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Bipartisan white-out

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Uninterested, incapable governments should hand their budgets for Aboriginal affairs over to Indigenous people, writes JACK WATERFORD.

About 40c in every \$1 the Commonwealth spent on remote housing in the Northern Territory went on "administration". Meanwhile, Malcolm Turnbull seems in no hurry to improve the lot of Indigenous Australians.

Refugees are not the only folk who must look to the election without hope or expectation of advantage. So must those other folk whose marked levels of illiteracy, innumeracy and unemployability excites exasperation, antipathy or apathy from other Australians. Mercifully, however, there's little risk of some Aboriginal Australians being accused of threatening the jobs of other illiterates, innumerates and unemployables.

Not to be too brutal about it, Indigenous affairs policies simply do not figure in the calculations of either major party, even though a disciplined Aboriginal vote has the capacity to determine the outcome of up to four seats. Both care, in a vague way, of course. Both are happy about a certain amount of symbolism and signs of goodwill.

But that's about it.

There will be, of course, some minor - even trivial - differences between Labor and Nationals policies put forward, but it's doubtful that either existing policies, or ones concocted as incentives for votes, black or white, at this election, will make the slightest difference to life in Aboriginal communities, whether remote, rural, in regional centres or in major metropolitan cities. Feel-good policies about recognising Aborigines in the constitution, or progress towards reconciliation, will be focused mainly towards friendly white constituencies, because folk in black communities find it hard to get excited about them.

It's doubtful that more than one in 500 Australians knows the name of the Labor spokesman on Indigenous matters, and that's pretty much as intended. (It's Shayne Neumann.) A very few speeches and media statements show him to have an accurate critique of his opposite number, Nigel Scullion. But he has little to say about how the Scullion way is pretty much a continuation of what the previous Labor government did. Or how this would change under a Shorten government.

Neumann, I guess, means to be more compassionate and understanding than his immediate predecessors. They all do. But I expect the same addiction to coercion, top-down management and engagement (as opposed to consultation) as seen in Labor's last minister, Jenny Macklin. But Neumann will be even less effective, if that's possible, because he lacks her clout in the party's higher councils.

Neumann has little to say about why Indigenous Australians should hope or expect that policy, programs and the style of management by him, with his limited background and experience, should be any better than, say, his nearest five predecessors, Labor or Liberal.

Labor once had a slight edge in relationships with Aboriginal Australians. That, like an old notion of an Australian special relationship with and understanding of Papua New Guinea, has long died for lack of nurture.

Scullion is a senator from the Northern Territory, the first Nationals politicians to administer Aboriginal affairs since such matters, in the NT at least, were in the fiefdom of the Country Party in the 1960s. Scullion can hardly be blamed personally for his lack of achievement, and the positive retreat on progress towards bridging the gap.

This is because his initial prime minister, Tony Abbott, cared deeply about Indigenous matters and declared that he wanted to be known as the prime minister for Indigenous Australians. He shifted most specific functions involving special programs into the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, carried out promises to spend dedicated time in Aboriginal communities, and took an active interest in constitutional matters and a lead in most announcements, other than with bad news and budget cuts.

No one could doubt that Abbott cared, and that he wanted to show that he cared. But if mere caring, leadership and ceaseless activity could effect change in Aboriginal affairs, one might have expected it to be obviously making some difference somewhere by, say, 1930.

That was in the missionary period.

Or in the late 1970s and early 1980s, as the idealism and some foolishness of the Whitlam years were tempered with some practicality and discipline under Malcolm Fraser's ministers.

Malcolm Turnbull, by contrast, seems only to care in a vague and uncommitted way. He probably owns a few Aboriginal artworks. But he's never evinced any particular interest in matters Indigenous, nor said anything to show it sits high on his list of priorities. It's by no means clear that Aborigines, too, will be swept into prosperity by his vision of innovation and the new economy.

It's rather more likely they will be put further behind. Particularly if Turnbull depends on his present advisers, including Scullion.

Change in Aboriginal affairs has never had much to do with what ministers in Canberra have decreed as policy, or what ever-expanding hordes of white bureaucrats have done. Nor ever had it had much to do with the money invested. It's only true in a general sense that the more money that is spent on Aboriginal affairs, the bigger the meagre amount that trickles down to become income or, more rarely, capital for Aborigines. At best, trickle-down is about 20 per cent.

Data issued about five years ago suggested that governments spent about \$250,000 a year per average Aboriginal family in mainstream or special programs. In its hands, this could send all the sons to Riverview and daughters to Canberra Girls Grammar, with enough left over for Toyotas and groceries. But the average actual income of Aboriginal Australian families is less than a fifth of this. The rest provides incomes for a largely white private and public sector "helping" Aborigines, and lets their children go to these schools instead.

For all of Abbott's caring, his government made big cuts to funds going into Aboriginal communities.

And the bureaucracy's capacity, such as it was, to respond to the particular problems of individual communities or families has been reduced by "rationalising" the program streams.

Systematic defunding of Aboriginal organisations has caused a collapse of local initiative, involvement and "ownership" of programs. Some of this was partisan or personal payback, given that some local organisations were perceived to have Labor links. (In fact, most Indigenous organisations are equally disenchanted with the Labor Party, for which most have voted so loyally over the past 60 years.)

Abbott may have cared. But he was like nearly everyone else in having very little idea of what the government ought to do to make things better, and he had a weakness for listening to people who also cared, but who tended to think that Aborigines needed to be both dragged and pushed into what was "known" (at least by such advisers) to be for the Aboriginal good. In this model, Aborigines are somewhat naughty children needing punishment rather more than reward, lectures rather more than things. The lives of the advisers are, apparently, the modern role models.

