

Crossed purposes: the Pintupi and Australia's Indigenous policy, by Ralph Folds, 190pp, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney 2001 \$37.95

The 'policy of assimilation' adopted by governments in the 1950s has had such a bad press in the past 40 years that some find it unthinkable that contemporary, enlightened policies and practices could have anything in common with that discredited approach.

But Ralph Folds, the author of this book, argues that 'western ideals for indigenous peoples have never really changed':

Under the assimilation policy governments demanded that virtually everything about indigenous people change, without looking too closely at how this would affect the societies they were so keen to manipulate. No one thought that this would be possible without creating massive social transformation in the societies they were 'helping'. Under current policy it is assumed that the same differences will be voluntarily eliminated by indigenous Australians themselves while at the same time those involved deny that this is orchestrating cultural change (p 116).

Folds believes that the Pintupi at Walungurru (Kintore) and elsewhere are 'strong, self-confident people', 'a society of fiercely independent individuals leading sustaining lives', but that their basic values and codes of behaviour are such that they find themselves 'in sharp disjuncture at every turn with the assumptions of indigenous policy' and the programs that are 'aimed at banishing disadvantage' (pp 2–4).

When he wrote this examination of how government policies and programs work in the Walungurru community, Folds had been there for 12 years as the principal of the school — surely a record term for a teacher in a Western Desert community. His account of how Pintupi society works and of how the Pintupi see government's duty towards them relies heavily on Fred Myers' ethnographic work; his own experiences provide him with many illustrations of the ways in which programs intended to improve life for the Pintupi come up against Pintupi imperatives and fail to produce their expected results.

Folds begins with a chapter on the 'contact history' of the Pintupi, a mix of information taken from written sources and from stories told by Pintupi informants. This history is relevant to Folds' themes as far as it helps to explain the Pintupi position that, as Myers puts it, they 'were prepared to accept the government's willingness to "look after" them — its food, clothing, and services — as long as it did not seriously abrogate their own values'.¹ This Pintupi conviction that they have a 'social contract' with government and their cheerful acceptance of 'dependency' are underlying themes of the book as Folds discusses how the Pintupi and government have been managing a relationship 'of mutually outraged sensibilities' (p 181).

Myers and others have published fuller, more accurate, and more balanced accounts of the early period of contact.² Folds has relied heavily on a 1977 report on the Papunya settlement and sources even more colourful and less reliable, such as John Greenway.³ He gives no references for some misleading statements, like his mention of 'the intense fighting that went on at Haasts Bluff'⁴ and his imaginative story of how the welfare branch patrols were conducted in the 1950s and 1960s.⁵ Blending Pintupi

1. Myers 1986: 39.

2. Myers 1986: 25–46; also Long 1989.

3. Davis et al. 1977; Greenway 1973. Folds has apparently relied on the 1977 report for the statement that 'of the 72 new arrivals from the desert [during 1963–64], 29 were dead by August 1964, a staggering death rate of 40 per cent in the year'. The records show that 87 arrived between July 1963 and August 1964 and eight of these had died by August 1964 — a distressing figure but nearer 9% than 40%.

4. Sister Gartrell's stories of her eight months working at Haasts Bluff in 1955 may be the basis of Folds' view that fighting there was 'intense' (see Gartrell 1957).

stories of their early encounters with whites into the narrative presents serious challenges and Folds gets himself into chronological difficulties with his account of the experiences of the man, Katingura, whose handsome portrait photograph is on the cover of the book. The documentary record shows that Katingura was among the Pintupi seen by the Adelaide University expedition at Mount Liebig in August 1932 and that he was one of those listed as 'self-supporting' at the Haasts Bluff ration depot in October 1942. But Folds writes that this man, before he had 'seen a white man', came upon strange tracks and heard graders building a road 'for the rocket range across the Western Australian border' (p 13). This event occurred in the winter of 1960, some 30 years after Katingura had first seen white people and after he had lived at Haasts Bluff and Papunya for nearly 20 years. It must have been someone else who encountered the road-building party.

