



WHITEMAN'S DREAMING

The grand experiment of separate development and self-determination has failed. We need an exit strategy

BOOK EXTRACT
 BY GARY JOHNS



THE dream of the whiteman, that Aborigines could live collectively and separately from the rest of Australia, has turned sour.

The Christian missionaries, for example, were right to protect Aborigines from the worst of the rapacious whiteman's world, and right to prepare Aborigines for the modern world.

They were wrong, however, to abandon those efforts in favour of self-determination. In doing so they, and many others, condemned Aborigines to playing out a whiteman's dream of Aborigines living in ancient ways in an ancient landscape. Now, many years on, it is time to make amends.

Noel Pearson urges policymakers to move beyond what he terms the "campaign Aboriginal", an Aborigine fighting to protect land for recognition.

With some exceptions, for example the Wild Rivers legislation in Cape York, Aborigines do not have to campaign for their rights, or land, or recognition; these have been assured for years.

Yet recent visits by the presi-

dent of Amnesty International and the UN Special Rapporteur to Alice Springs town camps and elsewhere are given prominent coverage in the media, as if there was some profound remedy for Aboriginal strife in their pre-digested human rights policy medicine.

Aborigines do not lack rights. Their struggle is with their past, the ingrained habits of generations that prevent some from getting a foothold in the Australian economy. Aborigines do not need new homes so much as new lives; they need to change their behaviour. Unfortunately, many Aboriginal leaders misdiagnose their people's dilemma.

Galarrwuy Yunupingu boasts: "I have maintained the traditions, kept the law, performed my role, yet the Yolngu world is in crisis; we have stood still. I look around me and I feel the powerlessness of all our leaders. All around me are do-gooders and no-hopers ... Whitefellas. Balanda. Although the wealth of the Australian na-



tion has been taken from our soil, our communities and homelands bear no resemblance to the great towns and metropolises of the modern Australian nation.”

Yunupingu wants the white-man’s economy and the black-man’s culture — what could be simpler? But does Yunupingu seriously suggest Aborigines could build cities and economies, and remain the unskilled people of the Yolngu tribes?

To argue that wealth was taken from Aboriginal soil is to assume that civilisation does not exist and that wealth was sitting there waiting to be plucked. Wealth is not plucked or stolen, it is created, and Yunupingu would be a poorer man if it were not so.

Aboriginal tribal life was radically different to modern life in both culture and economy. Tribal Aborigines had no real understanding of how the world worked; their profound lack of understanding was masked by ritual as a means of explaining events, whether abundance or absence of food, or life and death.

Tribal Aborigines no longer exist but, if they did, public policy would dictate either they be assisted to enter the modern world, which would destroy their belief system and consequentially their authority system, or they would be left to fend for themselves. Policy has swung between these two views for more than 200 years.

All appeals to save “the Aborigine” founded on the idea of a pristine original state and a fall from grace are doomed to fail. They are not only wildly inaccurate, they provide no answers to the present predicament, and they get in the way of saving the children.

All Australian Aborigines live in the modern world and most thrive in that world. A minority do not. They have been led to believe that they can avoid it by living on “country”, or possibly in cities, living their culture and avoiding the realities of the non-subsidised economy. The belief has irreversibly damaged thousands of Aborigines, causing them to fail.

Successful Aborigines, those

who do not unduly rely on others for their wellbeing, are, by and large, descendants of those who were prepared for the modern world, often by missionaries and government patrol officers.

These people knew a great deal about Aboriginal culture and its shortcomings.

Successful Aborigines have language and skills sufficient to get a job and support a family. To all intents and purposes successful Aborigines are integrated into the economy and society.

A minority of Aborigines live in a world of faux culture, faux economics, degradation and violence. The latter group, overwhelmingly although by no means exclusively living on their lands in discrete and remote communities, is being excluded from the economy.

The question is, why?

Faced by a strong ideological push to re-create an “Aboriginal society”, governments have condemned 100,000 or so Aborigines living mainly in remote areas to a living hell.

The elaborate inquiries in the 1990s into Aboriginal deaths in custody and the Stolen Generations and in the 2000s into Aboriginal child sexual abuse came up with the same answers, that “Aboriginal culture” must be respected and “Aboriginal communities” must take charge of their destiny. But what if this “solution” is the problem? What if the culture is no more than people behaving badly, a result of blighted environments, poor incentives, awful history and a historic culture best relegated to museums and occasional ceremonies?

What if these communities are hopeless, in economic terms and every other respect, and their only rationale is that an ancient band of people once inhabited them or, more brazenly, where some remain in the hope that through land rights they may gain a windfall from a resources company?

These are the uncomfortable questions governments avoid asking lest they be labelled racist. Yet in avoiding them they are being racist and intellectually dishonest.

Aborigines did not prosper in Australia. They simply survived. They were small bands of hunter-gatherers who did not develop metal tools or writing and or political structures, in as much as they had nothing to administer, no taxes, no surplus to distribute or hold, no means to hold prisoners, no public works to administer.

The world changed for Aborigines the moment the whiteman arrived and bequeathed stored food. Much of the *raison d’être* for their “way of life” or “culture” evaporated. That day, Aborigines wanted more because they could have more.

