The Hindmarsh Island Bridge affair began in 1988 as a simple development approval for a marina but became a major Australian controversy when the construction of a bridge between Goolwa and the island was stopped because of secret concerns held by Ngarrindjeri women. Investigative journalist Margaret Simons has now published *The Meeting of The Waters: Secret Women’s Business* (Hodder), after four years examining the case, and concludes that there were fundamental flaws in the rule of law, parliamentary democracy and the media’s coverage of the affair. Anthropologist Dr Ron Brunton, a critic of opponents to the building of the Hindmarsh Island Bridge, sees the affair differently. On Wednesday, 30 July 2003, Ron Brunton and Margaret Simons addressed The Sydney Institute to debate the issue.
I would like to start by thanking the Sydney Institute for this opportunity. I think this discussion will, among other things, place the current “culture wars” in some historical context, and it is encouraging to be able to do so in this kind of forum, where strong points of view may be held but all views are given a fair hearing, as opposed to the polemical personal attacks that pass for debate in some other arenas.

Someone suggested to me recently that my book might gain more currency if I renamed it “Harry Potter and the Meeting of the Waters”. But I think it doesn’t need such boosting. The story of the Hindmarsh Island bridge affair – what happened at this little island at the mouth of the Murray – is one of the most important episodes of recent Australian history. It is one of those big, even archetypal stories that tell us something about who we are.

But I have to accept that the Hindmarsh Island bridge affair will be dim in the minds of many, so let me briefly remind you of what it was all about. Today it is best remembered for the phrase “secret women’s business” which entered the popular lexicon but is nearly always used mockingly and ironically.

It all started in the early 1990s, with a plan to build a bridge from the little South Australian town of Goolwa to Hindmarsh Island. At the last minute, in early 1994 and after planning approval had been granted, Aboriginal women of the Ngarrindjeri people claimed the island was special to them for reasons that could not be revealed. They applied to the then Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Robert Tickner, for a heritage order prohibiting the bridge. The women were successful. The Keating Government banned the bridge. This was controversial, of course, but would have long since disappeared from all but legal history books were it not for what happened next. Another group of Aboriginal women came forward and said, or rather were reported by the media as saying, that the claim of what had become known as “secret women’s business” was a hoax – that the original Ngarrindjeri women had made up the stories.
A Royal Commission was called. In December 1995 it found that the secret women's business was a fabrication. “Lies, lies, lies” was the newspaper headline in the *Adelaide Advertiser*.

As you know I have written a book that examines the evidence and, I believe, establishes that the Royal Commission got it wrong. My book also reveals that the so-called dissident women – the women who denied secret women's business – would almost certainly never have emerged as an organised group, as a media event, if not for the intervention of Liberal Party figures, in particular Ian McLachlan. Other key players in this affair were Christopher Pearson, later appointed as John Howard’s speech writer, the journalist Chris Kenny, now media advisor to the Minister for Foreign Affairs, Alexander Downer, and of course Dr Ron Brunton, who was one of the main barrackers for the Royal Commission and its findings.

I conclude that there never was a solid reason to believe that Ngarrindjeri women lied about what became known as “secret women's business”. There are a lot of reasons to believe they were telling the truth.

The Royal Commission was less than rigorous in many ways. There was evidence available that it did not look for, and therefore did not find. Other evidence was found, but buried or overlooked. Yet other evidence was interpreted with what can only be described as spin.

Why was this so? The answer lies in a big story of secrets and power – not Ngarrindjeri secrets and power, but those of mainstream Australia – an undertow of political operatives, media actors and supposedly independent commentators. The result was a miscarriage of judicial process, and a significant injustice directly to the Ngarrindjeri, but indirectly to the nation, and to all of us.

Dr Brunton and I agree about some things but also disagree about many things. He has been vehement in his support for the Royal Commission and his attacks on its critics. In a 1995 article in the *Herald Sun*, Dr Brunton wrote that the evidence supporting the fabrication finding was “overwhelming” and that “the real question about the Hindmarsh Island fiasco is why a royal commission was required to establish something so obvious”.

