

Mabo: a moral crisis festers

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Blinkered ideological thinking is not limited to the right, says Robert Manne.

On June 2, 1992, the High Court overturned the legal doctrine on which this country was settled - the idea that at the time of the British arrival Australia was a mere waste and desert, a terra nullius. As a consequence of this founding doctrine, the hunter-gatherer clans who had lived on this continent for perhaps 60,000 years were able to be treated, under British law, as trespassers on what they had imagined to be their ancestral lands.

For many people, the High Court's Mabo judgment, which acknowledged native title, marked a moral turning point in the history of Australia, a great cause for celebration and for hope. On the eve of the 10th anniversary of the judgment, I wonder if it is still possible to feel this way.

The Keating government responded to Mabo in two main ways. In late 1992, at Redfern, prime minister Paul Keating described the dispossession with unsparing clarity: "We took the traditional lands and smashed the traditional way of life. We brought the diseases. The alcohol. We committed the murders. We took the children from the mothers. We practised discrimination and exclusion." Every word was true and obvious. Yet for a nation that had spent the better part of 200 years in a form of denialism about its origins, the Redfern speech still had the capacity to unsettle and to shock.

Keating accepted that the meaning of Mabo needed to be clarified by statute law. Because the Coalition removed itself from the negotiating process altogether, the most important discussions took place between Keating and the Aboriginal leaders - Lowitja O'Donoghue, the Dodson brothers and Noel Pearson. The negotiations were tough. However, for the first time in the history of race relations in this country, they were conducted on the basis of equality and mutual respect.

It was only after the anti-Keating election of 1996 that a mild anti-Mabo breeze blew up. Near the beginning of his prime ministership, John Howard faced the challenge of the High Court's judgment concerning native title and pastoral leases, in the case of Wik. In the subsequent negotiations to amend the Native Title Act, miners, pastoralists and conservative state premiers were the key participants. From these negotiations Aboriginal leaders were, almost altogether, frozen out.

Exactly five years after Mabo, a reconciliation conference was called. Patrick Dodson chaired the meeting with gravity and grace. The Prime Minister also attended. Under

challenge from the audience, he began to hector delegates in defence of his 10-point plan.

In a gesture of spontaneous political eloquence, a sizeable part of the audience rose from their seats and turned their backs. By now a serious rift between the government and politically conscious Aborigines had opened up.

This rift widened as the dismal response of the Government to the 1997 report into the forcible removal of thousands of Aboriginal children from their mothers and communities became known. The Government pretended that this policy had never been driven by a racist desire to "breed out the colour" of the "half-caste". It refused to consider the payment of compensation. It refused to apologise.

The question of the apology became now the issue of greatest tension between the Howard Government and the Aboriginal people. After his near-death political experience in the 1998 election, Howard pledged, surprisingly, to devote his government to the cause of reconciliation. This mood soon passed. Soon the Prime Minister sponsored a parliamentary motion that expressed "regrets" about the most important "blemish" in Australia's history - the dispossession of the Aborigines. This motion represented the outer moral limit about the meaning of the dispossession that the Howard Government would ever be willing to concede.

For 10 years the Reconciliation Council had worked on both an ambitious program for the revival of indigenous society and a succinct reconciliation declaration for the centenary of Federation celebrations. In May, 2000, a quarter of a million people walked over the Sydney Harbour Bridge in support of this declaration. At the Opera House the declaration was handed to Howard. On the grounds that it contained an apology and that it spoke of Aboriginal self-determination - an idea that every Australian government since Gough Whitlam's had embraced - the Howard Government rejected the declaration out of hand. The political quest for an act of reconciliation was, at that moment, effectively killed.

In order to disguise this death, the Howard Government began now to speak of something it called "practical reconciliation". When examined, this amounted to nothing more than the conventional promise of all Australian governments since the time of Harold Holt to try to make improvements in the areas of Aboriginal employment, housing, education and health. Nothing demonstrated the hollowness of the talk about "practical reconciliation" more clearly than the fact that, with his appointment of the more than fully occupied Immigration Minister, Philip Ruddock, to the Aboriginal portfolio, John Howard became the first Australian leader since Sir William McMahon who did not feel the need to put a full-time minister in charge of Aboriginal Affairs.

As it turned out, for Howard, "practical reconciliation" amounted to little more than a rhetorical move in an ideological game.

It would be comforting but nonetheless dishonest to regard the Howard Government as exclusively responsible for the derailing of post-Mabo reconciliation hopes. For in the area of Aboriginal politics, blinkered ideological thinking has not been restricted

to the right.

In recent times certain courageous indigenous intellectuals - such as Marcia Langton and Boni Robertson on the question of domestic violence and Noel Pearson on the impact of alcohol at Cape York - have broken through the self-imposed silences of many Aboriginal leaders. By doing so they have issued an important challenge not only to their own people and to governments throughout Australia but also, indirectly, to some of the most enthusiastic supporters of Mabo and reconciliation - the sentimental, romantic, suburban, anti-Howard moral middle class. What their work suggests is that, in the presence of drug and alcohol epidemics and of an entrenched Aboriginal culture of violence, and in the absence of meaningful economic activity, the very survival of the remote Aboriginal communities is now at serious risk.

The neo-assimilationist intellectuals around the Howard Government would not be unhappy to see these communities simply disappear.

For those, however, who care about reconciliation and the Mabo legacy, there seems to me at present no cause of greater importance than the expression of solidarity with those Aboriginal leaders - such as Patrick Dodson in the Kimberley or Noel Pearson at Cape York - who are struggling daily with their people to discover new economic purposes and to recover old forms of spiritual and moral health.

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