
Serious Aboriginal issues will prevail

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THREE years ago, Gracelyn Smallwood, then Associate Professor at the University of Southern Queensland, said that fighting for land rights and ignoring the health needs of indigenous people was an example of twisted priorities. "What good is ownership of all the land in the world if you are not alive to use or enjoy it?" she asked.

The quote sprang to mind yesterday when Les Malezer announced that, should the State Government's proposed native title legislation pass into law, "there will be no co-operation by any indigenous groups with the Government and there will be serious protests".

Malezer is the spokesman for FAIRA (Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action), a group that did commendable work gaining justice for Palm Island workers who had been denied wages.

However, his latest threats ring hollow. It would be so much more convincing to hear Malezer and other (male) leaders of indigenous organisations coming out in support of the report tabled in Parliament this week dealing with violence and alcoholism on remote communities.

The document was completed by a taskforce of 50 indigenous women from all parts of Queensland, headed by Griffith University's Associate Professor Boni Robertson.

It contained 123 recommendations which addressed the causes as well as the solutions, with particular emphasis on controlling alcohol consumption.

The report is an amazing document. It is credible because it was completed by Aboriginal and Islander women telling their own stories, and coming up with their own solutions.

And what courage it took for these people to participate -- and to tell of the atrocities that occur and the plight of their people.

Given the subject matter, the absence of any professional or legal support for the taskforce, and the need for the women to cover all of Queensland, the document produced was, in my view, the most outstanding and thorough report of its type produced in this state in recent history.

The hard work has been done -- the problems identified and made public; some solutions proffered; a commitment by government to co-operate. It has to happen.

Unless the senseless drunkenness, rape, murder and violence cease, and young indigenous people are given the chance to live a life free of those horrors, the situation will just deteriorate further. Who wants to hear of one more black youth, stricken with hopelessness, taking his/her own life?

WHAT is frustrating in indigenous issues is to see the passion a spokesman like Malezer can muster on the subject of native title rights to land, yet not one peep emerges regarding something as fundamentally important as the taskforce report on violence.

There seems little encouragement is needed to garner support for issues such as land rights or perhaps the heavy-handed actions of police.

But that enthusiasm wanes when indigenous people such as Boni Robertson or Noel Pearson take on social issues which demand that Aboriginal and Islander people accept responsibility for their own lives.

Pearson's "partnership plan" seeks to lift indigenous people from their lives of welfare dependency and despair, but depends on them accepting the responsibility to do it for themselves.

This attitude, or expectation, that people should be helping themselves rather than receiving handouts has infuriated some leaders in Aboriginal organisations who see their personal fiefdoms threatened, their sinecures exposed.

Aboriginal Australia is going to progress with the help and intellectual guidance of people such as Pearson and Robertson, despite dissension .

The force of their argument is too strong, the evidence too obvious; the need too great. But so much more would be achieved -- and so much more quickly -- if leaders such as Malezer applied their considerable skills to the holistic problem rather than focusing on single issues.

That is the difference between the Aboriginal leadership of the old and the new. Malezer's threats of disruption, protest and non-cooperation smack so much of the confrontationist attitudes that reconciliation and maturity were assumed to have resolved.

He will have no support at all, and doesn't deserve any. The way to achieve gains for his constituency is for Malezer to communicate and conciliate -- convince government by the force of his intellectual argument that a certain course should be adopted. Should he not get all he wants, it is infantile to respond with threats of disruption and non-cooperation.

What Aboriginal Australia is crying out for is a leader -- a man or woman who can engender the respect and stature required to further their cause. But how often is it seen that good people with good ideas and energy such as Pearson or Robertson emerge -- only to be pilloried by their own people who are so racked with insecurity they refuse to acknowledge the harm they are doing?

The greatest human rights tragedy facing the Western world is the plight of our indigenous people, particularly those living on remote communities. Current government policies and current black leadership are failing indigenous people. Their living conditions, health and future prospects are getting bleaker by the day.

Something has to change, and those resisting that change should be questioned as to their real motives for not wanting to be a part of the rescue of their own people.

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