

The Failure of Aboriginal Separatism

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Romance and Policy

Imagine the white spiritual father and mother of Aboriginal separatism, Nuggett Coombs and Judith Wright, sitting down during the 1960s to ponder the future of their adopted people. What profound disappointment in their own lives could have led Coombs (echoing similar sentiments by Judith Wright) to write ‘despite its relative poverty in material terms, Aboriginal society may well be capable of providing a superior quality of life.’¹ What is it among white intellectuals, who, in assisting Aboriginal people in their struggle, have to first deny the dominant culture any claims to greatness because all cultures and civilisations are of equal worth, and then proceed to claim superiority for the Aboriginal culture?

Like William Lane before them, Coombs and Wright and a thousand staff and students in universities around Australia set off to find their own New Australia, not in the wilds of Paraguay, but in the Aboriginal lands of Australia. Manning Clark described William Lane as a man ‘who wrote with all the extravagance of a man who was all heart.’² And so it is with the white romantics who have fed the intellectual fires of Aboriginal separatism in Australia. The claims by the romantics that the dominant culture was built on invasion, massacre, genocide and the denial of an act of self-determination (preferably registered with the United Nations) have lost their moorings from reality. It is curious indeed that inflammatory and inaccurate terms like invasion, massacre, genocide and stolen generations are being applied to Aboriginal history and policy, some three decades after Aboriginal policy changed from assimilation to self-determination. Is it because emancipation for Aborigines has been a hollow victory?

The overtly traumatic period for Aboriginal people of settlement and confrontation closed a century or more ago. It was followed by a period of protection in the hands of missions or the state, where both assimilation and separation were applied to different Aborigines, half-caste and full blood. In this period, Aborigines made an accommodation of sorts with the dominant society, partly resignation, partly acceptance, partly resistance. In the most recent period, Aboriginal people have achieved equal formal rights. Their real status is still being contested.

¹ Coombs, H. 1994. *Aboriginal Autonomy: Issues and Strategies*, ed. D. Smith. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 222.

² Clark, M. 1978. *A History of Australia* Vol IV. Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 399.

In the 1930s and 1940s, the aboriginal activists Patten and Ferguson³ argued that the objective of Aboriginal policy was to achieve equal citizenship with whites. In this sense, their politics were assimilationist. More recently, the objective of a new generation of Aboriginal leaders is to establish an Aboriginal identity, an element of which is indigenous rights. These rights imply a different citizenship. Aboriginal activists have expanded their claims beyond equality to self-determination and even sovereignty in political, cultural and economic terms. The Aboriginal struggle for identity in the political realm is a struggle between the establishment of a pan-Aboriginal politics and the recognition of the enormous diversity of Aboriginal Australians. In the cultural dimension, the struggle is between Aborigines as one part of a multicultural Australia and Aborigines as an entirely separate or 'other' culture. In the economic dimension, it is a struggle between dependence and independence, between welfare recipients and Aboriginal capitalists.

At its most radical, self-determination is said to be part of what the anthropologist Gillian Cowlishaw calls, a 'modernising project', 'the last in a long series of initiatives which, while progressive in logic and intent, in fact operate to reproduce the racial inequality which they seek to expunge.'⁴ Such a critique comes very close to a rationalisation of all failures in Aboriginal policy. It suggests that failure stems from the white man's lack of understanding of black culture. Self-determination is only self-determination within the bounds of white liberal democracy, and success is measured by white measures of success. The ultimate fear is that 'we are all destined to share the same culture.'⁵ The tendency in this post-modern world to be denied the tools of comparative analysis, especially cross-cultural comparison is somewhat debilitating. It seems that we can never understand the 'otherness' in other cultures unless the others whom we are addressing, say we do. Add to this the political desire to regard all stories in the hands of the oppressed minority as facts, and all facts in the hands of the privileged majority as stories and you have a recipe for ignorance. I propose we be bold, yet sensitive and talk about matters that concern people of the

³ See Stokes, G. 1997. 'Citizenship and Aboriginality: Two Conceptions of Identity in Aboriginal Political Thought.' In *The Politics of Identity in Australia*, ed G. Stokes. Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 162.

⁴ Cowlishaw, G. 1998. 'Erasing Culture and Race: Practising 'Self-determination.'" *Oceania*. 68: 3, 147.

⁵ Op. cit, 166.

other realm and observe things we regard as good or bad, sensible or silly, productive or unproductive.

Aboriginal policy can be characterised as a struggle between separateness and sameness—separatism and assimilationism. The term integration incorporates both dimensions because it tends to assume economic assimilation but cultural and perhaps political separateness. In a similar manner, self-determination may be a policy that has elements of both separateness and sameness. Like Cowlshaw, but for very different reasons, I too believe self-determination (as with reconciliation) is a clever political device designed to enable the process of the modernisation of an ancient people to take place, under the noses of the chatterers and scribblers who fight over the intellectual meal of Aboriginal politics. I embrace the modernisation stream, but in a way that would let Aborigines decide for themselves. If Aborigines want an identity that rejects the ‘modern’, then so be it. They of course must suffer the consequences. In fact, the path that Aboriginal people will choose will be a mixture. Some things will be kept or regained, some abandoned. Some of the ‘kept’ will be harmful, as will some of the ‘new’. The issue is what mix of cultural, political and economic separatism, or integration will work. And what mix will not.

The task for policy in the future is to make explicit the cost of the choices. It should also be much more open and honest about where we are most likely headed. My guess is towards a modern Aboriginal people distinguished by their history and race, hardly at all by economy or politics and for me, because culture is the least understood construct of the world, a culture that they can claim to be whatever they wish.

Self-determination

One of the great barriers to commonsense in Aboriginal policy is that only certain people are allowed to speak the truth. When Pauline Hanson, albeit in her clumsy and inarticulate way, argued that Aborigines had to ‘get off’ welfare she unleashed a wave of abuse in Australia normally reserved for paedophiles, war criminals or Liberal prime ministers. When Noel Pearson said much the same 5 years later, he was listened to in silence. He is an Aborigine, he was demonstrating self-determination. Pauline was a redneck white, she was racist. Freedom of speech in Aboriginal affairs is a freedom that Australians have only recently won!

