

Must Be the Grog Can't Be the Government: Relationships Between Government and Indigenous People in Australia

Tomlinson J*

Queensland University of Technology, Carseldine, Queensland, Australia

Abstract

This paper sets out to consider relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, particularly interactions with governments and their agents in Queensland. Many levels of government impinge on Indigenous communities and these will be examined to see if they are acting to enhance or control the interests of Indigenous communities. Issues such as the management of alcohol, mining leases on Indigenous land, land rights, employment and the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP), health, housing, infrastructure development, community governance, legal aid, incarceration and community services will be considered. The protection period, 1897 to the mid 1970s, will be compared with the present to see whether the current arrangements demonstrate a major break with past administrations.

Various community work traditions will be analysed in an attempt to suggest a form of community work likely to lead to Indigenous self-determination. This analysis will compare previous community work with current efforts and will concentrate upon the period between the early 1970s and the present. The 'social entrepreneurial', 'social capital' and 'community capacity building partnership' arrangements of current state, local and federal governments will be considered with a view to determining whose interests are being served.

Keywords

Indigenous, government, obligation, self-determination, welfare

Structure of paper

This paper begins by suggesting a framework that informs the analysis. It uses this framework to criticise current governments' community work practices in relation to Indigenous people and goes on to suggest a form of progressive community work that might enable a more productive interaction between Indigenous citizens and governments. This framework is used to survey *major issues* confronting Indigenous people in Queensland. The paper then attempts to place those issues in their historical and current contexts before setting out alternative solutions to those current governments are applying.

The analytical framework

Governments' policies and actions are assessed against a progressive template developed to clarify the impact of governments' policies upon Indigenous communities. This framework is in part derived from the observation that Australian society is structured in terms of race, class, gender, age, locality and the way governments respond to people with disabilities (Tomlinson 2003). The author, in his community work activities with Indigenous people, has attempted to adopt a framework embodying anti-colonial, non-racist, egalitarian and liberationist (rather than paternalist) practices. The justification for adopting such a framework derives in part from Gandhi (1965), Marx and Engels (1971), Alinsky (1969) and Standing (2002). But more importantly such a framework has been suggested by many Indigenous colleagues.

Governments' current community work: 'Practical reconciliation', 'social entrepreneurs', and 'community capacity'

The Howard Government has emphasised what it terms 'practical reconciliation' as its 'solution' to the issues that Indigenous Australians face. The essence of 'practical reconciliation' is the provision of at least basic health, nutrition, sanitation, education and community services. No non-racist would oppose Indigenous Australians being assisted to gain access to decent shelter, nutrition, clean drinking water, safe sanitation facilities, appropriate community and educational infrastructure. Such a happy outcome has not occurred, however, despite eight years of Howard's 'practical reconciliation' policy (McMullen 2004; Savage 2004; Tomlinson 2004a). Altman and Hunter (2003a) compared Indigenous employment, education, income, housing and health in 1991, 1996 and 2001 and concluded that the position of Indigenous Australians relative to other Australians has hardly altered, except that they were doing better prior to 1996 when John Howard imposed his 'practical reconciliation'. If mutual obligations were really mutual then it would be incumbent on a government to ensure Indigenous and non-Indigenous health profiles were on a par.

The 'social capital, social conservatism, social coalition, mutual obligation and participation income' themes of the Howard Government all undermine the concept of universal rights and erode previously established social security entitlements. McClure (2000) attempted to legitimise the extension of the breaching of 300,000 plus Centrelink clients annually (ACOSS 2001). Initially those breached were mainly young unemployed people and, to a lesser extent, single parents. The Howard Government has signalled, in the 2005–06 Budget, its intention to extend its imposition of mutual obligation to single parents and those with a disability and has also announced it plans to impose increased obligations on those who participate in CDEP projects (Karvelas 2004). In 2005, the Howard Government abolished the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and announced its intention to 'mainstream' Indigenous service provision. It also tried to contract out all Indigenous legal aid in order to dismantle the Aboriginal Legal Aid network. Vanstone's more virulent form of 'mutual obligation' imposed on

Indigenous communities in November 2004, through her 'shared responsibility agreements', is a form of white paternalistic interference (AAP 2004).

The unifying constant in 'social capital, social conservatism, social coalition, mutual obligation and participation income' is the replacement of rights with a benefit /obligation compact. The techniques the Howard Government uses to delegitimise the entitlements of people with a disability, refugees, migrants, asylum seekers, Indigenous people, unemployed individuals or single parents are remarkably similar. The task facing community organisers is to alert members of each group to identify the similarities and to confront the issues they have in common. A mechanism the government often uses to suppress dissent is to employ 'social entrepreneurs' who are charged with the task of riding into the community's 'bad lands' under the guise of increasing that community's capacity (Tomlinson 2004b). Many social entrepreneurs claim to draw their inspiration from 'Third way' political pundits. Guy Standing (2002, ch. 7 and 8) demolishes the myth that the 'Third way' is a significant departure from the economic fundamentalist prescription for welfare cutbacks.