That the consistent practical effect of such policies over, say, the past 200 years has been a complete lack of client interest or engagement, passive resistance and dumb insolence is apparently neither here nor there.

(The failure of alien improvement programs is not, of course, some peculiar, or genetic, weakness of Aborigines. Everything ever done in Aboriginal affairs, from isolation to massacre, assimilation to integration, was initially practised on, say, the

Irish or the London underclass and, later, non-British migrants, with similar lack of effect.

Some of us of such backgrounds must mostly cheer at Aboriginal resilience and resistance even as we mechanically deplore the wasteful way in which they fail to become what upstanding aliens proclaim to be in their own best interests.)

Recently, a keen reader drew to my attention a report from the NT News, quoting Chief Minister Adam Giles as saying that more than half a billion dollars invested in Aboriginal housing in the territory (during eight years under Macklin and Scullion) had been eaten up by "administration". That's 40 per cent of the \$1.3 billion spent in the NT under the national partnership agreement on remote Indigenous housing, signed in 2008. Giles was with Scullion at Uluru on May 9, while a joint Commonwealth-NT plan to top up the "investment" was being announced for electoral purposes.

Most of the apparent "administration", or slippage, seems to have been at the hands of that special expertise that NT governments, of whatever stripe, can inject into service delivery to Aborigines. As the acting Commonwealth ombudsman remarked in 2012, federal control of, or accountability for, such money more or less disappears once it falls into the bottomless NT maw. In theory, the Commonwealth has "embedded" officers in the various retitlings of the programs, and there was supposedly joint management, but it seemed to have little effect.

The Australian National Audit Office, which these days mostly seems to confine itself to harmless desk audits, seems never to pry too deeply, or hurtfully, into actual outcomes of such significant national Indigenous programs. Its November 2011 report on implementing the program glossed over appalling results in its efforts to be "positive". Australians deserve a review of the ANAO's own performance in monitoring such matters.

(The Ombudsman's office was rewarded for its interest in poor bureaucratic performance in delivering houses by being stripped of special funds for dealing with Aboriginal complaints on such matters.)

But I wouldn't get too passionate about blaming folk in Darwin alone, given the record of federal ministers and bureaucrats with the earlier strategic Indigenous housing and infrastructure program, which ended up being folded into the national partnership agreement. It spent \$100 million on "advice" before it built its first inadequate house. Most of this went to well-connected, non-Aboriginal businesses.

Nothing arrived at, or rotated around, an Aboriginal community.

That five- and 10-year programs are reorganised, retitled, and given new functions and reporting systems nearly every year serves to prevent accountability and the allocation of responsibility. I can't think of a senior Commonwealth executive ever

held to account for outcomes, or lack of them, in Indigenous affairs. If programs or policies fail, it must be Aborigines' fault.

Six years ago, I wrote this about the 2010 Indigenous affairs budget: "Page 27 of the separate budget paper, authored by [then] Indigenous affairs minister Jenny Macklin ... tells what she and her 4300-strong department are doing to 'close the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. 'In the NT,' it says, 'at the end of April 2010, the construction of over 80 new houses was under way, with seven completed'.

"Seven houses - that's not bad for 3 years work and expenditure in the hundreds of millions. At that rate, the gap will be closed in about 7000 years. It's good to see Labor on the job.

"A paragraph later, Macklin remarks that a recent review of the program had shown that everything was on track. This is a measure of her complacency about the worsening disaster over which she presides.

"Macklin and the department frequently redefine what they are pretending to be doing, or use weasel words and vagueness.

The minister adopts anecdotal reassurances to contradict evidence.

"This time 10 months ago ... newspapers were insisting that tens of millions had been squandered on planning to build houses, on talking about building houses, on consulting about building houses and liaising with each other about it. No actual houses, as such, had been built. This was hotly denied by the minister and the department, who used houses completed under other programs, redefinitions, hopes, expectations, plans, targets, timetables, anecdotes and blah, to insist that all was well.

"Delay occasioned by resistance to FOI requests ... made it even harder to find the facts, as did the ultimate production of documents, which, if amounting to the department and minister's sum of knowledge on the matter, might account for her confusion. At that stage, one might have said that nothing had been finished, but much was on the way. A year later, we learn that 'much' is not much ...

"Macklin remarks that the strategic Indigenous housing and infrastructure program will deliver 750 new houses by 2013. It is supposed to effectively demolish and rebuild another 230 and do extensive refurbishments to 2500 others. Two construction companies, known as alliances, are then to show the recipients how a clever government agency can organise things.

"About one in every three people on the gravy train is black and, by my guess, these people would get about 10 per cent of the bonanza provided, via the department's management processes, to the alliance.

"From time to time, COAG, or the federal government, will talk about the money spent as though the supposed recipients received it personally, and personally wasted it. At last guess, the program was budgeting about \$800,000 per ramshackle and environmentally unsuitable dwelling worth; were it at Forbes in NSW, or Echuca in Victoria, about \$100,000."

Nothing much ever changes when the task of improving Aborigines' lives is seen from the desk of a minister or helping white professional. No doubt both parties, and the Australian Public Service, and the private sector, really intends to make a difference this time. But Turnbull and Shorten have no appetite to make history in this field. Indeed, they could probably achieve more, even with some awful temporary anomalies, simply by dividing up among the recipients all the money presently going to public servants and private contractors. If the lucky people let go lack the agility to innovate themselves, they could, perhaps, be employed on the South Australian submarine project.

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