Tim Colebatch⁶ reinforces the point in a more recent example. Cathy Freeman's remark, after winning a gold medal at the Olympics: "I made a lot of people happy tonight. Biggest smiles I've ever seen, and they're not even drunk, my brothers" is contrasted with that of Philip Ruddock to *Le Monde*. Ruddock stated that the prime reason for Aboriginal disadvantage was that they had only recently made contact with developed civilisations. 'Everyone laughed, albeit nervously, with Cathy, but Ruddock was severely chastised. However, suppose those two comments had been reversed. Suppose Freeman, aspiring politician, had explained Aboriginal disadvantage by pointing out that they had spent 40,000 years outside the loop of global technological and social development while Ruddock joked that Cathy's brothers had got high on her victory without even being drunk. Freeman would have been widely applauded as showing courageous insight into the roots of Aboriginal problems. Ruddock would have been swept from office.' Quite so.

Self-determination by an indigenous people within a liberal nation state is an unsavoury affair. It is biased at the outset. If the dominant culture offers a freedom of choice that is inconsistent with the minority culture, it is inevitable that practices forbidden in the minority culture will act as an inducement for members of the minority culture to leave. Why would young women wait around to be given to old men? Where practices condoned by the minority culture are forbidden in the dominant culture, the dominant culture will fail in its duty to its citizens who are members of the minority if it does not protect them from adverse (in the dominant culture's view) consequences. The care and protection of children cannot be ignored. In the end, Aboriginal self-determination means self-determination within limits.

A further limit to the idea of self-determination is its idealisation. An Aboriginal writer, analysing self-determination at the community level, based on research in her people's area of Walgett NSW, found that the struggle was often surrounded by terms and concepts common among leading protagonists, but not familiar to local Aboriginals. 'Today in many Aboriginal communities definitions of who and what elders or leaders are, is extremely diverse. The towns of the northwest are no exception. When I asked elder June Barker from Lightning Ridge who she thought elders were, she said she had never heard the word "elder" used so much as she does

⁶ *The Age*, 10 October 2000.

now.⁷ Further, ‘Curious why I had never heard my elders refer to the “land as their mother”, I asked my mother if she ever heard any Uralarai elders use the phrase when she was a child. My mother felt the concept was relatively new and that the first time she had ever heard it was on television. To her, the land was only as significant as the people who took care of it, but to think of the land as “mother” was totally foreign to her.’⁸

Such recovered or imported indigenous terms are used as political weapons not just by blacks against whites, but also by blacks in their own community. ‘Aboriginal community organisations have become the “gate-keepers” of the communities they service and somewhat problematic because the prominent and dominant families in the town are likely to have an advantage over other Aboriginal families. They consciously foster the use of this concept [of elder] for their own advantage and to the disadvantage of less powerful language groups and families... It is particularly unrealistic to expect all loyalties to kin and tribe to disappear when the structure of “community boards” is based on western notions of representativeness.’⁹

Choosing a way of life is not a simple matter. That choice will be determined by all manner of choices that others have also made. No one literally chooses a way of life, in some senses a way of life chooses you. Aboriginal people have many who are advising them to choose a way. There are inducements to be loyal to a family, a land, a people, to leaders. Self-determination really is a construct, it does not exist free of the considerable forces which impinge on peoples’ lives, particularly when one is a member of a minority culture whose leaders must find reasons to keep their followers in the game.

What Measure of Success?

The enormous joy that sports-loving Australians shared with Cathy Freeman at the Olympics was surely a result of her success in winning a race in open company. There is no other construction or meaning necessary. She won, and she enjoyed it. The joy was an illustration not of reconciliation, foolishly hijacked by the Olympic organising

⁷ Peters-Little, F. 1999. ‘The Community Game: Aboriginal Self-Definition at the Local Level.’ AIATSIS Research Discussion Papers No10, 6.

⁸ Op. cit, 8.

committee, but of Cathy Freeman, Aborigine, tasting success in the modern world. How she chooses to interpret her success, how she chooses to engage her people or any other people is a matter for her. The whole notion of role models is to induce others to follow. In this case, for Aboriginal children to follow Cathy into the modern world. Of course, pride and self-belief are part of the story, but she and we seemed to have shared the same goals and the same measure of success.

What are Aboriginal measures of success? I must confess, I do not know, nor have I been told, or not in a way that I could understand. It may be as simple as ‘knowing where you came from,’ a common term used by every Irish mother and father who wished their offspring a fond farewell as they joined the great Irish diaspora. I am not attempting to belittle deeper measures of Aboriginal success, far from it. But why is the constant talk among Aboriginal leaders that their people are not as wealthy and healthy as the whites. Why those measures? If the game is to construct a significantly different Aboriginality, then surely there have to be different measures of success, different standards, different goals?

On a range of social and economic measures, Aborigines are not on an equal footing with other Australians. Then again, it is not from want of generosity on the part of the wider society. According to the Commonwealth Grants Commission measures of expenditure over the entire range of transfer payments—health, housing, schooling and employment programs—from State and Commonwealth sources, Aborigines are advantaged on a per capita basis:¹⁰

- In **acute health care** (1998-99) indigenous expenditure per capita was \$1475, non-indigenous expenditure per capita was \$773.
- In **primary health care** (1998-99) indigenous expenditure per capita was \$1592, non-indigenous expenditure per capita was \$ 940.
- In **housing and infrastructure** (1998-99) indigenous expenditure per capita was \$ 1428, non-indigenous expenditure per capita was \$206.

⁹ Op. cit, 30.

¹⁰ Commonwealth Grants Commission, 2000. *Indigenous Funding Inquiry Draft Report*. Attachment A ‘Expenditure on Indigenous Programs.’

- In **schools education** (1998-99) indigenous expenditure per capita was \$2263, total non-indigenous expenditure per capita was \$857.
- In **employment programs** (1999-2000) indigenous expenditure per capita was \$446, and non-indigenous expenditure per capita was \$147.