Social entrepreneurs often reiterate the diatribe about ending welfare dependency and the need to be self-reliant (contra Goodin 2001; Goodin et al. 1999; Tomlinson 2003). Ex-Labor leader Mark Latham has also adopted this rightwing version of self-help. Pearson is the Howard Government exemplar of this approach on Cape York. I have criticised the Latham/Pearson line elsewhere (Tomlinson 1999, 2005). Many social entrepreneurs seem oblivious of the fact that many of the creative approaches to community work, which they claim for themselves, have been part and parcel of the practice of community work at least since the 1940s (Alinsky 1969; Gandhi 1965). There have been many examples of progressive community work being undertaken by and with Indigenous people in Australia since the mid 1930s, in the run up to the 150th anniversary of the invasion (Tomlinson 1974, 1985; Day 1994; Fabb et al. 2003).

Turning our back on our history

The first principle of community work is to help remove the obstacles preventing community members doing things for themselves. Alinsky and Gandhi use the concept of self-help in a quite different way from that of today's social entrepreneurs. When Alinsky or Gandhi accentuated self-help it was in the context of mutuality underpinned by communal solidarity. Today the purveyors of social entrepreneurial thought want to impose self-help in the context of individualised self-reliance. From the 1950s to the early 1980s community workers relied upon widespread respect for the concept of solidarity. But now, in the days of 'community capacity building', 'social capital accumulation', 'social entrepreneurs' and 'social coalitions', solidarity seems outmoded. The community is not conceived of as a caring communal hearth that sticks by people who are down on their luck, rather it has become a debt-collecting

agency to which those who receive government-provided poverty-line income assistance “are expected to give something back” (Tomlinson 2004c).

In the following sections: health, employment, housing, stolen wages, the stolen generations, incarceration, land rights, alcohol consumption and welfare payments as they impact upon Indigenous communities will be discussed. These issues are all interrelated. Were they to be tackled by an integrated non-racist, anti-colonial, egalitarian and liberating community work approach, then the application of such a practice framework would go a long way towards ending the economic deprivation, alcoholism and social dislocation prevalent in many Indigenous communities. Yet governments persevere with the idea that each of these issues is an isolated feature particularly amenable to treatment via their prescription of ending ‘welfare dependency’ through the imposition of ‘mutual obligations’.

Major issues

Health

No one comparing the morbidity and mortality of Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians could fail to be appalled by the continuing government neglect of the health needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Indigenous infant mortality may no longer be in the order of 400 to 500 per one thousand births as it was in many remote parts of Australia in the early 1960s and 70s (Moodie 1973); yet it is still four to five times that of non-Indigenous infants (ABS and AIHW 2003, ch. 9; Jonas 2003, Appendix 1, p. 8). In 1989, the first priority identified by the National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party was clean drinking water, yet there are over 100 remote communities in Australia still without drinkable water (Jonas 2003, Appendix 1, p. 17) — after water; nutrition, sanitation, housing and health services were identified in descending order of importance. The Australian Medical Association, relying on the Access Economics Report (2004), believes that a huge cash injection is needed if the health of Indigenous Australians is to approach that of non-Indigenous citizens.

Indigenous Australians are dying on average 20 years younger than other Australians and this statistic has remained virtually unchanged for two decades (Jonas 2003, Appendix 1, Table 5). In Queensland, South Australia, Western Australia and the Northern Territory, three-quarters of Indigenous male and two-thirds of Indigenous female deaths occurred before the age of 65 years compared with one-quarter of male and one-sixth of female deaths of all Australians (ABS and AIHW 2003, p. 183). Australians for Native Title and Reconciliation (ANTaR 2004) points out that “the Indigenous health crisis is both solvable and preventable. In similar countries, such as New Zealand, the US and Canada, the health of Indigenous peoples has been rapidly improved by determined government action over the last 25 years” (see also Jonas 2003, Appendix 1, p. 5). Research in the Northern Territory (Condon et al. 2004) in the period 1967–2000, demonstrates the gap between the average age of death of

Indigenous and non-Indigenous people is widening, particularly for those in their middle age. Henry, Houston, and Mooney (2004) writing in the *Medical Journal of Australia* assert that the Australian healthcare is institutionally racist (See also Taylor 2001).

Employment: Frontier economy to a mission economy to a surreal economy

Idleness is not the problem. Impoverished, depressed, meaningless, optionless idleness is the problem. The level of exclusion from award wages is demonstrated by *ATSIC News* 2001 p.17 “only three of 102 adults in Kuranda ...received a non-CDEP wage.” Phil Bartlett notes:

“that the CDEP has been going for 23 years...CDEP provides activities, training and employment to about 33,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people throughout Australia. CDEP has allowed withdrawal of government services in rural and remote communities, the downsizing of government departments...CDEP is far cheaper to run than other programs of a similar nature such as Work for the Dole” (2001, p.19).

Unemployment is much higher in the Indigenous population than in the non-Indigenous population throughout Australia. In most rural and remote areas real unemployment levels among Aboriginal people is between 40 and 80 per cent. The Bureau of Statistics does not count participants in ‘work for the dole’ schemes as employed but does count Indigenous Australians involved in CDEPs, the Indigenous ‘work for the dole’ scheme, as employed (Altman and Hunter 2003b; Tomlinson 2003, ch. 6).