Folds' rather confused account of the early years of contact may well reflect what some people at Walungurru now believe happened then, but it leaves out important aspects of the experience of the 'old Pintupi' — those who 'came in' before 1960. He gives the impression that the Hermannsburg mission project was an entirely secular one, concerned only to help the people survive by providing supplementary rations to induce them to keep away from cattle stations and from Alice Springs. But Pastor FW Albrecht and the Aboriginal evangelists, who mediated contact on his behalf, came with a primary evangelical purpose and were trying to persuade people to abandon their pagan beliefs and rituals. Folds also says nothing of what happened at Haasts Bluff in the 1950s when the Northern Territory administration assumed full management responsibility for the ration depot that the mission had run (at administration expense) for the first ten years. By the mid-1950s work was available for the able-bodied men for a small cash wage and rations (then including fresh beef and goat meat) — cattle work, fencing and yard-building, making roads, market gardening and, in the later years, the construction of Papunya. But, as Folds tells the story, working for wages started with the move to Papunya, a move that he portrays as sudden, traumatic, and even irrational, since he does not mention that it was the failure of the water supply at Haasts Bluff in both quality and quantity that forced the move to the abundant good water available at the Papunya bore north of the range.⁶

The rest of the book deals with 'the contemporary interface' at Walungurru. Folds gives examples of how Pintupi seek to 'maintain their chosen lifeways', while making the best use they can of the services provided there by what he terms 'western institutions'. Governments, and the public at large, would like to see expenditure on Aboriginal advancement produce visible and measurable improvements in levels of health, housing and education, so that disadvantage will be quickly reduced and eliminated before long. Folds argues convincingly that this 'social justice' project is unrealistic for Walungurru because Pintupi values are profoundly different from ours.

5. 'After seeing the smoke of hunting fires and following footprints, patrol officers would hide their Land Rover on one side of a sandhill while their Pintupi companions walked around to the other side to their relatives, telling them about the food and inviting them to join them at the settlement' (p 20).

6. Folds quotes a letter written by Albrecht in 1945 commenting on the administration's plans for developing Haasts Bluff but represents his remarks as referring to the plans for Papunya, which was not conceived until another 10 years had passed (p 17, citing Henson 1992: 171).

Though they have been constantly adapting to changed conditions, they are unable and unwilling to change their basic values rapidly and radically.

A central proposition of the book is that community 'self-management' is fundamentally in conflict with Pintupi values. 'Self-determination' and 'self-management' have commonly been treated as equivalent terms as used in relation to Aboriginal affairs. 'Self-management' was the term used by those drafting policies for the Coalition parties in 1975 as a substitute for the Labor slogan of 'self-determination', which seemed to imply some possible challenge to sovereignty. Folds, however, without offering his definitions, states that they are 'oppositional goals'. It seems that for him 'real self-determination' means Pintupi negotiating to obtain the sort of help from government that they want, while 'self-management' entails their taking on administrative responsibilities that they are unable to fulfil to the satisfaction of government without denying their own values and cultural obligations — and/or blaming 'whitefella bosses' for their failure to do the right thing by their relations:

A Pintupi interpretation of 'community ownership' is each individual having a personal stake in institutional assets, which leads individuals and their families to feel they should have access to the resources, at any time, according to their own individual needs (p 83).

The high value put on individual autonomy and the essential need to look after one's own family first and last prevent their acting in the unselfish and disinterested ways that are expected of those managing community organisations. It seems hard to escape the conclusion that the imposition of 'self-management' on communities like Walungurru does not help them and should be reviewed. Indeed, if the goal is 'social justice', it seems unfair to burden Pintupi with responsibilities that few of the rest of us carry for managing (and employing other people to manage) the provision of community services.

Folds also makes a strong case that 'statistical equality' of outcome in areas like health, housing, and education is unattainable in remote communities like Walungurru. But he acknowledges that 'the dominant society will never feel comfortable with Pintupi choosing to be different, if their choices produce inequality' (p 113).

Governments, the media, and the Australian public — including other indigenous people who may, in Folds' words, 'more closely share meanings with the dominant society' — will no doubt continue to deplore the disadvantage of people in communities described as 'traditional' or 'tribal'.

Folds hopes to encourage his readers to 'acknowledge the collision of values at the interface' and to recognise 'the achievements of both sides of the relationship' (p 181). Unlike Richard Trudgen, whose book *Why warriors lie down and die* is another that tells us what has gone wrong in remote Aboriginal communities in the past 25 years, Folds does not go further and suggest specific ways of improving the situation. He is clearly concerned that governments should not reduce the level of aid when programs fail to achieve quick results, and he says enough about the positive, if modest, benefits of various practical 'interventions' in Pintupi communities to encourage continuation of such programs, but with realistic expectations of their likely impact. He argues, for example, that it is unrealistic to expect schools in remote communities, where English has to be learnt at school as a second language, to match the outcomes of schools in Australian

cities; or to expect 'equal educational outcomes' when attendance is optional and schools are also expected to be 'maintaining' Indigenous culture in what has been termed 'two-way schooling' (pp 128-34).

