

# Australian Government Policies towards Indigenous Peoples

## *assimilation v self-determination*

John Howells

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Broadly speaking, and at the risk of oversimplification, there have been two distinct policies by Australian governments during the last hundred years towards Indigenous peoples: *assimilation* and *self-determination*. These policies arise from the differing assessments by Australian settler communities of the worth and future of Indigenous cultures. If Indigenous peoples are seen as primitive and inferior human beings who have no future as unique human cultures, then for those who hold this view they should be allowed to die out or be absorbed into mainstream Australian life. This is the policy of *assimilation*. If, on the other hand, non-Indigenous Australians conclude that Indigenous cultures have intrinsic value and their people have the will to maintain and evolve their culture in interrelation with the mainstream culture, then they should be allowed to determine their own future. This is the policy of *self-determination*.

### **Assimilation**

Assimilation was the policy of both state and federal governments up until the 1960s. At first Aboriginal people were expected to die out as a race. Government policy during this period is usually characterised as *protection*. Governments encouraged the setting up of missions and the establishment of reserves to care for Aborigines, who were expected to quietly and sadly fade away. The policy has been described as 'smoothing the pillow' of a sick and dying man.

When this did not happen, it was then expected that their cultures would quickly disappear in competition with what was assumed to be the superior white culture. In line with the interest in eugenics (the science of improving the human race by the careful selection of parents) during the first half of the twentieth century, a widely favoured policy emphasis was 'breeding out the colour'. The forcible removal of mixed blood Aboriginal children from what was thought to be the malign influence of their parents was an outworking of this policy.

In the aftermath of the Second World War there was universal horror at Nazi racist policies and abuse of human rights exemplified in the holocaust. Australia, while still maintaining its racist 'white Australia' policy, softened its policies towards Aborigines. The policy of 'breeding out the colour' was dropped. Aborigines were still regarded as inferior human beings with no future other than to be assimilated into the Australian mainstream.

Because Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders were 'not like us' in the eyes of settler Australians, they were generally held in contempt as primitive savages or pitied as child-like creatures. Their beliefs and customs were ridiculed and denigrated, their sacred places ignored or desecrated. Legally they did not exist, and individuals and groups could be moved at will by government authorities.

Alongside this negative view of Aborigines, however, there has also been a romantic view of them as 'noble savages' free of the complexities and responsibilities of civilisation. They were held to be 'closer to nature' and closer to 'the sacred'. Both the negative view and the romantic view arise from seeing Aborigines as 'not like us'. The net result has been that Aborigines have not been free to be 'like us' in some respects and 'not like us' in others.

### **Self-Determination**

The change in Australia's attitude to its First Nations may be dated from the 1967 referendum which removed certain discriminatory phrases from the Constitution. The result was that Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders were to be counted in the census and the Commonwealth was empowered to make laws for their betterment.

Change did not come quickly. It was the work of anthropologists like Professor W E H Stanner that prepared the ground for the changes that came in the 1970s and 1980s. Stanner's study of North Australian Aboriginal communities from the 1930s through to the 1970s convinced him that Aboriginal culture dealt with the great themes of human existence in a way that had intrinsic worth

and should be preserved where possible. In the mid-1950s he wrote that Aboriginal culture possessed 'all the beauty of song, mime, dance and art of which human beings are capable'<sup>i</sup>. This marked an extraordinary change in the attitude of a non-Indigenous Australian to Indigenous Australians. It took time for this new understanding to spread through the community, and it still has a long way to go.

Associated with this new appreciation of Aboriginal cultures was a conviction that Australia's settler community had to make peace with the country's First Nations whom they had dispossessed of their lands, abused and treated with contempt. It was a question of justice. Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders are not a new wave of migrant peoples to be absorbed into the dominant community. They are the original peoples of this land.

It was that great public servant, Dr H C 'Nugget' Coombs, who persuaded Gough Whitlam to give Aboriginal people the right to determine their own future. The racist contempt that underlay assimilation policies slowly changed to attitudes of respect for Aborigines and their culture. The movements for land rights and reconciliation followed and were supported by the Fraser, Hawke and Keating Governments.

The focus on the symbolic elements of self-determination, important as they are, however, was at the expense of providing proper infrastructure for Aboriginal communities - health and educational services, housing, policing and employment. The struggle to cope with the impact of mainstream Australian society given the enormous cultural differences, as well as inadequate infrastructure and an abundance of alcohol, proved impossibly difficult in many cases. Self-determination does not mean that Aborigines have all the answers for their development. Their development inevitably is to be in interrelation with mainstream Australian society, and it must be a two-way process.

### **Assimilation Revisited**

Not all non-Indigenous Australians were convinced of the desirability of self-determination policies. Right-wing think tanks like the Centre for Independent Studies and the Institute of Public Affairs, have consistently opposed such policies. They argue that the future for all people, in what is now one world, is to become participants in the global economy. We all need to be self-reliant, competitive individuals making our way in an open global market. They see no place in the world for communal societies like Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ones, whose fundamental values concern culture, kin and land.

