

The Sad Predictability of Indigenous Affairs

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The recycling of debates around welfare, violence and history in Settler-Indigenous Australian affairs involves the circulation of some well-worn perspectives. For new – and not-so-new – assimilationists such as Janet Albrechtsen, Peter Howson, Paul Toohey and Gary Johns, recent high-profile discussions around violence and the playing out of ATSIC politics are proof that any particular identification with land and culture by Aboriginal people is misplaced. We are told that with “autonomy” has not come responsibility. The time has arrived, so they tell us, for the end of “special” programs, time for all Aboriginal people to join the modern world, to get a job and develop neoliberal self-responsibility. Over the past 30 years of Indigenous affairs this perspective has operated in opposition to the more moderate rhetoric and practice of the Left.

Surprising though, at least to leftist supporters of Indigenous rights, is that respected anthropologist, Peter Sutton, has added to this drumbeat. Sutton begins a 2001 academic paper by arguing that levels of violence and depravity require examination of the ‘complex joining together of recent ... factors of external impact, with a substantial number of ancient, pre-existent social and cultural factors’¹. He ends arguing for significant shifts in culture and economy for Aboriginal people. Most recently, in Paul Toohey’s article (The Australian 13th June p 11), he is quoted as openly challenging the different treatment of Aboriginal communities and the wisdom of Aboriginal liberation politics.

So what were the gains of “liberation” politics? During the 1960s, Aboriginal people asserted rights to freedom of movement, to vote, minimum wages, access to a minimum level of social security, education, to consume alcohol and so on. The resulting achievements helped to close the gap between Aboriginal status as determined by legislative and administrative action at both Commonwealth and State levels on one hand, and rights of citizenship on the other. In practice this translated as the removal of discriminatory practices which barred Aboriginal people from participating fully in the civic life of white Australia.

During the 1970s and 1980s, the expression of “liberation” politics fell considerably upon the shoulders of Charles Perkins. The intention of Perkins and others was to reverse the position of Aboriginal people as mere recipients of bureaucratic processes to positions of control within the administration. Over time, administrative systems changed the colour scheme of service-delivery and Aboriginal people came to occupy positions to manage that delivery. But while the policies developed advocated Aboriginal aspirations, they remained tied to mainstream ways of doing things. The slogan, *whitefella wants for blackfella needs* became its articulation among some Aboriginal people.

¹ Sutton, P. 2001 "The politics of suffering: Indigenous policy in Australia since the 1970s." *Anthropological Forum*, 11(2), Nov 2001), 125 – 173, page 127.

There is no doubt that there is some value in reforming administrative arrangements in response to symptoms such as those identified by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. But this approach also has its dangers. For Aboriginal people, it means beginning to trade in a different currency. A major risk lies in adopting this currency. By trading in “whitegoods” Aboriginal politics, policies, the articulation of interests, problems and solutions, are defined through the administrative expressions seeking Aboriginal involvement. This occurs at the expense of knowledge informed by Aboriginal history and experience with white institutions.

To take up Sutton’s point about the coming together of cultural factors, there was little or no deep-seated recognition of a difference of culture or values during the mobilization of “liberation” politics. White Australia may market the distinct values and cultures of Aboriginal Australia in pursuit of economic gain and national symbolism, but in relation to political and administrative policies Aboriginal values are considered to be in common with all Australians. Aboriginal gains from “liberation” politics include access to white citizenship, incorporatist models, institutional and internal assimilationist policies and practices. In short, an opportunity to act and think white.

If the rhetoric of the Left gives Aboriginal people the opportunity to be subsumed with “whitegoods” and the right insist that only “whitegoods” are marketable, how can they claim to be so opposed? Process. The Left graciously offers up “whitegoods” while salving the nation’s collective soul, the Right says take it or leave it. Here the operation of power effected by the Left has perhaps proved the more effective through its encouragement of Aboriginal ownership. Somewhat ironically, the so-called “separatist” policies of the past 30 years may be the most successful practices of assimilation Aboriginal people have encountered. The point of departure between Left and Right concerns means, not ends. Their respective ideologies may take the field but they are both bound by the political philosophy of a liberal democratic tradition just as the current history wars largely operate through the Western historical tradition.

The result in the administration of Aboriginal affairs and the associated politics is that critiques from Left and Right have consistently been restricted to the management paradigm. This focus on administrative content and process to the exclusion of structures and values has created false oppositions in politicking about Aboriginal policy. The massive failing in all this is that the management paradigm can only evaluate its projects self-referentially, it has no way of engaging the interface between the two cultures. When governments encounter policy failure their immediate response is to modify the inputs, occasionally their own, but predominantly those organizations charged with the responsibility to deliver the intended policy outcomes.

This repackaging only enables government to change how they do things, not what they are doing. It simply allows administrative arrangements to reinvent new strategies for old ideas over and over until we reach points like the current crisis. Along the way, the rug has slipped out from under Leftist and Aboriginal leaders, undermining their rhetoric for substantive equality, justice and rights. Previously, the argument was that whitefellas couldn’t deal with black programs. Under the banner of self-determination blackfellas

took up the reins. Now that the wagon has lost its way, nobody is more to blame than anyone else: white oppression “disappears” as problems faced by Aboriginal people are rendered as problems that any people might face.

Well-meaning leftists are strangely silent in the face of shocking statistics and anecdotes from Aboriginal communities. Aboriginal claims framed through rights discourse are also muted as they spin their wheels in the terrain stalked by the new assimilationists: “whitegoods” have a limited life – trading in them can bring you unstuck. It is here that politically astute and skilled operators like Noel Pearson carve out a place for themselves. At times Pearson advocates taking responsibility and acting decisively on substance abuse with limited or no reference to historical context. At other times he invokes land rights, values and history. And then he mixes it up with word-plays about the right to take responsibility. Here we rejoin the new assimilationists. The identification with “whitegoods” and the taking of responsibility politely identifies black culture as the failure. Meanwhile, the new assimilationists shout it out.

But what happened to Sutton’s call to examine the complex joining together of cultural factors? He says all bets are off and that everything must be up for consideration, which sounds eminently sensible in such a tight situation. However, not up for examination, it seems, is Sutton’s own culture. White culture including bureaucratic management paradigms, liberal values and notions such as rights, representation, and democracy are not tackled in his paper or in any of the contemporary debate.

In all of this, the debate about policy failure in Aboriginal affairs ignores the cultural assumptions and biases of a white worldview of “civil society” or, in the case of the history wars, the contours and constraints of white history grappling with its own story. These assumptions sustain relationships between polity and institutions that reinforce liberal Western culture. Charles Perkins often made comment about the fear of white backlash. This was not imagined. In the current debate it would seem that those in the best position to advocate Aboriginal interests, cower under its shadow.

Yes, it is time that all bets were off, that *everything*, was up for consideration. This should include a critical examination of Australia’s political and administrative rationality and (the history of) its intersection with Aboriginal culture. In short, we need a dialogue between European and Aboriginal political values and systems. It’s time for conversations rather than conversion, brow beating and false oppositions.