Housing: A measure of progress

In 1971 Frances Lovejoy estimated the cost of providing adequate housing for all Indigenous Australians at \$3 billion. The Whitlam Labor Government in 1973 promised \$30 million dollars a year for ten years. The Aboriginal Development Commission and the Department of Aboriginal Affairs 1988–89 survey of Indigenous housing needs found that 31 per cent of Aborigines were either homeless or living in inadequate accommodation (National Aboriginal Health Strategy Working Party 1989, p. 109). In 2001, Geoff Clark (Chairman of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) pointed out that additional funding in the 2001–02 Budget “will make little dent in the \$3 billion deficit in this area” (*ATSIC News* Autumn 2001. p. 3; see also Jonas 2003, Appendix 1, pp. 16-7). “Eighty percent of houses that are home to 10 or more people are occupied by indigenous Australians” (Savage 2004). Obtaining adequate nutrition and decent sanitation are major problems confronting many Indigenous communities. The standard of housing occupied by nearly half of Indigenous families is inadequate (ABS & AIHW 2003, ch. 3). Overcrowding is a major contributing factor to the spread of disease, the prevalence of violence and strained interpersonal communications.

Stolen wages

Dr Roslyn Kidd (1997) and the Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action (The Consultancy Bureau 1991) have recorded how the government and protectors controlled Aboriginal workers' bank accounts and helped themselves to approximately \$30 million from these accounts. The failure of the Queensland Government to make a decent reparation offer has invigorated the Stolen Wages Campaign (2004).

The continuing stolen generations

The heartbreaking story of the stolen generations is described in detail in the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission *Bringing them home* Report (1997) and dramatically told in biographical works like *Rabbit Proof Fence*. Unlike the Howard Government, which was only prepared to express regret, the Queensland Parliament has issued an apology to the stolen generations. Government agencies have not stopped stealing Indigenous children. Many of the same players are still involved: the courts, police, white 'saviours' and a children's department using alleged neglect or abuse as grounds for removing Indigenous children from their families and communities by placing them in white foster homes or institutions (Jonas 2003, Appendix 1, pp. 21-2). Indigenous children in Queensland are 32.8 times more likely to be in detention than non-Indigenous children (Cunneen 2001, p. 23) and the incarceration rate for young Indigenous people is rising (Jonas 2003, Appendix 1, p. 19).

Adult incarceration

Cunneen estimated that "Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people were 27 times more likely to find themselves in police custody than non-Indigenous people" (2001, p. 18) and that "when Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal offenders were matched by prior record and offence, a greater proportion of Aboriginal people were sentenced to imprisonment — irrespective of the offence or the level of prior record (2001, p. 35). Such a disparity has a long history in Queensland (McCartney et al. 2003, ch. 3). "The Indigenous female prison population increased by 262% between 1991 and 1999 (compared with an increase for non-Indigenous women of 185%). In June 2003, Indigenous women were incarcerated at a rate 19.3 times that of non-Indigenous women" (Jonas 2003, Appendix 1, p. 19).

Betrayal of Indigenous land rights aspirations

In the wake of the High Court's Mabo Judgement No.2 came the Wik Judgement, which held that Native Title and pastoral leases could co-exist and in Queensland this led to a delay in granting some 4000 mining and pastoral leases. The Howard Government's ten-point plan introduced in its 1998 amendments to the 1994 *Native Title Act* were designed, in the words of the then deputy prime minister, to "provide bucket loads of extinguishment" (McKenna 2004). The Beattie Government, which formed a minority government in June 1998, rushed to placate pastoral and mining interests by granting the overwhelming majority of the 4000 outstanding leases. It aped the Howard Government with its Queensland native title

legislation (Bartholomew 1998; Saunders 1998, 1999; Lavallo 2001). Les Malezer (1999) in his aptly titled article, 'Beattie sustains 100 years of Queensland racism', pointed out that the Queensland laws were in breach of the Racial Discrimination Act (1975). The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination came to a similar finding.

Alcohol restrictions

Widespread substance use exacerbates social tensions, interferes with labour productivity and can contribute to an increase in incidents of domestic violence. Wilson (1982) recognised that in many communities in the Cape region excessive drinking and associated problems have a considerable impact on the quality of life. It is imperative that the Indigenous community be assisted to deal with the causes of such symptoms of social dislocation (McCartney et al. 2003; Cunneen 2001).

Government agents have been present on Cape York for well over a century. They forbade substance use for 80 years but government and church prohibition did not solve the problem of social dislocation nor its associated excessive alcohol consumption. 'Protection' did not solve the problem. Run-down community health, housing and educational facilities did not solve the problem. Dispossessing Indigenous people of their land did not solve the problem. On 15 November 1963 an armed police party shifted the Mapoon people from their land and burned their houses to facilitate bauxite mining (Roberts et al. 1975). Allowing multinational mining conglomerates access to whatever part of Cape York they wanted, despite Aboriginal protest, did not solve the problem. Given the longevity of government intervention on Cape York, one possible explanation is that the present social problems are, at least in part, caused by the way governments have intervened in the past. Governments are reluctant to accept any blame for present failures. The rebuttal often is that governments 'acted with good intent' — therefore the blame must lie with the Aborigines: "Can't be the government, therefore it must be the grog and welfare dependency".