Dr Brunton has repeatedly suggested that those who persist in doubting the findings of the Royal Commission are not only wrong, but morally bad, and prepared to sacrifice rationality and evidence for ideological reasons. He has suggested that they might do more harm than the worst racists.

But the hard fact is that the evidence is against him. That evidence is now on the public record, both in the findings of Justice von Doussa of the Federal Court, and in my book, and elsewhere. The fact is that there is simply no evidence of fabrication that stands up to scrutiny.
None. On the other hand, there is evidence corroborating the Ngar-irdjeri’s oral claims.

Dr Brunton and others may continue to be suspicious, but the simple fact is that their suspicions are not supported by the evidence. We must now ask who has been driven by ideology.

One of the things Dr Brunton and I agree on is the importance of Hindmarsh Island. Dr Brunton has written that it set the stage for the Howard Government’s approach to Aboriginal affairs, and its attitude to probity in public life. I agree with him. This affair was also the first walk in the sun for several of the culture warriors, and arguably the beginning of the still raging culture wars. Hindmarsh Island was the start of the prevailing attitude of scepticism to oral history – the things Aboriginal people say about themselves.

I have said all along that we need reasoned, evidence-based debate, so let me turn to the evidence. Dr Brunton has written that those disputing the Royal Commission’s finding that secret women’s business was a hoax have to deal with some “stubborn and massive facts”. The first “fact” Dr Brunton proposed was that strategically placed Ngarrindjeri had stated publicly that women’s business was a hoax. He is referring to the Ngarrindjeri women who became known as the dissidents.

I agree with him that the main dissidents were women of courage and integrity. But if Dr Brunton had interviewed the proponent women – which he did not – he would have found exactly the same was true of them. That is not only my opinion, but the opinion of every independent investigator before whom they have appeared – including Professor Cheryl Saunders, Justice Jane Mathews and Justice von Doussa of the Federal Court, who also heard evidence from the dissident women.

On both sides of this debate are strong minded, outspoken Aboriginal women of great conviction and courage, all very sure that their world view is the correct one. So how are we to choose between their opposing convictions and beliefs?

The fact is that the force of what the dissident women say is very limited. All they can say – all that many of them have claimed – is that they weren’t told secret women’s business, and didn’t know of it. When the dissident women were cross examined before Justice von Doussa of the Federal Court in 2001, it became clear that there were many other well established and documented Ngarrindjeri Dreamings that they also were not aware of. It is therefore hardly surprising that they didn’t know secret women’s business.

Justice von Doussa said of the dissident women that they were sincere and credible, but that it was clear a number of them regarded Ngarrindjeri culture as an historical curiosity no longer appropriate to their lives as Christian members of a wider community. He said their evidence did not deny the probability that important pockets of
knowledge were possessed by other Ngarrindjeri. The truth is that the evidence of the dissident women proves nothing of significance, despite their integrity and worth as individuals.

The other “strategically placed” Ngarrindjeri who is generally regarded as having said women’s business was a hoax was Doug Milera, who appeared to make this claim in a Channel 10 interview with Chris Kenny. There is some doubt about whether Milera was sober when he did that interview – he was a well-known alcoholic. My book reveals that he was also a diabetic who had not had his medication for some days.

But even if we assume Milera was competent during the interview, the full transcript makes it clear that he contradicted himself many times. Three times he told Channel 10 that he believed that secret women’s business was a genuine tradition of the Ngarrindjeri. Once he said it was fabricated. The only fair journalistic representation would have been “Aboriginal man contradicts himself”. But of course that wouldn’t have led the national news. What Channel 10 put to air was a distortion and a beat up. Even more shameful and alarming, the Royal Commission endorsed Channel 10’s treatment.

The final strategically placed Ngarrindjeri Dr Brunton has in the past relied on as evidence of fabrication is the elder Laura Kartinyeri, or Nanna Laura as she was more affectionately known, who appeared to have written a letter denying knowledge of secret women’s business. My book reveals that she later signed a statutory declaration, in the presence of her granddaughter, denying that she had ever read that letter. She said she had signed it in the belief it was opposing the bridge. The letter she signed had been written and taken to her by two Ngarrindjeri men who were at this time co-operating with the developers of the bridge, and the Liberal Party.

