

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA
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The politics of suffering: Indigenous policy in Australia since the 1970s

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Introduction

Eminent epidemiologist Stephen Kunitz (1994:187) has said that:

failure to at least acknowledge the possibility that it is not simply poverty and oppression—real as these may be—but one's own culture that may contribute to some of the problems that confront so many communities may limit the likelihood of growth and positive change.¹

He said this after acknowledging the political difficulties of confronting such hard realities openly:

to suggest that precontact indigenous life was anything but Edenic and that traditional modes of socialization and social control may contribute to the contemporary problem of violence is to risk being accused of blaming the victims and excusing their oppressors.

Like Kunitz and others (see below), I am prepared to run this risk because the time is over for tinkering around the edges of the problems discussed here. The trend of what is called 'Indigenous disadvantage' in Australia does not show enough signs of improvement in critical areas to allow for any further complacency about the correctness of existing approaches; indeed, many Aboriginal people, both in my personal observation over 30 years and also on the available statistics, have actually suffered a decline in well-being in recent decades. There are, of course, others who have not, but in a number of places, especially but not exclusively remote settlements, there has been a dramatic decline into conditions of which most of the wider public is only dimly aware if at all.²

The contrast between progressivist public rhetoric about empowerment and self-determination and the raw evidence of a disastrous failure in major aspects of Australian Aboriginal affairs policy since the early 1970s is now frightening. Policy revision must go back to bedrock questions, with all bets off, if it is to respond meaningfully to this crisis. This means that *everything*, including the question of artificially perpetuating 'outback ghettos'³ or other similar bureaucratically maintained institutions, the encouragement of corporatism as against the

pursuit of individual needs and aspirations, *de facto laissez-faire* policing policies with regard to Indigenous community problems of violence, petrol sniffing and drug abuse, even separate Indigenous service delivery, should all be on the table.

Limits to the powers of policy should not be underestimated, and the historical burden of policy in creating misery should not be exaggerated. It is just one of several distinct factors in the mix. Having said that, it is arguable that policy, unlike history, is something we can change, and policy, unlike culture, is something that can be changed over a short period.

I should declare my biases at the outset. I completed the first draft of this paper in September 2000, just after returning from a particularly harrowing visit to a remote Aboriginal community with which I have had close personal and professional associations since the mid-1970s. I lived there, mainly in outstations, for long periods in the past and have visited in most years since 1973. What took me there this time was a double funeral for people I had known half a lifetime.

The cemetery there now reminds me of the Australian war graves at Villers-Bretonneaux in France, where my great-uncle Bert lies among thousands of other young men killed in World War I. White crosses, many of them fresh, stretch away seemingly for hundreds of metres. In my time with this community, eight people known to me have died at their own hands, two of them women, six of them men. Five of these were young people. From the same community in the same period, 13 people known to me have been victims of homicide, 8 of them women, 5 of them men, and 12 others (9 men and 3 women) have committed homicide. Most of these, again, were young people, and most of the homicides occurred in the home settlement of both assailant and victim. Of the eight spousal murders in this list, seven involved a man killing his female partner, only one a woman killing her husband. In almost all cases, assailants and victims were also relatives whose families had been linked to one another for generations. They were my relatives, too, in a non-biological 'tribal' sense. As far as I know, only one homicide and one suicide occurred in the same community between 1960 and 1985. A wet canteen was opened there, for the first time, in 1985.⁴ Most of the homicides and suicides I refer to here took place between 1986 and 2001. It has been a devastating time, in more ways than just these. This remote settlement is not alone in its experience of recent decades.

A significant number of other individuals known to me from the same place have died prematurely in other ways. Many of these premature deaths, and most of the homicides, have been alcohol-related, although alcohol alone cannot carry anything like a full explanation for the dramatic deterioration in the people's quality of life over a rather short period. The settlement has grown from about 600 to about 900 people in this time. Prior to the 1950s, most were resident in the same region but in a relatively decentralised way. For the majority, their lands have remained accessible and were long ago reserved for their use,

albeit increasingly under mission supervision until the 1970s. The community was not in the past a regular dumping ground for removals from distant areas. Certain classical traditions such as language use and ceremonial life remain comparatively strong, regionally speaking. The impact of constant high levels of conflict and crime on the members of such a small population of kin, now concentrated mainly in one village of suburban layout, is not easy to imagine for those who live in different circumstances.

On my return to the city, I felt unable to give comfort to the view that a non-Indigenous person should leave public statements on these questions to Indigenous people alone, although I am conscious that there are those who maintain this view with passion.⁵ The tragic circumstances I refer to are not alone the business of those who suffer them. Australians generally, I argue, carry a duty of care towards all citizens equally, and especially to the vulnerable.

Too often, unhappily, these profoundly difficult questions are turned into a compassion contest, a game of proving that ego is less racist or less bleeding-heart than thou, producing at times a subtle performance that masks what is in reality an exercise in the pursuit of one's own virtue at the expense of what one knows. 'Ideologuery' paints people into political corners, which can have the effect of deafening others to what they say, or to what their opponents say. Worse still, the questions I address here have become an arena in which partisan politics often makes use of Indigenous people as political footballs. If a serious and effective reappraisal of public policy and practice in this field is to occur, a politically non-partisan and non-ideological approach is of the utmost importance.

At a factual level very little of what I have to say here is new, at least for the Australian Indigenous intelligentsia, academic specialists and better informed bureaucrats and community workers in Indigenous affairs. I have tried to draw together both arguments and evidence from a number of related fields, and have had a great deal of helpful comment on earlier drafts from those acknowledged. The resulting range of opinions is, of course, my own.

In writing this paper I have been conscious of perhaps going out on a limb in limited company. In it, I say things that may rock the boat rather too roughly for some people. If that is the cost of trying to get the relevant debates onto a more honest and productive footing, so be it. Critics may suggest that I have played into the hands of those with interests hostile to those of Indigenous Australians, simply by saying certain things that, while possibly true, might be hijacked for purposes opposite to my own. What is most likely to trigger such a response is my unqualified position that a number of the serious problems Indigenous people face in Australia today arise from a complex joining together of recent, that is post-conquest, historical factors of external impact, with a substantial number of ancient, pre-existent social and cultural factors. Here I focus, in particular, on violent conflict.⁶

For many, the proposition that all Indigenous disadvantage has been caused by external impacts alone has been a sustaining fiction, one perhaps defended at times on the grounds that the masses cannot handle the subtlety of the truth and are inclined to simplism. On the contrary, it has been a relative silence about the complexity of the causal factors, not an acknowledgement of it, that has comforted and assisted those on both ends of the political spectrum with ideological axes to grind, and which may be eroding traditional liberal support for Indigenous causes. A relative silence promoted and policed by both the Left and a number of Indigenous activists has created a vacuum in public discussion that has been filled in recent years by those pursuing the agendas of the Right, to put it in somewhat antique political terms. The use of racial criticism to exclude non-Indigenous voices from debates—on the grounds that one's ancestry determines what topics one is allowed to speak about in public—has in this sense backfired.

The downward spiral since the 1970s

The downward spiral in many remote Aboriginal communities, as Noel Pearson (2000) has emphasised for Cape York Peninsula in his recent book, *Our right to take responsibility*, coincides with the era of 'passive welfare'. He dates the start of this era to the early 1970s. When Pearson (2000:20) says, 'It is passive welfare that has caused this social dissolution', many would agree that this is an important part of the truth but would also argue that there is much more to the story.

The welfare system has to be placed into historical context in order for its own effects even to be understood. The period after about 1970 was not only one of passive welfare but also, very crucially, the era in which systems of control and repression imposed on Indigenous people by church, state and private enterprises were generally displaced by the freedoms of liberal democratic policy, with its emphasis on community self-management and Indigenous self-determination. In many cases, especially in the earlier years but often still today, this governance shift was an emperor whose new clothes could amount to not much more than indirect administrative control by imported community advisers,⁷ whose sometimes very strict external accountability was often interwoven with a covert policy of *laissez-faire* towards the quality of local community life. A sudden breakdown of 'social control' in a number of Aboriginal settlements at this time was noticed by those in power in Canberra, but the situation was allowed to drift.⁸

This sudden release of external controls seemingly presupposed that the old pre-colonial ideological and coercive systems of social discipline would revive, even after having been so thoroughly smashed and displaced in so many cases by enforced change and the effects of an often brutal frontier where terrorism

was practised against the original inhabitants.⁹ Or perhaps it presupposed that the people would replace their own cultural values overnight and do what the new European-derived elected local councils told them to do, if indeed the councils ventured significantly down that path. Or perhaps it supposed that a new and unprecedented kind of internal system of control would arise quickly to cope with all eventualities. That these would have been unreasonable and naïve assumptions is plain to anyone who has lived in the relevant cultural contexts, and I discuss them further below. Current degrees of suffering from problems of sexual violence not only against women, including the elderly, but also against children of both sexes, and similar manifestations of shattered discipline in a number of settlements are in significant part attributable to the withdrawal of older, coercive and culturally prescribed regimes, both Indigenous and imposed, without provision for something resilient that would fill the resulting vacuums.

Unfortunately, the goodwill of the mandarins of policy in the 1970s was not always matched by their knowledge of the local facts of Aboriginal societies. Some were knowledgeable, many were not. A key driving force behind Indigenous policy change in the late 1960s and 1970s was H. C. Coombs. Around 1979, I clashed (politely) with Nugget Coombs over what I regarded as his lack of realism and his romanticised view of the practicability of the new policy regime, in a seminar at the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. A rapid frost indicated I had broken a taboo. Then, as now, some prominent people in the field of Indigenous policy have never lived daily with the reality of the conditions many Indigenous people contend with, often seeing only a brief 'presentation' of local life on the settlements, which are usually and naturally putting their best feet forward on the day. Not infrequently, this is an official experience sandwiched between air flights taken on the same day. As the late Francis Yunkaporta of Aurukun once put it, officials visiting remote communities tend to be *tippin' elbow* (i.e., looking at their watches) as the afternoon of their brief transit in the tropics wears on. A shift over recent decades from a non-Indigenous to an increasingly Indigenous officialdom has not necessarily altered these patterns dramatically. Bureaucracy is bureaucracy in anybody's language.

