

Land rights and progressive wrongs

by **Noel Pearson**

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IN AUGUST 2003, Prime Minister John Howard visited the community of Aurukun and attended the annual Cape York Land and Health Summit held at *Uk-aw*, the brown-snake story place, on Wik country. Since the community began regulating the availability of alcohol on January 1, 2003, there has been an 80 per cent reduction in the number of people with injuries presenting to the local hospital. The Aurukun community chose to limit alcohol consumption at the canteen, prohibiting takeaways and any importation of alcohol. Thus the village and, most importantly, the homes are free of the binge-drinking parties that are a feature of family and community life in Cape York Peninsula.

There are still many problems to solve – drugs, behavioural problems associated with kids who have hardly ever been to school, youth who have grown up in the past dysfunctional system who have no education and almost no life skills, alcoholism among those who still drink at the canteen, and so on.

But the reduction in the violence alone is in itself precious. This statistic has a reality in terms of the lives of real human beings – the people of this community. Queensland Premier Peter Beattie's courage and the concrete actions taken to support our efforts in Cape York have already saved lives and reduced tragedy. We are at the beginning, and things can and likely will go wrong, but we will not be deterred.

The commentator Michael Duffy has written that nothing will come from any partnership between John Howard and us in Cape York Peninsula. He argues that, like other well-meaning indigenous leaders of the past, I have engaged the Prime Minister's attention by telling him "what [he] wanted to hear".

It may well be that nothing will come from our attempt to establish real partnerships between our people and the Federal Government. Progress will depend on policies that are rigorous and work under the hot sun, not just on paper. It will depend on leadership and determination by indigenous people as well as government.

The Prime Minister himself assumes that the common-policy ground that exists between us in Cape York and himself has come about because there has been a "change of attitude" on the part of indigenous leaders.

If he means that we have changed our policy and our thinking about our problems, he is wrong. I first articulated my own views about grog, history and dependency back in 1987, when I wrote a paper with my late friend and mentor, Mervyn Gibson, from my home town. In it we described how addiction had corrupted our culture and social relationships (www.capeyorkpartnerships.com). Reading again what I wrote as a 22-year-old, I am struck

by how little my basic convictions have changed. So, with respect to those from the right who think they have succeeded in a "cultural war" on indigenous policy – the truth is that many indigenous leaders have always understood that rights and responsibilities must run together and that victim-hood will get us nowhere. There is little that I have said about the poison of welfare dependency that had not already been said by the late Charles Perkins.

People in Cape York Peninsula have embarked upon what is seen as a radical departure from the thinking that has been unable to avert the indigenous social disaster. We have taken the discussion about indigenous responsibility further and started implementing a comprehensive program.

I HAVE BECOME convinced that indigenous people must move decisively beyond the legacy of the past decades – regardless of some real achievements, such as the recognition of native title.

Until autumn 1999, I was known as a native-title activist. In general politics, I wouldn't have promoted ideas that departed from left-liberal Labor-oriented progressive thinking.

There is a widespread perception based on brief or selective media reports that I have moved to the right since 1999. However, in my published texts I have defended the welfare state and the organisation of people in trade unions and other political and social movements. My good relationship with many political leaders of the right must be due to their broad-mindedness, because they have read my texts and know where I stand.

In my daily work, my commitment to indigenous and lower-class people is unchanged. What changed in the late 1990s was that, from my remote Aboriginal-community perspective, I started to doubt whether many of the official policies of the organisations and parties of the left, and the left-leaning intellectual culture, serve indigenous people.

I use the label "left" in a wide sense. It includes most of the academic, cultural and media spheres where people have had rights-based and service delivery-based perspectives on the indigenous predicament. I also include those with "moderate" and "liberally-minded" attitudes in the Liberal Party. At the same time many Labor people cannot be labelled "left" in this sense.

AS THE INDIGENOUS crisis accelerated, it became apparent that leftist or progressive discourse was unable to deliver solutions or even identify policy areas of strategic importance. Of course, there has been much well-targeted criticism from the left (for example, observations about sheer neglect of health services). But even if all of the proposals of the left had been acted upon, possible gains would have been swallowed up by an explosion of indigenous dysfunction, the causes of which the left was unwilling to discuss.

