



BLACK LIVES WHITE LIES

Rosemary Neill

The Weekend Australian

29 June 2002

For all the dramatic shifts in indigenous affairs, one thing has not changed: low Aboriginal life expectancy. This mortality gap should be considered a national emergency, writes Rosemary Neill

AUSTRALIA has the dubious distinction of being the only First World country with a dispossessed indigenous minority whose men, on average, will not live long enough to claim a retirement pension.

Aboriginal life expectancy lags 20 years behind that of the wider population -- a figure that has not improved in 20 years. This stagnation is also unprecedented among wealthy nations with dispossessed indigenous minorities.

Describing deeply troubled Cape York indigenous communities, Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson has said that if non-Aboriginal towns experienced a life expectancy of "50 years and sliding", if almost 40 per cent of 15 to 40-year-olds had a sexually transmitted disease, if the populations of country towns suffered the same imprisonment rates as those of Aboriginal communities, "nothing less than a state of emergency" would be declared.

But because it was black communities that were afflicted, these "outrageous" statistics were greeted with "numb acceptance".

Australia's longevity gap seems even more scandalous when we consider that other countries with dispossessed indigenous peoples have in recent decades made steady progress in shrinking the mortality divide between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples. According to research by the federal parliamentary library, the gap between Native Americans and the rest of the US population is three to four years; for the Maori it has been cut to between five and six years. Between 1970 and 1988, mortality rates for Maori declined at twice the rate for non-Maori.

In sharp contrast, a report by the Queensland health department published in 1999 concluded that the lack of improvement in indigenous Australians' adult mortality over the past two decades, particularly among middle-aged Aborigines, "is virtually without precedent on a world scale".

A paper published in 2000 by the Australian National University's Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research found the life expectancy of indigenous people had not significantly improved since the first reliable estimates were drawn from 1981 and 1986 census data, which put life expectancy for Aboriginal men at 56 and for women at 64.

According to the centre, the 1991 Census revealed a slight improvement in Aboriginal survival prospects since 1986. But data from the 1996 Census showed that although indigenous male life expectancy had not changed, indigenous female life expectancy fell below the 64 years it had been throughout the early '80s.

Australian Bureau of Statistics figures for 2000 put estimated life expectancy at birth at 56 for indigenous men and 63 for indigenous women. The comparative mortality statistics for non-indigenous people were 77 for men and 83 for women.

This stagnation and slippage is all the more disturbing when we consider that since 1981, overall life expectancies have shown a marked improvement. This means that the relative mortality gap between black and white Australians has widened during a period when governments were supposedly acting on the principle of Aboriginal self-determination.

Such a result would be cause for national humiliation if it were Olympic gold medals rather than indigenous lives that were at stake.

The conservative response to such statistics is that they prove the failure of self-determination. Small-l liberals counter that they prove the need for more resources and less racist attitudes.

Both responses are simplistic. Neither provides any insight into the true complexities that underlie the failure of successive governments and indigenous organisations to significantly improve the living conditions of Aboriginal people.

There is no single culprit, no one cause underlying such abject failure. Yet how often is the question even asked? The fact is that this issue generates little urgency on either side of politics, or in the community. The perception in Canberra is that there are few votes in Aboriginal social issues. The political price for failure remains low.

Even so, it is simplistic and misleading to declare, as the expatriate journalist John Pilger did in his documentary *Welcome to Australia*, that Australian governments have offered Aboriginal people nothing but "promises and betrayal".

The real picture is far more complex. It is of sustained government spending in some areas and Third World levels of deprivation in others; of a scandalous shortage of some important resources and a glut of others; of shocking levels of waste resulting from inappropriate resourcing, duplicated programs or mismanagement by both governments and indigenous agencies.

In almost every area -- from employment to education to land management -- the focus on intentions over outcomes has fostered a culture of systematic underachievement.

Thirty years after self-determination was officially adopted by the Whitlam government, the issues militating against better living conditions for the nation's first inhabitants are vastly more complicated than the master narrative suggests.

Pearson has pointed out that life expectancy in the indigenous communities of Cape York in far north Queensland has fallen, despite a "vast improvement" in their material resources over the past 30 years. Three decades of socially corrosive welfare dependence and what Pearson says is among the world's highest per capita alcohol consumption help explain how more money has produced a worse outcome.

Just as disturbing are ABS figures showing life expectancy among indigenous women in the Northern Territory and South Australia, and among indigenous men in Western Australia, deteriorated between 1995 and 1999.

Yet many of those dying early have, at least in theory, enjoyed opportunities and civil rights their parents and grandparents could only dream of.

Despite these catastrophic results, few Aboriginal leaders or non-Aboriginal activists have been prepared to speak openly about the deepening economic and social problems besetting many indigenous families and communities.

As Pearson has put it: "Despite the fact that ours is one of the most dysfunctional societies in the world today, none of the present discourse on the subject gives me any satisfaction that the underlying issues have been grasped, let alone confidence that the right measures are being taken to change this situation."

One of the risks of such a loosely defined concept as self-determination is that its very open-endedness leaves it vulnerable to political and ideological manipulation and misconception. Governments committed to Aboriginal self-government or self-management have left some communities to sink or swim, without further inquiry.

It is true the nation has had just one generation of self-determination to counter the ill effects of almost 200 years of dispossession. It is also true that no distinct group of people in Australia has been as discriminated against as Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. This has meant that as self-determination and self-management policies were being adopted, the intended beneficiaries already endured shocking privation.

Yet the raw statistics suggest that what we have seen in Australia is a staggering betrayal of the idealism that underpinned self-determination. Even under sympathetic governments it has often amounted to little more than benign neglect, with communities catapulted from the dehumanising controls of the assimilation era into a new form of dehumanisation -- lifelong welfare dependence and social disorder.

There is plenty of consultation, talk of cultural sensitivity and autonomy, even revolutionary land rights victories. But there is little sign that most indigenous citizens see themselves, or are seen by the wider community, as valued stakeholders in national life.

A deeper register of this failure is the non-engagement of indigenous people in important areas of mainstream life. Many white Australians, including those who feel strongly about indigenous issues, have never met an indigenous person; their relationship is largely symbolic.

By design or default, powerful institutions have operated almost as exclusion zones. Federal parliament has accommodated only two indigenous senators in its 100-year history and no indigenous members in the lower house.

It is a further comment on just how invisible Aborigines are in mainstream national politics that we have yet to have a federal Aboriginal affairs minister who is indigenous. Yet if a man were given responsibility for any women's affairs portfolio, the appointment would be ridiculed.

It was not until 2001 that the Howard Government moved to make indigenous affairs a cabinet post. Howard appointed Philip Ruddock to the joint portfolio of immigration and Aboriginal affairs. In effect, the Government downsized indigenous affairs to a part-time job at the same time as it claimed to raise its profile.

The man charged with proving that Australia wasn't a "soft touch" referred in his 2001 election policy documents to the shameful discrepancy in the life expectancy of indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Ruddock said: "We must do all we can to remedy this." All, that is, except campaign on it, since his overriding priority at the time seemed to be making political capital out of asylum-seekers.

The Opposition's then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs spokesman, Bob McMullan, declared in an election speech that "indigenous injustice, disadvantage and reconciliation are the greatest social justice issues of our generation". Yet during the election campaign, Labor devoted far more energy to its promised GST rollback on coffins and tampons.

For many Aboriginal people looking for reform, the 2001 election campaign must have seemed like a political terra nullius.

Rosemary Neill is a senior writer on *The Australian*. This is an edited extract from her book, *White Out: How Politics is Killing Black Australia*, published this week by Allen & Unwin (\$22.95).