While Coombs had spent some time in Aboriginal communities and had for years enjoyed the advice of anthropologists, he was able to pursue his own visions with great determination. In particular, he seemed able to accommodate a profound contradiction, namely, the view that Aboriginal people would find it feasible to maintain major cultural and social structural patterns from their traditional past while at the same time pursuing economic and other forms of modernisation in bureaucratic and corporate ways derived from industrial society.¹⁰ However, there are other critical historical factors that have been at work in the last 30 years apart from welfare dependency and a withdrawal or defeat of disciplinarian regimes of local governance. From 1968, equal wages

for Aboriginal stockworkers proceeded to be enforced, resulting in extremely widespread and typically undesired departures from small communities on pastoral holdings, where local Aboriginal people had tended to live close to their homelands while enjoying, in many cases, meaningful employment. This was the same era in which motorbikes, helicopter mustering, diesel pumps, chain saws and four-wheel drive vehicles were reducing older labour needs through mechanisation, and the fencing of runs was improving stock control. With the collapse of pastoral employment, large numbers of Aboriginal people became concentrated in artificial Aboriginal townships or were attracted to fringe settlements at real towns on highways in, and sometimes even outside, their home regions. For many in the pastoral districts and in nearby labour pools on missions, this period (mainly the early and mid-1970s) was an entry into the gates of hell. Aboriginal people at times recall this era as being the most destructive in living memory. The process began later in some places, where increased access to alcohol was delayed, for example, by community decision.¹¹

For many people in remote and rural districts, however, the 1970s brought a dramatically increased access to alcohol, not only by demographic shifts but also following the extension of legal drinking rights to Aborigines. In some parts of the country, the installation of wet canteens was officially encouraged. Many such canteens were and are owned by local Indigenous councils, which must bear their social and medical consequences alongside financial profits; and, crucially, drinking, like any other kind of consumption, has to be funded. Rising real disposable incomes, while reflecting a reduction of economic disadvantage, have played a significant role in the intensification of alcohol-related problems.¹²

It is also important that this was the main era of the secularisation of Indigenous community administrations. Severed from their economic and bureaucratic powers, and denied their old coercive practices by modernising humanitarian values, in many places the moral and political authority of the churches was suddenly gutted. For a number of communities, this era spelled the end of all formal marriages, either by church or by custom; it was when a major decline occurred in household stability, and the era of supporting mothers' benefits began. Domestic family life was in many places severely challenged and frequently transformed in many ways, or even fundamentally altered.¹³

Add to these factors the will-sapping welfare dependency Pearson has stressed, the boredom and purposelessness of life in so many communities, as well as the psychological legacy of past years of ethnic discrimination, coercive assimilation, the devaluing of traditional male roles, and the mourning and lowered self-regard that followed what was often a brutal initial conquest, and it becomes easier to understand the widespread epidemic of alcohol and drug misuse that from the 1970s has run riot.

The new freedoms

Much of the rapid decline in people's lives can be located in this last 30 years of progress in civil rights, and in some cases might be attributed to the effects of granting some of those rights without planning for the consequences. It may thus be tempting to conclude that the political and legal gains of the time were of mixed value—apart from the attainment of equal rights, which was both proper and, in a political sense, inevitable. Land rights, viewed as a matter of natural property justice, may be seen as an equal rights matter also, and this is certainly how I see it. Clearly, land rights have not as a general rule led to improvements in social welfare, although this expectation perhaps misled many people.

More at issue, and increasingly a focus of public debate, is the long-term effect of a spreading structural and fiscal separation of service delivery to Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations, as distinct from matters of land ownership. Whether this really reflects 'self-determination' or an emphasis on the 'culturally appropriate' is variable and debatable, for several reasons: most rules and structures for such bureaucracies are determined externally; many administrative and financial positions in them are still held by non-Indigenous staff or by staff of Indigenous descent but Anglo culture; and the ideological culture of the operations themselves is often thoroughly Western. Aboriginal support for the fostering of a parallel universe of Indigenous services is not universal, but the influence of the dissenters is not large.¹⁴

While a perpetual segregation of services and Aboriginal residency may be supported by a number of leading Aboriginal people, at the national level many members of such elites tend to live in the suburbs, are not normally based in Aboriginal communities among kin, choose partners who are not Indigenous, and enjoy the lifestyle of their (and my) professional class. These are usually people who have attained their standing through talent, dedicated hard work, and formal education. Given such people are at times identified as 'role models' for oncoming youth, the way they frame or take part in debate on issues such as the relationship between administrative separatism and growing social integrationism will be very important in the years ahead. So also will be their response to one of the great unresolved issues of the last few decades, namely, the degree to which ameliorative policies should be based on identity as against need, a debate that shows little sign of going away. Services created for those in special need are not in question. Special services created on the basis of identity are under severe questioning.¹⁵

The Achilles' heel of recent policy history, as we may now say with the advantage of hindsight, was that the new levels of unemployment, new freedoms from authoritarian control, new concentrations of populations formerly dispersed, new accessibility of drugs, new alcohol-purchasing power, new 'sit-down money' for the unemployed, and so on, were not matched with measures

designed to assist people through the crises of occupation, discipline, motivation, conflict management and community trauma that soon erupted and have now reached a crescendo, especially in the remoter regions. One of the most obvious governmental omissions of the period was the failure to foresee the effects of the equal wages decision, at least in broad outline, or which, if foreseen, were ignored. In short, some of the problems frequently attributed to the British Empire's original conquest and dispossession have their roots in events much closer to our own time, although it has to be recognised that without the Empire there would have been no wages policy at all.

One of the major policy failures has been in the area of local and corporate governance. As Tim Rowse (2000b) has argued in some detail, policy in the early 1970s shifted from a predominant focus on the emancipation of the individual, hitherto the goal of assimilation, towards a 'communalising and corporatising' approach based on a doctrine of self-determination, combined with an emphasis on non-interference with Indigenous custom. Collective self-governance bodies were encouraged to enjoy 'culturally appropriate' values, structures and processes.

Custom, however, clashes with corporatism and with external accountability to the wider polity (Rowse 2000a:132–133, 192). Rowse questions the realism and empirical foundations of continued attempts to give priority to custom and culture in seeking to make Indigenous bodies accountable, given that custom and culture 'now coexist with indigenous social forms that are recently developed and consciously contrived' (Rowse 2000b:1520). Yet policy seemingly continues to be built on a willingness to ignore publicly the profound incompatibility between modernisation and cultural traditionalism in a situation where tradition was, originally at least, as far from modernism as it was possible to be.¹⁶ To proceed as if both were possible in this instance was the Coombsian contradiction. It was an illusion that was challenged while Coombs was alive,¹⁷ but he could be deaf to such reason, perhaps especially when fired up with the pursuit of an ideal that reflected virtue. It is sad to be forced, by the evidence of history, to come to the conclusion that the Coombs legacy in Aboriginal affairs has been a mixture of progress and disaster.

In case people are tempted to assign responsibility for the rights-based trends of which I speak solely to the Whitlam era (1972–75),¹⁸ it should be remembered that the primary policy shifts were initiated after the 1967 Referendum under a conservative federal government. This was when self-determination began to replace integration/assimilation as federal Indigenous affairs policy under conservative William McMahon's Prime Ministership in 1971.¹⁹ Changes brought about under Whitlam were largely maintained under Fraser's subsequent conservative government and the Hawke and Keating Labor governments that followed, right up to the present conservative Coalition term of office. Rather than assume a particular correlation between the party in government and

patterns of policy, it may be safer to associate this policy period with the success of the assertiveness of Indigenous people and the collaboration of their supporters. This alliance characterised a particular generation, one now coming to the end of its tenure as baby-boomers approach retirement. In many ways this success was real and substantial, especially in the arena of discrimination. In the fields of health and social welfare, however, and with some well-known exceptions such as the drop in neonatal mortality, the high hopes of that era have generally not been realised; though the 1970s paradigm is exhausted, it is still with us.

So it is that Professor Stanner's remarkable Boyer lectures of 1968 now make chilling reading, 33 years later:

Possibly the most dangerous theory, though it is scarcely that, is that things are now going well, that all we need to do is more of what we are already doing, that is, deepen and widen the welfare programmes, and the rest will come at a natural pace in its own good time. The trouble is that things are not going well. The gap between the average real conditions of the aborigines and ours shows signs of widening, not narrowing. (Stanner 1969:58)

Facing diversity

One of the more difficult issues with which this country is now grappling is the profound contradiction between liberal democratic support for cultural diversity, with its attendant alleged devolution of power to Indigenous communities, and a seeming difficulty in facing and dealing with the very reality of that diversity and devolution on the ground.

A perception that the state seems now to be engaging with, along with members of elites and a growing number of other people, might be encapsulated thus: Traditional paintings based on the Dreaming, or complex sacred ritual performances, are of high value, and are among the great achievements of Indigenous culture, and of Australian culture generally. On the other hand, features such as family preference in the allocation of resources,²⁰ and patterns of ill-health, youth suicide, violent and sometimes homicidal assaults on women by certain men in certain places, especially but not always under conditions of extreme alcohol use, are considered not cultural products but *problems* that can be tackled within existing cultural frameworks.²¹ That is, neither the bureaucratic culture and its society of origin nor the culture of the social field in which these problematic practices occur, in a deep-seated sense, is seen to be central to the genesis of 'the problems'.

When non-Indigenous men bash their partners, for example, it may be easier in a political sense to say this is a situation in need not only of change by the

individual offender but also of cultural change in the offender's society or subcultural group. One can argue, with good sense, that the way violent relationships between men and women are produced and reproduced in the society that harbours them has to be called into question. This is not to absolve individuals from responsibility, if for no other reason than that individual responses are always integral to social and cultural reproduction.

'The problems' in this instance are often traced back to a particular pattern of relationships and to ways of handling of conflict that are learned early in men's lives, from childhood onwards, and in combination with the effects of socio-economic circumstances. They are not merely triggered by some external condition of adulthood such as poverty or unemployment, even though such conditions can be significant. In the end, also, there is the individual factor. Siblings brought up under the same circumstances can take very different pathways in life. This alone makes political, bureaucratic and academic generalisations about the causes of human degradation always a little suspect.