During the 1990s, I thought that there must be academic expertise that could help do something for our people, do something about the accelerating social breakdown. I approached academics and anthropologists because I felt I didn't have enough theoretical understanding of the questions about culture, alcohol and so on.

Mervyn Gibson and I wrote the paper in 1987 about broader social issues, about how alcohol had insinuated itself into our culture. The discussion was based on the observation that the Hopevale mission of my childhood was poor but socially stable. But I put our ideas from

1987 to the side for many years when I worked on native title. During this time the social disintegration accelerated and the gulf between the reality in our communities and the credibility of the thinking of my supporters and allies, the progressives and small "I" liberals, became intolerably wide.

My original aim was to influence the left, but I only roused resentment or bewilderment. (Labor politician Mark Latham was the exception and, indeed, I was inspired by his courageous challenge to the established Labor thinking about social policy.) During the 2001 election campaign we received a message from federal Labor saying that it would "differentiate from Howard's policy by not using the words 'welfare dependency' but have a very strong position on regional control and other things that ... Noel would like".

I wondered how these politicians were going to make any headway if they couldn't even bring themselves to call one of our two main problems by its name. (Federal Labor's election policy document did contain a cautiously expressed concern that "long-term CDEP [Community Development Employment Projects]... is contributing to welfare dependence", but no section of the document was devoted to passive welfare.)

In the same policy document, a ninth of the "health" section was dedicated to our other main problem, abusive behaviour; there were no whole sections about indigenous violence and substance abuse.

Of course, the conservatives had no record of serious interest in my people's development but they were pragmatically open to dialogue about our immediate problems, in spite of the disputes and differences between them and me.

The big problems were that progressive thinking consisted of a fixed set of ideas and attitudes and that left-liberal and radical opinion was unable to change in response to evident policy failure among our people.

The left was unwilling to discuss passive welfare even as we saw the deleterious effects of an entire people being predominantly reliant on handouts. The left also defended the dogma that "substance abuse is a health problem" and "caused by underlying issues" even as the majority of indigenous people were severely affected by the self-perpetuating substance-abuse epidemics.

Let me once again state that our miserable condition is a product of our dispossession. My objection to leftist analysis is twofold: first, in the case of the individual addict, the addiction itself is the main problem. Personal and collective history might have led to the first, voluntary abuse, but history and personal circumstances don't maintain the advanced addiction, so we can't expect to stop the abusive behaviour by reducing "indigenous disadvantage" (which, of course, we should do anyway). Second, when substance abuse becomes widespread in our communities, it becomes the main "disadvantage factor" and "underlying issue". Its omnipresence becomes the main reason why non-addicts (new recruits to addiction) start experimenting with intoxication – history becomes even less a "cause".

In relation to substance abuse, I find contemporary Australian radicalism isolated historically and geographically. Harm minimisation dominates the leftist thinking in Australia. But in many places (including Australia) and in many historical periods there is and has been popular, progressive resistance by people to the use of addictive substances. These people's

ideology may be non-socialist or religious or whatever, but my definition of "progressive" is that of ordinary people getting together to improve their living conditions.

It is easy to see why "self-improvement" as a radical cause is difficult to advance. It is compromised because it was used as a diversion against the early labour movement; non-socialist "workers' associations" were organised by the bourgeoisie and social misery was attributed to lack of self-discipline and drinking among the lower classes by hypocritical elites. Radical people are also prone to think in terms of "social engineering", "structures" and "social forces". They are sceptical about mass movements that strive to consciously uphold social norms and ideals about individual responsibility (but not sceptical towards movements that strive to achieve economic, gender or "racial" equality by using the legislative power of the state).

WHEN I WAS thinking about passive welfare and abusive behaviour, it seemed obvious to me that the Australian left was defending societal and intellectual structures that kept my people down in the underclass. This contradicted the official goal of the left, which is collective advancement of the lower social strata and the marginalised.