The measure of 'success' in these programs is the norm of the dominant society. The assumption is that Aboriginal people should achieve equality with the rest of Australia in employment, income, housing, longevity and so on. There is little acknowledgement that the Aboriginal desire for self-determination should be measured against an indigenous measure of success.

Those who argue that assimilation is death to Aboriginal people also argue that all policy to this time has been assimilationist.¹¹ That was not their view at the outset of the period of emancipation. They expected an Aboriginal society that could be distinguished by a separate culture, a separate economy and a separate politics. To use the new language, a different citizen. Instead, for the most part, the cultural attributes of Aboriginal people are almost indistinguishable from the dominant culture. Aboriginal involvement in the economy is for some the same as that of any other Australian, for others one of almost total dependency on the broader economy. Aboriginal politics at the national level lacks the legitimacy of the support of its constituents. It parades as a pan-Aboriginal movement but is essentially clan, and in some cases, family-based, which makes it ill-suited to the national and international stage.

The Recent Failure of Aboriginal Policy

As recently reported,¹² the failure of the Yalanji people of the Cape York region to return to their native land, two years after it was granted, is symptomatic of a larger Aboriginal problem. Aboriginal people were emancipated in the 1960s, fully two generations ago. In the face of the enormous and contradictory pressures for separation or integration, many have found their emancipation to be meaningless because the choices were too stark. They were free to be separate from the dominant culture and return to their land, but not to live as they once did. They were free to

¹¹ Altman, J. 2000. 'The Economic Status of Indigenous Australians.' CAEPR Discussion Paper 193. Summary, 1.

¹² *The Australian*, 20 November 2000.

integrate into the dominant culture, but feared a loss of identity. Aborigines have chosen both paths, and Aboriginal policy reflects an uncomfortable accommodation of each path.

I recently asked Col. Dillon, former ATSIC Commissioner, why Wujal Wujal the Aboriginal township south of Cooktown, which I had visited, had been until the 1960s economically self-sufficient—beef cattle and market gardens—and was now virtually¹³ without an economic base. He related a very common tale. Wujal Wujal had been a mission settlement and while the mission employees were in charge Aboriginal people were sufficiently disciplined to maintain the regime. However, the discipline was imposed. ‘These people woke to the sound of a bell, went to work to the sound of a bell and knocked off to the sound of a bell.’ It was an artificial and cloistered existence. In the era of self-determination, the missionaries handed control to public servants and the indigenes, and the ability to maintain production ceased. Aboriginal people had won their freedom and lost their livelihood. For many, theirs was a meaningless emancipation. The same story is told by John Harris of the experience of the Christian Mission Society in East Arnhem Land. ‘At first the Aboriginal people were protected from massacre, even extermination. This gradually changed into being protected from the outside world.’¹⁴ After 1947, mission policy changed. ‘Reserves must be places of preparation, not just places of segregation, but as preparation for contact with civilisation which is coming as a rush. Every Mission is to be a community settlement based on [economic] activity.’¹⁵

In the prophetic words of Percy Leske of the CMS, writing in 1973, ‘It would serve little long term purpose if we free Aborigines from their present bonds of paternalism and at the same time make them wholly dependent upon financial assistance from the greater community.’¹⁶ Leske’s fears have been realised, but who is to blame? Noel Pearson contends, ‘that policies that were not malevolent but theoretically flawed have worsened the situation and probably even caused a social breakdown during the past three decades that could have been avoided, no matter how heavy a burden of

¹³ The Wujal Wujal Aboriginal Community Council operates quarries, which provide blue metal for roadworks. There is a suggestion to establish an Aboriginal-managed Australian Centre for Traditional Medicines. See ATSIC 2000. National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rural Industry Strategy.

¹⁴ Harris, J. 1998. *We Wish We’d Done More. Ninety Years of CMS and Aboriginal Issues in Northern Australia*. Adelaide: Open Book Publishers, 295.

¹⁵ Op. cit, 269.

¹⁶ Quoted in Harris, op. cit, 301.

historical legacy (dispossession, trauma, racism, genocide) was.’¹⁷ It seems it was an unreasonable expectation that policy-makers had of Aboriginal people to make the shift from a state of protection to a state of emancipation, and maintain the same disciplines necessary to be successful in the wider economy and society.

The romantics want a second round of emancipation, a round that may be characterised by the ugly politics of clan and family rivalry, elder and interloper, black bureaucrat and crony, the preference for the national and international stage instead of the neighbourhood. Lois O’Donohue confided in me not long after Prime Minister Hawke appointed her to chair ATSIC in 1989, that she wanted to resign, disheartened by the singular desire of the then part-time ATSIC commissioners to convert their positions to full-time. It may have been more seemly if they had waited until they proved their worth.

Presently, the dominant path in policy circles is the ‘separate’ aspect of self-determination. As far as land rights are an integral part of self-determination, it appears to be separatist. Other than for the fortunate few, the future of Aboriginal homelands is likely to be ghettos in the wilderness. They are being established without an economic base, on a legal structure of non-traditional communal ownership, through non-traditional political processes, and following two centuries of the failure to overcome a ‘cargo-cult’ mentality.

These are the observations of Richard Trudgen in his book, *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die*. He recognises the needs of the Yolnu, with whom he worked, to maintain control over their lives by maintaining their language and traditional customs. He writes, ‘when I left Arnhem Land in 1983, ninety-five percent of the work on Yolnu communities was carried out effectively by the people themselves. On my return in 1992, I found only a few remained involved in meaningful work.’ More devastating, ‘if you visit the Yolnu drunks in the long grass in Darwin or Nhulunbuy, you will find that a large proportion of them have had college or tertiary education.’ The Yolnu emancipation brought destruction.

Two stories from his book help explain what happened. The first is of an Aboriginal man who was trained as a builder. He, along with Aboriginal apprentices built 3

¹⁷ *The Australian*, 24 October 2000.

houses per year in their settlement. The government of the day decided there was a backlog in housing and sent in white builders to catch-up. They completed 6 houses in three months. The Yolnu community ridiculed the Yolnu builder for not keeping up with the white builders. That Yolnu man has not worked since.