Domestic violence patterns among Indigenous men are, by implication if not explicitly, frequently defined not as manifestations of a particular kind of culture located where Indigenous and non-Indigenous societies intersect, but as the outcomes of dispossession, discrimination, alienation, poverty, stress, and the destructive effects of historically new drugs. This is a common view reflected in official discourses, in political statements, in sympathetic responses by non-Indigenous people, and in the words of some Indigenous community leaders. Yet it is demonstrable that some behaviours such as high levels of interpersonal violence involving both men and women existed well before the impacts of colonisation, both in sanctioned collective forms (as in formal dispute resolution through duelling and warfare) and in forms less subject to such controls (as in the beating of women by their husbands).²² However, the contexts of violent events are now often dramatically different from those of the distant past. Culturally speaking, they exhibit both continuities and discontinuities with the classical.

The Pearson manifesto

In contrast with much official discourse, many Indigenous people do not share liberal views of the colonial causes of all things deemed to be Indigenous problems. Patterns of collective drinking to the point of drunkenness, the context which is so often central to the development of disease, premature death, child neglect, suicide, serious assaults including sexual assaults, and so on, are at times described as drinking 'Blackfella-way'. A man's right to beat his wife without interference may be described in similar terms, as 'their business', not anyone else's, and as something that has always been the way it is, a part of ancient tradition, so to speak. Yet the role of alcohol and other drugs, the absence

of sober kin who can separate combatants, and the dangerous privacy of closed doors in European-style housing can be critical parts of what is new here. Similarly, when children break into houses looking for food because they are not being fed by drunken adults, it is hardly sensible to claim that this is just a continuation of a tradition of permissive child rearing, even if that factor is present. Frequently, both kinds of factors are co-present.

Noel Pearson's *Our right to take responsibility* contests the way modern drinking patterns are sometimes identified with Aboriginal culture (Pearson 2000). He refers to the deformation, corruption and manipulation of notions of cultural tradition by the drinkers themselves. Such distortions are, in his words, 'not culture, not tradition, not identity' (Pearson 2000:18). In an anthropological sense, rather than the sense used by Pearson, such ingrained and widely repeated patterns of practice and value do form part of a society's culture, or at least that of a subset of its members, as it is at the moment of observation.²³ In this technical sense, culture is not merely a consciously assumed personal attitude that may be donned or doffed at will. The recent shift of government policy towards a stress on the taking of more responsibility for their own betterment by Indigenous people may reflect this voluntaristic but less than realistic view of cultural reproduction. In this sense, it is unlikely to make a huge difference, in and of itself, given the fact that dependency,²⁴ the privileging of social capital over accumulation, political atomism, customary externalisation of blame and similar obstacles to autonomous progressive action can rest on some very deeply seated cultural conceptions of power, obligation, causality and economy.

Meanwhile, a shift in the emphasis of policy towards the Responsibility model, while its aims are undoubtedly laudable, courts a certain danger. If it fails to budge significantly the 'negative social indicators', may it not then arouse responses of blame in the wider population? If 'taking responsibility' in reality cannot be expanded in the ways Pearson and the federal government were suggesting in 2000–01, would non-Indigenous Australians feel less responsible for Indigenous well-being, or the lack of it, thereafter?

The trouble with culture

In this context, the trouble with culture is that it is neither fully conscious and subject to voluntary control nor wholly unconscious and beyond being brought to mind.²⁵ Culture consists of the interplay between 'unreflexive daily practice' (see below) and our partial awareness of what we are doing and thinking. This complexity alone makes cultural engineering an unpredictable and daunting venture. A vast proportion of our cultural makeup is developed in infancy and childhood, when we absorb the fundamentals of what can be learned about the world using our rich biologically based learning capacities. By the time we reach what is sometimes called the age of reason, reason alone is seldom able to

rearrange our cultural makeup overnight or merely at will. For this reason, when people talk about getting rid of profound disadvantage via measures that downplay the critical and central role of the socialisation of children, it is clear that they are not really proposing deep and dramatic cultural change.

Indigenous Australians themselves propose various kinds of cultural change as integral to improved well-being. There are those who promote engagement in the 'real economy' instead of reliance on welfare, greater engagement in Western education or a combined 'two ways' education, conscious intervention in dietary and other health-related practices, the promotion of non-violent ways of resolving adult conflict, the reintroduction of greater degrees of coercion as a means of controlling crime, emigration from Indigenous settlements to cities, alcohol prohibition, and so on. Yet for young adults who have grown up in the vortex of the most deeply shattered communities, it may be too late for these ideas to have much effect. These young people are already being spoken of as 'lost' generations. For many of them, adding a new economic element to the existing mix, for example, will not be enough. Young people who, unlike their grandparents, are functionally illiterate and unemployable in the 'real economy', but who have also received only a diminished education in their elders' cultural traditions, if that, are increasing in number.

Those who remain culturally closest to the classical traditions of their forebears may be those least likely to find engagement in the market economy congenial or possible. As Stanner (1979:58) once wrote: 'Ours is a market-civilisation, [that of Aboriginal people] not. Indeed, there is a sense in which The Dreaming and The Market are mutually exclusive'. While this older view may seem to have been washed away by the tide of the fine art business, there is still much substance to it, more broadly speaking. Even the fine art trade in outback Dreaming pictures is not a very solid exception, being largely a cottage industry organised by non-Indigenous administrators and entrepreneurs, at the point of production as well as of distribution.²⁶

Modernisation

When cultural changes were simply imposed on Indigenous people by others, the process and the policy were both called 'assimilation', which has rightly become a pejorative description. The arrogance of many manifestations of assimilationism in years gone by almost defies belief.

Yet when people seek cultural changes for themselves and their own people, they are usually characterised in political and bureaucratic discourses as pursuing 'development' or 'modernisation' instead. Until recently, many Australians have thought of both processes as things that happened overseas, in 'developing countries'. To suggest to Indigenous people within our borders that they consider 'modernising' themselves culturally as a way out of dire problems would still

beg a hostile response from many Australians, because it implies a negative comparison between ancient ways and modern ways.

Modernisation is not necessarily the same as imitation, especially when imitation, for a Fourth World people, can at times be an attempt to mimic the dominant society's idea of what a pre-modern culture should look like, albeit one that may thrive mainly inside the bell chamber of government funding or the curiosity cabinet of tourism. Imitations of modernity can be very selective, at times merely superficial, and almost always a part-time occupation.²⁷ Sometimes, they are not much more than strategies for survival, for political careerism, or for maintaining the annual grants. Modernisation in the sense used here is a much deeper structural and cultural shift.

The problem, in the context of the present discussion, is that the kind of deep cultural changes that may assist a real move out of profound Indigenous disadvantage are not well understood, not just in official policy-making circles, but more generally, and in my own grasp of the situation as much as anyone else's. Social engineering can be a dangerous and disappointing pursuit, especially in a cross-cultural situation. Anthropologists would find it easier to suggest why certain past cultural shifts have been effective in improving a people's quality of life than to propose future shifts that people might consider trying to manipulate so as to have a better existence. An obstacle to effective debate in the present context is that so many are in denial over the need for cultural change if Indigenous disadvantage is to be addressed at its roots. This need for change is not all one-sided, however.

Culture and reconciliation

When official policies and indeed common liberal attitudes express respect and support for 'retaining Indigenous cultures', their intent, as many of us have understood it, has been encompassing, supporting the freedom to retain a way of life rather than just a limited set of aesthetic practices. Yet it seems that this perception has been a mistake. The dominant official discourse in Australian Indigenous affairs has really moved back closer to support for 'culture' in the old selective 'high-culture' sense of the term, while at the same time continuing overtly to proclaim support for freedom to choose a whole way of life. This contradiction cannot be maintained without criticism. In such discourse, the modern culture concept has been hijacked, anthropology has lost control of it, and it is being abused by official propaganda machines and their unofficial stable-mates. My concern here is not so much this shift, regrettable as it might be, but the typifying role played by talk about 'culture' in masking the horrific gap between policy and reality in Australian Indigenous affairs.

An example of the selective use of the culture concept is in a draft of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation's 'National strategies to advance reconcilia-

tion', dated February 2000.²⁸ One of the many criticisms one could mount against this document is that it appears to make reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians conditional on the achievement of equality of living standards across the two populations. This is more like a reconciling of the columns of a bank statement than of persons. The present federal government's policy has been summarised by the Prime Minister and other government members as one of 'practical reconciliation', and it is clear from official pronouncements that its success is to be measured principally by the progress of programs aimed at closing the gap between Indigenous living standards and those of other Australians.²⁹ The repeated emphasis of such statements is on health, education, housing, employment and reducing Indigenous involvement in the criminal justice system. On 2 October 2000, journalist Dennis Shanahan (2000:30) quoted Prime Minister John Howard as saying: 'Progress has been made in practical reconciliation in closing the gaps ... There are still big gaps and disadvantage but we have still made progress in the areas of mortality, high school retention, TAFE enrolments, and some progress in literacy'.

Statistics can be a minefield, even for the experts, but John Taylor, of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at The Australian National University, told me recently (pers. comm.):

I am not sure we can say convincingly that statistical indicators overall are improving [for Indigenous Australians]. While this may be so in absolute terms for some indicators (people have more income, home ownership has increased with time, there are more people with jobs, *etc.*), things have not necessarily improved in ratio terms or relative to the rest of the population. Indeed, I can't think of a single indicator which emphatically shows relative improvement over the past decade. Obviously, over much longer time periods, say, since the 1960s, many indicators have improved because they started from a low base. It is also the case that Indigenous social indicators are closer to those of the general population as one moves south and east away from the north and west of the continent. At the same time, there is an inadequacy of data which has prevented the establishment of clear causal relationships, say, for example, between educational achievement and better health, and this makes it hard to develop simple scenarios of across-the-board improvement or decline on the basis of links between social indicators.