This contradiction led me to think about the classical leftist theory: materialism.

The original main thoughts of the left are that there is unjustifiable stratification in society and that our culture in a very broad sense (including our political thinking) should be seen in the light of material (economic) relations between people. Existing social structures, ideologies and thinking are traditionally suspected by the left of supporting unnecessary inequality.

According to this thinking, the objective function of a societal institution or idea may be opposed to, or radically different from, its subjective justification. A church that preaches equality can contribute to oppression, for example.

Another feature of this perspective is that injustice is not upheld mainly by brute force or overt monopolisation of assets but by social and intellectual confusion among the lower strata.

From my indigenous perspective, I applied the classical leftist thinking to the contemporary left itself and concluded that the left was perhaps more guilty of maintaining thinking that kept indigenous people down than the right. The right has, of course, in an obvious way been opposed to recognition of our property rights and many other rights. But those elements of our political and social thinking that are the most important immediate impediments for indigenous people are promoted by the left. Remember that the official left is no longer an oppositional force like the 19th-century workers' movement, but part of the ruling elites. This explains, if we apply the original leftist perspective, why the official contemporary left can play a role in oppression.

The right's opposition to indigenous people's rights is intellectually easy to handle. But the factor that determines whether indigenous people will be able to do anything at all is our ability to handle substance abuse, passive welfare, et cetera. Strength in these policy areas is a prerequisite for the struggle for land rights and social and economic equality with non-indigenous people, but it is harder to formulate correct thinking about those problems than it

is to argue for our rights. In the social-policy areas, leftist and liberally minded opinion is our main opponent.

Of course there is much genuine leftist, egalitarian and democratic thinking in the official left, resulting in policies that I would probably support if I were politically active outside indigenous affairs: defence for universally accessible health care, defence for public education along the lines advocated by Canadian author and philosopher John Ralston Saul, and so on.

Such policies might be wrong; I do not reject without discussion the argument and evidence presented by the market-economy liberals. But the discussion about whether the "class solidarity" heritage of the left is economically viable is separate from my criticism of the socially destructive side of leftist ideology. I argue that leftist thinking maintains social tension at least to the same extent as rightist thinking does, by advocating policies that give rise to the spread of irresponsible lifestyles and dysfunction. Policies that objectively worsen indigenous economic and social marginalisation and fragmentation of our society (and I argue that progressivist policies do that) obviously contribute to "racial tension" even if the proponents are card-carrying lefties.

Left policies contribute to driving wedges between groups of unprivileged people who should be allies – divide the masses, the old labour movement would have said. The irony is that the left accuses the right of being divisive and believes itself to be morally superior.

The right has a damning record of marginalising and neglecting us indigenous people and other groups. However, the current situation is that the right is interested in exploring policies that perhaps can deal with indigenous people's core problems, while the left is not.

I OFTEN RETURN to the area of addictive substances and behaviours because it is the area where the outcomes of "liberal" attitudes have the gravest consequences for my people. My first paper, the speech I wrote with Mervyn Gibson in 1987, was about alcohol and gambling. Now other abuses are growing threats to my people. In my land, alcohol, illicit drugs, gambling, et cetera are not means of recreation but miserable sources of disunity, passivity, crime, violence, pain and death.

The introduction of new abuses hits the weakest people the hardest and has a paralysing effect on people who are not directly involved in abusive behaviour. That is what the left calls "oppression". If the introduction of new potential social problems is reactionary and oppressive, then "radical" and "liberally minded" people must ask themselves some questions.

First, why has participation in the spread of new potentially addictive abuses been a "radical" or socially accepted attitude in wide circles? (Very many left-leaning people have, of course, been opposed to abusive behaviour and they might take offence at my assertion, but it is a fact that the least charge that can be upheld against the left is that it has consistently diverted the discussion away from the responsibility of the individual in favour of theories about underlying social reasons for people's behaviour. The same story is now repeating itself with a wide range of new illicit substances.)

