

White Australia can't solve black problems. White Australia is the problem

In an extract from her book, Sarah Maddison argues that the Australian democratic ideal does little to improve Indigenous lives

Sarah Maddison

7 Apr 2019



Things are getting worse, not better for most Indigenous Australians, and 2017 was “particularly dismal” for Indigenous peoples’ rights.

The relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and the rest of Australia is broken.

The system is not working. It has never worked for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Yet despite incontrovertible evidence of failure, the nation persists in governing the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in ways that are damaging and harmful, firm in its belief that with the right policy approach, the right funding arrangements, the right set of sanctions and incentives, Indigenous lives will somehow improve.

This is what I call the colonial fantasy.

At the heart of the colonial fantasy lies the belief that colonialism is already over, ended perhaps at federation, or with the 1967 referendum, or perhaps the 2008 apology – but definitely over now. What reveals this as fantasy is the survival and resistance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, a constant reminder of the fact that settler society has been imposed on Indigenous lives and territories.

Indigenous people see the anxiety this causes for non-Indigenous people, as Waanyi and Jaru medical anthropologist Gregory Phillips points out, “White Australia’s biggest fear and justification for denying Aboriginal prior ownership and brilliance is not only because they are jealous of it, and cannot comprehend it, but because they fear this land won’t ever be their true spiritual home – that we might tell them to go back to Europe.”

Progressive Australians – those who seek to reform and improve society rather than protecting the status quo – desperately want their position as an occupying power to be resolved. One way to achieve this would be to have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people enjoy the status and quality of life enjoyed by most Australians.

Like many others, I have spent years believing that with the right attitudes and policies Indigenous people might one day accept us as colleagues, allies, friends and family, with a legitimate place on their land. Like many others, I believed that Australian democracy was fundamentally benign and benevolent, and that the problem lay with ideological approaches and policy settings that could be contested and corrected as part of the normal business of electoral politics. I bolstered this belief with the view that once the policy settings were right, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples would be able to thrive as equal citizens with other Australians.

This set of beliefs blinds us to the obvious lack of evidence for this position. Or more accurately, perhaps, what blinds us is that part of the colonial fantasy that believes colonialism is almost complete, that the coloniser will (one day soon!) cease to be an invading force and that all peoples living on these stolen territories will share in the nation’s riches and rewards.

There is an Aboriginal children crisis which would be on the front pages if they were white

However, seemingly progressive policies, which produce moments of hope – the 1967 referendum, the Mabo court case on land rights in 1992, the bridge walks in 2000, prime minister Kevin Rudd's 2008 apology to the Stolen Generations – do little to change the relationship or transform Indigenous lives. Although each of these initiatives was a genuine expression of the hope felt by progressive Australians that the relationship between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and others in Australia might be improved, this hope is always trounced by the underlying desire for colonialism itself to be completed. Something far more radical is required.

Things are getting worse, not better. The age-old Western belief in the inexhaustible march towards progress leads many to assume that we are making progress on Indigenous poverty and disadvantage, child removal, dispossession and recognition. And yet, 2017 (the 50th anniversary of the 1967 referendum), was, in fact, a year that the Australian director of Human Rights Watch, Elaine Pearson, described as “particularly dismal” for Indigenous peoples' rights.

That there is deep pain and much suffering in many Indigenous communities in Australia goes almost without saying. The successes of a burgeoning Indigenous middle class do not obscure the fact that for the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, government policies and programs have made little positive difference to their quality of life. Over many decades, Australian government policies in the Indigenous affairs domain have been marked by two things: constant churn and reinvention; and constant resistance to the one thing that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people want, indeed the one thing that has made a difference elsewhere – the ability to control and manage their own lives.

One of the great fantasies of colonialism, still alive in the Indigenous affairs bureaucracies of the world, is the idea that ‘we know what’s best for you’. But we don’t. **Stephen Cornell**

Bunuba woman and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social justice commissioner, June Oscar makes this point, “Since the arrival of the British on our shores in 1788, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have consistently called for greater control over our destinies, for the ability to live freely and equally, and for greater recognition of our rights as the First Peoples of this land. This has remained an unresolved source of pain for our people. Today, nearly 230 years later, too many of our peoples are still not able to feel at home in the place we call our own ... So long as we fail to address this question as a nation, so long as we suppress the desires of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people for a greater say – the policies, the programs directed at us will flounder.”

International evidence confirms that Indigenous communities begin their revival at the point where they acquire the sort of territorial autonomy that enables them to control their own affairs in areas such as health, education and economic development. Evidence gathered over decades by the Native Nations Institute at the University of Arizona and the Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development is now incontrovertible. While the process of rebuilding Native Nations in the US has been slow and uneven, where these nations have regained genuine control over the systems that matter most in their lives – particularly health, education, and law and justice – a steady turnaround in both economic development and community wellbeing is evident.

Stephen Cornell from the Native Nations Institute argues that in the United States, self-determination has been the only overarching policy that has shown “sustained evidence of actually improving the condition of Native peoples”, precisely because self-determination has put “substantive decision-making power in Aboriginal hands”.

Drawing on decades of research on the resurgence and success of Native Nations, he argues that three important things happen when Indigenous peoples gain power over their own affairs. “First, bureaucratic priorities are replaced by Indigenous priorities, thereby gaining Indigenous support for initiatives and programs. Second, decisions begin to reflect local knowledge and concerns. One of the great fantasies of colonialism, still alive in the Indigenous affairs bureaucracies of the world, is the idea that ‘we know what’s best for you’. But we don’t. And the third thing that happens is

that decisions get linked to consequences. When Indigenous peoples themselves are in charge, they pay the price for bad decisions and reap the rewards of good ones. Jurisdiction, in other words, creates accountability.”

In Australia, however, Indigenous affairs policy has gone in exactly the opposite direction, continuing to exert ever more heavy-handed controls over Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people and communities despite all evidence that this approach is failing miserably.

At the same time, many First Nations in Australia are taking back control, turning away from the state as a solution to their challenges and doing more and more for themselves. Look at the Yawuru in Broome, the Ngarrindjeri in South Australia, the Yorta Yorta in Victoria. The successes of rebuilding Indigenous nations are becoming evident here as well, and yet Australian governments resist supporting these successes at every turn.

The endless renovation and relentless paternalism of Australian Indigenous policy has always been justified as a response to the so-called “Aboriginal problem”, which – it was assumed – could only be solved by the exercise of settler colonial authority.

In a lecture in 2000, Yawuru man, and now federal senator, Patrick Dodson argued that for all governments, at all stages in Australia’s post-invasion history, policy has been about “their solutions to us as the problem”: “The problem of our being here. The problem of our disposal! The problem of our assimilation! And the problem of having us appreciative of all that governments have done ‘for our own good’.”

There can be little doubt that Australia does indeed have a problem with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Judging by the heat and volume of public debate, the endless moral panic, and the constant readjustment to policy settings, it is a very big problem indeed. But the problem Australia thinks it has is not the real problem at all.

This is an edited extract from The Colonial Fantasy by Sarah Maddison

