

Two stories of Indigenous affairs

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Two stories of indigenous affairs

To the 40th Anniversary of *The Australian*

By Noel Pearson

The Australian 27 July 2004

Australians who are younger than *The Australian* have grown up with declarations of goodwill towards indigenous people and official attempts to extend the benefits of the modern world to us without imposing assimilation. The ideological shift has been so dramatic that people need to be reminded how different things were forty years ago.

Discriminatory laws and practices continued to affect indigenous people. The idea that Aboriginal people were inferior was still influential. It today seems incomprehensible that even in the 60s and 70s, Australia allowed some of our nation's languages to disappear forever insufficiently recorded. Such facts cannot be explained away; white Australian ideology and attitudes had the function of justifying the dispossession of the original owners of this land. Prime Minister Howard was wrong in 1997 to argue that white Australians should reject the notion that "we're all part of a sort of racist, bigoted history".

Things seemed straightforward for progressive people: discrimination should be removed and Aboriginal people would become equal. Decision makers did in fact know that in remote areas, equal pay would cause a comprehensive transfer to a welfare economy, but they made a conscious choice; equality was the first priority.

Dismantling of formal discrimination culminated with the referendum of 1967. After 1967, there have been two stories of indigenous affairs.

The first is the official liberal/progressive story of positive advancement by means of a rights agenda and government service delivery. This programme had two components.

The first component was based on the thesis that indigenous people still suffered unofficial discrimination and disadvantage. To remedy this, there was legal aid to deal with bias in the criminal justice system, health services, community development, and other indigenous-specific programmes.

These efforts were not explicitly anti-assimilation. The second component of the official liberal/progressive programme however went further than removing formal discrimination and addressing unofficial discrimination and disadvantage: Aboriginal culture and Aboriginal society were advanced as being as valuable as Australia's British institutions and perhaps morally superior.

The most important components of this programme were land rights and attempts at the incorporation of indigenous languages and culture in education and many other aspects of government policy.

In recent years, the entire complex of progressive indigenous policies that I have just outlined above has sunk into disrepute. It must nevertheless be said that many of these policies and ideologies were both necessary and successful, or could be

successful subject to reform. Even ATSIC had successes, for example with indigenous home ownership. Abstudy was better before the Government allowed Pauline Hanson's One Nation to influence policy. And Land rights could be a foundation for economic development.

However, the true story of what has happened in indigenous affairs bears little relationship to the narrative constructed by the liberal/progressive reconciliation movement.

During the last forty years, the following factors became completely dominant in the real life of the communities: passive welfare; withdrawal from (unequal, exploited) participation in the market economy; the collapse of the local subsistence economies; idleness; supply of legal and illicit addictive and psychoactive substances; gambling; libertarian social values, and bewildering and hesitant government policies in the areas of social order and substance abuse.

The presence of these factors led to substance abuse epidemics, and an outlook shaped by passive welfare. Results are that the gap in life expectancy of twenty years between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians is not narrowing; illiteracy; sexual violence, and epidemic foetal alcohol syndrome.

These facts have been discussed within the liberal/progressive reconciliation framework – albeit belatedly. However, the reconciliation movement has failed to reach two necessary conclusions.

First, the chaos and misery has incorrectly been attributed almost entirely to the legacy of dispossession and racism. It has not been acknowledged that many elements of the abolishment of formal discrimination and the liberal/progressive advancement programme have inadvertently been major causes of Aboriginal disadvantage.

The liberal consensus during *The Australian's* lifetime was that Aboriginal disadvantage was caused by the denial of self-determination and denial of rights and services, and by discrimination. Many reforms that have had deleterious consequences (such as the right to drink and equal pay in the cattle industry which led to unemployment) were unavoidable consequences of equality, but there was no discourse about Aboriginal responsibility in this new situation. Nor was there any awareness that many elements in the positive advancement programme were flawed. Policies for recognition of culture and language – correct in principle – marginalised indigenous people instead of making them fully integrated citizens with a strong cultural identity. Legal aid policies and criminology theory did nothing to reduce crime or help the victims of crime.

One item on the anti-discrimination agenda is still unfinished business: government misuse of confiscated Aboriginal wages was a crime even during the era of “protection” and discrimination, but has not yet been adequately rectified. However, the situation has deteriorated to a point where even the just act of handing back illegally withheld wages presents a dilemma. One of the reasons why we initiated Cape York Partnerships with governments and the private sector was that we saw how

any kind of money supply – including restitution of stolen wages – was likely to facilitate substance abuse and gambling.

The second necessary conclusion is that the numerous official documents articulating the official reconciliation programme are diversions. The Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and similar reports, and the vast academic literature – all these piles of paper give no guidance to our work in Cape York Peninsula.

Limited space does not admit outlining our positive programme. By way of conclusion: At the end of *The Australian's* first forty years, the real story of indigenous affairs is no longer containable. The liberal/progressive interpretation of indigenous affairs is not standing up to scrutiny.

The Australian, for all its faults, is the main national forum for this painful reassessment. There are notable efforts made in other fora, in particular by Michael Gordon in *The Age* and Tony Koch in *The Courier Mail*, but alone *The Australian* currently outweighs the rest of Australian mass media in terms of in-depth analysis and coverage not merely fed by the indigenous leadership debacle. Indeed, sectors of Australian opinion seem to be retreating into silent disappointment over the crumbling of the old reconciliation paradigm.