Self-determination may mean lower standards of living. Will this be recognised by those clamouring for self-determination? Will policy-makers recognise that the right to control ones' life will have consequences for the achievement of an equal standard of living? Richard Trudgen is a romantic. He would opt for Aboriginal control in preference to equal outcomes. Unlike other romantics he would be honest enough to admit the possible consequences of Aboriginal control. The irony in self-determination may be that it would be like the old missions. It would require a band of dedicated and skilled people to act as interpreters, as a buffer between the Aborigines and the army of helpers presently moving in waves through the settlements. Such protectionism is fundamental to Noel Pearson's' model of escaping welfare. It would require a highly managed, possibly authoritarian model of community control.

The second story reveals the irony even more powerfully. It concerns a group of Yolnu schoolchildren who visited Singapore on an excursion, and within two months were found sniffing petrol. 'What was meant to be an exciting and enriching educational experience had actually given the children a completely false understanding of how the world works and turned them against their own families.' The children were angry with their parents for not being able to give them what others could. Trudgen reconnected the children with the adults through his understanding of the Yolnu language and custom. However, his skills could not tackle the most fundamental issue. "How do you keep 'em down on the farm?" Aboriginal children may not stay in communities where the opportunities they identify as being important, do not exist.

Why is it intelligent to persist in the policy of separatism? Separatism will require a devotion and intensity and experience that only missionaries had. This body of skills and devotion may no longer exist. It may also require a level of authority that few elders possess, and it seems, few new leaders possess. At the very least, the inter-

family and inter-clan fighting of ‘crony’ pan-Aboriginal politics will continue under a separatist model of self-determination.

Self-determination—as integration—may require resistance to the current progressive ideology, and some loss of Aboriginal identity, but perhaps, in the long run, a more enduring settlement between Aborigines and the rest of Australia. The Yalanji of Cape York may well have chosen the latter course. An important first line of attack in setting the debate on Aboriginal policy for the 21st Century is to expose the damage that separatists impose on Aboriginal people.

Political Separatism

A powerful symbolic action of the desire by some people to rid Aboriginal Australia of the rest of Australia, is the report of an Oxfam International Investigation Mission, entitled, *The Rights of Indigenous Australians*.¹⁸ It is a symbolic act because Oxfam is now using its good name for giving aid to the poor in the third world, to support separatist indigenous policies in first world countries, on the assumption that such a political strategy is unambiguously good for, and desired by, the intended recipients. Oxfam declares in its report, ‘Oxfam International takes a rights-based approach to its work: that poverty and suffering are primarily caused by injustice between and within nations, resulting in the exploitation and oppression of marginalised people.’¹⁹ Among its recommendations and arguments is the centrality of land rights, of which it states, ‘many forms of customary Indigenous economic activity have a basis in land: thus, land tenure is critical to ensure the right to a sustainable livelihood.’ This statement reveals a great deal of the romantic agenda. It assumes three things: that land tenure has to be customary, that is, not a tradeable commodity. That customary economic activity will deliver a sustainable livelihood, and that indigenous people see their future as based on either customary land or customary activity.

At a more overtly political level, Oxfam recommends that all Commonwealth programs for indigenous people, except in the short-term, health, be ‘under the direct or explicit control of ATSIC’.²⁰ The Oxfam assumptions are, that there is a national or pan-Aboriginal identity in Australia and that solutions to the many problems of

¹⁸ Community Aid Abroad-Oxfam Australia, 2000. *The Rights of Indigenous Australians*. Oxfam International Investigation Mission.

¹⁹ Op. cit, 1.

indigenous people are of a kind, or are amenable to programs delivered by others, whether Aborigine or white. For example, the vexed problem of alcohol abuse is argued by some²¹ to be amenable to outside intervention. The authority of the outsider can be used to legitimise a person's changed behaviour. It can be used to resist peer pressure to continue to indulge. Oxfam also recommends that the Commonwealth government reverse its opposition to the Draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous People, including the right of self-determination in the UN Charter. The assumption here is that self-determination means separation. What if self-determination leads to integration or assimilation?

It may be that the only remaining form of Aboriginal identity exists through shared experiences and a determination to do something about them. This is not the same as assuming that Aboriginal people share similar political aspirations. Yet, the dominant discourse in Aboriginal policy is of political sovereignty. Henry Reynolds²² asks, 'are the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities really small nations although unrecognised as such?' He distinguishes the nation from the state, the state being a legal, constitutional and political institution, nations being based on culture traditions, origins and identity. Aborigines could constitute a nation within a state. The head of ATSIC and the document of the Aboriginal Reconciliation Council both seek a Treaty between Australia and the Aboriginal nations. The difficulty with these ideas is that political aspirations devoid of the ability to produce the conditions for its achievement and its defence are romance of the most destructive kind. The suggestion by Coombs²³ that there must be 'an Act of Self-determination in a form recognised by the United Nations and be binding on future Australian and State Governments' is a dangerous piece of rhetoric. It would separate Aboriginal people for all time from the society in which they live, long after the way they exist now would have disappeared.

A Treaty between all Aboriginal people and the Australian nation consists of claims to self-determination, the recognition of unspecified inherent rights, the recognition of traditional law and custom and even an Aboriginal state. Two models of Treaty are on offer—a final settlement or a contract with on-going obligations. A settlement is

²⁰ Op. cit, 4.

²¹ The paper from which I have taken this remark was not for attribution at the time of writing.

²² Reynolds, H. 1994. 'Ethnicity, Nation and State in Contemporary Australia.' *Australian Journal of International Affairs*. 48: 2, 281.

²³ Coombs, 1984. *Aboriginal Autonomy*, 227.

attractive in some ways because it promises an end to the matter. This option will disarm the Aboriginal leadership.

Treaty-as-contract would replace the implied contract between each citizen and the state, based on a formal equality before the law, and public power resting in accountable and impartial institutions. The new racial relationship would be that of proprietor and tenant, vanquished and conqueror, victim and perpetrator, First People and latecomer. In fact, each of these already exists. Some Aborigines are landowners and receive royalties from their tenants, usually miners. Some Aborigines feel, because of the European ‘invasion’ of 1788 that they are vanquished. Some are victims of prejudice and government policy like the removal of children from their parents. They are all descendants of First People. At present, these roles can be transcended. People can change their circumstances. A Treaty will lock in a permanent and unequal status—if you are one you cannot be the other. Almost certainly, a Treaty will not help Aboriginal people come to terms with their condition. For example, policies aimed at economic integration will in time ensure that Aboriginal people have the same class-health-demographic profile as the rest of the nation. How will a tenant-landlord contract look when the proprietor is doing well?