Bonnie Robertson's Women's Taskforce *Report on Violence* (2000), which looked at the connection between drinking and domestic violence in Indigenous communities, drew attention to the prevalence of internecine violence on many Indigenous communities. Noel Pearson's 1999 report entitled *Our right to take responsibility* focussed on 'welfare dependency', 'the grog problem', unemployment and the need to impose 'mutual obligation' in the absence of a *real economy* on many Indigenous communities. Tony Fitzgerald's (2001) three-volume report recommended restricting alcohol on communities where social dislocation and domestic violence was occurring.

In April 2004 a plane carrying Libby Clark, the Queensland Indigenous Affairs Minister, was found to have a bottle of wine on board when it landed at a 'dry' community (CMC2004). No one was charged. The 2004 alcohol bans on Indigenous communities have resulted in the

criminalisation of many Indigenous people for alcohol offences, such as bringing alcohol onto a closed community (Wallace 2004). Not only does the Queensland Government know what is best for those carrying 'the white man's burden' but best for 'the burden' as well.

Welfare dependency and mutual obligation

Noel Pearson (1999) and Tony Fitzgerald (2001) share similar views about the causes of problems on Cape York and, as a consequence, identify remarkably similar solutions. The identified problems are 'the grog', violence and unemployment. The solutions that such an analysis demands is to control 'the grog' and to end 'welfare dependency'. Implicit in much of the 'welfare dependency' rhetoric is the suggestion that those who *impose the obligations on others* are 'being cruel to be kind'. There is no evidence that suggests that such imposition of obligations makes people better citizens, helps them escape poverty or provides any beneficial outcomes. Those who impose the 'obligations' are the sole beneficiaries of such policies (Tomlinson 2004d). Allowing a white government or a department of a white government, to impose Europeanised '*mutual obligations*' upon Indigenous Australians privileges the hegemonic white view of the world. Imposing so-called '*mutual obligation*' upon Indigenous citizens extends the oppression of the colonial invasion, aspects of which have endured for the past 217 years. It does not provide Indigenous people with real opportunities to improve their social and economic situation. People freed of behavioural constraints will willingly choose those social obligations to others that they regard as reasonable. Only when Indigenous people's right to be self-determining is recognised will non-Indigenous Australians be freed of *their compulsion to impose obligations*. Then Indigenous people will be in a position to effectively address the social and economic questions that confront them.

Policies of 'mutual obligation' are also imposed on the poor in white society allegedly because they decrease 'welfare dependency'. In part, the attractiveness of the 'welfare dependency' rhetoric is that it justifies (or rather rationalises) reductions in welfare spending. Such rhetoric has a sanctimonious aura allowing the better off to justify a meanness of spirit under a cloak of benefaction. The logic underlying the 'mutual obligation' rhetoric also led, in 1977, to the imposition of the CDEP on Indigenous communities. 'Mutual obligation' has been tried (Tingle 2004); it has not solved the very problems that the current round of imposed 'mutual obligation' is supposed to solve.

The historical and current contexts

The background

Much of the current debate about income security, unemployment and social dislocation as they affect Indigenous communities fails to address the real issues confronting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Queensland. Assertions made about 'welfare dependency', domestic violence, unemployment, economic underdevelopment and drunkenness have

come from a Eurocentric understanding (Tomlinson 1975; Tomlinson 2003, ch. 5 and 6) and address white agendas.

The antecedents of current Australian governments' use of 'welfare dependency'

The Howard Government's concept of 'mutual obligation' is a more pervasive version of the previous Labor Government's policy of 'reciprocal obligation'. Elements of 'mutual obligation', driven by the fear of 'welfare dependency', were present in the consolidation of the Federal social security legislation of 1947. They are most obvious in relation to the treatment of unemployed people. The CDEP and people's compelled participation in 'work for the dole' schemes are latter-day equivalents of the 1930s Depression 'Susso' scheme's forced labour programs. Fear of 'welfare dependency' is revealed in Parliamentary debates that occurred in 1908 at the time of the introduction of the first Commonwealth social security legislation. Policies were implemented in the Australian colonies from the early 1800s, which aimed to deny assistance to the 'unworthy poor', 'malingerers', and the 'work shy' (Dickey 1980).

Such policies were adaptations of the British Poor Law system of welfare relief. The revised Poor Law of 1834 enshrined the concept of 'less eligibility', which discouraged people from applying for welfare relief by ensuring that anyone assisted would receive less than the lowest paid worker and that those assisted were stigmatised. The first legislative enactment of the Poor Laws was in 1601. This act was the English Parliament's attempt to pull together the practices of the previous 70 years (Rodgers 1968, p. 12). (Fuller accounts of this welfare history can be found at Polanyi (1945), Tomlinson (2003).) Joel Handler (2004, Footnote 217, p. 56) traces the English legislative origins of such policies to the 1348 *Statute of Labourers* with its concern to avoid assisting the 'sturdy beggars'. The modern incarnation of such concern can be identified in the Howard Government's attempts to force one-third of disability support pensioners onto unemployment benefits or into employment (Galvin 2004).

