

## After the White-Out: Indigenous Policy post-Howard

by PETER JULL

Someday soon the Howard era will end. Discussion of Aboriginal and Torres Strait issues will again be possible without cascades of furious denial and obfuscation from on high. The holiday from national responsibility will be over. I imagine the present as an Arctic white-out, or blank stage where a single actor stumbles helplessly, unable to find footing or direction, muttering, or shouting at Nature, like King Lear.

Howard has recycled our grand-parents' dismissive platitudes as national 'policy'. He even says he won the debate ('PM's reconciliation hopes' *The Australian*, 6 May 2002) [*see endnote!*]. But, no, he has merely silenced people when he enters a room. Their little smiles do not all signal approval.

Yet there are knowing winks amid denial. Federal and state governments are running pilot projects under their highest officials in a few indigenous communities. Aware, apparently, that they have no answers, the top brass hope that with their own attention and local indigenous notables, something will work, or something will turn up. With Noel Pearson and the well-publicised Cape York work, there must be hope.

Yes, indeed. Even were all these to fail, an élite of policy-makers would become acquainted with painful realities and promising interlocutors, boding well for the future. But whatever the outcome, other elements of a national outcome will remain unresolved.

The truncated or hijacked work of recent years hides much. Even well-functioning fully employed villages have needs and aspirations unsatisfied by water and sewer services. Their ownership and development philosophies, sense of local and national history, language and culture, and hopes to strengthen and build on these require more than local government powers. Canada's Inuit found that despite a relatively welcoming national public and government, they must work hard for 25 years at

- trans-boundary and multilateral environmental policies, including ocean management, e.g., against Big Oil, Big America, etc.
- international indigenous peoples' cooperation and rights-setting processes;
- international publicity (including 'good news' as well as criticism);
- national constitutional talks among governments and indigenous groups;
- practical reform or renewal of institutions and boundaries (functional or map-drawn);
- endless interventions before environmental, regulatory, and other inquiry processes;
- carefully selected court actions;
- building of organisations and hiring of experts to carry out all the complex work required;

- fights over every imaginable local issue from new military bases to archeological remains to duck hunting thousands of miles to the south, the real issue being, always, their attempt to determine their own economic, social, and culture situation to the fullest extent; and
- endless explanation so the white public, regionally or nationally, could see that their concerns were not mere whimsy or wilfulness.

It amuses me today to read commentaries saying that achieving self-governing Nunavut was easy, or problem-free. It certainly was not. *It should have been easy*, perhaps, and it did set precedents which make other peoples' struggles in Canada now easier.

Australia is not currently hearing the voices, white or indigenous, who can lead debate. Too often white politicians respond to events or issues, e.g., the Redfern riot (see *Arena Magazine* No. 70), with irrelevancies or to push unrelated agendas. Nobody wants to go first on the big issues, it seems. There is no lack of documentation or ideas from the indigenous side. Patrick Dodson's 1999 Lingiari lecture, the 1998 Kalkaringi statement, the three indigenous social justice reports of 1995, the one-liners or more of various constitutional discussions of the past years, the Reconciliation Council work, etc., all provide practical ideas and much consensus.

The Howard era reached lift-off for Cloud Cuckoo Land, the apotheosis of silliness imagined by Athens' Golden Age comic playwright, in mid-June 2001 with the sensational allegations about sexual misconduct and violence traded by Aboriginal leaders. At the time I wrote for colleagues abroad:

'Whites ... feigned surprise and outrage at horror stories now widely reported in lengthy articles and TV items around the country. *Feigned* because books, articles, oral and visual reports about the real Aboriginal Australia have been appearing for many years. Worse, Aborigines and their non-indigenous friends and supporters were accused of having "hidden" this unpleasant information. ... The lions of white public opinion denounced Aborigines – especially leaders – and their white friends for allegedly "accepting" or ignoring the misery of communities and families. Editorials, commentators, talkback radio callers and hosts demanded that Aborigines act now, and stop talking – stop wasting our time with proposals for political, constitutional, social, and economic reforms – and get busy solving their problems. ... The shrill excess [was] clear. Surely white reactions would not be so extreme, so opportunistic, so *grateful*, if they did not allow Australians the chance to express themselves both vehemently on these issues – and at no moral or material cost.'

