Howard washes whiter!
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The over-simplification – or trivialisation – of indigenous policy discussion in Australia is no less a problem than supposedly ‘practical’ or ‘concrete’ matters. The sheer illogic of many calls for ‘practical’ betterment belies their supposed common sense, rationality, and obviousness. Not all the notables who hector and moralise have any real idea of how things really work or what to do. We need a new way of talking as much as improved social and economic statistics.

The Australian produces a flow of editorials on indigenous affairs. This commitment is admirable, but not always illuminating. On 10 December 2004 an editorial makes its biggest point in the title, ‘Defending the real rights of Aborigines’, and begins with an attack on the shadow minister for indigenous affairs: ‘If Kim Carr really wants to help indigenous Australians living in remote impoverished communities he will shut up until he has a constructive contribution to make to the debate on the Howard Government's mutual obligation plan.’

This tone and style of putdown is characteristic of the Howard government, to the point that the national newspaper sometimes sounds like a ministerial press release. It is a tone unlikely to win new supporters to an argument, and more likely to alienate the relatively well informed reader of a national newspaper, someone reasonably open-minded on most issues. The notorious Howard ‘dog whistling’ and ‘wedge’ tactics may work with the mass voting public – a readership is surely different.

The same editorial ends: ‘objections [by some national indigenous leaders] are based in an old-fashioned ideology that emphasises abstract rights and is born of an obsession with the dispossession of indigenous Australians in times past. They come from the age of freedom marches, when indigenous rights were still to be won, times when black Australians did not have their right to vote enshrined in law and where what was effectively apartheid was practised in country towns. But the ideological issues now being pursued, such as an apology for the stolen generation, and anger over Aboriginal deaths in custody, are very much second order issues in the struggle to improve the health of all Aborigines. The distress of the 1000 people who protested in Townsville over the death of [Mulrunji] Doomadgee while in police custody on Palm Island last month is understandable. They have a right to know what happened. But it does nothing to help kids who are at high risk of going blind.’

Another editorial in The Australian, 19 February 2005, ‘Land rights should apply to individuals’, we get the same tone, beginning ‘Although conservatives will rail against new ideas, we are finally seeing the possibility of practical solutions to the problems of indigenous Australians. … At present, much Aboriginal land is held in common by communities, with individuals barred from owning, or purchasing property. This conforms to the old ideology of the land rights movement, that
indigenous communities are happiest practising primitive socialism and are culturally comfortable with collective control of homes and land. This may be so, but it ignores the reality of incompetence and corruption that bedevils the administration of land councils. In essence, when everybody owns assets, it can be hard to find individuals prepared to take responsibility for them.

The language is loaded and coded – ‘conservatives’ are the liberals and Left, ‘new ideas’ are early post-1945 policies being recycled past an uninformed or uninterested public, and the attributions about ‘primitive socialism’, etc., part of the endless ideological song-duel which has everything to do with comfortable white men’s rivalry in Australia’s Establishment and very little to do with Aborigines.

This editorial ends as near-Romantic poetry, an ode to the bliss of Australian home ownership: ‘Private ownership of communal assets cannot cure the poverty, substance abuse and domestic violence that bedevils bush settlements. Nor will owning property in communities without an economic base make anybody rich. But it offers an alternative to the collectivised welfare that has done little to help indigenous Australians prosper. ... Home ownership is an Australian dream many Aborigines are happy to embrace if they have the chance.’

Perhaps the writer was too hasty, could not recall what s/he wished to say, and spun off tearfully into a reverie of the childhood home. The piece totally ignores the value to indigenous people of living in community for social and cultural purposes, the more important for mutual support in an often hostile society where jobs and income are scarce. Moreover, an Anglophone white Australian can live anywhere in Australia and have local, state, and federal government which ‘speaks our language’ and governs with our values, the Pitjantjatjara or Murray Islanders have much less choice.

No print medium has more potential for good than The Australian. It has been admirable in publishing many comments as well as other articles including lengthy obituaries of notable indigenous persons and celebrations of indigenous graphic, performance, writing and other arts. But we must all move beyond rant and detergent slogans – Howard washes whiter! – in order to solve problems. Whites exchanging barbs are no substitute for policy-makers meeting with indigenous politicians. A politics and language of mutual courtesy and attempt at understanding between indigenous leaders national, regional, or local, and serious interlocutors among the non-indigenous majority, are required for solving the problems identified by both sides.

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