This brief history shows that it is possible to observe clear links between the Howard Government's policies of 'mutual obligation' and 'welfare dependency' and similar policies in Britain circa 1348. Links between current Australian Government welfare policies and those of church and parish welfare policies would stretch back even further into antiquity. This raises a number of central questions:

- What is it that makes such outdated social and moral concepts acceptable to Australian governments in the 21st century?
- Why are present welfare policies so closely linked to 14th century views of welfare relief rather than to understandings provided by modern social science research?
- If such antiquarian views are to be forced upon Indigenous citizens, what regard is to be given to traditional Indigenous views about appropriate reciprocal relationships?
- What value is to be given to the self-sustaining system of Indigenous reciprocity that has evolved on Cape York in the post-invasion period?

Some connections with the past

Pearson's (1999) paper and his continuing denunciation of Aboriginal people of Cape York (2004), for 'substance abuse' and 'welfare dependency' (Koch and Emerson 2004), has a familiar ring to it. Such an analysis formed part of the stated justification for Archibald Meston's advocacy that led to the 1897 *Protection Act* in Queensland (Rowley 1970). Opium and alcohol were the offending substances at that time. The Queensland Aboriginal Protection Act continued to control the lives of Indigenous people living on missions and reserves until 1975. Professors Rowley (1970) and Reynolds (1981, 1998) demonstrated how the containment of Aborigines on missions and settlements assisted farming and mining expansion onto land previously controlled by Aboriginal people. The police invasion of Palm Island following the police killing of Mulrunji Doomadgee is well within the tradition of the 19th century policy of 'dispersal' of Aborigines (Walsh 2004; Robertson 2004).

Hal Wootten succinctly sums up the Indigenous/non-Indigenous history: "Since the settlement of Australia, the colonisers have repeatedly diagnosed and found solutions to 'the Aboriginal problem' by reference to a prevalent western narrative of the world, rather than to the specific situation, needs or wishes of Aboriginal people" (2004, p. 16). He acknowledges the move (at a federal level) from the protectionist era to a dialogue based on universalism, human rights and reconciliation that informed much of the debate from the early 1970s to 1996 and notes that, in the late 20th century, there emerged a new conservative agenda out of the bowels of the Bennelong Society and the Institute of Public Affairs. Wootten asserts that "Stripped to its bones, it is a narrative of the triumph of capitalist individualism" (2004, p. 18). He describes the debate at a federal level but his comments apply to Queensland state and local governments.

William Jonas and Darren Dick (2004, p. 11) deplore the Howard Government's abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission and the replacing of national Indigenous elected representatives with an appointed advisory body as being in breach of Article 5 of the *International Convention on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination*, which Australia has signed and ratified. Apart from human rights issues, "what is of particular concern is the significant shift away from the recognition provided by the *ATSIC Act* in 1989 of the appropriateness of representative structures to maximize Indigenous participation in government decision making processes" (Jonas and Dick 2004, p. 10).

In Queensland, the Beattie Labor Government attempted to silence Indigenous critics when it abolished direct funding to the Aboriginal Coordinating Council for Deed of Grant in Trust (DOGIT) Community Councils (ACC 2004) as a way of promoting the Cape York Partnership scheme (Cape York Partnerships 2004). This was only a short term victory as the Aboriginal people from DOGIT communities relaunched the organisation as the Aboriginal Local

Government Association Incorporated of Queensland in October 2004 (Message Stick 2004).

In Hal Wootten's words:

"In the end the emerging conservative narrative is little more than a return to assimilation, although it usually declares its allegiance to the more humane version espoused by Paul Hasluck. Essentially it regards Aboriginality as a deficiency, a burden that handicaps Aboriginals in the modern world and should be shed. But for most Aboriginals it is a central feature of their identity, a source of pride" (2004, p. 19).

Queensland police powers to restrict drinking in public places and the use of 'move-on' powers by local governments, such as the Townsville City Council, are most frequently directed at itinerant Indigenous people. Such actions are the most obvious examples of this new conservative narrative at the local level. In many parts of Australia where large Indigenous populations exist there are frequent calls made for youth curfews to get young Indigenous people off the streets (*Townsville Bulletin* 2004). The local 'notables' who make such calls are usually blissfully unaware that Aborigines had to be outside of many Queensland town boundaries by nightfall well into the 20th century.

Running along side the new conservative individualistic narrative is an equally conservative, albeit communal, dialogue of 'whole-of-government', 'partnership', 'social entrepreneurial', 'social capital' and 'community capacity building'. Beattie (2000), Howard (1999, 2000) and Latham (1998, 1999) are all singing from the same song sheet. They embrace Pearson's (1999) version of participation income. Whether it is Howard's 'social coalition' or 'mutual obligation', Pearson's 'scourge of welfare dependency' and the 'need to take responsibility' or Latham's choice of 'learning or earning' (ALP 2004; Tomlinson 2005) there is the suggestion that those who are given a poverty line income must 'give something back'.