Labor politician Carmen Lawrence has always been opposed to such madness, but her eyewitness account in her speech about the sixties and the Whitlam years was accurate: "A

growing number of young radicals dedicated prodigious energy – and large quantities of mind-altering substances – to analysing and re-imaging our society ... a new strand of libertarianism, impatient with censorship and anti-drug laws, flourished." (For balance and fairness, non-progressive people could be asked questions about the role of the Australian alcohol and gambling culture and the alcohol and gambling business in the destruction of my people.)

Making a distinction between "hard" and "soft" drugs is no defence – the "recreation" of the liberally minded can become lethal for the disadvantaged. In my land, the mixture of alcohol and cannabis causes violent injury and death, and social and economic breakdown.

Second, why is the left reluctant to support the grassroots rejection of the behaviours, instead preferring to talk about the "underlying issues" that "make" people adopt irresponsible behaviours? Every addict was once a non-addict who would have been more easily persuaded by a political argument about the importance of individual responsibility for the common good – solidarity, in leftist parlance.

It is easy to point to the United States and claim that the "war on drugs" as a government policy has failed. The problem with the left is that it uses its influence to discourage people from establishing a grassroots consensus against behaviours that, in the long run, will be a burden on ordinary people and especially on the most disadvantaged. For example, the left opposes workplace drug and alcohol testing by insisting that people must display signs of impairment from drugs before being tested. Such obfuscation – pretending that the struggle against substance abuse, which should be part of working-class solidarity, is a workplace-safety issue – is typical of the official left.

Finally, unprincipled and inconsistent responses to addictive and destructive behaviours, including gambling, are not confined to the left. In New South Wales, the Greens want to decriminalise the use of currently illicit drugs but are "hard on pokies" (presumably because putting coins in a slot is not a widespread behaviour in the Greens constituency), while the NSW National Party is hard on drugs but soft on poker machines because the party is sensitive to the lobbying of clubs.

THERE IS PRACTICAL work in Cape York Peninsula addressing these apparently intractable problems The Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, which contributes to this work, has been set up with the active support of Griffith University and the bipartisan support of Peter Beattie and John Howard.

The underlying principles for our work are to stop servicing dysfunction and to transcend the political divide between left and right. It has been a refreshing experience to work with community people – elders and women in community justice groups and other formal or informal groups, who are determined to take responsibility for restoring social order. These people are not deterred by the fact that their direct attacks on abusive behaviour do not follow the progressive nostrums about "attacking underlying issues". They do not feel that they are attacking the "symptoms" in an intellectually unsophisticated way.

It has also been a great experience to work with enthusiastic people from the public, but especially the private sector, to implement responsible management of the meagre resources we do have, mainly welfare benefits. It has been heartening to see their competence in

helping my people to seize economic-development opportunities and putting the planning and structures in place that give our enterprises a realistic chance of surviving.

There are still many unresolved issues. Settlements about our land and our place in this nation are not off the agenda but we have attacked the immediate circumstances that, if not changed, would have prevented us from any kind of purposeful action.

The things we have achieved together with recruits and volunteers from the private sector stand as a marked contrast to the mountain of paper that has been produced by the "Aboriginal industry" through the decades. What we seem to need is assistance by people from "hard schools" like the financial sector. The public institutions that have been created in order to find solutions to our problems seem to have little to offer.

I have found very few academic texts about economic development, substance abuse, criminology, incarceration, deaths in custody, health, education, et cetera that have any relevance to our work in Cape York Peninsula. More importantly, I have not seen analyses that are inspiring, convincing and socially and politically useful. The same goes for the political documents about "reconciliation" that have been written in the past decades.

There are, of course, numerous exceptions to my generalisations about publicly funded research about the problems of indigenous Australia. But the insightful analyses and texts do not form a comprehensive, publicly noticed and promoted alternative. Without such an alternative, it is hard to get decisions about new policies and to have the policies carried out. The political system, the administrations and the bureaucracies have the turning circle of a supertanker. Massive public support, large bodies of analyses and successful practical trials will be needed. That is why the Cape York Institute is necessary.

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