

Ordinary racists in power

By Michael Mansell

I too have a dream: that one day we Aboriginal people will be in full control of our lives and our destiny. Instead of inappropriately advising inadequate politicians about our needs, we will have our own government, put in place by our people and only removable by our people.

An Aboriginal government!

I look forward to the day our communities will be protected by our own political arrangements that represents our needs and interests. We want an economic policy that encourages the practice of Aboriginal culture, especially the unique lifestyles, instead of condemning them. Our culture provides us with a sense of self: of identity as a people, and our lands. It is a cultural heritage unique to indigenous peoples, one that here in Australia is seen by some politicians as an impediment rather than a positive basis for an Aboriginal future. We can be a vibrant and prosperous people if we maintain our culture, but impossible without it.

Our future looks grim while white politicians make decisions for us.

The use of the army, police and civil servants in Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory makes a mockery of Australia's claim to be a fair and democratic country. How many citizens expect the army to be used against them? Laws passed to compulsorily acquire the land of Aborigines in the Territory, and monies spent according to government dictate were so blatantly racist that the Racial Discrimination Act had to be suspended.

The threat by Prime Minister Howard to force every Aboriginal child in the Territory to have anal and vaginal medical examinations was designed to paint a picture in the minds of the white electorate that every Aboriginal child had been molested by just about every Aboriginal man. Howard gained by being seen as a caring leader by taking advantage of the lack of information white Australians had. His manipulation of the political scene treated Aborigines in the Territory as being politically expedient. While Howard's tactic backfired electorally, Aboriginal people were left with the fallout.

Now the very existence of remote Aboriginal communities is threatened on the pretext that black communities are "not viable"; the children are said to be deprived of an education (meaning a white education), or there are no jobs.

The emphasis on jobs and education deflects the demand for compensation dispossession. Vested interests encourage us to ignore the stolen lands question by emphasising, over and over again, that labouring jobs offered by those who use our lands are our salvation. As a matter of mathematics alone, the billions in compensation would far outweigh the total sum of wage payments and provide a much more solid economic base than paid work.

We have seen that the rainforests, fisheries and endangered species have been the victims of the "jobs" mentality. The word "job" has taken on a force of its own, given more prominence than the cost to communities of having to move for work.

Our economy should not be entirely dependent on paid work. Heck, why should we be the labourers for the big companies that pay no access or royalties to us for the billions they make from our lands? And be punished by the government if we refuse!

Sure we must provide a European style education to our children and the many who want to participate in a western cash economy- if only to provide options for our people. This should be alongside, not instead of, an appropriate Aboriginal based curriculum. That gives our people the choice we do not have now: choice of dual languages, moving into the Australian economy and way of life, or contributing to the upkeep and maintenance of Aboriginal communities.

It is not imperative to work for a living as the pseudo Lutheran preacher claims. There is a lot more at stake than a job- we need our lands returned, and with them the authority usurped by the white Australian nation. Be part of that nation? Why can't we have our own? Be assimilated on their terms, or strike a treaty that resolves the land and power questions, and clarifies the terms of the relationship between Aboriginal people and Australia?

We need to recognise the full value of Aboriginal culture as a living mechanism for guiding Aboriginal youth in a difficult world. The fabric of any complex society is made up of political, economic and legal structures that derive from, but also shape the values of, the society they administer. The importance of the social and cultural values that help underpin society is not measured in purely economic terms- or put another way, by insisting everyone has a paid job. White Australian society is not just based on jobs, so why should ours be? Where would we be without our cultural leaders and spiritual heroes; the artists like Namatjira; the poets like Oodgeroo Noonuccal; the Elders, and the Aboriginal flag?

Just as oil is forms the foundation for the economies of middle-east countries, so too can compensation for us. That income can be used to generate a second economy, focusing on health and welfare needs along with the broader cultural and developmental aspirations of the Aboriginal nation. We need a vision, strategies to achieve it, giving people encouragement against despair, hope against hopelessness?

We are, of course, a long way from being in such a position. After being savaged for 11 long years by the Howard government most Aborigines believed the election of the Rudd government would be a welcome relief. How wrong we were.

The tying of grants to school attendance; compulsory medical examinations of all Aboriginal children in the NT; compulsory acquisition of lands; closing the CDEP program; disbanding national Aboriginal representation and replacing it with hand picked advisers, and forcing Aboriginal service providers to compete on the open market, were hallmarks of the Howard years. The John Howard ideology of forced assimilation was the cornerstone for these policies.