One might argue that mutual acceptance or, better perhaps, parity of esteem should lie at the heart of any meaningful reconciliation process, whatever differences in well-being, and in political persuasions, may remain to be overcome within society.³⁰ Parity of esteem between ethnic or other groups does not entail acceptance of discrimination, crime, cruelty or bad faith, no matter how these things may have arisen historically. To understand all, contrary to the old saying,

is not to forgive all. Leaders of groups can agree to work together, rather than in opposition, to tackle what is wrong within and between their peoples, but individual action is critical. Our tendency to collectivise human problems and their solutions may draw on the strength of unities, but some of our best strengths come from our capacity to make it on our own. Like a number of others, I remain sceptical about 'official' collective attempts at promoting reconciliation between Indigenous and other Australians, while still seeing the process as useful in bringing smouldering issues out into the open.³¹

Some of the processes envisioned by those promoting reconciliation may take a long time, perhaps generations. Some problems may never go away. The present official focus is not on getting rid of problems altogether, which indeed would be pie in the sky, but on evening up the balance sheet so that Indigenous Australians are at least no worse off than other Australians, collectively speaking. It may have been the Prime Minister's realism that made him disinclined to sign off on a document of reconciliation in the year 2000, given that it was a matter of his own policy that the process was tied to closing this notorious gap of well-being. Signing under such conditions would indeed have been an empty symbol. Unless the reconciliation process is severed from the imposition of welfare objectives, however, it is unlikely to do much for the fabric of the country. Where those objectives are politically embedded in relationships of political demand and fiscal supply, they are likely to remain a focus of oppositional relationships between Indigenous representatives and government.³²

A shift of focus

The draft Reconciliation document to which I have referred was also far too heavily concerned with the recognition of rights. Even though significant work still remains to be done in that regard, huge forward steps have been achieved. The very emphasis on rights *per se*, however, is historically misplaced here. The rights campaigns that formed a central context for the past careers of current Indigenous leaders cannot be repeated, if for no other reason than the fact that, at the formal and legal level, most technical obstacles to equal rights have been removed.

The continued massive emphasis on rights in public discourse in this field is becoming counterproductive, and not merely because it is another version of conditional reconciliation. Worse than this, perhaps, it plays into the hands of those who make political capital out of alleging that in Australian Indigenous affairs a culture of complaint endures regardless of whatever progress has been made. The accusation is partly true, partly a dangerous untruth. But some of us are indeed still 'Living in the Seventies'.³³ Fixing the remaining legal rights problems is vital, but it is not now the main challenge confronting Australian Indigenous people.³⁴

Racism, while in serious decline in Australia as against 30 years ago, is something about which people need to be ever vigilant. Yet to represent it as the main issue of Indigenous affairs in our time is to misread completely the extent of profound suffering on so many other fronts and from so many other causes.³⁵ The balance of the political situation has moved on. The fight against discrimination and for equal rights threw up many of the strongest Aboriginal leaders of recent Australian history. It would be surprising, though, if their achievements were not better acknowledged in future for the successes they have been, and if the Indigenous heroes of the coming years were not more likely to be those who make their mark on morbidity, violence, unemployment and incarceration rates.

These criticisms can be expanded elsewhere. Here, I address in detail only the issue of the former Reconciliation document's treatment of *culture* and cultural traditions. This treatment exemplifies much of what seems at best muddy and counterproductive, and at worst a tragic exercise in official propaganda, in similar pronouncements.³⁶

Turning a blind eye

The first part of the document, which was a strategy to promote recognition of Indigenous rights, had a section called 'Recognition and protection for Indigenous cultures, heritage and languages'. The process of reconciliation, it told us, relies on respect for these things. It read in part: 'Culture extends further than languages. It is diverse and dynamic and reflects [*sic*] politics, histories, stories, songs, ceremonies, traditions and relationships to land (Part 1)'. Someone reading this from an anthropologist's perspective might respond: But these are specific manifestations of a culture, and only a few at that. What about the socialisation of children, or 'demand sharing' of resources,³⁷ the pervasive importance of kinship, a high stress on personal autonomy, long patterns of internecine feuding, resistance to delegating authority, the blaming of deaths on out-group sorcerers rather than on those involved in episodes of drink driving or wife-bashing, for example? While these and many other practices may contain powerful elements of classical traditions, they now exist under conditions that differ significantly from those of the pre-colonial era. Although, they might be described in terms of a classical versus post-classical mix, they are nonetheless still aspects and products of a particular contemporary culture in its specific time and place. They can be among some of the very things that make Indigenous cultures obviously different from non-Indigenous cultures in present-day Australia, where such differences exist.

So how do members of a community in which youth suicides are believed to be caused by sorcery react to the perceived double message they are now getting from the governments and paragonovernmental agencies, which goes something

like this: (a) that people will be assisted to make every effort to combat the social, emotional and chemical triggers for suicide; and (b) that the state no longer wants people to 'change their culture'? One reaction seems to be to define 'culture' as harmless artefacts such as paintings, songs, dances and languages, and the traditional Dreaming ideology that has been their source. Owning such 'culture' is a matter of pride. This is what 'culture' seems to mean in the glossy tourism brochures. The state would like these things to be retained, understandably. As for culture in the wider, anthropologically informed sense, however, the state clearly does want people to change aspects of their culture, but does not really want to say so.³⁸

Let me take a particular example, that of child rearing. In those cases where parents' own childhood institutionalisation, or a devastating relationship with alcohol in their own lives or those of their parents' generation, has deeply damaged their capacity to care for their children, what culture of child socialisation are they now handing on to the next generation? Those of us who encounter such situations know that, while severe cases of neglect do result in official intervention, there often seems to be an unwritten rule that more neglect is tolerated for some Australian children than for others, notably Aboriginal children in the more isolated settlements. In a remote community, I recently almost drove into a young woman who staggered across the road, clearly in advanced pregnancy, and clutching a can of petrol to her face. It is one of many communities in a desperate condition, and where observations of this kind are not rare. Officially, it was a community enjoying 'self-determination'. What 'self-determination' was being enjoyed by that unborn child? While many of the very young in such places enjoy loving protective care, there are others who do not.

Another example concerns education. It is not rational for people to support traditional child-rearing practices, and thus their emphasis on the autonomy of the young child, while both officials and community members turn a blind eye to what are sometimes massive school absenteeism rates, and continue with customary rhetoric about the important role of education in the liberation of Indigenous communities from dependency. This is placing impossible and unfair burdens on a child's capacity for biculturalism. This is setting children up for failure. It is not done to non-Indigenous children and is therefore, in this sense, discriminatory.³⁹

More tragically, perhaps, to continue to assign all the causality of petrol-sniffing to a history of colonial conquest, as some still seem prepared to do, is at best a case of sad ignorance, and at worst an obscene abuse of this appalling disaster for the purpose of scoring cheap political points. On its own, it is no better a causal explanation than the 'blame' theory that merely assigns the causes of petrol sniffing to some kind of personal moral weaknesses of 'the parents'. Both responses ignore the far deeper, and let me say far more *respectful*, analyses available from the work, in this context, of anthropologist Maggie

Brady.⁴⁰ The potential of anthropologists' contributions for rescuing official and popular discourses from the realm of fantasy is still poorly realised. This may be especially true of the area of alcohol-related and other 'family violence'.⁴¹

Have scholars been mau-maued into silence?

According to a 2000 news feature provocatively called 'Victims of tradition', solicitor Joan Kimm began her research into violence against Aboriginal women with 'the now common assumption among academics and activists that colonisation was the only culprit' (Lane 2000). Her research clearly disabused her of that view, as it should have, but is the myth really so widespread in academia, or is this 'widespread' distribution itself the myth in this case? The day after this news item appeared, a letter to the editor of the same newspaper claimed that Kimm 'confirms what many of us suspected, that academics don't practise, or continue to get the co-operation needed to practise, in the area of Aboriginal anthropology unless they are willing to put political correctness ahead of the truth' (Drennan 2000). While this may have been true to a degree, anthropologists on the whole are too much of the maverick persuasion to toe the line as a class. By contrast, the editor's correspondent suggested that anthropologists had been utterly silent on the facts of domestic violence and sexual abuse in Indigenous communities for fear of their professional lives.

Although there is evidence that heavy politics around these issues has resulted in the suppression of some research and publication, anthropologists as a whole have *not* been silent, especially since Diane Bell and the late T. Napurrula Nelson published 'Speaking about rape is everyone's business', in 1989.⁴² This paper was soon followed in 1990 by Indigenous scholar Judy Atkinson's 'Violence in Aboriginal Australia: Colonisation and gender', in 1991 by Audrey Bolger's book *Aboriginal women and violence*, and in 1994 by Victoria Burbank's book *Fighting women: Anger and aggression in Aboriginal Australia*, among a number of other related works. Scholars have been far from silent, they have even 'transgressed and said the unsayable', but who has been listening?⁴³ It seems that the work of scholars such as Judy Atkinson, Diane Bell, Audrey Bolger, Maggie Brady, Victoria Burbank, Marcia Langton, David McKnight, David Martin, Kingsley Palmer, Gary Robinson, Lee Sackett, Basil Sansom and a number of others is too often rendered relatively invisible when the underlying factors leading to community violence are being addressed at the official and political levels.

Most recently, and most comprehensively at the level of nation-wide statistical reporting, the subject of Indigenous community violence has been the subject of a major study by Paul Memmott, Rachael Stacy, Catherine Chambers and Catherine Keys.⁴⁴ They found spouse assault occurring at alarming rates in many communities and at even higher rates in the remote communities. Homicide rates were roughly 10 times more than would be expected on a population basis,

and again they were higher in remote communities. Rape and sexual abuse, including incest, were increasing in frequency and intensity in some communities. Exposure of children to violence and neglect was in need of urgent attention. Suicide was far more likely to be committed by young men than by any other age or gender group. Rates of self-injury, especially among young men, were high and increasing. There was evidence of cyclic violence, where violent behaviour had become the norm across generations in certain families. In some places, including remote Queensland settlements, there was a pattern they called dysfunctional community syndrome:

A typical cluster of violence types in such a dysfunctional community would be, male-on-male and female-on-female fighting, child abuse, alcohol violence, male suicide, pack rape, infant rape, rape of grandmothers, self-mutilation, spouse assault and homicide.... Such communities need to be viewed as in states of dire emergency. (Memmott *et al.* 2001:51)

Alarmingly, while Memmott and his team examined 130 remedial violence programs implemented in Indigenous communities in the 1990s, they could find only six programs that had received some reasonable evaluation that was in a documented form (2001:77). There is a total absence of discussion of program failure in the literature on the programs, although one of the original report's authors was readily enough able to list from first-hand experience 10 reasons why these programs may fail (Memmott *et al.* 1999:65).⁴⁵ Was this silence on failure (or success, in real terms) a case of political self-censorship, or was it some other form of negligence on the part of those who funded these programs?

Good intentions, and statistics

Good intentions, and especially a taking of the moral high ground, cannot of themselves guarantee desired outcomes. One of the ways in which sympathetic liberals have not served the Indigenous community well has been their tendency to believe that the politics of compassion do not require expert or statistical evidence, or not much of it. Given the public role of critics of liberalism in this field, and their power to call into question generalisations about the past, the generous assumption of many liberals that statistics are a side-issue to struggles over the morality of history or administration can no longer be sustained. The gloves are off. A more forensic approach is required. In part, this need is driven by legal cases themselves.