Like the Psalmist one is tempted to say that unless indigenous people help build the house, Australians labour but in vain when building (or rebuilding) any institutions or structures whatever. They are no longer feasible, plausible, viable. There has to be a fundamental understanding, with practical and constitutional effect, duly and ceremonially concluded, at the heart of national life. Mark McKenna's *This Country: A Reconciled Republic?* and Germaine Greer's essay, *Whitefella Jump Up*, make the point in various ways, as do countless reports and inquiries. When will we act?

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*Endnote* (not included with published article)

'PM's reconciliation hopes', by George Megalogenis, *The Australian* (6-5-2002)

The anger in the dialogue between the Government and Aboriginal leaders has disappeared, raising fresh hope for progress towards reconciliation, John Howard believes.

While careful not to claim vindication, the Prime Minister told *The Australian* that "the widespread rejection of welfare, and a lesser emphasis on the rights approach" by indigenous activists such as Noel Pearson showed the debate was shifting towards the Coalition's viewpoint.

"A year or 18 months ago, people said we were going nowhere on Aboriginal policy," Mr Howard said. "Paradoxically, I think we are going somewhere on it now."

However, he said the state of Aboriginal communities remained disgraceful and the experience of indigenous people compared poorly with the nation's success in absorbing migrants.

"I think it is still one of the hardest things we have. There are plenty of Aborigines, indigenous Australians, who are fully integrated. But there are still quite a lot who aren't," Mr Howard said.

He said part of the problem was that many Aborigines were physically separated from the rest of society.

"One of the accepted cornerstones of our immigration policy has always been that you shouldn't allow ghettos or enclaves to develop. Yet in a way . . . that is exactly what has happened and it is one of the difficulties we have."

Mr Howard is encouraged by statements from Mr Pearson, who has called for a new approach to address the dependency, dysfunction and disadvantage in Aboriginal communities. The Prime Minister sees this as an endorsement of his practical reconciliation ethos.

"The widespread rejection of welfare, and a lesser emphasis on the rights approach – I find quite interesting that many of the views that would have been expressed by John Herron when he became the minister (in 1996), that were derided and criticised, are now embraced."

Mr Howard said the heat had gone out of the debate.

"I hesitate to say it, but the anger in the previous dialogue has disappeared. It's not that I'm suggesting that my critics are embracing me on it, but I think there has been quite a change," he said. "I hope it means we are inching towards a more sensible and harmonious outcome."

Mr Howard said he had learned the lesson of the 1998 election when he committed to achieving reconciliation by the Centenary of Federation [January 2001] – a target he subsequently dropped.

"I'm not setting any of those goals. But I do think we have a better dialogue and it's a more realistic one now."

Five years ago, prime minister Kevin Rudd took to the nation's driving seat with the historic Stolen Generation apology. With the theme of this year's NAIDOC (National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee) Week the 50th anniversary of the presentation of the Yirrkala Bark Petitions to federal parliament, there is renewed focus on relationships with indigenous Australia. But how far have we really come in this difficult policy area? And as Rudd takes the wheel once more, what moves will he and the government make in a policy area that has been strangely quiet? Other than the past we Indigenousness is an identity constructed, shaped and lived in the politicized context of contemporary colonialism. The communities, clans, nations and tribes we call Indigenous peoples are just that: Indigenous to the lands they inhabit, in contrast to and in contention with the colonial societies and states that have spread out from Europe and other centres of empire (Alfred & Corntassel, 2005, p. 597). Individuals and communities link their Indigenous identity closely with the country on which it emerged. Tradition (lore and law) and cultural mores contribute to the identity of the group. During the Howard decade, numerous controversies emerged in the Indigenous Affairs portfolio: the "ten point plan" on native title; the question of a formal apology to the stolen generations; and the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC).... Underpinning these contested policy developments is a common issue—the rights of Indigenous peoples within the Australian nation. The Coalition government has consistently opposed measures that give recognition to Indigenous rights. The previous policy of self-determination was rejected on the grounds that it has "implications of separate nations or governments" that are unacceptable (OATSIA 2003a).