Policies aimed at separate development will ghettoise Aboriginal people, substituting their theoretical oppressors with real ones. The new oppression will result from petty feuding and retribution between local leaders, part of any society where authority is not embedded in impersonal institutions. The disciplines and lines of authority of pre-1788 are well and truly gone. Aboriginal society may well become the most inegalitarian on the continent. Different laws will apply to the signatories. For example, Aborigines will take Aboriginal children at risk. Such a system may work if it occurs in wholly Aboriginal families and in wholly Aboriginal areas. However, as few exclusively Aboriginal families or areas exist, which law—Aboriginal or Australian—will apply when the authorities come to claim the child of a mixed marriage? As a prominent anthropologist has recently written, ‘while severe cases of [child] neglect do result in official intervention, there often seems to be an unwritten rule that more neglect is tolerated for some Australian children than for others,

notably Aboriginal children in isolated settlements.²⁴ Aborigines of this generation may sue the Commonwealth in the future for not taking them!

The great moral principle on which Aboriginal claims are made is, ‘We were here first!’ This has all of the weight of an original sin. It can never be overcome—all ills are placed at its feet. It is also a very useful tool to update claims, which is why some Aboriginal leaders prefer it as the basis of a Treaty. Of course, Western civilisation could offer a modest contrary principle—that all are created equal, a morality that has freed white and black people the world over. A foundation for a civilisation whose brilliance offers the longest, most comfortable, free and artistically and intellectually productive and stimulating life ever produced.

Individuals may choose to practise their beliefs and live in an Aboriginal culture, but those who want something more must not be abandoned. Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people recognise successful Aborigines as those who are successful in the wider society. The only ‘authentic’ Aboriginal successes are the artists, painters, dancers and storytellers who keep alive ancient artistic traditions. Aboriginal culture grew out of the specific living conditions before settlement (or invasion). They have not been the same since, they are adaptations and remnants. They can be revered or abandoned, but that is a matter for each person. The worst thing the nation can do for Aboriginal people is to make credible that which is not. A contract that imposes separate terms is a dangerous fantasy. Every measure of success and piece of recovery demanded by Aboriginal leaders points to the further integration of Aborigines into the broader society. A Treaty of dubious moral principle may be good for a new class of Aboriginal leaders. It is bad for Aboriginal people.

Moreover, it is entirely unlikely that a referendum, even among Aboriginal people would result in a vote for separate nation-within-state status. For example, the measure of the consent required for the nation to even consider such a proposition would have to be an absolute majority of eligible Aborigines. At the 1999 ATSIC elections, the number who voted was 22% of the eligible population. If every single one voted for the proposition, it would not constitute consent.²⁵ Moreover, the

²⁴ The paper from which I have taken this remark was not for attribution at the time of writing.

²⁵ Elections were not required in some remote regions because the number of nominations equalled the number of positions in each of those Wards. Elections were also not conducted in other remote regions

percentage of those voting is highest in the Northern Territory and falls in the states where the Aboriginal population is more urbanised. This pattern suggests that the prospects for any consensus among Aboriginal people would be confined to the Northern Territory and the north of Western Australia, and the northwest of Queensland.

Aboriginal leaders in the form of ATSIC have a serious credibility problem. The establishment of a pan-Aboriginal politics feeds on the meal of international standards of indigenous rights. Legal, political and economic rights of Aborigines are assured in Australia. Aboriginal futures are a different matter. The politics of identity is very thin when many of the elements that build an identity are non-existent. In some ways, a pan-Aboriginal political culture is the opposite of the traditional politics of Aboriginal people, and the modernisation project, much frowned on by the radicals, is fanned by the most modern and global of structures, a national Aboriginal parliament and links via international treaties to international politics. As the narrow base of identity—a shared history of oppression and the struggle to come to terms with the dominant culture, in fact, to modernise—becomes more apparent, the politics of separation and Aboriginal nationalism is attempting to outlast the reasons for its existence.

It would be more beneficial for the modernisation process if ATSIC were abolished. Communities at different stages of the process of modernisation, and those who wish to reject it, understanding the consequences of their actions, could make their own arrangements. This may mean a lack of national and international focus on Aboriginal politics, but the national and international focus is the problem. It sends signals that a mighty struggle is going on above the heads of people over matters that are most unlikely to affect their lives. More likely to impact the lives of Aborigines are the matters that national governments have to manage on behalf of all their citizens.

The political desires of Aboriginal leaders have in the past been far more modest and practical. When Charlie Perkins led the Freedom Rides to Walgett in NSW in 1965, it was over the more mundane but essential issues of segregation and equal access of Aboriginal people to a life that other Australians led. It sought the integration of Aboriginal people into the mainstream. This is not the same as assimilation. It does

because the number of nominations received was less than the number of positions to be filled. Further elections were subsequently conducted to fill the remaining positions.

not have to mean a loss of identity. However, where that identity has its origins in a hunter-gatherer economic system that no longer exists, where it requires the subjugation of women, where in the dominant culture they have been emancipated, and where it requires denying its children access to the wider education system, the Aboriginal identity will scarcely be recognised as such.

