A SEPARATE POLICY FOR ABORIGINAL AUSTRALIANS: A PAPER TO THE LIBERAL FORUM (1987)

On 13 December 1985, Alan Missen wrote reminding me that he and I were to produce a paper on controversial aspects of policy directed towards Aborigines. No action was taken and, with his death, the opportunity for a joint paper was behind us. Nevertheless, I offered these thoughts to colleagues.

Why a Separate Policy?

One of the arguments being advanced increasingly frequently is that there is no justification for a separate policy for Aborigines and that we should make one set of arrangements for one homogeneous nation. Apart from this being a thin veil over a racist approach, it is inconsistent with our approach to other areas of policy where special programs and policies have been judged to be necessary. The most obvious example is in the area of veterans' affairs. Anyone propounding the 'abolish Aboriginal affairs' argument should be asked whether, in the name of consistency, they are willing to abolish veterans' affairs programs too? Generally those who are against Aborigines are not against veterans and their argument falls down.

But the main justification for separate programs rests on the demonstrated special needs and on the desperate social condition of Aboriginal Australians. In an attached paper from 1981, I set out some of the dimensions of Aboriginal disadvantage. The extent of Aboriginal disadvantage provides complete and sufficient argument for special responses and initiatives on behalf of government.

The Emerging Racist Backlash

Even at the time that Malcolm Fraser introduced the *Aboriginal Land Rights (NT) Act* in 1976, the coalition of interests sympathetic to the cause was only just strong enough to carry the day. Thinly veiled racist sentiment was always present in the joint party room and was certainly present in the public. It was fed by recognised extremist groups like the League of Rights and other 'white Australia' groups. Lately it has been exacerbated as an incidental spin-off from the campaign by mining interests to gut the *ALR (NT) Act* and to prevent any new legislation to secure Aboriginal land tenure. To the extent that the miners' campaign continues, so the racist backlash is likely to continue to gain strength.

Faulty Conceptualisation

But part of our problem rests with faulty (or absent) conceptualisation of the relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australia. Part of this problem is a product of history. We have passed through several policy stages in our two centuries here. The phase of conquest and dispossession was bloody and lasted for much of the first century. The phase of paternal protectionism lasted for another half to three-quarters of a century. It meant that Aborigines were guaranteed food, shelter, schooling, jobs at part-pay, but in return for this, they surrendered much decision-making to those providing for their needs, they surrendered their rights to equal treatment as citizens, and they surrendered control of their own lives.

There were some benefits in this model—Aborigines were not drunk (they were forbidden access to alcohol), they did not cause trouble (they were denied access to power), they were cleaner, etc. This philosophy merged closely with the concept of assimilation—the idea that the 'successful' Aboriginal was the one who most successfully adopted white standards and who succeeded in our terms.

Some people are fixed in the protectionist/assimilationist philosophical mould even today. The Queensland Government, for instance, and its Director, Mr Killoran, act as though they can do best by taking certain classes of decision from Aborigines and making decisions for them. People forget that Joh Bjelke-Petersen really was the chairman of the board of Hope Vale Mission for 15 years and that he did an enormous amount for (not with) Aborigines. People forget that Charles Court really did go annually to the Kimberley and visit each community in the heat of mid-summer for decades. It is just that they are fixed in the wrong game—and that they still want to play by yesterday's rules.

The later developments were in a theoretical framework that identified first, integration instead of assimilation, and later, self-determination as models for Aboriginal advancement. As liberals, we would of course wish to be associated with a philosophy that liberates and empowers people. For this reason we would support self-determination and would reject any proposal that sought to remove from Aboriginals power over those vital matters that affect their lives.

Lord Hailsham once said that giving freedom only has value if it includes the freedom to do things of which we do not approve. So we liberals have to accept that freedom for Aboriginals carries with it our acceptance of decisions that we consider wrong or inappropriate. It does not mean that we do not insist that power over decisions should be divorced from responsibility for them—and as minister I insisted that the two went together.

Controversies

With this conceptual appreciation, and with the contextual factors of special need and deprivation set out in the attached paper, all the controversies fall into place.

Some are racist—overt, naked and ugly. Some are racist manqué. Some relate to bad judgements by Aborigines in the use of their new power over their own lives—for example, the decision to become and remain an alcoholic (I am aware of the dual role of victim and autonomous decision maker here but offered the example anyway). Some relate to bad administrative decisions by government.

Some relate to interface problems—for example, the Aboriginal Secondary Grants Scheme (ABSEG) does help keep Aboriginal children in secondary school. The interface problem arises because equally needy white children cannot draw the same benefit. Some relate to faults in legislation—for example, the need to get amendments to the *ALR (NT) Act*.

Some relate to non-racist value differences, for example, between a paternalist/protectionist and a self-determinator. Many are aggravated by concurrent agendas and games, for example, between a state Labor premier and Labor prime minister and many are aggravated by the ignorant, banal, or mischievous treatment which the press gives to the issues.

Party Policy

Within our Coalition (both within the Liberal Party of Australia and between that party and the National Party) many of these factors operate today. They are added to by a sizeable dose of ignorance and ill-will.

At a minimum we must insist on full personal autonomy for Aboriginals, we must insist on special programs to respond to demonstrated need among Aboriginals, and we must insist on special arrangements, including adequate arrangements for land tenure, for Aboriginals in special circumstances.

We should be careful about the rights to royalties to mining available under the *ALR (NT) Act* at present. These are not, a priori, essential and could be replaced with other adequate government arrangements to provide an economic base to Aboriginal communities. In particular, while we oppose uniform national land rights for proper federalist reasons, we must not allow the parties to abandon all commitment to secure tenure of land under circumstances appropriate to need and location.

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