

ARCHIE MOORE

Pillors of Democracy

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by Larissa Behrendt AO

Archie Moore's *Pillors of Democracy* is a reminder that colonisation needs to be understood as an aggressive and on-going process. This continuing project is explored through the four pillars of modern Western democracy – the Legislature, the Executive, the Judiciary, and the Media (also called the Fourth Estate).

The first three are chapters in the Australian Constitution, each designed to check on the other (policing themselves), with the fourth (not mentioned in the Constitution) reflective of the idea that the media should scrutinise governments to hold them accountable to the people they represent.

These pillars are represented literally through Doric columns, representing the architectural style adopted by so many colonial structures. The architectural style evokes the ancient Greek roots of the earliest concepts of democracy. It was no coincidence that the buildings of colonial power adopt this architectural style. Courthouses and houses of parliament are designed to be imposing to project the power they claim to hold. These places where colonial power is exercised physically colonise the First Nations land on which they stand, imposing one system of law over another.

Moore's wordplay with the concept of 'pillor' instead of the 'pillar' to describe the representations of each democratic arm positions his critical voice – they are held up to public scrutiny, to scorn, to ridicule. They need to be interrogated. They are not what they seem. They should be pilloried.

In *Pillors of Democracy*, Moore powerfully reminds us of this, showing the land that represents the eternal connection, the unceded sovereignty, First Nations people have with the land – always was, always will be. The corrugated iron evokes the tin shacks and humpies that First Nations people lived in when pushed to the fringes. It is also emblematic of the extraction of ore from the ground, the exploitation of First Nations land by mining companies while First Nations people remained beggars in their own country.

Focusing on these literal and metaphorical pillars, Moore challenges us to consider who democracy protects and who it doesn't. At a time when the cracks are showing in Western democracies around the world, when it has never seemed more fragile, Moore reminds us that there has never been a time when these pillars protected Aboriginal people. They were used in an attempt to legitimise the land theft that went with the colonisation of First Nations land across the continent. They were reasserted when Australia became a Federation in 1901.

But they continue, Moore reminds us, to work against First Nations people, continue to provide the protection they claim to offer. The Judiciary imposes the English common law, that relied on the colonial-constructed Doctrine of Discovery and employed the legal fiction of *terra nullius*. Judges sentence First Nations people at higher rates than non-Indigenous people. The Legislature makes laws that fail to protect Indigenous property and land; they pass laws that disproportionately impact on First Nations people (like bail laws that provide a presumption against bail if you do not have a fixed address – punishing people for being

poor). The Executive implements policies that disproportionately remove First Nations children from their families. And the mainstream media has focused on deficit-model reporting and elevated voices that are antagonistic to First Nations rights and identity. The pillars might be the ideals of democracy, but they have failed to protect those who needed their protection the most.

Moore reminds us that architectural symbols of power, Empire and the colony are illusory. His exploration of how, in challenging colonial narratives, statues and what they represent – conquest, dominance – are now highly contested sites. Pulling them down is an act of decolonisation, of challenging a national story that speaks of ‘discovery’ and ‘civilising’. The power of these symbols, Moore reminds us, is tenaciously protected by the state – surrounded by police to guard them from desecration. But when they topple, they are empty and thin, no more than mangled metal. In this form, they are a reminder that empires fall. First Nations people have challenged the colonial narrative from the arrival of the first colonists. It is not surprising that truth-telling remains a central part of the contemporary political agenda for many First Nations communities, along with treaty and the need for First Nations representation, the need to ‘close the gap’ and the claim for self-determination as a framework for policy and for greater community control over areas that impact the lives of First Nations people.

Against the imposing structures of colonialism and its four pillars of democracy, Moore provides a subtle but powerful meditation on the resilience and tenacity of First Nations presence. The pillars of democracy – and the architecture that sought to project their power – were imported onto land where a governance system existed for over 85,000 years. Australia’s First Nations people are the world’s oldest continuous living culture.

To survive continuously for that long, you need to understand how to live with the world around you, to live sustainably. But you also need to know how to live with each other. You need to have processes that allow a community to make decisions and to solve disputes. You need to have a system of rules or laws, so people understand their responsibilities. First Nations communities

around the country were organised and had systems that regulated life and behaviour. They did that without the need for prisons, without the need for orphanages. Totemic and kinship systems regulated relationships, connections, and obligations to other people and to the world around them. It was a system that sustained communities without the need for imposing architecture, without courthouses, without houses of Parliament.

Ironically and arrogantly, when the colonial legal system declared Australia to be *terra nullius*, it was under the pretext that it had no system of government. But those kinship systems remain today. It’s why we ask, ‘where are you from?’ rather than ‘what do you do?’ We can still find our connections to each other. It is a system, because of its circular nature, that can be rebuilt. Reflective of this, First Nations cultures that were presumed by the coloniser to be dying out are now being regenerated; First Nations languages and cultural practices such as possum cloak making and weaving are being revived.

Moore’s *Pillars of Democracy*, by signalling the lies of the pillars, by challenging their immutability, their inevitability, their superiority, undermines the power colonial institutions try to assert. It is an act of decolonisation. But by reminding us of what still lies underneath, what remains unchanged and unceded, it is also a reassertion of an enduring sovereignty.

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Archie Moore *Pillors of Democracy* artworks courtesy
The Commercial, Sydney