Even where statistics are produced, they sometimes sink with little trace. Who now remembers the statistical observation cited in the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody Report that the death rate of Aboriginal prisoners in 1987 and 1988 was approximately half that of Aboriginal people on non-custodial court orders, presumably because of the better and safer living

conditions found in prisons than in many Indigenous communities? Who now remembers the statistic that Indigenous prisoners did not have a particularly higher rate of death in custody than did non-Indigenous prisoners (Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody 1991:vols 3:60, 1:227, respectively)?

While it may be increasingly important to justify contested generalisations by the use of statistics, this moves the emphasis towards the pattern rather than the person in a way that should not be done hastily. Those who live in Aboriginal communities where so many have died in tragic circumstances have lost relatives and friends, not statistics.⁴⁶ Yet argument and action about matters of equity within society critically require measurements if they are not to be abandoned to unsubstantiated claim and counter-claim. The statistics are now proving one vital overarching point above all others: existing approaches to dealing with community violence are a hopeless failure. If the Indigenous leaderships and various governments cannot more widely and assertively grasp the nettle and take radical action, what hope will there be for the generations to follow?

These generations are arriving fast. Indigenous populations are rising sharply, not just through the addition of 'recent identifiers' in the cities, but also through natural increase, especially in the outback. It is estimated that by 2006 the Indigenous Australian population will be near 500,000, while unemployment within that number is expected to remain at best unchanged or at worst to increase (Altman 2000:16). Especially in outback areas where there are majority Aboriginal populations, social problems may well get worse, not better, if existing structural and cultural trends persist.

John Taylor of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) has carried out the following crude estimations on some such regions (pers. comm.). In 1996, the Cooktown ATSIC region had an estimated population of 6,184; in the Arnhem Land region, the Jabiru ATSIC region had 8,685 and Nhulunbuy ATSIC region had 7,848. For south-east Arnhem Land (Ngukurr and outstations), an estimate of 1,200 is reasonable. For the Western Desert, the 1996 estimated population for Warburton ATSIC region was 2,952. Evidence from recent population growth trends in central Australia suggests an arithmetic rate of natural increase of just under 2 per cent per annum as a reasonable expectation for these regions (Taylor 2001). Assuming this to be constant for some time, and in the absence of net migration loss or gain, the following forecasts can be made for (1) Cooktown (Cape York), (2) Arnhem Land combined, (3) Warburton (Western Desert):

Year	(1)	(2)	(3)
1996	6,184	17,733	2,952
2001	6,709	19,240	3,203
2011	7,760	22,255	3,705

2021	8,812	25,270	4,207
2031	9,863	28,284	4,709
2041	10,915	31,299	5,211
2051	11,966	34,313	5,713

By rough rule of thumb, outback Indigenous community populations have every prospect of doubling in the next 50 years, all other things being equal. Yarrabah, for example, which has about 3,000 people at the time of writing, would on these projections have about 6,000 people in 2051.⁴⁷

Given the concentration of so many problems in remote-region settlements, it is difficult to imagine the political and bureaucratic wings of Indigenous affairs in this country maintaining the current policy framework through a period of demographic escalation.

The liberal democratic polity and the persistence of 'disadvantage'

I said earlier that present-day culture, which may contain a number of very old cultural traditions or transformations of them, may be implicated or embedded in the reproduction of what is often referred to in official discourses as 'Indigenous disadvantage' and described in terms of negative 'social indicators'. Such language itself is inadequate to the task of conveying the levels of sheer suffering that many Indigenous people are experiencing today. It moves in a territory somewhere between euphemism, banality and propaganda. A murdered mother is not 'disadvantaged'—she has lost her life.

The suffering is frequently statistically greater in the outback ghettos than elsewhere.⁴⁸ That such suffering is not *confined* to remote places is well known, but, there, its visibility, concentration and engulfing nature seem to be most apparent. In many of these locations, the quality of daily life has seriously deteriorated during recent decades, in spite of local efforts and a raft of ameliorative and social engineering measures funded principally by the state. The worst aspect of these developments has been the epidemic of interpersonal violence, especially sexual violence towards women and children, including the elderly and infants. The subject arouses such strong reactions that it is difficult for those who speak about it to avoid being pigeonholed either as whimsy-minded romantics or boot-swinging fascists. Otherwise useful contributions to debate on the issues can easily contain the seeds of their own dismissal by members of opposing political factions. Peter Howson's (2000) article, 'Reality and fantasy: The abject failure of Aboriginal policy', managed to combine the timely raising of an important subject with a mixture of useful observations and some simplistic and at times quite bizarre assertions that probably cost him a significant audience.⁴⁹ Conversely, to argue, as Co-chair of the New South Wales Reconciliation Committee Joanne Selfe has done, that the root cause of disadvantage simply

lies in the denial of human and indigenous rights as a result of government policy, is again to lose an increasing proportion of the intended sympathetic audience (Selfe 2001).⁵⁰

It is noticeable that those living in the communities with the worst conditions can have a much greater tolerance of those conditions than visitors from happier locations or those who come from different cultural backgrounds. Part of the problem, from an outsider's point of view, can be that many insiders either already were, or have become, relatively unshockable. The 'compassion fatigue' of many outsiders seems more than matched by the 'tragedy tolerance' of many insiders. A term like 'suffering' has to be used carefully. By whose standards and pain thresholds are we measuring suffering?

The problem with a relativity argument which ultimately concludes, for example, that people are 'free to go to hell in their own way', that they 'have the right to make their own mistakes' and to set their own standards of what constitutes a social problem, is that we do not normally apply such an argument to the care or neglect of infants, the elderly, the mentally handicapped, and many other potential victims of abuse. That is, Australians generally assert through the state a duty of care towards others, especially the vulnerable, whether or not their own relatives and neighbours are doing so and whether or not the victims complain. What may be suppressed 'communally' or kept as knowledge 'within the family' may not be tolerated by the law or by the wider population, especially in cases such as incest and rape and other forms of assault. While the law may be non-discriminatory in such contexts, is the law being *applied* in a non-discriminatory way?

Education is compulsory throughout Australia—but only in theory. This law is simply not applied rigorously in many Aboriginal townships, where, as a result, thousands of young people have now been disenfranchised and rendered powerless to engage with government or industry on anything like an informed and participatory basis. At the same time, their interest in and grasp of classical Aboriginal culture is widely regarded as in serious decline, or already minimal.⁵¹ This is where government enters the picture in a crucial way. If local action on severe problems is not working, does not the wider community have to recognise its responsibilities by taking a more interventionist approach? I am not arguing for any distinct laws here, only the uncompromising, prompt, fair, and *predictable* application of ordinary Australian law.⁵²

The causation issue

What is missing from dominant official attitudes to the aetiology of Australian Indigenous disadvantage, apart from scientific sophistication, is sufficient honesty. The problem with honesty is that the more you stress its importance the more likely it is to become integrated into the rhetoric that masks what people

really think. Musing on the problematic emphasis on sincerity in American culture, my colleague, Steve Kunitz, once told me that his father used to say: 'Son, always be sincere—even when you don't mean it'. Exhortations to honesty are never enough. Fear of being caught out, and actually being caught out from time to time, remain indispensable.

To return to the 2000 draft document on Reconciliation, in an earlier version of 1999 there was a section called 'What are the causes of disadvantage?' This is the kind of sentence that few social scientists dare to utter. We know too much—and too little.⁵³ Apart from being methodologically naïve, the draft was also fundamentally dishonest, not by including falsities but by excluding factors widely considered integral to gaining some knowledge of Indigenous disadvantage. On the face of it, this draft alleged that dispossession, dislocation, separation, exclusion from services, inadequate services and the tyranny of distance were sufficient to explain current levels of Indigenous disadvantage. This seemed to presuppose a cultural flat earth, one in which the particular cultures of the colonised and of the colonisers were of no importance in understanding why different populations reacted to being overrun by different conquering peoples in such markedly different ways. Yet it is obvious that the Maori/British experience, the Aztec/Spanish experience, the Celtic/Anglo-Saxon experience, the San/Bantu experience—and this list could go on—all differ significantly, both from one another and from the Aboriginal/British experience in Australia. Cultural differences, as we keep hearing, matter.

Then there are commonalities that also cry out for comment, such as the similarities of the kinds of disadvantage experienced by colonised and dispossessed recent ex-hunter-gatherer populations in different parts of the world, such as northern Canada, the Great Plains of the USA, and Australia (see Kunitz 1994). Again, how can one explain why levels of disadvantage are higher in a number of remote settlements where the arrival of the state has largely been under the more benign conditions of the mid-twentieth century, and where the people have never lost the freedom to make traditional use of their lands, than they are in urban communities where the colonial impacts were initially far more devastating and their aftermath so much longer? Marcia Langton addressed such questions in her work on the Aboriginal Deaths in Custody report, *Too much sorry business*, but the topic requires more consideration.⁵⁴

In the February 2000 version of the Reconciliation document to which I have referred, much of the earlier causality argument in the 1999 draft seemed to have disappeared. Instead, there was a new heading called 'Understanding disadvantage'. It told us that the history of Australian Indigenous disadvantage began with territorial dispossession and population displacement, and was then fuelled by discrimination, poverty and loss of autonomy. Disadvantage in one area increases the likelihood of disadvantage in other areas, it said. Educational failure was then attributed to not having home study facilities, to hearing loss,

and to undernourishment—but with no mention of anything else. Poor sanitation and housing, alone, were then blamed for poor health. Poverty and unemployment were said to statistically lower self-esteem and increase illness, death and the likelihood of arrest and imprisonment. Yet that was about it in terms of links. The language of the social sciences was present, but the social sciences in any real sense, and an honest, balanced appraisal of what lies behind ‘disadvantage’, were absent. This was ersatz, cavalier, causal theory.