The continuing difficulties of many Aboriginal communities convinced thinkers on the Right that it is futile to encourage Aborigines to cling to what they judge to be inferior and doomed cultures. Roger Sandall in an influential 2001 book wrote: 'illiterate, vocationally disabled, unpresentable outside the ethnographic zoos they live in, these tragic people are Australia's contribution to the New Stone Age'<sup>ii</sup>. Such contemptuous views of Indigenous cultures have been promoted by *The Australian* newspaper, and undoubtedly the Howard Government was influenced by them.

The Howard Government rejected the notion of self-development and insisted that Indigenous people be treated in the same way as any other disadvantaged group in society. It has sought to dismantle the structures set up to give effect to self-determination. It abolished the elected Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Council (ATSIC), it replaced the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation with the ineffective Reconciliation Australia, it has sought to wind back land rights legislation, and it has talked about 'practical reconciliation' while pursuing a policy of attrition. It has received some support for its neo-liberal (economic rationalist) views from the respected Aboriginal leader, Noel Pearson. Pearson deplores the effect of welfare dependency and alcohol on his people, and has established the Cape York Institute to develop a new and prosperous way of life for his people.

In March 2007, the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, announced that the Australian Government would commit \$60 million to turn the town camps in Alice Springs into 'normal suburbs'. The eighteen town camps house some 2,000 people, but visitors from remote Central Australian communities often swell this number, and overcrowding is normal. The proffered money would go a long way to eradicating the overcrowding and unhygienic conditions of the camps. To receive this money, however, the eighteen Housing Associations would have to surrender the leasehold of their land, and they had a month in which to decide. A special meeting of all town camp residents rejected

the minister's offer. They preferred their communally owned and controlled land to the prospect of individually owned or rented houses controlled by the Government.

On 21 June 2007 the Prime Minister, John Howard, declared a national emergency because of widespread allegations of child sexual abuse in the Northern Territory. The report of a Northern Territory board of enquiry titled, *Little Children are Sacred*, had recently been released. It pointed to serious problems in many remote communities and made recommendations to address the causes. It was not the first report of its kind. Over the years there have been a series of such reports calling for urgent action, but for the most part governments have ignored them. The Howard Government planned a massive intervention involving the army, police, volunteer medical staff and bureaucrats. It promised to renew infrastructure and overhaul the administration of Aboriginal communities. The Labor opposition supported the initiative, and many observers welcomed the prospect of a real injection of federal funds to redress years of neglect.

The Government painted a picture of dysfunctional Aboriginal communities overcome by alcohol and drugs and with rampant child sexual abuse. In general the media accepted this sensationalist portrayal, and there was widespread community support for the intervention. Aboriginal leaders complained that they had not been consulted on either the broad outlines or details of the plan which threatened to undo the gains they had slowly made over the last thirty years. Township lands would be compulsorily acquired, the permit system which enabled local communities to control who entered their land would be abolished, community councils would be replaced by Government-appointed managers with overriding powers, Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) would be abolished. What angered Aboriginal people and their leaders most was the contempt and disrespect for them implicit in the way the intervention was designed and carried out.

As details of the plan became clearer, it was evident that the problem of child sexual abuse was being used by the Government to implement its wider agenda, in particular to undermine the kin-based forms of ownership of Aboriginal land title and to substitute them with individual forms amenable to a market economy. Mal Brough would get the land of the Alice Springs town camps without paying the incentive of \$60 million. The Government has been accused of using *Little Children are Sacred* as a 'Trojan horse'<sup>iii</sup> for undermining land rights.

The objective of the Federal Government has been to force Aboriginal communities and their people to become like us. This is *forced assimilation*. Undoubtedly Aboriginal communities in coping with the impact of the western world will need to graft features such as health and education services, police, appropriate housing and paid employment onto their cultures. But to be effective, it cannot be forced on them. Decisions must be mutually arrived at and implemented.

### **What May We Hope For from the New Labor Government?**

It is too early to say how the new Government will handle the intervention. In opposition during the election campaign it supported the Government's legislation, but it made a number of commitments that suggest it will make changes when in power. It has declared that it will retain the permit system and the CDEP. It has also declared that it will consult widely for an elected body to replace ATSIC, and that it will support the United Nations *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People* which John Howard had strongly opposed. It has also promised that it will make a formal apology for the stolen generations.

Let us hope that it will commit the funds necessary to provide proper infrastructures for remote Aboriginal communities, and that it will tackle the tasks in consultation and cooperation with Aboriginal people. Let us also hope that it can persuade the Australian community that we will never be at peace with ourselves until we have achieved a just solution to the Aboriginal question, a solution which honours the dignity and place of Indigenous peoples within our nation.

## **ENDNOTES**

Quoted in Raimond Gaita, 'The Moral Force of Reconciliation' in *Coercive Reconciliation* edited by Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson. Melbourne: Arena Publications, 2007, page 302.

<sup>ii</sup> Quoted in Raimond Gaita, *ibid*, page 302.

<sup>iii</sup> See Pat Turner and Nicole Watson, 'The Trojan Horse' in *Coercive Reconciliation* edited by Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson. Melbourne: Arena Publications, 2007, pages 205-212.