Folds states that he has written the book to inform 'those who wonder how policies like social justice and reconciliation engage with the lives of remote indigenous Australians' (p 1). This could be a wide readership but he has not made his argument as accessible as it might be. He has done little to help the general reader understand the situation at Walungurru and how the community functions. He tells us next to nothing about the township and about the 'western institutions' there. One of these institutions is the school where he has been principal. He refers to this as a 'government institution', revealing that it is apparently not a community-run school. Since issues of 'self management' are central to the book it would have been relevant to indicate clearly how the school relates to the community both in formal terms and in practice. Similarly he mentions the Pintupi Homelands Health Service, but he says nothing about what services this provides at Walungurru, or how it is structured and managed. Of other 'western institutions' and the other 'administrators' ('whitefella bosses') we are told nothing. Folds seems to take it for granted that his readers already know a lot about Western Desert communities and about Walungurru in particular.

The book may present other obstacles to those who work in this region and who might hope to get some useful guidance from an old hand at the game. Folds has read widely, but some readers could be put off by the academic jargon that results from his research: 'Foucault contends that the production of discourse is controlled for the purpose of warding off alternatives' (p 113).

His own writing is somewhat repetitious and not always as clear as it might be. He is given to using vague expressions like 'western society', 'the mainstream', 'the dominant society' when he sometimes means 'Australian society', or perhaps 'some Australians', or just 'some government officials'.

The book needed more careful checking and editorial work. It is good that it has an index, but this one is not altogether adequate or reliable.⁷ Other evidence of hasty work can be found. Folds begins each chapter, and most sections of his chapters, with quotations from other writers or from Pintupi people. Most of these are from the writings of WEH Stanner and some are from Myers, a check of which revealed that Folds has a disconcerting inclination to edit them in ways that alter the meaning and seem unnecessary and easily avoided. For example, Folds has:

Relations are the source of most valuables in Pintupi life, including food, a spouse, rights in ceremony and protection ... [a] network involv[ing] persons who do not consider themselves to be related ... [in which] one cannot afford to reject or ignore ties with some neighbours to concentrate only on a few other relations (p 73).

⁷ Three of the five index references under my name proved correct and one reference was not indexed. The two errors could result from failure to check the work of a computer program: the phrases 'Long-term whitefella residents' (p 47) and '(Long silence)' (p 58) seem to have resulted in these references.

The paragraph Myers wrote reads:

Critically, as a person grows older, the field of those considered to be relatives increases in breadth and complexity. This is of great significance because relations are the source of most valuables in Pintupi life, including food, a spouse, rights in ceremony, and protection. A person's relatives are likely to be found in all geographical directions; the network will involve persons who do not consider themselves to be related. This dispersed quality of the social field is a source of strain. One cannot afford to reject or ignore ties with some neighbors to concentrate only on a few other relations.⁸

Seeing a book of mine quoted, and being unable to make sense of the extract, I found that something I had written about settlements in general had been translated into a comment on Papunya in particular; and only some of the words in the 'quotation' were mine. My observation had no real relevance to Folds' book and, like many of his other quotations, might well have been omitted.⁹

Folds has important and valid things to say about the ways that 'two fundamentally discordant cultures' meet at Walungurru and similar places. The deficiencies in the writing and editing should not deter those who could most usefully read this book, and notably all those involved in any way with the making of policies, the shaping of programs, and the delivery of services to such communities.

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References

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⁸. Myers 1986: 163.

⁹. Folds has: 'Intervention [at Papunya] brought satisfaction when human problems seemed intractable, even if it suggests that management may have lost interest in or despaired of any worthwhile achievement in human terms.' (p 91) What I had written — with the words Folds uses underlined — was: 'One can sympathise with those practical men who have found satisfaction in the material development of the settlements for which they have been made responsible when the human problems seemed intractable and the human aims so often seemed obscure, confused, or impracticable. But when the progress of a settlement is measured largely in terms of the construction of buildings and the produce of a garden it suggests that management may have lost interest in, or despaired of, any worthwhile achievement in human terms.' (Long 1970: 181).

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