Economic Policy

The contest for economic policy is one that provides a great insight into the inconsistencies in Aboriginal policy. As John Altman from the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research observed, ‘nowhere are the differences between Indigenous institutions and those of the colonisers of Australia more marked than in the economic system.’²⁶ Altman argues that, ‘there seems no doubt that most indigenous people, whether urbanised or in remote locations, wish to maintain their distinct identity and cultural autonomy. How can this be reconciled in modern Australia with economic equality?’²⁷ Altman’s assertion that indigenous people wish to maintain a separate identity is unproven. Aboriginal people may, as may any other ethnic group, want to maintain their identity, but does that imply a separate economic road? It does not square with the fact that almost 50% of indigenous people are employed in the public sector²⁸ and over 1200 are enlisted in the Australian Defence Forces.²⁹

Forgiving Altman his assumption on Aboriginal desires, he does nevertheless, pose the key question, the conundrum of the different economy and economic equality. Altman admits that economic equality may be unachievable ‘in certain circumstances’ but goes on to state a policy position, as follows. ‘It will be incumbent on both governments and business leaders to defend both the heterogeneity and the exercise of choice that will mitigate against a rapid integration of Indigenous people into mainstream economic institutions.’³⁰ This statement captures all of the confusion and bias evident in policy in indigenous economics. It seems that self-determination in economic terms must be a collective exercise. Aboriginal people must run their own

²⁶ Altman, J. 2000. ‘The Economic Status of Indigenous Australians.’ CAEPR, Discussion Paper 193, Summary, 1.

²⁷ Op. cit, 1

²⁸ 1996 Census, cited in Commonwealth Grants Commission, 2000. *Indigenous Funding Inquiry Draft Report*, Table 10.2.

²⁹ *The Courier Mail*, 28 November 2000.

companies. The individual who works in the market economy is not exercising self-determination.

A recent study on indigenous self-employment concluded that ‘the small size of the self-employed population mean that self-employment plays a minor role in promoting economic independence among the indigenous population as a whole.’ And, that as there were no significant correlations across geographical areas, this is an indication that there were ‘market opportunities for the indigenous self-employed in remote Australia.’³¹ However, ‘living in a family where at least one person is non-indigenous is strongly positively correlated with indigenous self-employment.’³² These conclusions do not appear consistent. The fact that there is no significant correlation between self-employment and place does not suggest there are market opportunities for the self-employed in remote Australia. Employment in the private sector, which incorporates the self-employed, is highest in the most urbanised states. Further, there is the likelihood that indigenous people are more likely to partner non-indigenous people in the more urbanised states. All in all, the prospects for self-employment are poor and poorest in the remote areas. The best measure of unemployment for example (which is not the opposite of self-employment but nevertheless will serve to make the point), is the CDEP, which is highest in the NT and lowest in Tasmania, NSW and Victoria. The supply-side factors to explain indigenous economic marginality are location, differing priorities and the absence of labour migration.³³ The facts give the lie to the ambition. Separate economic development, at least of the kind expected to create economic equality, is highly unlikely in those areas where Aboriginal numbers are high.

What are reasons why past self-employment ventures have failed? Trudgen provides two examples for the Yolnu. In the local fishing industry, ‘when the mission at Galiwin’ku handed the fishing industry over to the Yolnu council in 1974, everything proceeded well for a while because the mission staff also transferred to the council. For most Yolnu nothing really changed. Then in 1975 it was decided to try and get a loan from the government to develop the industry. The Aboriginal Development

³⁰ Op. cit, 2.

³¹ Hunter, B. 1999. ‘Indigenous Self-employment: Miracle Cure or Risky Business?’ CAEPR Discussion Paper 176, Summary, 2.

³² *ibid*

³³ Altman, 2000. ‘The Economic Status of Indigenous Australians.’ Summary, 1.

Commission decided to bring in a consultant to look at the viability of the loan and how it could increase the efficiency of the industry. Following the consultant's recommendation, one big, modern fishing trawler replaced the small boats. In the dead of night, the small boats were burned and one was cut adrift, to 'convince Yolnu of the need to move up to the big boat. Within six months the whole fishing enterprise at Galiwin'ku had collapsed and Galiwin'ku became an importer rather than an exporter of fish products.' Why the collapse? 'From the Yolnu perspective the collapse happened because the separate clans and nation alliances found it impossible to work under one Balanda (white) boss on the trawler, as the trawler captain now had to be licensed. Moreover, Yolnu were insulted and grieving over the destroyed boats. With no clear lines of ownership the people could not see any authority had passed to them.'³⁴

This story could easily lead to the conclusion, better commercialisation be left to indigenous people. Indeed this may be correct. However, despite the obvious incompetence and insensitivity of the ADC intervention, the problems of ownership and authority remain. There are a thousand such stories of the failure of indigenous enterprises. The integrationists will argue it is only a matter of training, the separatists will argue it is a matter of control. Both are correct, training and control are central, but they are also hampered by a lack of a market, the same as any other remote enterprise. Successful business enterprises in remote areas will be rare. They are more likely to be in places where there are few other signs of indigenous society. They will be in urban settings, with the involvement of whites, probably a wife or husband. A dream of a separate people will not be built on an indigenous economy. The dream cannot be reconciled with 'economic equality' at least in as far as indigenous enterprises are concerned.

However, economic equality is still the measure of policy outcomes, even in the face of policies that cannot deliver it. The achievement of economic equality by means of transfers illustrates this contradiction. As referred to earlier, the Commonwealth Grants Commission is undertaking an Inquiry into the distribution of Commonwealth funding for programs that affect Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. The

³⁴ Trudgen, 2000. *Why Warriors Lie Down and Die*, 47.

final Report on the Inquiry is due in late March 2001.³⁵ Its aim is to compare the pattern of needs with the existing pattern of resource allocation. Its task is incomplete but two things are clear: on the important transfers—health, housing, schooling and employment programs—expenditure per capita for indigenous people vastly outweighs expenditure per capita for non-indigenous. Second, that the needs of indigenous people appear to be greatest in the more remote areas. There is nothing at all surprising in these interim conclusions. If the instructions of the Commonwealth Grants Commission are to suggest a better fit between need and expenditure, more money will have to be allocated to those indigenous communities in remote areas, most likely those on Aboriginal lands. Such a policy would be a waste of resources.

