
Communities crippled by playing costly politics

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AS THE wheels hit the tarmac at Doomadgee airport on Wednesday, Tony McGrady realised his fears were correct.

The State Mines Minister and MP for Mt Isa, sent to the remote Gulf community by Premier Peter Beattie to ease recent race tensions, had told companions en route not to expect a friendly reception.

McGrady, a veteran political figure in western Queensland, knew that intense political jealousies and rivalries in Doomadgee made the community a political hotbed.

He was right. Locals refused to let him leave the airport.

Although many wanted to talk about community problems, two local politicians rejected the offered olive branch and used the occasion for political grandstanding.

It made for great television.

And although the parties finally began negotiating for the return of the government hospital staff who fled the Doomadgee hospital after last weekend's riot, the whole affair highlighted the continuing difficulties facing governments in dealing with Aboriginal communities.

Many Aboriginal leaders want more self-determination and a greater hand in helping to lift their own living standards. But continuing problems such as alcohol abuse, domestic violence, illiteracy, poor health standards and community despair are crippling the ability of those communities to be part of the solutions.

This week's events at Doomadgee added another ingredient to the potent cocktail -- the fact that Aboriginal leaders can work against their own interests by playing politics.

Beattie sent McGrady on a peace mission to secure guarantees of safety for hospital staff, so he could reopen the hospital.

Most people at Doomadgee wanted the same thing. But the tone of his visit was one of discord when it should have been one of consensus.

Doomadgee Mayor Clarence Walden, later joined by activist Murrandoo Yanner, hijacked the visit and tried to make it an anti-government political rally.

Meanwhile, community members serious about reopening the hospital were left to stand around in embarrassment.

Walden, facing re-election next March, ranted at length about how all his community wanted was a doctor -- not a politician.

His position was a bizarre contradiction. McGrady was there to negotiate the return of doctors.

So while Walden and Yanner hammed it up for the cameramen, McGrady and his party of bureaucrats worked the edges of the crowd -- talking to people who actually wanted to negotiate an end to the violence.

Later, Walden told *The Courier-Mail* no one cared about Doomadgee residents because they were "a bunch of blacks".

"I want to give people the freedom that has been coming to these people since 1967," Walden said.

"I think I might be better off asking my people to vote National -- (federal MP) Bob Katter's mob."

And last weekend, Yanner had sought to deflect heat on the riot by questioning the medical and personal ethics of the medical staff -- accusations he was unable to back with evidence.

Bizarre contradictions are part and parcel of Aboriginal politics.

The Doomadgee incident stands like a case study of the same problem the Beattie Government is facing across the state amid growing indigenous frustration at the lack of progress on improving living standards on communities.

The problem is that Aborigines want to improve their lives, but cannot speak with a united voice. There is no Aboriginal community. Instead there are dozens of factions, hundreds of tribes, thousands of families.

Statewide, the Beattie Government has been caught up in a bitter Aboriginal political play as various factions attempt to seize the indigenous agenda.

Aboriginal activist Noel Pearson, a city-educated law graduate, has proposed a plan that argues that Aborigines are too dependent on welfare handouts and need to develop economic autonomy as a launchpad for improvements in living standards.

The Pearson prescription emphasises improved education standards and calls on communities to seek outside investment.

The plan is not very detailed and far from revolutionary.

But community jealousies have seen it open a gaping rift in the indigenous political world.

Key Aboriginal factions across the state are rejecting Pearson, citing not their opposition to the plan but their anger that they were not consulted in its formulation.

No one seems to be interested in discussing the plan on its merits. The debate is all about consultation.

And that's where it gets difficult for the Beattie Government.

Beattie has great sympathy for the Pearson plan but has learnt to his horror that key factions with which he has negotiated in the past oppose Pearson.

DURING negotiations in the past 18 months over native title and indigenous policy, Beattie leant heavily on Cairns activist Terry O'Shane.

O'Shane is no fan of Pearson.

So whatever Beattie thinks about the Pearson plan, his own political imperatives make it difficult for him to be an active proponent.

This is why Beattie's current rhetoric on Doomadgee, Pearson and indigenous affairs in general is focused on the need for communities to find common ground.

"Governments can't do everything," Beattie says.

"I want a partnership with community leaders but first I need a cohesive approach from community leaders."

It is no use, Beattie says, for indigenous leaders to grandstand on local issues and then complain when governments fail to respond.

"The leaders of these communities have to take responsibility themselves and show some leadership," Beattie says.

Former premier and now Opposition Leader Rob Borbidge agrees.

Borbidge, who has clashed in the past with Yanner, says too many activist Aboriginal leaders are not representing the real aspirations of their people.

"I appreciate the self-determination argument but at the end of the day the government is the government," Borbidge says. "If there's not leadership coming from the community then it has to come from the government."

Borbidge says community elders at Doomadgee and across the state offer great wisdom but are often drowned out by the clamour of politics.

"The more you give Murandoo Yanner, the more he will take," he says.

"We have to start talking to people who want solutions."

"I think the time has come not to be politically correct and to do what's right."

Back in George Street, McGrady and Beattie are safe on Aboriginal affairs -- for now.

No matter how bitter the debate within the Aboriginal community, they played a clever political game on Doomadgee this week, carefully aiming their political messages at the political mainstream.

When news broke of the riot Beattie made the right noises of concern and called on Walden and Yanner to show leadership to their community.

Later, Beattie sent McGrady to Doomadgee with strict instructions to cop whatever criticism Walden handed out and to concentrate on fixing the problems. McGrady, a longtime political enemy of Walden, showed great self-restraint in a difficult situation. He won the guarantees of safety and returned to deliver on a community request that the Government prevent a Burketown pub from selling a particular type of port popular at Doomadgee.

By sending McGrady on the peace mission, Beattie sought to satisfy left-wingers and city moderates who want humanitarian action on Aboriginal affairs.

But his choice of emissary had another message. By sending McGrady, Beattie was telling hardline blue collar supporters that he would not be stood over by radical Aboriginal community leaders.

It was an attempt at an iron-fist-in-a-velvet-glove approach carefully crafted to win widespread political approval.

But that's just for now.

Privately, Beattie genuinely wants to improve life for Aborigines. Unless he can bring the communities together in a spirit of co-operation he will fail.