

After four decades, Aborigines still struggle to be heard

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AS WE celebrate the 40th anniversary of the 1967 referendum, we should keep a healthy balance between nostalgia and reality.

The 1967 referendum was aspirational as it sought to recognise indigenous Australians but also wanted action from the Commonwealth government. From the record yes vote, it is clear the overwhelming sentiment of the era was for the Commonwealth to take the lead and to make substantial changes for the betterment of indigenous Australians. Forty years on, it seems government is not living up to the aspirations of the yes campaigners or the voters.

It is incumbent on us to look critically at the past four decades. We must ask ourselves if the yes campaigners' hopes have been realised and their hard work has been rewarded.

In the '60s there were changes for the worse in the way in which stock and station hands and their families were looked after or paid by pastoralists. Turned off their traditional lands but not welcome in the towns and cities, many Aboriginal people drifted to shanty towns. They were out of work and out of luck so there was a collective loss of esteem and direction.

After four decades, the Northern Territory is either unable or unwilling adequately to deal with the issue of "long-grassers". Strangely, as recently as last week, the offer of \$60 million from Mal Brough was not enough to move the NT Government to action on the Alice Springs town camps.

Forty years later the shanty towns are full of broken people.

In the '60s, Aboriginal people with a job were most likely unskilled. Tertiary education was just a wish and you would have had to look extremely hard to find a successful Aboriginal businessman (political correctness came much later). Overcoming adversity was not easy, but hard work was rewarded.

Forty years later Aboriginal people are, in the main, still outside the real economy or perhaps on its fringes. Many indigenous youths do not see the need to finish school on the assumption there is a lifetime of welfare ahead of them. On several pastoral properties, the Indigenous Land Corporation is unable to fill vacancies with indigenous workers who opt instead for "sit-down money" that is at the same time easy and destructive. As a sign that things are looking up, the Commonwealth Government is implementing changes to the indigenous work-for-the-dole scheme making it harder for people to languish on welfare.

Visit any indigenous community, even in the cities, and you will most likely find a staggering array of organisations and funding arrangements. In some communities, grant applications

and acquittals can keep up to three people in full-time employment. Government intervention in the form of grants and handouts run counter to market forces. In Queensland, the Government still runs many community stores; it seems to hold a low opinion of the capability of indigenous people.

The 1967 campaign for the yes vote was a struggle, a struggle for profile and a struggle to be heard. Forty years on and indigenous people remain without effective means to influence Commonwealth policy. Sure, Labor had a go at setting up something. But I hope we have learnt once and for all that a national representative structure such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission is neither national nor representative. The struggle to be heard continues.

Not for a second would I think the hopes and aspirations of the yes campaigners have been fulfilled by the past 40 years of indigenous affairs. Conditions in so many indigenous communities maintain a sort of timeless despair about them.

As the real beneficiaries of the referendum, indigenous Australians were, and remain, only a small percentage of the population. However, in 1967 and with more than 90 per cent in favour of the changes, clearly mainstream Australia took an interest in indigenous affairs and wanted the Commonwealth Government to fix things. The result of the referendum was not just a win for a minor interest group; it was a win for the whole country. The flip side to this, 40 years of government failure to act genuinely for the betterment of indigenous Australians, is a let-down for all Australians.

The 1967 referendum was a watershed event and as we celebrate the 40th anniversary there is no doubt some commentators will drift into romanticism, but we should be brought back to reality by 40 years of indigenous affairs that tell us a lot more about ourselves as a nation than any interpretation of that one distant day at the polls.

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