

Australia needs you

By Noel Pearson

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Aboriginal affairs has unexpectedly become an issue in the lead-up to the federal election because of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission crisis.

Most voters have negative opinions about Aboriginal affairs. The Coalition and the ALP know that to get a political advantage (or avoid being vulnerable) in this policy area, they need to be associated with a negative message.

The federal ALP recently became the first party to commit to abolishing ATSIC. Because of the negative electoral logic that prevails in Aboriginal issues, the Coalition is forced to respond with policies that convey a negative message about Aboriginal affairs.

Hence the Government has ruled out any kind of indigenous representative body to replace ATSIC. Furthermore, according to media reports, the Government might transfer every federal Aboriginal programme from ATSIC and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services, set up by the Government to avoid any potential ATSIC conflicts of interest in spending, to mainstream federal departments in the May Budget.

The view is gaining ground in public opinion that every kind of Aboriginal representation or Aboriginal executive responsibility for public programmes is inherently detrimental for Aboriginal people. The ALP realises that it must hide dissent from this view behind the headline-grabbing “abolish ATSIC”.

In the debate about the future of Aboriginal affairs there are three themes: regionalisation, mainstreaming of services, and encouraging Aboriginal people to adopt suburban and urban lifestyles and become socially and economically integrated or assimilated. I have been credited as one of the main champions of the concept of regionalising ATSIC. However, I am not without my doubts about this policy. Regions are part of the solution, but there must be a national role. Many of the regions lack capacity and there is no reason to believe that the problems experienced at the national level with ATSIC would not be transferred to the regional level.

Mainstreaming is also uncritically promoted as a solution to the crisis. Most services to Aboriginal people are already mainstreamed – education has always been a mainstream responsibility, as has been health since 1995 – and our experience shows that state and federal bureaucracies do not have the solutions.

Finally, a large-scale, government-led Aboriginal exodus from remote and small-town Australia is politically, practically, legally and culturally absurd. Aboriginal people cannot be (again) dispersed.

The political parties must stop taking the voters' lack of interest in, or antipathy to, Aboriginal affairs as their unstated tactical starting point. Instead of the election-driven, negative attitudes to indigenous affairs and the insufficient reform suggestions presented so far, we need a positive political programme.

First, the service-delivery perspective on Aboriginal affairs must be replaced by a social enterprise perspective. In Cape York Peninsula we have established a multitude of relationships with non-government organisations and the private sector. During the past four years, the idealism, altruism, flexibility and competence that big businesses such as Westpac and the Boston Consulting Group have contributed to our partnerships have been vital to our promising economic and social efforts.

Second, we need to realise that the most important underlying assumption of the reconciliation movement is wrong. Policies based on acknowledgment of, and compensation for, the past and recognition of Aboriginal rights are justified, but they do not in themselves lead to social improvement. I have always been fighting for recognition of land rights, but the strategically most important task is that Aboriginal people form a strong movement for the restoration of social and cultural order.

Aboriginal people should not give up the so-called rights agenda and there is a place for symbolic reconciliation. However, Aboriginal people must abandon the leftist notion that social dysfunction is maintained by our history of dispossession. Dysfunction, violence and substance abuse can be defeated only by conscious promotion of personal and collective responsibility.

Third, on the basis of restored social functionality, we must create a demand for the best available primary education for our children. Our experiences in Cape York Peninsula show that educational improvement will not be driven by the Government's formal goals to improve Aboriginal education; it is driven by parental and community demand.

Fourth, we need to encourage geographic mobility among people in remote and regional areas, leading to secondary and tertiary education, other training and working careers in urban areas. Aboriginal social and economic integration is necessary, but the best way to achieve it is to give young people the security of socially functional homelands to which they can return for longer or shorter periods and make a contribution. This is not an assimilationist programme. Complete command of English and knowledge of European culture can be combined with an Aboriginal cultural identity.

These policy suggestions are general goals. The concrete action that should be taken is to replace ATSIC with a governance structure that facilitates the creation of an intellectually and politically strong national Aboriginal leadership.

There are Aboriginal people who could take up a national leadership role. These people have mostly not stood for the ATSIC elections. We must therefore adopt a different structure that recruits all the potential national leaders in one sweep.

We need a structure that would have attracted people such as Northern Territory MPs John Ah Kit and Marion Scrymgour and NSW MP Linda Burney to get involved. These leaders are contributing as mainstream parliamentarians, but there are other indigenous people of similar high calibre who need to be asked to take up strategic leadership on behalf of their people.

The ATSIC representative system was flawed because the only elections were local elections. Local Aboriginal politicians whose competence and narrow support bases made them more suitable for a regional role essentially elevated each other (after power struggles and deals) up to the highest offices of ATSIC.

To create an efficient national leadership with a strong mandate from the communities, we must separate the election of regional representatives from the election of national leaders. I suggest that an assembly of all Aboriginal regional councillors directly elect a person who is not a regional councillor to be chairperson of a national executive that replaces the ATSIC board. The chairperson then appoints others who are not regional councillors to be members of the national executive. This executive should have executive responsibilities over programmes and not be a token advisory body.

This mechanism would create a national executive that would earn the respect of the public and governments. It would have the competence to develop national policy guidelines for implementation through regions such as our own in Cape York Peninsula, and the executive would be responsible for some national programmes in support of struggling communities.

We would love to be assisted in our work in Cape York Peninsula by someone such as Scrymgour working as the national executive member responsible for health – she has the administrative competence, she has the policy capacity. Or someone such as academic Marcia Langton taking national executive responsibility for education. Or someone such as Tiga Bayles (the man behind Brisbane's 4AAA FM radio station) taking responsibility for communications. Or Kimberley leader Peter Yu taking responsibility for economic development. These people are as competent as ministers; why would you limit them to an advisory function?

The developments in Aboriginal affairs in recent years have led to a strengthening of the conservative doubts about the value of indigenous representation and indigenous programmes. The Right sees reconciliation as a matter of providing good government services that will enable Aboriginal individuals to become integrated into the economy.

It is right that there is no replacement for individual achievement in Aboriginal advancement. But most Aboriginal people strongly identify with communities. Aboriginal communities struggle with seemingly insurmountable problems. In this struggle they need support from a competent, respected Aboriginal leadership that is perceived to have legitimacy and a democratic mandate.

Aboriginal people across the country must set aside differences and agree on a plan for

filling the vacuum in Aboriginal affairs with a credible leadership.

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