At the National press Club address on January 25th 2006, Mr Howard described what he saw as the superiority of the cultural and political imperatives of his race:

“Most nations experience some level of cultural diversity while also having a dominant cultural pattern running through them. In Australia’s case, that dominant pattern comprises Judeo-Christian ethics, the progressive spirit of the Enlightenment and the institutions and values of British political culture.”

Neither Kevin Rudd, nor his Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Jenny Macklin, ever articulated an endorsement of Howard's ideology, but they certainly follow and apply that ideology.

Successive federal government attacks on Aboriginal people appear to rely on Noel Pearson's adoption of the right wing American stance that there must be a price to pay for receiving welfare. Direct them how to spend, otherwise take the money from them and pool it. Using Centrelink to force Aborigines to adopt white ways is no longer to be seen as racist but politically acceptable.

Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Jenny Macklin announced her latest scheme to take money from poor blacks when she said "*...it will certainly apply to all of those families in the Northern Territory who are already being income managed.*"¹ She added:

*"The problem with the previous government is that they made a lot of noise about wanting to introduce a system of income management for those parents whose children are in the child protection system"*². The fact that most of the 9,000 Aboriginals whose income was compulsorily managed did not have children in the child protection system did not deter the Minister from promoting the impression that there was widespread abuse and corruption among Aborigines in the Territory: *"This debit card will prevent people from swapping cards for cash and make sure money is not spent on prohibited items such as drugs, alcohol and pornography. We are determined to stamp out the use of welfare payments on things that will hurt children."*³

Without providing any evidence to back up her slanderous claims, Minister Macklin explained why only Aborigines had been targeted by declaring *"most parents love their kids, do a good job for their kids. We have to make sure that payments are spent in the interests of children"*⁴. The Minister was implying that Aborigines subjected to compulsory welfare management did not love their children.

A policy of encouraging cultural diversity should require government support for Aboriginal communities. The future of Aboriginal communities must not depend on some obscure ideology based on assumptions of racial superiority.

Hard fought for land rights are now threatened by successive federal governments that compulsorily convert ownership rights to the more fragile lease arrangements. This abuse of power by politicians, made all the worse because they have no accountability to the very people they seek to dominate, is a reminder that money corrupts, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.

¹ 9/5/08 www.fahcsia.gov.au/internet/jennymacklin.nsf/content/welfare_debit_card_9may08.htm

² ibid

³ Australian Online, www.theaustralian.news.com.au/story/0,25197,23668892-601,00.html May 9th 2008

⁴ Statement made in Melbourne 9/5/08, op cit

“That which I am unable to do as a man, and of which therefore all my individual essential powers are incapable, I am able to do by means of money.”⁵

The Review of the Northern Territory intervention conducted by Peter Yu, Marcia Ella Duncan and Bill Gray, while calling for changes to the intervention still endorsed the intervention itself. You can't have it both ways. The Report was opposed to the interventions racial targeting. However, the Report effectively gave the federal government a green light to continue with, and extend more federal interference over Aboriginal people, by agreeing that school attendance and “other relevant behavioural triggers” justify the federal action.

This does not make sense. The Report's finding that racial discrimination is offensive must mean the targeting of Aboriginal people is equally offensive. Not just because of race, but also because of our weak position against the powerful. If we were not weak and politically powerless it would not make a difference what race we belonged to- the government would be reluctant to act against us, especially acquiring a person's income and humiliating people.

The report is stated to oppose government action without community consent but calls for more policing of Aboriginal communities. This is a stark contradiction. The Report also took a short-term view of the whole race issue by not setting out some fundamental human rights that could guide government action against Aboriginal people. The authors were undoubtedly concerned about the undermining of the human dignity of Aboriginal people, but you have to say it clearly if it is a strongly held view.

The Report was silent on how to allow political authority to vest in communities rather than with outsiders in order to help the people help themselves. Disappointingly, the Report confined itself to merely watering down Macklin's plans.

Predictably, Marcia Langton and Warren Mundine believed the whole thrust of the intervention should be imposed on Aboriginal people.

Politicians can avoid scrutiny of their failings so long as the focus is on whether Aboriginal people are good or bad people. The right wing media have had a field day. In the meantime there are no discernible advantages from the over-the-top actions by successive federal government in the NT. And for all the millions being given to Cape York for people to be managed there is not a shred of evidence showing people are better off.

If we are to be in charge of ourselves and put some dignity back into communities, people like Jenny Macklin must be removed. At the time of writing, the good news is that the Rudd government are a bit on the nose electorally. Here's hoping.

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⁵ Karl Marx, *The Power of Money*, Progress Publishers, Moscow 1959;
www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/power.htm