From 'our right to take responsibility' to 'mutual obligation': Some questions?

When Noel Pearson produced his discussion paper entitled 'Our right to take responsibility', his views were presented in much of the mainstream media as *the* Indigenous view. The complexity of the issues that he was addressing escaped many. They needed to, but did not ask "Are Pearson's views *the* Indigenous view or are they simply the views of *an* Indigenous person?" It is important to know if Pearson's views reflect a wider Indigenous perspective or part of a conservative Christian world view. David Martin who has worked extensively on Cape York makes the important point that; "it cannot be assumed that the pejorative view of dependency advanced in the welfare debate, grounded as it is, in no small part, on an ideological construct of the moral worth of the productive individual within the market economy, is necessarily shared by all Aboriginal people" (2001, p. 6).

Had observers asked what was driving Pearson's analysis, then it may have allowed commentators to identify the antecedents of Pearson's views. Pearson uses the words

'reciprocity' and 'mutuality' often in ways compatible with Prime Minister Howard's (1999, 2000) Patrick McClure's (2000) or Mark Latham's (1998, 1999) usage. Ray Cassin (2000) attacks such usage:

"You can be 'on' social security in the literal sense of receiving benefits, but this usage does not carry the pejorative flavour of being 'on' welfare. The reason is not mysterious: we do not talk about social-security dependency, or social-services dependency because 'social security' and 'social services' are bound up with an older notion of entitlement, and an understanding of mutual obligation that goes beyond tit-for-tat reciprocity.

The ideal of mutual obligation underpinning a system of social security is not one of reciprocity, but of obligation borne by all of us to contribute to the support of people who would otherwise be destitute."

Pearson (2004, 1999) has spent much effort condemning the social security system for undermining Indigenous society. He wrote that welfare:

- is invariably a poor substitute for a fair share. Welfare is never enough to properly live on. Rather than provide the opportunity for a proper place in the wider economy and society, the cheap option of welfare is provided instead
- kills initiative and breeds dependency. It discourages people from self-providing and taking their fair share through engagement in the real economy
- promotes wrong and destructive values in the recipients and the society at large — namely that life can be sustained through perpetual dependency, when the truth is that it never is
- undermines self-esteem and promotes a sense of helplessness and hopelessness in people
- pacifies recipients rather than invigorating them into social or political action to secure a better deal for themselves and their children
- reproduces these same problems in following generations (the 1999 original monograph did not have page numbers).

Clearly, Pearson is drinking from the same cup as ex-minister Jocelyn Newman who, when commissioning the McClure Report (2000), set the context in which the report was to be written with her paper entitled 'The Challenge of Welfare Dependency in the 21st Century'. Despite the ardour with which Pearson, Latham (1999), Newman (1999) and other conservatives regard the unerring propensity of social services to increase dependency, weaken initiative and destroy society, they are simply wrong. Professor Robert Goodin and his colleagues (1999) refute the suggestion that generous welfare provision invariably leads to the outcomes that Pearson asserts. Anthropologist David Martin (2001) agrees with Pearson that Indigenous people on the Cape are experiencing increased social problems but says that Pearson "is not correct in positing access to welfare incomes for Aboriginal people as contributing to this social breakdown in a direct and causal sense (p. 11)."

Pearson (1999) speaks as if 'mutual obligation' has a specific Indigenous flavour. 'Mutuality' and 'reciprocity' have clearly defined, locally specific meanings in traditional society. They have a more generalised meaning in modern Indigenous society — certainly one that goes beyond 'tit-for-tat reciprocity'. The problem that then exists for any agency wishing to impose 'mutual obligation' is: what do such words mean within the cultural context of a particular community or a specific clan group living in a community? If a department cannot clearly articulate what concepts such as 'mutual obligation' mean in the context of specific Indigenous communities then it will not be in a position to evaluate the effectiveness of its program. When the views of members of an Indigenous community about appropriate obligations clash with a department's interpretation of obligations, they will be forced to choose between their culture and compliance with departmental dictates, undermining their sense of community, culture and society (Keen 2004). If specific Indigenous interpretations of concepts such as 'mutual obligation' are not heard, it is possible that 'mutual obligation' on Cape York will simply come to mean what John Howard (1999, 2000) intends it to mean.

In search of the *real* economy

Pearson is correct when he points out there are few viable enterprises owned by Indigenous Australians. But his analysis misses the mark when he asserts that the absence of 'a real economy in these regions' can be attributed to either substance abuse or reliance on welfare payments. Throughout much of Australia the only 'work' on offer to 80 percent of the Aboriginal population is a form of 'work for the dole' called the CDEP. For Pearson to claim that *passive* welfare is the problem denies the everyday experience of people in Aboriginal communities, where they work for their social security and have done so since the late 1970s. Before that, many worked on settlements or missions at welfare rates of pay, euphemistically called training wages. The majority of those who worked away from missions and settlements had the bulk of their wages stolen by their 'protectors', if indeed they were paid wages.