Let me make something clear: it is not so much the listed causes that I object to as the fact that other integrally implicated factors of central policy relevance were simply ‘nothingised’ here.⁵⁵ What is repeatedly missing in officialese accounts of what lies behind ‘disadvantage’ is the very thing that everyone in such circles is usually quick to say needs proper recognition: Indigenous culture and society. The earlier draft Reconciliation document did go on to say that a ‘further overarching factor’ in causing disadvantage was ‘the ongoing clash of cultures with Western values, beliefs and practices’, which could be read as suggesting that Western values, beliefs and practices were the wrong ones to promote in an Indigenous context. However, the entire document was based on those Western values or, as many would prefer now to describe them, the liberal values of a globally distributed type of industrialised democratic society, regardless of the appearance and ethnic origins of its members. The writers said that this clash had ‘contributed to a sense of isolation and denial impacting on the ability to participate fully within the community’. In promoting what is effectively modernisation by using the most bureaucratic and welfarist of approaches, did not the Reconciliation document itself add to this contribution? Of course, I am not against people modernising themselves if this is what they want to do.

In this document and those multitudinous statements that resemble it, there seems to be a wilful blindness to the role of past and present Indigenous egalitarian social organisation and the challenge this offers to performing in accordance with the expectations of a modern corporatist society. There is a blindness to the role of traditional power structures in setting some of the conditions for dependency. There is a blindness to the ancient need to pursue family loyalties over essentially foreign ideologies such as the doctrine of ‘the common good’. There is a blindness to the part now played by traditional medical beliefs and practices in blocking certain preventative health measures. There is a blindness to the lingering background of an originally semi-nomadic economy with its appropriate but minimal hygiene practices, its emphasis on demand sharing, and its general rejection of accumulation. There is a blindness to the legacy of a formerly and in some places very recently stateless society and its perfectly expectable system of self-help or self-redress during conflict, including frequent recourse to physical means. There is a blindness to a deep and old philosophical tradition of assent to the tragic terms of human life, and there is

a blindness to the complementary tradition that the order of things was meant to be, thus rendering notions of general social progress deeply alien to those of a classical Aboriginal persuasion. Lest I be quoted out of context here, I wish to emphasise that the complex combination of these forms of cultural persistence with the after-effects of colonisation, including ghettoisation, is what makes Indigenous conditions such a challenge to reformers.

Not all Indigenous people in Australia retain such classical values or practices, whether transformed or intact, but many do. These are things that officials and spokespersons often avoid talking about. In a sense this is understandable because of the dangerous obsession so many of us have with questions of blame. A careless and historically inaccurate habit is the 'blame the victim' syndrome. Yet courting the danger of offering more cannon fodder to the blamers is as nothing compared to the dangerous world into which Aboriginal infants have leapt every day in a number of places around the country, increasingly so in recent decades. Is the silence because officials and others fear that the spectre of simplistic remarks about 'primitive societies' and 'it's all their own fault' will arise again from the ashes? Indeed, such stupid analyses continue to reappear, and the fear is justified; but this does not in turn justify a turning away from the partially cultural underpinnings of disadvantage, and from looking clear-eyed at successful interventions that actually diminish disadvantage.

Brief interventions

Maggie Brady (2000, and see 1995a, b) has presented cogent evidence that brief verbal interventions by doctors with individual Aboriginal patients who are problem drinkers could be an effective technique for enabling them to give up the grog. Brady found this outside intervention to be influential at a late stage in the drinking careers of some individuals. Knowledge in 'mainstream' Australia concerning the impact of a doctor's advice earlier than this has been around since at least the 1980s. It has largely been neglected by the Aboriginal medical services, she argues, for three main reasons, structural, political, and ideological. The structural reasons were 'associated with federalism, the roles of DAA and later ATSIC in managing substance abuse, and the insulation of Aboriginal programs from outside influences' (Brady 2000:11).⁵⁶ The political reasons were 'associated with a long-standing separation of Aboriginal health services from Aboriginal alcohol services' (Brady 2000:11). The ideological reasons were:

associated with Aboriginal constructions of difference, and of 'difference' in alcohol dependence. There was a shift to theories of cultural loss, and the disease model and long-term treatment were reinforced by the arrival of indigenous alcohol treatment activists from America and Canada.

The prevalence of these constructions of drinking has led to the develop-

ment of new 'healing programs', and to an emphasis on 'culture' as a form of treatment. This often romanticised and idealised notion fails to explore honestly the ways in which ideas of 'culture' are manipulated, distorted and exploited by drinkers—something that Merv Gibson (from Hope Vale) articulated to me in 1987. In many cases, the manifestations of 'culture in treatment' seem to be simply new variations on the old theme of residential and end-stage treatment programs (Brady 2000:11, 2).⁵⁷

Any intervention, even one that appeals to what are asserted to be the healing properties of 'traditional culture',⁵⁸ presupposes a belief in improvability, if not perfectibility. At the deepest cultural level, where people's world views and primary presuppositions lie, for many at least in remote Australia such a belief should not be assumed. When talk in offices is of progress, but private and community action reflects what Stanner called a 'mood of assent' to the tragic terms of life, a view not of pessimism but of acceptance that life is 'a joyous thing with maggots at the centre',⁵⁹ the chasm between liberal democratic progressivist official thinking and the reality of the 'traditional Aboriginal culture' it promotes in glittering international art shows is made ruthlessly apparent.⁶⁰

It is demonstrable that some kinds of interventions work. What seems to be at the root of the success of the doctor-patient alcohol technique is the fact that the doctor is not kin, the intervention is private, doctors are on the whole trusted, respected, and considered knowledgeable, the advice is personalised, and

perhaps most importantly, a doctor can legitimise a change in a patient's behaviour. He or she can give an Aboriginal patient an 'excuse', a solid reason, from an authorising 'other', a person who is outside of the person's immediate social network. (Brady 2000:8)

Ironically, the doctor's intervention is for these very reasons 'culturally appropriate', or at least culturally effective, by reason of his or her status as *non-kin*. It is not because of any imitation of 'traditional culture' in the method, but because of the way the intervention actually works *in relation to* some key culturally conservative values and practices, that it seems to be so successful.

The basic point of this medical example is that it is not legitimate to reject 'interventionist' strategies *in toto*, when it is demonstrable that some of them may be 'culturally appropriate' from an Indigenous point of view. The services of a uniformed police presence, so often in demand from members of Aboriginal communities, is another example—as non-kin, they owe no obligations to disputing parties.

The problems of generalisation

I began with a broad-brush picture and a crude one, useful as it may have been, of communities in crisis. In some Indigenous communities, certain aspects of life

are in fact getting better. In some places, what Ron Berndt (1984) in his 1982 Wentworth Lecture called 'the fiction of Aboriginal self-determination' has been turned into something more of a reality than before. There are also some curious anomalies, such as the lack of correlation between income status and health status, that are hard to fit into a simple scheme of across-the-board improvement or decline.⁶¹

I do not want to be misinterpreted, or to have my words amputated from context and turned into slogans. For example, I did not say that all Aboriginal men are violent towards their partners, any more than I would suggest that all Aboriginal people make dot paintings, or, for that matter, that all members of the country's bureaucratic and political elites are unable to face and deal with the contradictions to which I refer. I have argued for more rigorous and less selective application of Australian law, not for ethnically targeted repression. It should also not be forgotten that there are many regional differences in Indigenous Australia, making continent-wide generalisations and national solutions potentially dangerous. Not all of these regional differences can necessarily be attributed simply to the different periods in which different groups came into contact with the British Empire, for example, as some of them seem to me to have pre-colonial roots.⁶²

Concluding remarks

The development emphasis of progressive political and governmental thinking in the last 30 years of Indigenous affairs has been on recovery rather than on coercion: recovery of lost political autonomy, lost property rights, lost regional integration, lost economic self-sufficiency, lost pride, lost languages, lost identities. Noel Pearson (2000) is probably right in arguing that it is economic relations that will most effectively drive change, out of all the public-domain factors that a government can influence by policy decisions and by funding shifts, although it is yet to be demonstrated that a regionally devolved, paragovernmental system of funding would not reproduce the main social features of big-government welfarism.

What I have been arguing here, however, is that what might be called cultural redevelopment on a deeper level than the merely superficial is also a precondition of radical improvement in people's chances of ending the suffering that is currently going on. The old culturally oppressive, chauvinist and racist policies both of churches and the state, under which even the most private aspects of life were in many places subject to Whitefella scrutiny and control, are happily past. If it is to happen in generations rather than centuries, the kind of cultural redevelopment I have referred to is something that, in the final analysis, only Indigenous people themselves can make effective, if indeed that is a realistic and conceivable option for them. However, cultural change does not proceed, as

it were, by committee. Deep changes in culture are normally and in most of human history unintentionally generated in contexts such as significant economic change, radical ideological shifts such as mass conversion to a proselytising religion, or major environmental catastrophes. The last two are, in this case, unlikely.

Difficult subjects such as Aboriginal 'family violence' cannot be approached ahistorically. One still hears the modern myth that the violent conflicts of today's Indigenous communities have no continuity with the ancient or 'traditional' past in this country. While ethnographic statements from the past make frequent reference to the affection and solicitude shown between husbands and wives, for example, early contact reports by colonial observers, including some sympathetic ones like Edward John Eyre,⁶³ and the more recent ethnographies of trained anthropologists,⁶⁴ make it clear that earlier versions of what is now called 'family violence' or 'community violence' were also widespread and frequent in Australia under 'traditional' conditions, although the evidence is clear that formal rules governed physical conflict to a greater extent than now. Bennelong's violent and armed public attack on a young woman at Port Jackson in 1790, as recounted by Watkin Tench (1996 [1793]), was among the earliest of many reports of male-on-female assaults that come down from the first-contact period.⁶⁵ Today, this kind of assault is found at its worst in communities that have remained closest to their cultural traditions, and where alcohol is available in quantity. Another way of putting this is to say that those with the most recent experience of being drawn into contact with the wider world seem to be facing the greatest problems of community violence at the present time.

