

Race misses starter's gun as election theme

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IT was the rise of the One Nation party, followed by division over the High Court's Wik decision on native title that threatened to turn this election into a referendum on race.

But a race-based poll hasn't materialised so far -partly because the two main parties have neutralised the issues.

The Coalition, rumoured to be planning a reduction in the core functions of the main Aboriginal affairs body, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, will not even confirm when it plans to release its policy, although it may be as soon as this weekend.

The Labor and Democrat policies are likely to follow soon after.

From the Government, Aboriginal groups expect the worst.

"I have real fears they (the Coalition) are deliberately holding policy to the last weeks of the campaign to whip up press coverage in an attempt to win back the drip support from One Nation," Olga Havnen of the National Indigenous Working Group on Native Title said yesterday.

Aboriginal leaders, including former Cape York land councillor Noel Pearson, have backed the Democrats after the former head of the National Farmers Federation and native title negotiator Rick Farley announced his candidacy for the party in the ACT.

And it seems the Senate could hold the key to Aboriginal affairs after the election, particularly if Mr Farley wins a place, because under the rules for Territories he would go straight into the chamber.

Democrat spokesman on indigenous affairs John Woodley said Mr Farley could be in the Senate when amendments to the Wik legislation were revisited. The Senate must approve the State-based native title bodies before they can be set up.

"If the Howard Government is thinking of getting through all this very damaging legislation before the new Senate takes its place on the first of July next year, it may need to think again because the Democrats could very well regain the balance of power in the Senate after October 3," Senator Woodley said. A spokesman for Aboriginal Affairs Minister John Herron refused yesterday to release details of Coalition policy.

Early indications from the Coalition are that ATSIC will be stripped of control over its core functions, comprising two-thirds of its budget.

Speculation about shifting control of employment and housing from ATSIC resulted in Pauline Hanson's One Nation claiming credit for driving Coalition policy.

So far the Prime Minister has refused to confirm the plan, but the Nationals' leader, Tim Fischer, and Senator Herron have railed against lack of efficiencies in ATSIC and a division of powerful land councils into smaller regional organisations.

And so far, only One Nation has issued its Aboriginal affairs policy, although its attempt to focus on race with no new announcements was spectacular in its failure to grab the spotlight.

Newspoll shows that the electorate -bombarded with Wik, the stolen generation report and appalling indigenous health statistics -ranks indigenous affairs only above immigration as an election issue.

In contrast, the push for reconciliation with indigenous Australians has gained some ground, with John Howard preferring "some kind of written understanding" recognising prior occupation of Australia by Aboriginal peoples.

At the same time Mr Beazley said Labor would not repeal the Wik native title legislation but would revisit the law.