Nanna Laura never expressed a view one way or the other on secret women’s business, but she said in her statutory declaration that such things should not be discussed with white people. She made her opposition to the bridge clear. Nanna Laura was elderly and in poor health at the time of these events. She died before the Royal Commission got underway. Her statutory declaration was not included in the evidence before the Royal Commission and indeed comes to light for the first time in my book.

The second “stubborn and massive fact” Dr Brunton proposed was the “strange timing” of the revelations about women’s business, and the absence of protests about other construction works that have occurred in the Hindmarsh Island region.

It is true that the women’s business claim was raised very late in the planning process – after approvals had been given. But it is also clear, and Justice von Doussa has found, that the consultation process in the lead up to those approvals was inadequate. Largely due to
misunderstandings and State government bungling, meetings with the Ngarrindjeri recommended by the developers’ own consultant were never carried out.

As for the lack of protest surrounding earlier construction works, this is also true – or at least no documentary record of any such protests has been found. But there are many possible explanations for this. The barrages, which are the most significant construction works, were built after a parliamentary inquiry heard evidence from 26 witnesses – fishermen, boat proprietors, farmers and so forth. There was not a single indigenous witness. At the time most Ngarrindjeri were either confined to the mission, unable to leave without a permit, or living in fringe camps and often largely illiterate.

Having addressed Dr Brunton’s “stubborn and massive facts” – and others are dealt with in the book – let me propose a couple of my own. The first is the documentary evidence. The Royal Commission did virtually no archival research. If Dr Brunton has done some, it is not evident from his writings on this affair. Thus, important records have been overlooked.

Let me give two examples. From early 1994, the Ngarrindjeri were claiming that part of the significance of the site of the bridge – the channel of water between Hindmarsh Island and the town of Goolwa – was that it was known as “The Meeting of the Waters” – the place where salt and fresh water met. This was seen as a place of great fertility and life. The Royal Commission dismissed this aspect of the claim out of hand. It made no sense, the commission said, because the barrages across the mouth of the Murray already stopped the water from mixing, so how could a bridge be a problem?

As well, the Royal Commission said, there was no reason why the site of the bridge should be particularly identified as the Meeting of the Waters, since fresh and salt water would have met throughout the lake system, depending on tides and the amount of flow in the river. All this seemed logical enough – although some would point out that Western religious belief does not normally yield to logic either. These arguments formed one of the main legs for the Royal Commission’s finding of fabrication.

But all this time, only a few blocks from the Royal Commission hearing room, there was a documentary record that would have forced a different conclusion. In the State Library of South Australia is a book containing an extract from the diaries of Charles Harding, an early settler in the Goolwa/Hindmarsh island area. Harding recorded that the name “goolwa” had been explained to him by a native as meaning “sometimes fresh, and sometimes of mixed water” to distinguish it from the nearby Coorong, which meant “very salty water”7 This was an independent documentary record written long before the current debate, that corroborates what the Ngarrindjeri were saying.
Let me deal with another piece of documentary evidence. At the Royal Commission, the only proponent Ngarrindjeri woman to give evidence was Veronica Brodie, who said that the heart of the secret women’s business was to do with the Pleiades, or Seven Sisters constellation of stars. The Royal Commission dismissed Brodie out of hand. It concluded, extraordinarily, that the Seven Sisters had never been part of Ngarrindjeri mythology.

There was evidence before the Royal Commission that should have led to a different conclusion. It was apparently overlooked. Since then work by the eminent anthropologist Dr Peter Sutton has established that the Ngarrindjeri did indeed have Seven Sisters mythology. Among the many strands of supporting evidence is a book about the Ngarrindjeri by the anthropologists Ron and Catherine Berndt. This is a volume Dr Brunton and others have suggested in other contexts discredits the secret women’s business claims. But it contains a star chart that clearly shows the Pleiades identified as *yatooka*, or young women. Other parts of the documentary record makes it clear the constellation was associated with seasonal change, initiation and fertility.8

The documentary record – not dependent on oral culture, oral history or for that matter on anything I might say – was overlooked by the Royal Commission and its supporters. It corroborates the Ngarrindjeri’s oral claims about their culture. There are other examples in the book. Time does not allow me to detail them all here.