This is the juncture at which the critics of Reeves Report on the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976*, come to the fore. Reeves is accused of expecting that land rights should have had a positive impact on Aboriginal well being. Further, that the remote location of many Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory is a major factor in their disadvantage. Part of the critique of Reeves is that he focuses mostly on the constraints imposed by locational disadvantage, and overlooks the extent to which human capital deficits are independent of location and reflect lifestyle choices made by Aboriginal people, choices that have been legitimately enabled (in Reeve's own view) by land rights. 'This is not just a point about cultural invigoration, ... it is also because there is a very real sense in which economic activity has been stimulated by land rights but in ways that are not amenable to measurement by mainstream social indicators. Examples of this abound in the literature and include subsistence activities (hunting, fishing and gathering), art and craft manufacture, land management and ceremonial business. To underline the economic importance of this informal activity one study has estimated that, by Australian standards, Aboriginal people on some Aboriginal lands are fully employed in the informal sector.'³⁶

Moreover, 'the evidence of the last 20 years or so of land rights paints another more positive scenario—one that is reflected in a growing population ... and associated increase in the number of settlements, much greater access to private and public

³⁵ Commonwealth Grants Committee, 2000. Indigenous Funding Inquiry Draft Report. <http://www.cgc.gov.au/>

³⁶ Taylor, J. 1999. 'The Social, Cultural and Economic Costs and Benefits of Land Rights: An Assessment of the Reeves Analysis.' In eds J. Altman et al *Land Rights at Risk? Evaluations of the Reeves Report*. CAEPR Research Monograph 14, 103.

moneys, the development of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal organisational and governmental structures, expanding provision of infrastructure, and a growth in the level and range of economic activity. Far from representing the stagnant economic areas of conventional economic theory, it would appear that since the establishment of land rights the remotest areas of the Northern Territory have been characterised by an internal dynamism, revitalised by the growing influence of Aboriginal self-determination based on legal access to traditional lands.’³⁷ The response to these findings is, will these ideas be placed before the Commonwealth Grants Commission Inquiry? If the indigenous economy is expanding, but that it is not expected nor required to deliver equal benefits of the kind expected in the rest of the community, should governments allocate funds based on need? If indigenous control is the object of policy, and the delivery of more and more goods and services by the dominant culture contradicts that policy, equal outcomes must take a back seat.

A 1985 study of the Aboriginal economy concludes that, taking into account the subsistence elements of the Aboriginal economies in remote areas, the standard of living for Aborigines in these areas was not the worst experienced. ‘A very interesting pattern emerges, showing that Aborigines at the two extremes—integration into the national social and economic life, and separation from it—appear to be far better off economically than those in the intermediate categories.’³⁸ If the object of Aboriginal policy is to give Aborigines a choice and an ability to control their own lives, that choice will, as it is now becoming clear, have a range of results. One will be to maintain a life outside of the dominant culture and use whatever resources they have, including royalties from their land. Another will be to build new communities in towns and suburbs where they can maintain their identity, but participate in the wider economy if not the wider community. The last will be to live as any other person, a fully integrated member of an economy and society.

The policy challenges in this mix are manifest. There are three distinct Aboriginal worlds, each suggesting a different policy mix, each requiring different assumptions. The mix is also dynamic. Are the children of Aborigines in traditional circumstances to be denied the choice of living in the second two worlds? Are these the children where ‘substance abuse’ is greatest? One study suggests it is. ‘The most compelling

³⁷ Taylor, 1999. op. cit, 104.

³⁸ Fisk, E. 1985. *The Aboriginal Economy in Town and Country*. Sydney: George Allen & Unwin, 7.

explanation for the distribution of the practises [of substance abuse is] the historical and social context of the cattle industry. The region where the cattle industry was, or still is, part of Aboriginal life has a low or non-existent incidence of petrol sniffing. Sniffing has taken root in some of the most 'tradition oriented' of communities, on land owned under Australian law by Aboriginal people, and among people whose historic contact with whites has been through settlements administered by missionaries and government welfare agents. It has generally not become established in the populations who were associated with the pastoral industry, which was tolerant of mobility, economically sound and tested the skills of its Aboriginal workers.³⁹ Perhaps testing the skills of workers is the key. There are lesser goals in economic policy and they should be acknowledged. They may not provide equal economic outcomes but they may provide some sanity.

In this context, what are the policy goals of the Community Development Employment Program? CDEP was established in 1977 and is an indigenous-specific program. However, it 'has been variously described as a labour market program, an alternative income support scheme and a community development initiative.'⁴⁰ Rowse observes, 'CDEP is the principle source of labour demand in some remote regions in which Indigenous people chose to remain because it is their ancestral country. To leave their home 'country' *merely* for the sake of a job is an unattractive option for a people already resisting many pressures on their cultural survival.'⁴¹ At present, less than 1 per cent of Aboriginal participants in CDEP move into the workforce.⁴² It is clearly failing in the objective of moving Aboriginal people into employment. It is clear that CDEP is attempting to straddle too many objectives. It operates in the face of a resistant clientele and cannot realistically act as a preparation for jobs. If there are to be sub-optimal programs—like CDEP in its make-work mode—these should be measured against sub-optimal standards. As long as the consequences of policy are understood, including the policy of separate economic development, these may be acceptable.

³⁹ Brady, M. 1992. *Heavy Metal: The social Meaning of Petrol Sniffing in Australia*. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 192.

⁴⁰ Altman, J. and M. Gray, 2000. 'The Effects of the CDEP Scheme on the Economic Status of Indigenous Australians. CAEPR Discussion papers 195. Summary, 1.

⁴¹ Rowse, T. 1997. 'Indigenous Australian Employment Prospects.' *Journal of Australian Political Economy* 40: 126.

⁴² Dr Peter Shergold, as reported in *The Australian*, 9 November 2000.

