of Robert and Selina Eggington is also profiled in Utopia. After the suicide of their son, Robert and Selina created a healing centre in Perth called Dumbartung. Its aim is to stop the deaths and provide an outlet for the never-ending grief of so many Aboriginal families.

I reject any suggestion that by telling those stories, that by honouring these lives, Pilger has “focused on the negative”. Their achievements may not fit the mainstream idea of “success” but they inspire me and other Aboriginal people because they’re shared stories. They are our courageous, unrecognised resistance.

Nana Fejo, another strong Aboriginal woman, appears in Utopia. She tells of her forced removal as a child. It’s a heart-wrenching story and yet she speaks with a graciousness and generosity of spirit that should inspire all Australians.

Like Fejo, my mother was a member of the stolen generations. My family has been touched by suicide, like the Eggingtons. My family and my people talk of truth and treaty, just like Kunothe-Monks does. My family has been denied our culture, language and kinship systems, like all the Aboriginal people who feature in Utopia. This extraordinary film tells the unpleasant truth. It should be required viewing for every Australian.

Adam Goodes is the Australian of the Year and plays AFL for the Sydney Swans.