And if we turn to the oral evidence, there are now around two dozen people who have given sworn evidence or signed statutory declarations saying that they knew something of the secret women’s business from years before these events. Are they all liars? Are all the independent investigators who have found them credible wrong? Most of them have no conceivable motivation for lying. Their evidence meshes with the documentary record in a way that makes the fabrication theory insupportable.

As a result of the research presented in my book, I am able to say there is no evidence of fabrication that stands up to scrutiny, and a fair bit of evidence corroborating the Ngarrindjeri’s claims. The Royal Commission got it wrong. This debate is not about Dr Brunton, or about me. It is about evidence based history – in this case very recent Australian history. I would say that this shows the fabrication of history is not necessarily the preserve of the Left. The Right, too, in this case, has been ideologically blinded to evidence, and too quick to rush to judgement.

And I am appealing to those values that I trust I share with Dr Brunton. The values, not of Aboriginal culture, but of our own. The values of the enlightenment. The values of independent scholarship, independent judicial process, freedom of speech, respect for
evidence. All these things were abused and miscarried in the Hindmarsh Island bridge affair. We are the poorer as a result.

**Author’s Notes**

**Response to points in Dr Brunton’s paper**

1. **The dissident women**

   It is true that I assert that one of the things that divides a number of the dissident women from the proponents is their attitudes to Christianity, and its compatibility or otherwise with traditional Ngarrindjeri culture. In this I agree with Diane Bell. Indeed, differing attitudes to Christianity is one of the consistent themes of this affair. This is established not by my words, but by the words of the players themselves in their evidence before the Royal Commission and Justice von Doussa, and particularly Dulcie Wilson’s memoir, *The Cost of Crossing Bridges*, Small Poppies Publishing, 1997.

   It is also true that I allege (pg 162) that Dorothy Wilson made her dislike of Victor Wilson very clear. This is based on my interview with her, of which I have a tape recording. If Dorothy Wilson gives permission, I am more than happy to make this tape public. It is more than supports my assertion.

   Dr Brunton has made various suggestions in a number of forums to the effect that my interviews with the dissident women were in some way questionable. When he first raised these allegations with my publisher, he suggested that I might be lying about having conducted these interviews. He wrote:

   *Mrs (Dulcie) Wilson has told me that she has no recollection of any interview with a female journalist who arrived unannounced at her door as described on page 295. Even after I read her the statements and incidents that arose from the interview she could not remember, and I rang her again the following day to check once more.... The situation is more complicated in the case of Bertha Gollan, as she died a few years ago. It is clear from page 299 of Ms Simons' book that the interview was conducted in person, rather than on the telephone, as she describes "a little grimace", which obviously could only be seen. Veena Gollan, her daughter, is also a 'dissident woman', and she has told me that she is very puzzled about the interview. This is because, like Dulcie Wilson, her mother was also very wary about talking to journalists, and because she and her mother spoke frequently and discussed everything that had happened regarding Hindmarsh Island; yet Veena has no recollection about her mother mentioning anything about a visit from a female journalist, even though this would have been a highly significant event. Again, it is possible that faulty memory is involved here, but Veena would also like a photo of Ms Simons – which could be shown to two of her brothers, who were living with Bertha Gollan at around the time when the interview would have taken place – as well as the date and place of the interview.*

   Following Dr Brunton’s correspondence with my publisher, I wrote to the women concerned directly, providing times, dates and other details of the interviews. My publisher provided Dr Brunton with a photograph, as requested. I invited the women to get in touch with me if they had any concerns. My publisher also telephoned their solicitor several times. These calls were not returned, and I had no response from the women. All we have to go on is what Dr Brunton alleges they say.

   Dr Brunton’s claim changed. He now acknowledged that I had interviewed the dissident women, but claimed they said I had not properly identified myself as working on a book. He claimed that a relative of Bertha Gollan remembered that I had not taken notes of the interview.

   I refute these suggestions. I have eight pages of shorthand notes from my interview with Bertha Gollan, with whom I spent about an hour, and twelve pages
from my interview with Dulcie Wilson, with whom I spent nearly two hours. I made it entirely clear to both women why I wanted to interview them, and that I was working on a book about the Hindmarsh Island affair. I left them with my business card, which clearly reads “journalist and writer”.