Which leads to the ultimate area of separate development, that of the Aboriginal capitalist. The National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Rural Industry Strategy and various Commonwealth indigenous commercial programs also struggle to avoid the divisions of separation and integration, of inappropriate expectations and of mis-applied standards. For example, the Rural Industry Strategy suggests the expansion of the exploitation of wild animal resources. ‘Many ATSI people have maintained customary practices in harvesting wild game for their own use. However, the tools used are different, with guns being used to kill animals, and motorised vehicles being used to find sources of game. The animals being hunted have also changed, with a mix of feral and native animals used as a food source.’ The report continues by pointing out a difficulty with one source of food, ‘the recently released Rabbit Calicic Virus disease has a potentially severe impact on some Aboriginal communities, such as those in central Australia. *The rabbit has played an important role in culture, diet and the local economy.* The Commonwealth Government, with the involvement of ATSIC, is currently considering initiatives to manage this disease and its impacts.’⁴³

This discussion of indigenous enterprises is revealing. First, it is sure to use the term ‘customary practices’ to impart a notion of ownership. It then updates those practices, guns and 4-wheel drives. It refers to native animals to also impart a sense of ownership, and updates it to include feral animals. It then mentions the importance of these practices and animals as a source of food, and the threat to that source by the desire of almost all other landowners, not to mention environmentalists, to rid the land of rabbits. Aboriginal people may be assisted to take up commercial opportunities, but they should not presume or make claims of ownership or special knowledge or insight, unless these are provable, defensible and in the end, commercially realisable.

A second example from the same document concerns wild food plants and their cultivation and commercial exploitation. ‘ATSI people have effectively been sidelined in this process, and are currently finding difficulty in participating within industry groups aiming to assist collectors and growers ... The ATSI people were initially major players in the industry—their traditional knowledge of the food properties of bush plants was the initial foundation for the industry, and several thousand people are estimated to have been involved in collecting these foods from the bush to supply

⁴³ ATSIC 2000. *Rural Industry Strategy*, 2.

to wholesalers.’⁴⁴ The inference is that Aborigines should remain hunters and gatherers or that the industry should remain in a pre-cultivation stage. The first prejudices the desire of Aborigines to determine these matters for themselves, that is to want to be more than the most basic of skilled worker. The second reveals an unwillingness to face the commercial realities of the marketplace. These sentiments in industry strategy are romantic and separatist to the point of inviting the sort of failure that will reinforce the concept of Aboriginal people as being the oppressed. It is more accurate to say they are simply being left behind. The obligation to allow Aboriginal people to opt out, or lag behind or catch up in their own time, or catch up in someone else’s view of time are matters that must be honestly addressed.

The romance and naivety of industry strategies is further compounded by the desire to have a separatist view of capital. A discussion paper on reforming indigenous economic development⁴⁵ proposes to establish a new statutory authority called Indigenous Business Australia. IBA would engulf ATSIC’s Business Development Program and the Housing Fund, the Commercial Development Corporation, manage investments of the ATSI Land Fund, manage investments of the Aboriginal Benefit Trust Account and advise on indigenous economic development. The purpose of the proposal is to enhance indigenous economic development and self-reliance as a means of overcoming welfare dependency. It aims to overcome the key weakness of existing arrangements, the failure to clearly delineate socially and commercially oriented programs. ‘History shows that the most common problem faced by indigenous organisations responsible for commercially oriented programs in the past has been the conflict between social and economic goals where social needs have led to poor commercial decisions, and thus commercial failures in so-called indigenous economic ventures.’⁴⁶

Commercial programs for indigenous development were established by the Commonwealth in 1969, in the five previous bodies responsible for managing indigenous commercial programs, and in the seven different bodies now responsible for aspects of the program the critique remained essentially the same, mainly the conflict between social and economic goals. In essence between separation and

⁴⁴ ATSIC, 2000. *Rural Industry Strategy*, 3.

⁴⁵ ATSIC, 1998. *Removing the Welfare Shackles*. A Discussion Paper on a Reform Initiative for Indigenous Economic Development.

integration. The critique of the Aboriginal Development Commission (1980-1990) illustrates the point. 'Early practice for the purchase of pastoral properties hinged on communities expressing an intention to run an economic business when the reality was that in many cases: the main community interests were land acquisition for social and cultural purposes: the properties were marginal in supporting a nuclear family experienced in pastoral management, let alone a whole community: and, later injections of funds for commercial operations were largely wasted in terms of commercial benefits.'⁴⁷ In addition, there was no scheme of prioritisation for home loans, in other words, those not in need received assistance. The emphasis in the commercial area was on grants rather than loans and proposals did not have to demonstrate 'clear prospects of viability.'⁴⁸ The focus was also on rural and remote areas, 'this geographic focus was doomed commercially simply by the adverse economic circumstances that generally existed in rural and remote areas.'⁴⁹

The paper continues the critique by exposing the conflict in the roles of the Commercial Development Corporation. On the one hand the CDC is required to engage in commercial activities in accordance with sound business principles, and on the other it has to satisfy various Community Service Obligations, to encourage indigenous participation in commercial projects, secure their ownership and control of projects, and 'are likely to have a beneficial impact on ATSI interests.'⁵⁰ These contradictions are not so different to some experienced in the wider community, the confusion of commercial imperatives and social obligations. These matters can be separated, but not in the context of attempting to establish an Aboriginal identity. That is asking too much of the policy. The contradictions are disabling the outcomes.

Economic development of indigenous communities will mean either, 'integration in our own time' or 'separate development with your help.' They may well merge. Commerce will almost certainly draw Aboriginal community closer to the dominant community. An Aboriginal capitalist is a contradiction in terms.

Conclusion

⁴⁶ Op. cit, 6.

⁴⁷ ATSIC, 1998. *Removing the Welfare Shackles*, 9.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Op. cit, 21.

Self-determination, whether overtly separatist or integrationist will probably lead to convergence in Aboriginal policy around the single goal of modernisation. Aboriginal people will become integrated into the dominant community if they so choose, but in different periods. As they do, Aboriginal identity will not be based on a distinct economic system, or on segregation. It will become much the same as for other ethnic groups. Apart from those Aboriginal people who own land, from which they derive economic and non-economic benefit, the distinctions will not support a separate political identity, other than on a regional basis. The sooner Aboriginal politics catches up with its constituents the better. The strain of Aboriginal policy, torn between the separatist and integrationist tendencies, must be relieved by an honest acknowledgement that the real policy is actually self-determination-within-boundaries. Aboriginal people are building a disparate set of futures, with a number of identities. They will become part of the modern world in their own time and in their own way. If not one clan, then another; if not this generation, then the next. The only surviving elements of an Aboriginal identity may be race and history. It would be a pity if we cannot speak openly of these matters with whom we wish, and in a language with which we are comfortable.