The fact they would have to change to continue to receive it is cast as a tragedy. It is only a tragedy if what is given up is more valuable than what is gained.

Part of the tragedy of the past 40 years is that the intelligentsia believe that what was given up was more valuable.

The essential misconception of separatists and protectionists is that they want both to be left alone and to have all the rewards that others work to achieve.

Integration has delivered more Aborigines more happiness than the separatist and human rights agenda has ever dreamed of. But the separatists deny the “counterfactual”, that things would not have remained for Aborigines as

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An early land rights march in the Northern Territory. The Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act was proclaimed in 1977

they always had: living short, brutish lives, lives that none would now choose.

At Daly River, Northern Territory, in 1932 the great Australian anthropologist W. E. H. Stanner observed “two intertribal coalitions existed which were acute in conflict. The surface of life was, for the most part, peaceable enough but under the surface something like a state of terror existed.”

People may choose elements of their old life but, in so choosing, there are trade-offs. An insufficient investment in the self leaves Aborigines vulnerable and dependent on the whiteman.

THE widely supported goal of Aboriginal policy is to close the gap in living standards and life expectancy between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians. How this should be achieved is problematic. For at least 30 years policy has been sympathetic to the idea that Aborigines would remain in another economy.

There were two mutually reinforcing sources for this, from very different sides of politics.

The first was the mainly southern intellectuals' romance with the “culture cult” (a cult that holds that primitive culture is not inferior to modern civilisation).

The second was the mainly northern settlers' practice of “not-in-my-back-yard” (Aborigines are best kept away from town).

Each was ignorant and prejudicial to the interests of Aborigines, although the excuse in the latter case is the northerners had to face the painful adjustment of those who failed to integrate into town life.

In hindsight, the period circa 1970 to 2006 will be viewed as an interruption to the long-run process of absorption and integration of the Aboriginal people, which began at European settlement. In hindsight it will be clear that no policy of separation could hold back the forces of change, but they

could foul the process of adjustment and leave vulnerable people with false hope and no skills.

Self-determination interrupted integration by preventing Aborigines from adapting to opportunities. The consequences have been tragic.

Closing the gap requires overcoming previous policy settings and establishing new ones. The contention here is that the best strategy is to encourage individuals to make sufficient investment in their capacity to enable them to conduct their lives without government support.

The difficulty is that government support is the sine qua non of Aboriginal politics. The support is for individuals and for organisations.

In common with other Australians, all eligible Aborigines receive government benefits. Unlike other Australians, eligible Aborigines have few obligations to fulfil to receive benefits.

Only very recently have Aborigines, especially those in remote communities, had to, for example, demonstrate that they were searching for employment to qualify for unemployment benefits.

A second element of government support is that Aboriginal organisations are funded to deliver programs to Aborigines. Only very recently have governments sought to have Aboriginal programs delivered by “mainstream” providers.

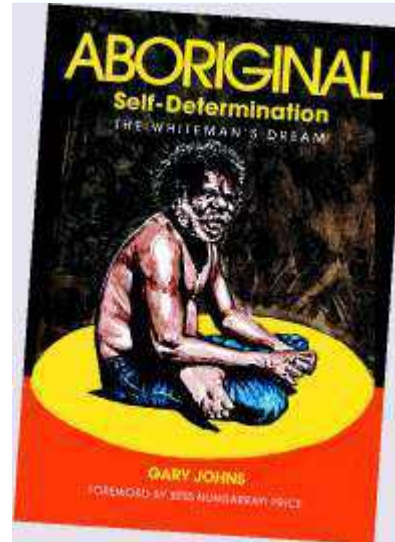
The change signals a significant emphasis on the consumer as opposed to the producer of services.

The change also signals a shift away from Aboriginal self-determination and towards integration. Integration is here defined as a government and personal goal to ensure that an individual has skills sufficient to get a job and support a family.

Moreover, the (regulated) market economy is the principal

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determinant of opportunities. How people live, their culture, is by and large a private matter. Culture becomes a matter for public policy only when behaviour sanctioned by "the culture" offends public decency and/or the law.

By contrast, self-determination is defined as a government and personal goal whereby collective political means are used as the principal determinant of opportunities. The prime value is equity, where equity means sharing the spoils of others' labour. The self-determination strategies give weight to cultural and group rights and deny that these may inhibit individual initiative.

The extraordinarily high level of intermarriage between Aborigines and non-Aborigines in Australia makes a nonsense of the notion that racial prejudice is at the heart of Aboriginal despair.

Where prejudice exists it is likely to be based on observations of bad behaviour: drunkenness and violence, not race.

Integration is a social and economic process. If entered into freely (albeit under vastly changed conditions from pre-European settlement) it is a measure that people are coping in the new conditions.

The new leftist fashion called "social inclusion" does not seem to be applied to Aborigines who are deemed not to need to make the sacrifices that others must make to be included, for example to learn English and attend school.

This is at the heart of the matter. Aboriginal children in remote communities often have fewer skills than their grandparents

who, thanks to missionaries and government officers, were trained and able to cope with modernity. In doing so, they had choices to stay or go to work and earn, or spend more time at leisure.

