



Shift in the right direction

Chris Evans has grasped the nettle on the indigenous welfare debate. It was only to be expected that he would be denounced for his pains by Labor's old guard

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ON August 12, 2000, Noel Pearson gave the annual Light on the Hill address in honour of Ben Chifley. It was a cold wet night in Bathurst and I was the only representative of the national press there to cover the event. Pearson used the occasion to launch a sustained critique of "the poisoned flour of welfare".

"Aboriginal society is in a terrible state of dysfunction," he told us. "Our social life has declined even as our outward, material situation has improved. The effects of passive welfare have grown worse." Labor's indigenous policy was shackled by political correctness to the point where "progressive thinking has become a distraction from the real problems". The real problems, he said, were the appalling rates of violent crime, murder, suicide and alcohol addiction in isolated rural settlements. Social welfare's solution of "more of the same" only compounded them. Worst of all was the exclusion of Aboriginal people from the real economy, the world of work and the possibility of self-betterment.

I was a guest of the Chifley family, who were impressed with the lecture and thought that "Uncle Ben would have approved". Local Labor parliamentarians just looked uncomfortable, as most of them have done ever since when confronted with Pearson's critique. It has taken six years and a lot of patient work by him and by the likes of Warren Mundine, now national president of the ALP, to turn things around.

But at last, on March 10, in an address to the John Curtin Institute, senator Chris Evans, the Opposition spokesman for indigenous affairs, signalled a key change in Labor's approach. The speech was entitled *The End of Ideology in Aboriginal Affairs*. It was almost drowned out by the hue and cry over internal ructions, which is a pity because it deserves closer scrutiny.

It would have been a better speech if he had not begun it with the usual lip-service "acknowledging and paying my respects to the traditional Nyoongar owners of this land". But, like the formulaic attacks on the Howard Government with which it was inevitably laced, these pieties could be forgiven for the sake of what was new and interesting in what he had to say.

"Both major parties have pursued their ideological convictions in indigenous policy to the detriment of indigenous Australians. Both Labor and the Coalition must be held to account. The clash of our political ideologies has dominated the debate,

distracting focus from our respective policy failings in addressing indigenous disadvantage.

"The bitter and protracted arguments over the history of Aboriginal experience of white man's colonisation has done nothing to assist one Aboriginal child beat trachoma or prevent one Aboriginal adult from dying many years before their time."

As a minor player in the history wars that Evans is deploring here, I think it should be pointed out that arguments about the colonial past exist in their own right as a necessary debate. They don't impinge in any way on campaigns to alleviate trachoma - a cause all the combatants would doubtless support - and to suggest otherwise, or that we should have one debate and not the other, is fatuous.

Evans's critique of the Howard decade, in the overall history of the past 23 years which he sees as largely wasted, is also predictable and rather mean-spirited, which is a pity coming from somebody who says he's interested in moving beyond ideological axe-grinding. Even so, reading the speech you get the sneaking suspicion that he's attacking the other side mostly so as to provide cover for the sterner things he has to say about his own.

"For too long the political process has acted as a brake on progress. Both sides of politics have looked to [minimise] the political risks they take in the management of indigenous affairs by downplaying expectations and refusing to take responsibility for results. Neither Labor nor the Coalition occupies the high moral ground. Neither side can take comfort in the evidence of their performance.

"Both sides have to look beyond our ideology and look to how we can move forward. For Labor that means abandoning our sense of misplaced moral superiority; acknowledging that the rights agenda is only part of the solution; accepting that confronting problems plague many indigenous communities; and becoming more focused on outcomes ...

"A useful place to start is to acknowledge the common ground. Both the Coalition and Labor believe indigenous people should have as much opportunity to share in the benefits of Australia as every other citizen. We all want to see a fair chance in life for indigenous children. Neither side of politics has a monopoly on compassion. We can, and we should, have a passionate and vigorous debate about the way we can achieve change. But we will better be able to do so if we work from a position [that] acknowledges the common aspirations we share."

That juncture in the speech would have been a perfect opportunity for Evans to pay tribute to the pioneering work of John Herron, a minister whom the Labor Party has often vilified and whose achievements it has consistently trivialised. It was Herron who begged the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission - and eventually bullied it - into spending the first few thousand dollars on long-overdue research into domestic violence in isolated communities. ATSIC thought it was a right-wing conspiracy and found it extremely politically inconvenient to acknowledge that there was a problem. But at this distance there can be no doubt that his timely intervention saved lives and that it was a mould-breaking kind of practical politics.

Herron was also among the first to encourage Pearson to speak out about dysfunctional communities.

If recognising Herron's achievements is still too much to expect, at least Evans acknowledges that "Noel Pearson's contributions on economic development, welfare dependency and individual responsibility have fundamentally shifted the indigenous debate. His contributions have been more powerful because they are made by an articulate and passionate indigenous person. His ideas have strongly influenced the federal Government, which has used them to justify their approach when it suits them. His approach and new 'get tough' language have invoked considerable criticism and unease from many indigenous people.

"The truth is, his agenda pushes the debate to issues where many of us are not comfortable to go. His language has been chosen to win conservative support, but he does confront real and raw issues that challenge us all. Many on the Left of politics have failed to respond, in part because it takes them into the territory of very difficult and negative aspects of indigenous life.

"What is even more worrying is that many indigenous leaders seem reluctant to publicly engage, in part because of their nervousness about the media treatment of Noel's critics."

It may well be that media enthusiasm for Pearson's analysis has led to people who disagree with him being cowed into silence. If so, Evans is right to make the point because Pearson prefers conversations to monologues and doesn't pretend he has all the answers. Evans has grasped the nettle on the welfare debate and says it's "one area where Labor must engage more and adopt a less ideological stance".

It was only to be expected that he would be denounced for his pains by Labor's old guard. Gerry Hand, who was the minister for Aboriginal affairs from 1987 to 1990, said that Evans's proposed shift to pragmatic policy was "ill-conceived and stupid". He also dismissed the speech as "totally lacking in any appreciation of the issues confronting Aboriginal Australia".

Mundine begged to differ. He said Labor's indigenous policy "had started out well but had lost the plot a little bit. It's a tremendous shift, a seismic shift, and I have to take my hat off to him".

At least one of Evans's criticisms of the Coalition struck me as quite telling. He said: "Personally, I struggle to see how removing an individual's welfare benefits helps them to overcome the alcohol, drug or petrol addiction that drives their behaviour."

It would be interesting to hear what Amanda Vanstone at her frank best had to offer in reply. Evans obviously thinks so too and says he's open-minded on that score. "I am willing to debate these issues. When we have this debate it should not be in a politically charged atmosphere. Labor has to do better than a knee-jerk response that labels political opponents as racist and paternalistic."

A return to the days when Aboriginal affairs policy was largely a matter of bipartisan consensus may be too much to hope for. But Evans's speech is a step in the right

direction and a welcome sign of his party's capacity for renewal.