Dulcie Wilson’s memory of our encounter is apparently less than complete. Although a member of Bertha Gollan’s family served us a cup of tea during our meeting, there was nobody else present for our interview.

In any case, little turns on these allegations. Only a few paragraphs of my 512 page book are based on these interviews, and these paragraphs are hardly crucial. The rest of the quotes and perspectives on the dissident women are drawn from their evidence before the Royal Commission, and Justice von Doussa, and other published sources, including Dulcie Wilson’s memoirs.

2. Edward “Chook” Wilson

Edward “Chook” Wilson is indeed a brother of two of the dissident women. In 1995 he signed a statutory declaration stating that his maternal grandmother told him that there was secret women’s business on Hindmarsh Island. As my book makes clear, there are several cases in this dispute of sibling disagreeing with sibling, cousin against cousin, neighbour against neighbour and parent against child. This is one example. Who knows why, in this family of 15 children, one was apparently told something that others were not. But the disparity is at least consistent. Wilson’s sister Betty Tatt knew nothing of Ngarrindjeri traditional Dreamings – including those that are well documented and not disputed. Edward Wilson, on the other hand, did know of the well documented Dreamings, as well as claiming to have heard of the existence (though not the content) of secret women’s business. It is hard to see any reason why he should lie.

3. The archival record on the barrages

Dr Brunton asserts nobody has investigated the archival record on the issue of whether or not Ngarrindjeri attempted to sabotage the barrages. He is wrong about this.

I spent considerable time examining these records in the South Australian archives. The results are suggestive, but inconclusive. One major inhibition is that the police and court records for the period are still closed to the public for privacy reasons. Some will become available in the next few years, and others in future decades. It will be interesting to see what, if anything, they reveal.

I also examined the records of the Department of Engineering and Water Supply, which built the barrages. Sadly, many of the files have been destroyed. What remains are card index files. One card for the lower Murray region has the heading “Natives – vandalism”. Unfortunately the file to which this card relates has been destroyed. It is therefore not possible to tell whether it relates to the barrages, or some other property in the Lower Murray.

Records from the Point McLeay Mission show that some of the individuals mentioned by Diane Bell and Dr Brunton were sometimes in trouble with the authorities. However, the reason for their being disciplined is not always clear. I found no mention of vandalism or the barrages. I detailed all this evidence in an earlier draft of the book. However, since the evidence is is inconclusive and the book was already long, it was cut from later drafts.

4. What the Berndts did and did not say

Whatever the Berndts did or did not say about the relative degree of gender division in Ngarrindjeri culture compared to other Aboriginal cultures, their book contains ample evidence of secrecy surrounding women’s rituals. Women were secluded during menstruation. They were kept in a separate camp and attended by older women. Aspects of women’s initiation were also secret, and there were female putari or doctor-midwives, who were specialists presumably with specialist knowledge.
There were songs and rituals associated with these matters that the Berndts were not able to record. The Berndts emphasised that their work was not a complete ethnography of the Ngarrindjeri, but represented only a fraction of the culture. Justice von Doussa heard extensive argument concerning how the Berndt’s book and other anthropological material should be read, and concluded: “I find that the restricted women’s business …is not such that it should be rejected on the ground of inconsistency with known historical and ethnographic material. On the contrary, I accept …that there is a measure of support to be found in that material for the existence of restricted women’s knowledge.”

Endnotes

2. References for Dr Brunton’s writings that support this statement include:
   The Herald-Sun of 22 December 1995
   “The False Culture Syndrome” IPA BACKGROUNDER March 1996 Volume 8/2.
   The Courier Mail 14 February 1998
   The Courier Mail 21 April 1998
   “Hindmarsh Island and the Hoaxing of Australian Anthropology”, Quadrant May 1999
   Courier Mail 1 September 2001
   “Correcting the False Scholarship Syndrome” Institute of Public Affairs website
6. The complete transcript of the Channel 10 interview is Exhibit 148 before the Hindmarsh Island Royal Commission, and is available through the South Australian Archives. The Royal Commission endorsement is at page 96 of its report.