

Aborigines have to save themselves

Noel Pearson
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Aboriginal people are lepers in the Australian democratic process. I have watched with awe how the progressive lobby turned al-Qaeda recruit David Hicks into a relentless, irrecusable and finally triumphant national cause — from Taliban terrorist to Nelson Mandela of Guantanamo Bay.

It has been said that it is not the man, it is the principle. There is a much clearer principle involved in the breach of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination by operation of the Australian Government's Native Title Act, but this has not become a cause celebre.

In terms of marketability, it is easier to sell a terrorist than an Australian Aborigine subjected to ongoing racial discrimination by the country's laws relating to native land title.

Aboriginal causes are a political hard-sell. For a while, the albatross of Australia's lepers hung around the throat of Paul Keating's prime ministership in 1996. Never before, and likely never again, would indigenes be invited in from the woodheap to sit at the main table as they did during those Keating years. This just confirmed the opinion that Aborigines are electoral poison. No more bleeding hearts.

There is a dichotomy in popular discussion of racism. It is assumed that people and ideas come from one of two possible sides: those who are racists and those who are not, those who are subject to racism and those who are racists.

The polarity between those who consider racism a serious problem and those who do not is generally seen as a left-right split. This is simplistic and misleading. There is an arc of views held by non-indigenous Australians that goes from denial to moral vanity, to acknowledgement and responsibility. For Aboriginal people, the arc of views goes from separatism to victimhood and to pride and principled defence.

There is a strong tradition of denial in non-indigenous Australia. There is a very large constituency that denies that the treatment of indigenous people was as bad as those historians who have contributed to the genre known as "Aboriginal history" demonstrate. These people deny that racism in Australia against the country's indigenous peoples is a serious problem and most are defensive about their own identity and heritage.

There is some truth in the proposition that "political correctness" has had this effect. The political right has also deliberately and wilfully galvanised this defensiveness by mischaracterising the progressive position as being about guilt, rather than what Keating

referred to as "open hearts" in his landmark 1992 Redfern speech. This has provided great fodder for the culture wars.

The second major constituency is morally vain about race and history. Its members largely come from the liberal left and are morally certain about right and wrong and ready to ascribe blame. For them, issues of race and history are a means of gaining the upper hand over political and cultural opponents.

This constituency contributes most to the outlook that casts indigenous people as victims. They have no understanding of how destructive, demoralising and demeaning this mentality is.

Moral vanity is perhaps an unfair characterisation. Within this group, many people have decent motivations. They understand the hypocrisy of the prescription to forget the past, especially in a country whose most famous lapidary exhortation reads: Lest We Forget.

Rather than denial or moral vanity, the optimum position for non-indigenous people to take is that of acknowledgement — of the past and its legacy in the present, recognising that racism is not a contrivance, that indigenous people endure great hurt and confront barriers as a result of racism. They need to take responsibility for the fact of racism, and work to answer and counter it.

On the indigenous side, the extreme position is that of separatism, yet the largest constituency on the indigenous side subscribes to victimhood. People object to my interpretation of the dimensions of victimhood because of what many of our people regard as radical, separatist and resistance politics, I say victim politics. What may have been a truly radical act at one time, such as the tent embassy in 1971, degenerates into a sad symbol of defeatist, victim politics.

We indigenes of Australia are confused in our cultural understanding of victimisation and victimhood. Yes, individuals and groups in our society are victimised in a variety of ways. But it is a terrible thing to encourage victims to see themselves as victims.

To adopt this mentality is fatal because it concedes defeat, and it can also literally kill. Victims do not take responsibility for education, economy, health and mental wellbeing; their families become dysfunctional and their children are damaged even before they are born.

The worst indulgence is to take away the one power victims need to survive, to defy victimisation. To say: "Yes, I have suffered victimisation — but I'm not giving in by becoming a victim!"

Who in world history has ever been saved by anyone in the way we hope whitefellas will save our people?

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