Their grandchildren are left to "play" Aborigine without the need to hunt and gather, or indulge the ancient belief in tribal ritual.

Instead, they converse in a pidgin language, attend sports days and funerals, watch pornography and take drugs. This is not an exaggeration; these are the findings of the many recent inquiries into the Aboriginal condition in remote communities.

The starting point for those who wish to have Aborigines functioning inside the mainstream economy is not Aboriginal organisational control but the capacity of Aborigines.

If governments want to close the gap in life opportunities they will have to intensify the shift away from self-determination (including collective land rights and separate administration of public programs) to the capacity of Aboriginal people to take advantage of opportunities in the economy.

The reason for the policy shift is that self-determination has failed too many Aboriginal people. It is also true that integration has been taking place throughout the entire self-determination period regardless of "official" policy. After all, no Aborigines live a traditional lifestyle.

Many Aborigines are fully engaged in the economy and live in cities and towns; many marry non-Aborigines.

The purpose of economic integration is not to demand that

Aborigines leave their land but that they become economically independent.

In becoming independent, Aborigines may remain on their land or they may move.

The question is where and under what circumstances the prospects for becoming economically independent are greatest, and who should decide these matters.

For example, Aborigines travel widely from homeland to town and regional centre for recreation, family reasons and living off others, but Aborigines rarely travel for work.

If no suitable employment can be found locally, finding work elsewhere will lead to significant or permanent absence from home. To avoid this uncomfortable truth, governments develop "make work" schemes such as Community Development Employment Projects and economic development programs.

These schemes do not solve unemployment; instead they intensify the problem by creating a disincentive for Aborigines to adjust to the market economy.

The transition to an integrated Aboriginal community will have its casualties, particularly among those who cannot adjust to the wider opportunities available in the economy.

In this category are tens of thousands of Aboriginal men living in remote communities, in fringe town camps and, to a lesser extent, in urban ghettos.

They will find it difficult to cope, for example, with the removal of remote area exemptions that will make receipt of welfare payments conditional on entering



training or job search or CDEP.

The winners will be women, if they can escape the violence of remote settlements and fringe dwellings, and children, if they can attend schools regularly, probably away from their communities.

The front-line troops in the transition will be Centrelink offices and officers, who will be under enormous pressure to let applicants move on to disability or other such pensions. The front-line places will be regional centres in the far north and west, including the Alice Springs camps.

The challenge in Aboriginal policy is to change behaviour, to have Aboriginal children attend school, find a job and make a life independent of government.

To the extent these are difficult to achieve has little to do with a lack of government assistance, as that assistance has been massive.

The assistance, indeed, has displaced effort and reinforced breast beating. The culture has become the goal and has thus become an impediment to individual responsibility.

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The path to integration will need to be mapped out explicitly. It is the only hope for closing the gap. At present governments simply move from one funding

program to another. Aware of bad behaviour, aware of perverse incentives that hold people into present arrangements but too afraid to offend, governments demonstrate no convincing argument for any position.

In the present situation men and women know that there will be enough money to keep them alive and that they will have accommodation and some sort of employment. Any time they wish they can demonstrate their independence by doing what they please, even if this means being fired from work, expelled from school or for serious offences being sent to prison.

Whatever they do, they can be certain of being looked after. But in the past it would be inconceivable that they never learned to hunt or refused to hunt and yet expected to be fed and cared for.

Prejudice exhibited by some citizens against Aborigines is most likely against bad behaviour such as "pride and violence as a way of life", not against race. Often prejudice within Aboriginal communities is directed at the well-off or the hard workers who rise above the pack, the middleman minorities, not those who simply have no clue about how to engage the economy.

The pack mentality is evident in remote communities where it is difficult for an individual to rise above the pack. Group think can lead to copying bad rather than good behaviour.

By contrast, those who exult the culture are those whose own children sleep safely in their bed at night. Only these people would assert that "only when a group shares this sense of ethnic honour

can it achieve community closure and compete successfully for a fair share in economic and political opportunities".

The political strategy to idealise Aboriginal culture and use it as the glue to rekindle a sense of worth among Aborigines is the reason many Aborigines fail to embrace modern society and feel resentful of its gifts.

The halfway house strategy wherein Aborigines run their own organisations but are sustained by others is a recipe for dependence. The strategy relies on an amoral view of progress, that by simply occupying land a group of people should be entitled to the benefits of the intelligence and ingenuity that is produced from it by others.

This is rent-seeking at its worst. It is rarely appreciated that rent-seeking does not contribute to the producers; it destroys the rent-seekers by denying the ability to learn how to produce. It denies them a purpose for living.

The political strategy devised by the political Left has resulted in many blighted lives and many deaths. Those who wrote ceaselessly in defence of the indefensible killed Aborigines just as surely as any redneck grazer of the 19th century.

Edited extract from Aboriginal Self-Determination: The Whiteman's Dream by Gary Johns (Connor Court Publishing, \$29.95). Johns is an associate professor of public policy, Public Policy Institute, Australian Catholic University, and is president of the Bennelong Society. He was special minister of state in the Keating Labor government.