What does Cape York Want?

Howard, Pearson and 'new directions' in Aboriginal policy

Hopevale (or Hope Vale), an Aboriginal community of about 750 people on eastern Cape York Peninsula, received a brief visit from Prime Minister John Howard on October 24, en route to a Pacific Forum meeting in Papua New Guinea. The locals had been instructed by his officials to obtain a brand new toilet for his exclusive use. Perhaps, like Martin Luther who was famous for his epiphanies at stool, Howard had chosen this former Lutheran mission as a suitable place to rethink official relations with the dark-skinned of the earth.

Assuming that the visit was more than a 'comfort stop' and less than a change of heart, Howard would have been glad of the ensuing shower of media attention to 'new' directions in Aboriginal policy. As the Australian reported (25 October 2005):

John Howard got everything he wanted out of yesterday's visit to the Hopevale Aboriginal community - a plea to end 'postcode money' welfare, support for indigenous home ownership, no demand for an apology and, to top it off, a Peter Costello (the same name as Howard's restive heir apparent) who reckons the Prime Minister should stay on in the job.

Hopevale is the home community of Noel Pearson, the Aboriginal leader who has taken sometimes controversial positions, or rather, some of whose remarks have been seized upon by media and government to support their narrow predilections or agendas. Pearson has been rewarded with funding for favoured projects and institutions, and by contact with Howard and his government.

Howard met Pearson in Hopevale and news media carried photos of the two men seated outdoors in the new universal backyard plastic chair. It appeared that all the lights were grouped facing them. Like Yalta, the proximity of the principals did not appear to indicate a marriage of true minds. Indeed, the photos from the visit showed Howard looking sour and sceptical, apart from obligatory mirthless laughter at the embrace of his local admirer, Peter Costello, aged 91. The handouts to the community were small and unremarkable, certainly not worth a prime ministerial visit.

The next day Howard told a radio station in Cairns, 'I like, on a fairly regular basis, to visit Aboriginal communities. I went to one in the Northern Territory a few months ago.' In fact, both Hopevale and the earlier Wadeye visit were remarkable because they were so unusual. Howard does not regularly visit such places. In Wadeye he spent almost the entire time cocomoned in meetings on unrelated subjects with his advisers. Getting to know the scene was merely a front. The Hopevale visit was as short as possible. (Pearson then met him outside town on his own land like an English lord of the manor.)

All this is worth noting. Cape York — as the great peninsula is casually known — named for the small cape at its northern tip, has a large place in Australian consciousness. It is the most remote and least accessible corner of the country; the 'last frontier'; 'the last wilderness'; an Aboriginal homeland where local people may be closer to their ancient traditions and ways than elsewhere; and so on. It has also been the locale of various white man's visions, from a world spaceport to, currently, a jungly retreat for Vietnam war veterans (some of whom are very impatient in dismissing the moral imperatives of the local people who have lived there for many thousands of years). Australians who will never see the region feel that they have a moral and cultural stake in it. This is a significant potential political resource for Aboriginals if they wish to use it.

Like other iconic regions, such as Canada's North or Danish Greenland, the local people will define its present and future in their own way, and draw on their past to do so. On Cape York that was a very bloody, yes, even genocidal past at times. They are unlikely to see it in the misty way various urban Australian editorials do, some sort of Brigadoon with happy folk emerging, singing, from the mist every century to warm our hearts.

Cape York has recently become a White Man's fantasy of eagerly assimilating blacks, in part due to distortions of Pearson's message about welfare 'poison'.

Noel Pearson has been playing a high-stakes poker game, trading hope of immediate benefits for the goodwill and understanding of many previously supportive indigenous and non-indigenous people around the country. With that goodwill now lost, only he can tell whether this approach has been worth it for himself politically and for his region materially. Certainly his own vision of the future of Cape York is larger and more expansive than the essentially assimilationist delusions of the Howard government.

In Canada, for many years, the national leaders and much of the commentariat asked, rhetorically and often petulantly, 'What does Quebec want?' The problem was not that they didn't know or hear the demands from Francophone activists in Quebec; rather, they did not want to accept such challenges to their conventional ideas of Canada's political culture and constitution.

One may imagine an entire self-governing regional territory with Aborigines making big decisions and pocketing revenues, with a great deal of local cultural and political autonomy within such a structure, like Nunavik (Inuit Quebec). Then Cape York people would really be equals within Australia, as Noel Pearson and many others desire.

Meanwhile the Prime Minister's new toilet remains, unsullied by black bottoms. As a Hopevale friend said to me, 'Doesn't that just say it all about the Howard government?'

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