

CANBERRA CONSENSUS HURTING BLACK PROGRESS

Evidently we are making progress as a nation in addressing the terribly difficult Indigenous development problem.

On 9 February the Prime Minister delivered the *Closing the Gap Prime Minister's Report 2011*. Progress is apparently happening: not according to any statistics, but to the powerful government public relations machine.

In fact, the Prime Minister could provide little evidence about gap closing, except to tell us that the statistics are not readily available despite a commitment of nearly \$50 million to this task.

A 2010 Australian Bureau of Statistics publication *Labour Force Characteristics of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians* has told us that the employment gap grew in 2008 and 2009.

This was not mentioned. The Prime Minister's speech, and media reporting, highlighted the extent of the spend on Aboriginal disadvantage and the commitment to meet transparent targets.

It then strangely called for Aboriginal individuals to take responsibility for treading the path out of their dire circumstances—'put down the bottle' and 'send your kids to school'—were the words uttered by the Prime Minister.

Yet the intent of former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's invention was for an annual report to the nation to hold governments, not the subjects of his master-minded project of improvement, to account.

There was little parliamentary debate about progress, mainly because there is a new bipartisanship in Canberra. I term this the 'cosy Canberra consensus', a bit like the discredited Washington consensus: there is an emerging view that all that is needed is 'hard' or neoliberal assimilation policies and those dreadful gaps will magically disappear.

This is a very dangerous state of policy affairs. Arguably, Australia has only had two approaches to the Aboriginal development problem—'self-determination' that some may call 'soft' assimilation and paternalistic 'hard' assimilation that in its current guise is neo-liberal assimilation.

Neo-liberal assimilation strives for two things, market individualism and a level playing field. The former requires Aboriginal people to change their social norms to match western ones. The latter requires particular outcomes for taxpayer dollars.

Altering people's norms is to be achieved via a series of social experiments and new institutions like income quarantining using the BasicsCard or the Family

Responsibilities Commission.

The aim is to modify expenditure and ensure that kids go to school, irrespective of the quality or relevance of education; make parents spend their welfare dollars sensibly, while dollars earned in ‘real jobs’ can be spent any which way; and to discipline adults with these ‘real’ jobs, or make-work or perpetual training if jobs are not there; and modifying land tenure to meet assumed aspirations for individual homes.

Carrots and sticks are to be used to alter norms. The playing field will be levelled by a series of Council of Australian Governments (COAG) National Partnership Agreements. The problems here are twofold. First, the capacity of governments to deliver, even to the handful of priority communities in remote Australia targeted for special attention, is limited. There are simply too many impediments.

In the past, community-based organisations were blamed for corruption and inefficiency, but they have been dismantled, so who is to blame now—bloated bureaucracies and greedy contractors?

Second, there has been no needs-based assessment of what is required to correct the deep historical legacy of neglect. So while billions are committed, no-one has actually estimated what is actually needed.

How did this dangerous new bipartisanship come about? In the modern policy era from 1972 there has been consensus that statistical equality is needed. But from 1996 bipartisanship was eroded as the Howard government set about demolishing the institutions of Indigenous Australia.

Addressing deep Indigenous disadvantage was not a priority, despite record budget surpluses year in, year out.

Initially the ALP objected, but then with agreement on the abolition of ATSIC and then acquiescence on the Northern Territory intervention a new bipartisanship was born.

It includes common acceptance of neoconservative ideas about welfare reform imported from the USA—the state provides, beneficiaries repay.

This approach has been given legitimacy and moral force by influential advocates like Noel Pearson and promoted by think-tanks like the Centre for Independent Studies. And the focus groups must be telling all political parties that there are votes in such an approach.

Ironically, state/Aboriginal relations are highly conflicted, there are few Aboriginal people who I know who will respond to a state that condones racist

laws, when race has been at the heart of postcolonial processes of marginalisation and exclusion.

The new bipartisanship is based on demeaning language of failure and deficit: social indicator differentials are great for measuring neglect but bad for measuring outcomes, if only because they use a western calculus, as if culture does not matter. We are left today with a policy approach that suits the rich and powerful, but serves the impoverished and marginalised poorly. Jumping onto the ship 'late capitalism' is very risky, especially for those who have land and cultural assets and identities and aspirations that are distinctly Indigenous and not mainstream.

The new bipartisan policy framework has done incalculable damage and has seen extraordinary waste.

No-one will be held accountable for this because political fortunes are never influenced by performance on Indigenous matters; and the Aboriginal spokespeople and media personalities who condone this framework, are rarely elected and always unaccountable, even as their views vacillate chameleon-like to suit particular purposes.

Policy is at a nadir, at its lowest point in 35 years. Smug with the apparent national success of neo-liberal globalisation and market individualism, not to mention extraordinary mineral wealth sourced on Indigenous land, the Australian state is promoting an approach based on direct intervention into Indigenous homes.

This approach has progressed as if Aboriginal views, history, culture, location, and past neglect do not matter. It should be razed and ploughed with salt, never to be revisited. People who are the subjects of this massive experimental project must have a say on their futures and their destiny.

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