If people are in any doubt as to whether or not serious armed assaults on women and men took place in Australia over the thousands of years prior to conquest, the archaeological record of prehistoric human remains settles the question decisively.⁶⁶ Palaeopathology expert Stephen Webb has studied the incidence and nature of trauma using 6,241 adult post-cranial bone samples and 1,409 adult cranial samples from prehistoric remains derived from all major regions of Australia except Tasmania.⁶⁷ Upper limb trauma consisted predominantly of parrying fractures, which indicated defence against an attack from the front by a right-handed person (Webb 1995:190).⁶⁸ East coast women's frequency for this specific injury was the highest at almost one in five (p. 190). By far the commonest cranial injury was a depressed fracture of a kind that can 'usually be regarded as the result of deliberate aggression' (p. 202). In the case of the central Murray and east coast, women's cranial injury frequencies exceeded but were less than double those of men, while on the south coast and in the desert they were roughly double those of men. Along the tropical north coast they were just under four times as frequent as those of men.⁶⁹

A striking feature of Webb's figures is that the percentages of cranial trauma for women outstripped those of men not only for all sample regions but also for

all three numerical categories of cranial trauma, that is, whether they involved single, double or triple lesions.⁷⁰ Overall, females were more than twice as likely to have two depressed fractures or other cranial lesions than men. Combining all Australian sources, male crania with triple lesions averaged 0.7 per cent and females 3.8 per cent. That is, the average female incidence of triple cranial lesions was prehistorically more than five times that of men (Webb 1995:203). There is, one assumes, no strict way to prove the gender of the attackers in the case of such archaeological remains, although men's and women's weapons used in assaults were, as we may deduce from historical observations, typically differently shaped. It is impossible to ignore this evidence of high rates of serious assault injuries to the bones in pre-colonial times, and it would be unwise to exclude the probability that a good many of the women's injuries were inflicted by men as well as by other women.

The anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (1913:68) long ago warned against judging Aboriginal men's reported violent treatment of their wives ethnocentrically, that is, by applying the standards of modern Europeans to the behaviour of people from a radically different culture. Today, many would reply to this that while cultural differences may explain why certain behaviours differ between peoples, multicultural tolerance should not be used to condone something just because it is customary. Capital punishment for minor thefts, once 'normal' in European society, is not suddenly acceptable now simply because it was once an old 'tradition' of Europeans in another era. That Captain Cook flogged 20 per cent, 26 per cent and 37 per cent of the sailors on his three voyages to the Pacific, respectively, was very 'traditional' and has in no way cost him his reputation of today.⁷¹ Yet would we allow him to do it now?

Patterns of family violence in Indigenous Australia, while they may perpetuate at certain points the behaviours of the deep past, are not only shaped and underpinned by some continuing, ancient factors but are also both formed and triggered by 'new' factors. These can include alcohol misuse, the demoralising after-effects of colonisation, the high levels of stress found in centralised populations of hundreds of relatives, increased opportunity for delinquency, and the failure of discipline. I say 'new' in inverted commas here, because these factors are now, for most of the relevant people, several generations old and have in many cases become entrenched. One first step in breaking such patterns must be the recognition that, to the extent that they can be attributed to official policies, or to policy vacuums, they represent profound and longstanding policy failure. In this sense, we have sown the wind and are reaping the whirlwind. To the extent that these patterns have become an integral part of 'contemporary culture', a quick shift of policy is hardly likely to dislodge them overnight. Minor adjustments to policy are unlikely to dislodge them at all.

If we are to understand what has been different about the last 30 years of Aboriginal community life as against the preceding decades of the control era,

perhaps we should examine the ways it both resembles and differs from the first decades of post-conquest Australian society, especially in the town areas. Here, the parallels with the era of William Hogarth's eighteenth-century London, as depicted in his famous image of social devastation in *Gin Lane*, are unnerving. In the first invasion period, in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, while the discipline and social controls of the classical Aboriginal order were being deprived of much of their force or removed comprehensively, the era of legally and institutionally imposed order and control was for most people yet to come. Especially in the south, for the first decades *laissez-faire* was more the order of the day than institutionalisation. London's *Gin Lane* had its echoes in early Sydney street scenes by Augustus Earle and others showing the effects of Aboriginal contact with alcohol and 'civilisation'.⁷²

Laissez-faire returned in a new form in the 1970s, in the shape of the freedoms of self-determination or, as conservatives once preferred it put, self-management (Palmer 1990:166). The ancient social order, while resting on a mixture of internal and external constraints like any other, depended very highly on external mechanisms of control, including fear of physical or supernatural harm or death. In this sense, the authoritarian and patriarchal regimes of most of the early Christian missions were, structurally and philosophically, and entirely bizarre as this might sound, 'culturally appropriate' in a way that recent liberalised and more chaotic regimes have not been.⁷³ This is not, of course, to suggest that this particular clock can or should be turned back.

The authority vacuums that have led to chaotic developments in many settlements seem strongly resistant to the reinstatement of older forms of power, which may be remembered fondly by the elderly but are feared and resisted by the young. The older forms were based significantly on senior people's domination of religious nurturance, their powers of mystification, their control of people's marriage prospects, and their possession of the sanctions of sorcery, physical injury and, ultimately and in a few domains, execution. Channelled retribution and 'getting satisfaction', not the foreign judicial independence implied in English terms like 'punishment', were mostly central to dispute resolution. The old social order also depended critically on the use of dispersal as a means of keeping conflict at manageable levels. There is little evidence that such a system, once thoroughly broken, can be reinstated, and in any case one could expect most citizens now, including most Aboriginal people, to take the view that its totalitarian and violent characteristics, perhaps once necessities of life in a stateless society, should no longer be promoted or supported.⁷⁴ Also, dispersal as a means of keeping relative peace was dealt a deadly blow by sedentisation and centralisation in the post-colonial era.⁷⁵

If in our time we try to understand phenomena like the reproduction of violence over time, we cannot start just with yesterday, and we cannot begin by excluding violence from 'culture' and confining it to pigeonholes such as

'criminality' or the emotional 'pathology' of individuals. The in-depth methodology of anthropology and its encompassing theoretical base, not mere assemblages of medical or criminal facts alone, can assist official policies and practices to move beyond their present, tragically ineffectual standing to a point where communities have a chance of a better life. Yet one should not exaggerate the value of anthropology in this highly politicised context—its role is now always likely to be minor, and indeed we may have seen the end of the era in which it was otherwise.

In spite of this, more and better ethnography is needed, for example, on how violence is learned by the growing child as much as on how and why it is practised by adults. Just to take a small but significant instance, a response of extreme anger and physical attack in retribution for pain or food deprivation inflicted by another person is regularly elicited from infants in communities distributed across north and central Australia, beginning in the child's first months. This seems to be done ostensibly for the purpose of eliciting responses of self-assertion, although deeper and less functional explanations to do with repressed anger and jealousy on the part of the instigator are probably relevant. It is done most commonly by relatives who pinch the infant's cheek, kiss it in a biting manner or slap it, and who may then offer part of their own body for a good hard striking by the child, or a mother may offer the infant the breast by way of comfort. In the Kuranda area of north Queensland, this is locally known as 'cruelling' (Finlayson 1991:238–239).⁷⁶ Infants who fall over things like chairs may also be encouraged to attack the offending object in a valued and approved display of physical revenge.

There is no doubt in my mind that this was once an ancient and, under pre-colonial conditions, extremely useful training in one of the requirements of adult life in the stateless foraging society then prevailing: you had to look after yourself, if necessary in deadly combat. Now is not the pre-colonial era, however, and the state, for all its faults, provides people with the protection of Australian law instead of leaving them to rely on direct retribution—although one would not always think this theory is being seriously put into practice on the face of the evidence from many remote places in this country.⁷⁷

Classical-style child-rearing practices could also include the following, exemplified here from Annette Hamilton's study in north-central Arnhem Land in 1968–69:

[Girls] witness the verbal and sometimes physical assaults on older women meted out by certain quick-tempered men, and are told that adult women as a matter of course comply with men's wishes for their own good.... When a man makes an unreasonable request a woman's usual response is compliance, and children of both sexes are constantly exposed to this pattern. (Hamilton 1981b:107)

On occasions like this [when a four-year-old boy attacked his mother and threw a screaming tantrum over being told to share a container of ice-cream] no one makes any effort to restrain the child's anger, to reason with him, or explain why he should act otherwise. Neither do they shout at him or punish him, or demonstrate in any way that they find his behaviour unacceptable. They simply accept it with a shrug.⁷⁸ (Hamilton 1981b:82)

The deprecation of aggressive behaviour in children, and the tendency to ridicule it, are no doubt important in conditioning the child's view of aggression in adult society. However, other early experiences indicate that wants sufficiently deeply felt will be satisfied by others. The temper tantrums of the young child over food (noticed especially though not exclusively among boys) have a close parallel in the apparently irrational demanding behaviour of adult men over women, the usual cause of overt aggression in this society.⁷⁹ (Hamilton 1981b:151)

Aboriginal people have abandoned many past practices voluntarily. Are the practices of 'cruelling' infants and tolerating violent demanding behaviour in boys, just to give two examples, beyond being brought to consciousness for critical assessment within the relevant communities? Here is a case where 'rethinking culture' might prove beneficial, in a context where community members, not their critics and enemies, do the judging and produce the initiative for change.

Yet rethinking culture is never an easy matter, especially if we are not in the habit of objectifying it. Also, would this kind of cultural self-reassessment just be tinkering? A deeper approach is warranted if such things are to change in a foreseeable period. In particular, I am unable to see how problems that have deep-seated historical and cultural foundations can be seriously challenged in the absence of a radical shift in the political economy—with an emphasis on the economy—even though this alone may never be enough.⁸⁰ Any truly significant shift in an Indigenous political economy, in the non-agrarian and technologically complex context of present-day Australia, is likely to involve much greater social integration with non-kin than occurs at present, even though this kind of integration may have long been advancing because of, among other things, urban drift. So long as kinship remains a major basis rather than a mainly private aspect of the political economy of a people, it is unlikely that they will pursue the desired benefits of the post-industrial world very effectively or at great speed.

In suggesting that a high emphasis on kinship may be central to some of the multitude of factors blocking serious gains for Aboriginal people, I might be seen by some as acting in opposition to Aboriginal interests. This could not be further from the case. There are now many successful Aboriginal people whose

identity is never questioned but for whom kinship has become a mostly private matter that does not in general determine which town they live in, or for whom they work, or with whom they decide to share resources, or with whom they live, or with whom they engage in cooperation and competition, or with whom they have a drink. Typically, these are the people defined in popular terms as 'role models' for the next generation.⁸¹ The chief mainspring of their perceived success has been individual, not communal, empowerment.

Anthropologists *per se* are not social engineers. For our work to have a chance of being practically useful to others in any specifically anthropological way in the area of concerns addressed in this paper, we may need to have carried out more and deeper research, but not all of it need be narrowly directed at understanding disadvantage itself. In particular, there is a conspicuous slightness about the available anthropological literature focused on the opposite of disadvantage, and how people achieve it in their own lifetimes.⁸² There are, however, those who take the view that the academic disciplines, or at least the 'soft sciences', may have little to offer to people who are facing a critical moment in their history on the scale currently true for large parts of Aboriginal Australia.