Pearson (1999) realises that "Aboriginal people participated in the real economy for most of Australia's colonial history, and we did so at the lowest end of the scale. Engagement in the real economy was quite degrading and involved tragic exploitation." He accepts that "the impact of the equal wage decision (1967) on Aboriginal labour in the cattle industry was decisive. People lost their place in the pastoral economy and returned to the increasingly welfare-based economy of the settlements." A reading of Rosalind Kidd's (1997) *The Way We Civilise* should give the lie to any suggestion that the pastoral industry was a *real economy* unsubsidised by Aborigines, rural labour and governments. Queensland governments were involved in enforcing the system of indentured Indigenous labour (setting wage rates and periods of employment). They kept the lease rental for cattle stations artificially low and provided other subsidies to the pastoral lessees. Police and mission protectors controlled [and often misappropriated (Kidd 1997)] the income of Indigenous workers. Queensland

governments set the rates of training wages paid on settlements and missions — the major form of alternative work available to Aborigines.

A reading of *The Mapoon Story* (Roberts et al. 1974) demonstrates the extent to which the Queensland Government was prepared to disrupt entire Indigenous communities on the Western side of the Cape in order to facilitate the development of Comalco's alumina mining operation. Nearly 6000 square kilometres of Aboriginal reserves were transferred to Comalco's control (Kidd 1997, p. 204). Comalco, like many other mining companies, does not conform to Pearson's definition of a *real economy*.

Pearson (1999) himself suggests "The geographical remoteness of the communities of Cape York means it is nigh on impossible for Aboriginal people to engage in the real economy". He points out that colonial dispossession removed the possibility of Aboriginal self-sufficiency. Thus people were forced to choose between taking jobs at exploitative wage rates in the pastoral industry or living on a mission or settlement. Pearson points out that until the 1970s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders seldom received social security payments but today these payments are widespread and this, plus the assistance community government or community enterprises receive from governments is, he suggests, "the welfare problem which is undermining Aboriginal society". This remarkable conclusion cannot be supported by the facts (Martin 2001, p. 11).

Welfare provision at community or individual levels is a strange place to start if the aim is economic development. If, on the other hand, economic development is the desired outcome on Cape York, then the necessary infrastructure would need to be put in place to allow such development. Large-scale economic developments have taken place on Cape York since the 1960s, but Indigenous people have only been involved at the periphery. Usually when economic development has been undertaken, in places such as Weipa, the Indigenous owners have been considered an encumbrance rather than partners. The real resources that Aboriginal people owned (land and mineral resources) were just taken from them.

Solutions

A start

There are, however, solutions that Australian governments in partnership with the Indigenous people could implement. These solutions will vary from community to community but will have some similar components, such as the provision of adequate housing, education, health, sanitation, water, transport and power infrastructure as an act of reparation for past injustice and neglect. Employment at decent wages, in socially and environmentally meaningful occupations, needs to be created. People and their culture must be respected. Social security needs to be provided for those unable to work. Adequate funding needs to be provided to

ensure appropriate municipal government functions are carried out. These solutions cannot be implemented without significant expenditure but such expenditure will provide improved outcomes for Indigenous people. Governments will benefit by not having to waste money in future addressing social problems that are the result of present inadequately-funded policies.

Reparation

The prevailing view on ownership of minerals in Australia is that it resides in the Crown. Professor Rowley points out that this was not always the case: in South Australia, “proprietors of land grants made before 1880 have retained mineral rights alienated from the original grants” (1972, p. 280). The South Australian legislation and the Northern Territory *Land Rights Act* have been the vehicle by which Aborigines in these two regions have recovered ownership of considerable areas of land and have consequently been able to start to develop a secure economic future (Crough 1993). The ceding of mineral rights on Indigenous land to local Indigenous communities is occurring in other parts of the world. It would be a significant step towards reconciliation were the Crown (state and federal governments) to restore the ownership of mineral rights to Indigenous people, at least in relation to land where native title has been held not to have been extinguished. This would substantially change the capacity of Indigenous people to control the pace and direction of mineral extraction on their land.

If the ownership of minerals were to reside with Indigenous communities it is likely that minimum requirements would need to be met before a mining operation could go ahead namely: all sites of significance would be protected, the quality of life in the affected communities would need to be safeguarded if not improved, enhanced environmental protection systems would need to be in place prior to the commencement of mining, Indigenous people would have a minimum of 50 per cent ownership of projects (their ownership of the land on which the development takes place justifying their 50 per cent equity), work for *all* local Indigenous people who required it would be found, training would be provided to Indigenous local people to assist them with careers in the operation and imported staff would undergo training in relation to local Indigenous culture.

The Crown's conceding Indigenous ownership of minerals would be one way to transfer substantial resources to Indigenous communities without affecting any non-Indigenous person's *individual* interests. Howard's ten-point plan took property rights from Indigenous people that the High Court had found them to have retained and gave those property rights to leaseholders whom the High Court had found did not have such rights (Reynolds 1999, ch. 14). Such responses towards perceived gains by Indigenous people are fuelled by a downward envy promoted by the same politicians who set out to diminish poor people's access to welfare services in recent years. There has been a conscious drive to replace concepts such as entitlements and rights with ideas of obligation and duty. Alongside this

debate have been attempts to deflect Indigenous Australians from their efforts to gain land rights, self-determination, reparation, sovereignty and a treaty.

