

# Thousands flock to see Utopia

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"I believe the way John Pilger has visually put it together, not on our behalf but with us and explained to the Australian community what exactly the Australian government has been doing and they've been doing this in hiding," Ms Kunoth-Monks said.

The film does quite deliberately use her community of Utopia to contrast the physical and human rights differences between black and white Australians and Ms Kunoth-Monks is grateful.

"I guess that was the demonstration, the visual demonstration. He also called Canberra the Utopia, the white Utopia, the Capital. And the contrast between Canberra where all the policy is made and then imposed on us; I thought it was poignant. And then you go to Ampiliwatja and Utopia and you see the abject poverty and it's not accidental, that's how we're being treated," she said.

John Pilger told the audience Australia truly was the lucky country. Lucky it had as yet escaped the fate of an Apartheid-era South Africa.

"What I do sense and I am perhaps something more of an authority on this is that overseas the notion is Australia is a lucky country, it's lucky that it's got away with how it treats Indigenous Australians unlike South Africa. You'll remember that a global campaign helped to bring about the end of racial Apartheid in South Africa," he said.

"I'm not suggesting there will be the same global campaign for Indigenous Australians but this is the 21st century and there are different agendas now around the world and Australia has been spotted. No Western country has been more repeatedly condemned for the way it has treated its Indigenous people and for its racism than Australia.

"This is its distinction along with a number of other distinctions. One more at random is it's the only First World country on the United Nations shame list in which an entirely preventable disease called trachoma has not been beaten.

It's been beaten in Sri Lanka, Vietnam, in Morocco; these are relatively poor countries but not in rich Australia," he said.

Mr Pilger told his audience what Australia's politicians fear was the kind of opprobrium that comes from overseas that likens Australia with infamy such as Apartheid.

"Now what I'm saying is the world is watching, the world is noticing; or beginning to notice," he said.

Ms Kunoth-Monks absolutely believes

Australia is headed for the same international reputation that plagued South Africa, and that international recognition and pressure has been quietly growing.

"I believe that quite strongly but it's being done under the radar thus far," she said.

Shireen Malamoo said the Australian government has been hypocritical and will be found out.

"The Australian government was on the UN Security Council. How can it sit in judgment on other countries when it has the most racist situation in this country?" Ms Malamoo asked.

"I think there's people overseas who are quite aware of this happening here in this country."

Selina Eggington of Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation said Mr Abbott's self-professed claim to be the Prime Minister for Aboriginal Affairs has been proved false after only four months in government.

"I think it means very little, I think he's just lying to us. He's going to do a lot of damage to a lot of services for Aboriginal people," she said.

"We're already starting to feel the effect of those cuts and it's just going to be so devastating for all our people that we're going to suffer these traumas and difficulties and problems even more than we already have because of the attitude of Tony Abbott and his cabinet."

For John Pilger it was the 2007 Northern Territory Intervention that made him realise the film that became Utopia was overdue.

"The Intervention in 2007 was one of the most savage assaults on Indigenous Australia and it was then I realised I needed to make my fourth documentary film on Indigenous Australia," he said.

In the editing suite a great deal of care had to be taken not mix up the recent footage of Utopia with that shot 28 years ago.

"Things always change but essentials in remote Australia have not changed, denial of basic services, poverty, prevalence of preventable diseases, all those shameful aspects of Aboriginal life that should have been fixed a long time ago still exist," he said.

"In the film we compare footage we shot recently with footage we shot 28 years ago and the situation is identical."

Rosalie Kunoth-Monks said this was an "important film all Australians should see".

"I believe it's the beginning of an awakening in Australia of the deception and the treatment of Aboriginal people by the government. It

is the fact the White Australian policy and the absolute hatred in the last lot of policies, it comes from the government, not from the people of Australia. Let's unite and let's fight it," she said.

Robert Eggington of the Dumbartung Aboriginal Corporation said Utopia was so important because the film targets the core challenges Aboriginal people face.

"The film itself is obviously an epic in terms of the work of John Pilger. It's a film I believe targets the core of the challenges Aboriginal people face today in relation to issues such as dispossession, issues dealing with suicide, dealing with incarceration; the very issues Dumbartung deals with on a daily basis in terms of our work," he said.

Mr Eggington believes the Block was a "really apt" location for the premiere and the film would be a pivotal film for generations to come.

"We think it's really apt that it's here on the Block in the very heart of Koori country," he said.

"It's a film for many generations to come will be absolutely pivotal in terms of awareness and creating a focus on the issues that are important to Aboriginal people," he said.

And the film doesn't focus just on Utopia and it doesn't just compare Utopia now to 28 years ago because while many issues have stayed the same or worsened, new issues have emerged, issues like Robert and Selina Eggington's work in trying to reduce the disgraceful rate suicide, particularly youth suicide.

"When I first filmed in Australia suicide was very, very rare in Aboriginal communities. It was a big problem in white Australia, youth suicide and still is, but in Aboriginal Australia despite the impoverishment and impositions on them it was very rare and now it's an epidemic," Mr Pilger said.

Robert Eggington points out the meagre resources for Indigenous mental health also are not going where they are most needed, to the communities trying to deal with the problem.

"Of course the political issue that needs to be addressed by us as Aboriginal people is the amount of money that is allocated into mental health through the Closing the Gap funding.

"So questions have to be raised about where that funding, in terms of Closing the Gap, is actually going to and we know it's going into mainstream agencies like Anglicare, Centacare, UnitingCare, Salvation Army and

the list goes on and on.

"But obviously it's not going into grass roots activism and we believe from a grass roots perspective we as Aboriginal people can deal with and put into place deterrents that can maybe start to have impact on lessening the statistics of suicide and incarceration," he said.

Mr Eggington said the lack of action by government continues an ongoing genocide.

"It's all part of an ongoing genocide that's been rampant in this society in Australia for over 200 years. But it also takes away from Aboriginal people the very heart of their human right to self-determine and in self-determination of course we can make and determine priorities, we can implement services upon resources to deal with those priorities," he said.

"But if you mainstream those resources that take away from Aboriginal people the right to self-determine, well of course we're under control again of their bureaucracies and what they think best for us in terms of our own survival and our own wellbeing," he said.

Utopia also points to an old problem that has only got exponentially worse: incarceration, with National Indigenous Times reporter, Gerry Georgatos telling John Pilger of Western Australia's latest addition, the all-Aboriginal jail in Derby.

"I think what people need to understand is in this country governments have just about created an industry from the incarceration of black people and in Western Australia, as people may know, Nyoongah men are the highest incarcerated males on the planet per head of population," Robert Eggington said.

"We are jailed at rates even higher than black South Africans in South African jail systems," he said.

Utopia had its world premiere in Britain and the reaction there from the many thousands who watched the film was of shock and hour at the treatment of Indigenous Australians.

"People were shocked, that was the public response. How can this be happening in Australia, we thought Australia was sort of alright, cricket and things, how come this is happening there?" was typical of the comments we received said John Pilger.

"People were shocked but they shouldn't be shocked. It's our shame that they're shocked.

"When I say to people overseas 'there is a struggle for freedom in Australia', they looked at me nonplussed until they saw this film and then they understood what I was saying," Mr Pilger said.



Vicki Wade, Karinda, Selina and Robert Eggington and Graham Merritt. All images: Geoff Bagnall