Reconciliation/treaty

Indigenous Australians survived invasion, dispossession, genocide, protection, exclusion, assimilation, integration, self-management and even the promise of self-determination (which was held out by the Keating Government as part of its plans for reconciliation). The Howard Government has relentlessly opposed Indigenous self-determination on the grounds that it undermines 'national sovereignty' (contra Daes 2004; Tomlinson 1996). Indigenous people have instead been offered the Howard/Herron/Ruddock/Vanstone prescription of 'practical reconciliation' provided they are quiescent about Indigenous sovereignty and land rights.

The provision of adequate shelter, nutrition, sanitation, health, community and educational services is an extremely important part of the Indigenous people's struggle to obtain equity with other Australians. It is as important to reach an accommodation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in relation to land rights, self-determination, reparation, sovereignty and a treaty (Daes 2004). Sanitising the history, which accords Aborigines passive civil rights, but denies them self-determination, cannot and should not be used as a convenient ploy to justify 'new age' mutual obligation ideology.

A treaty is central to any move towards a just accommodation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The claim of non-Indigenous peoples to sovereignty of this country, *in the absence of a treaty*, relies on the right of conquest (Daes 2004). If a treaty can be agreed then, and only then, would non-Indigenous Australians be able to claim their continuing right of residence and shared sovereignty of the nation as treaty partners (Snedden 2004). A treaty is simply a road map to the future. It is difficult to conceive a just accommodation (treaty) being reached until Indigenous Australians are allowed to exercise self-determination. This requires substantial reparation being made to Indigenous Australians in order that they can pursue their aspirations without being dependent on 'handouts' from the far more affluent non-Indigenous population. Providing secure land title (land rights) would secure partial reparation and be a step on the road to both reconciliation and a treaty.

Secure income guarantee

Since 1986 Australian governments have reduced the generosity and comprehensiveness of social security provisions (Tomlinson 2003). From 1999 on Noel Pearson has expended much effort condemning the social security system for undermining Indigenous society. I am not suggesting that the existing system of social security in Australia is without flaws. Rather, this is an argument to move towards a generous universal system of Basic Income rather than reduce people's access to social services (Standing 2002, 2004; Van Parijs 1992, 1997; Murray 1997; Lerner et al. 1999; Tomlinson 2003; see also Basic Income Guarantee Australia

website 2005; Basic Income Earth Network 2005). Essentially a 'basic income' is a universal payment made to each permanent resident of a country, irrespective of his or her economic or social status. The relevance of this model as an alternative is that it demands no readiness to seek employment as a condition for receiving income support.

Conclusion

There are many similarities between the days of the 'protection' system (1897–1975) and the behaviour of the Howard and Beattie governments. The Queensland Government no longer steals Indigenous workers' wages but it still refuses to make proper reparation for the monies stolen by previous government agents. It disproportionately jails Indigenous offenders and takes Indigenous children from their communities. Both governments grossly under-fund Indigenous health, housing and community services and this is killing Indigenous people.

The failure to pass commonwealth or Queensland legislation providing secure land rights to Indigenous Australians guarantees that whenever white interests want Indigenous land they will be able to take it, admittedly they might have to pay some token compensation (if Aboriginal people have native title rights in respect of the land). The failure to grant mineral rights to Indigenous people ensures that they will remain poorer than other Australians.

The Howard Government has not negotiated a reconciliation agreement between Indigenous and other Australians. It has impeded Indigenous self-determination at every turn. Its 'ten-point plan', its refusal to say sorry to Indigenous people for the 'Stolen Generations' and its incapacity to respond positively to the symbolic issues at the heart of the Indigenous struggle for justice and self-determination impede its working alongside Indigenous communities. When the Beattie Government's plans have been opposed by Indigenous leaders, ministers often attempt to marginalise them and promote the interests of other leaders. These are some of the obstacles to either of these governments engaging cooperatively with Indigenous communities. The term 'community partnership' as it is used by the Howard or Beattie governments is misleading — neither attempt to develop a shared vision with the communities on which they are attempting to impose their policies (McDonald and Zetlin 2004).

Australian governments (state and federal) are incapacitated by two major impediments to working cooperatively with Indigenous people. Firstly, they operate from an invader's perspective — they are blind to the important cultural and political contexts of Indigenous people. It is as if they are trying to work at a community level whilst ignoring the socio-historical context of Indigenous people. These governments claim they want reconciliation but are incapable of coming to a treaty that is just to both invader and invaded. The modus operandi is — what is currently in white hands stays in white hands and what Indigenous people have is open to expropriation. Secondly, current governments in this country are

ideologically obsessed by seven century old moral imperatives that have long outlived their usefulness. Together these two obstacles combine to ensure that, as far as governments are concerned, only conservative assimilationist programs will be tolerated on Indigenous communities.

Acknowledgments

I thank Penny Harrington for her generous editorial assistance.

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