NOTES

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1. This paper is a revised version of the Inaugural Berndt Foundation Biennial Lecture, given at the annual conference of the Australian Anthropological Society, on 23 September 2000 at The University of Western Australia. I wish to stress that this paper is aimed at a general readership rather than a specialist anthropological one.

2. After drafting this paper, I read Colin Tatz's 'Aboriginal violence—a return to pessimism' (1990), and was struck in particular by two things: the similarity of our concerns and arguments, and the fact that nothing fundamental had changed in Indigenous affairs policy in the decade that followed this passionate and informed plea in 1990. Where I may differ from Tatz is that my optimism, if one can call it that, rests on the

impression that things have now become so extreme that a wholesale and fundamental review of policy surely must occur soon. Lee Sackett's (1991) response to Tatz's paper includes the statement that, contrary to Tatz's plea for a rethink of policy, Sackett finds 'government involvement—be it enlightened or reactionary—nestled at the heart of the Aborigines' problem'. One reading of this could be that not only government but also paragonovernmental Indigenous bureaucracies, including the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC), should leave Aborigines free to get on with life as others are left, although I am not sure Sackett would agree. This is not my own position, but it is increasingly thinkable. Could things be worse, with or without a specialised bureaucracy, especially in those remote settlements that are the focus of my concerns here?

3. Historian Peggy Brock (1993), I think, introduced the term 'outback ghettos' to the literature on Aboriginal Australia. I use it deliberately here to counterbalance the falsely warm and fuzzy impression people often get from the common use of the term 'communities' for those settlements that have largely Indigenous populations. This impression may suffer from ethnocentrism, or is it just lack of information? There can be no assumption that such places are unified communities where mutual support beyond particular kin groups is the order of the day. Many descend from what were originally concentration camps formed to protect and control remnant Aboriginal populations drawn from wide areas in the aftermath of colonisation. Even those established under improved conditions in the mid-twentieth century, on lands reserved for Aboriginal use and now under full Aboriginal legal ownership, can be at times places of extremely high levels of internal conflict and stress. Some may say this is just an outsider's view—after all, it is sometimes reported that most residents in such places see nothing worthy of much serious complaint about their conditions (*e.g.*, Taylor *et al.* 2000:96–97). This observation is matched by survey reports dating back to 1983, revealing that the self-rated health status of people in remote communities, as opposed to their statistical health profiles as assessed by outsiders, regularly emerges as predominantly 'good to excellent' (see Taylor *et al.* 2000:91). This 'culturally appropriate' self-perception, so utterly at odds medically with global ideas of reasonable levels of health, has never been the basis of official health policy, however, and many of us would argue that, from the point of view of fiduciary duty, this is as it should be.

4. Regular access to alcohol came late in this case. In many other parts of remote Australia, perhaps the majority of them, a similar era began in the early 1970s. In 'settled' Australia, the comparable period was much earlier.

5. Like many others, for years I refrained from much public engagement with Indigenous policy issues because of the rising Indigenous leadership and its capacity to carry the burden. Now, given the critical situation so many people are in, an 'all hands on deck' approach seems necessary.

6. Debates among scholars as to whether only recent history, or recent history plus ancient culture, underlies the bulk of Indigenous suffering have gone on for some time, but those of the latter view have marshalled by far the more convincing arguments. For an example in the field of violence, see Reser (1991) and references therein.

7. 'Euphemisms abound: superintendents and managers become community advisers and community co-ordinators, with the Commonwealth still paying the salaries' (Tatz 1990:249). See also Cowlshaw's account of Bulman (1999a:267–277), where she notes the increased demand for complex management services since the 1970s. However, the advisors and co-ordinators do not have all the old powers of their predecessors, nor their 'hard man' (and hard woman) personalities, nor, in most cases, their decades-long personal commitment to a particular community. Managers now rarely, if ever, stay for 30, 40 or 50 years in one settlement, unlike a good number of the old missionaries.

Cowlshaw (1999b:22) discusses some of the negative consequences of the blow-through staff pattern.

8. In 1974, H. C. Coombs told Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Jim Cavanagh of his worry that 'recent tensions and apparent breakdown in social control' imperilled 'the effectiveness of Aboriginal involvement in the affairs of reserve communities' in the Northern Territory (Rowse 2000a:138). In 1973, Barrie Dexter, head of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, 'had concluded that progress in transferring authority to the Aboriginal residents of missions and settlements was "more apparent than real". In some communities, he had discovered, there was a vacuum in responsibility, with a resulting decay in basic services and infrastructure. Would "self-determination" turn these places into squalid disgraces? he wondered' (Rowse 2000a:137).

9. This is not to suggest that pre-colonial customary law prevented violent conflict, for example, but its mechanisms of restraint and its rules of engagement, combined with the use of dispersal as a means of limiting conflict, meant that distinct limits were customarily placed on potentially perpetual feuding, massacres were rare (but on the record), and large-scale organised warfare found in other kinds of society was not possible.

10. For some relevant discussion of examples of the Coombsian contradiction, see Rowse (2000a:66, 71, 80, 85, 90, 94, 135, 139, 153, 168, 170–172, 201, 203; see also pp. 79, 179, 192, 222). In one of these examples, Rowse (2000a:171) refers to the 'uncomfortable proximity of two political economies—public service accountability and Aboriginal (patronage) accountability'. Coombs's capacity for idealistic but unrealistic fantasy is well exemplified by his 1969 strategy for dealing with the problems at Yirrkala (Rowse 2000a: 78–79). Indigenous affairs in this country have long been plagued by those newly arrived in power, or merely in the media, who think they can rapidly 'fix' things as no others have done before them. Their self-confidence is frequently inversely proportional to the length and depth of their first-hand knowledge. Tatz (1990:249) spoke of 'an abysmal absence of historical perspective in Aboriginal affairs, resulting in a policy and administration myopia that is staggering in its implications and results. No one learns from the past, no one listens, ... and hardly anyone stays around long enough to osmose anything. Everyone re-discovers the wheel'. The language here may be excessive, but I think the drift is right. In what other field of endeavour would such conspicuous failure itself fail to challenge the perpetuation of what obviously does not work?

11. For example, in a settlement in Cape York Peninsula, following a quarter century of no reported local homicides, the town's homicide rate was calculated at some 120 times the Queensland average (that is, over 400 per 100,000) in the years following the introduction of a regular supply of alcohol in the mid-1980s (Martin 1993a, b).

12. That alcohol offers an escape from pain is inadequate to account for the problems I refer to here. People from different cultures and different populations react differently to the same drug. One cannot simply ignore the hedonic factor either. Many people, and I do not exclude myself, enjoy drinking for its own sake.

13. See case studies in Sutton (1998:59–142).

14. Those Aboriginal people who were promoting 'mainstreaming' in the 1980s do not seem to have had many followers. Trevor Satour, an Aboriginal resident of Cairns, published a letter questioning separatism and the future of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) in *The Australian* in 2001 (2001a), but it evoked little published response. He said in part: 'And whether or not the separatist path has been a total failure and historical dead-end, it is surely time to rethink our focus and priorities. Evolution and growth occurs forward in time and a hard fact of life today is that there comes a time to face truths. One either reinvents oneself to be useful or one ceases to exist. On the face of it and in terms of the relevance to the lives and existence of many

on the ground ATSIC may well be at one of those crossroads'. His critique of racial separatism in relation to Aboriginal affairs is presented in detail in Satour (2001b).

15. I say 'identity' because the single common factor uniting the wide variety of people now identified as Indigenous in Australia is a particular shared ancestry, not a single kind of appearance ('race', in one its central folk senses) or a single way of life (culture).

16. Tim Rowse (2000a:131) observes: 'Assimilation and self-determination are variations—significantly different, it could be argued—on an inexorable governmental imperative: the modernisation of indigenous society'. But modernisation is also, for a significant proportion of Indigenous people, their own imperative, a product of the exercise of self-determination, not a passive response to external demands for assimilation. Cogent arguments for Indigenous people exercising the right to pursue modern education and in other ways to prepare for more effective participation in wider Australian society, free of ideological restrictions based on narrow interpretations of tradition, have recently been advanced by academic, education specialist and Torres Strait Islander Martin Nakata (2000a, b).

17. For example, by Jon Altman (n.d.).

18. Prime Minister Gough Whitlam led a federal Labor government for this period, after decades of rule by the conservative Coalition parties.

19. See the 1971 Cairns statement, drafted by Coombs for McMahon (Rowse 2000a: 53–55). The more ambitious and hopeful policy changes were enunciated in 1973 (Tim Rowse pers. comm.).

20. See, for example, Anderson (1989).

21. See Cowlshaw (1999b).

22. See further below.

23. The distortions to which Pearson refers, which can also sometimes arise in other forms as defence arguments in assault, homicide and other cases, themselves may rest on a culturally conditioned preparedness to reinvent the past for one's own convenience, to defend the innocence of members of one's own family regardless of the facts, and so on.

24. Although Cowlshaw (1998:161) has queried this interpretation, I remain convinced by a range of evidence from several anthropologists, including Anderson (1983, 1988) and Myers (1986), as well as my own experience, that the particular patterns of government dependency, of being looked after, are not merely passive results of poverty, and so on, but are also actively constructed partly, though not wholly, out of classical social templates, by people in a great many Aboriginal communities.

25. There is a vast literature on the problematic status of the 'culture' concept within the anthropological discipline. For a recent critical overview that is particularly germane to the present paper, see Morton (to appear).

26. It is akin to the pre-capitalist 'putting-out' systems of past centuries in Europe and India, and at best a case of borderline capitalism (see Wolf 1982:87 and other index references).

27. Both modernisation and imitation might suggest a one-way traffic in cultural influence and change, yet it is often incredibly difficult to be confident that one can isolate the movement of complex processes in this simple, unidirectional sense. As Merlan has argued so thoroughly, particularly in *Caging the rainbow* (1998:149–181), the policy change from assimilation and control to self-determination in the last 30 years in Australia has taken place not across the borders of two otherwise separate populations, but largely in a single 'intercultural' space. She relies heavily on the notion of mimesis or imitation in her analysis of neo-traditionalism, among other things. She draws attention to the many ways in which a highly restricted idea of 'culture' is now central to constructions of

Aboriginality, as part of a complex dialectic in which Aboriginal people are engaged in the 're-creation of non-modern identities', which are at first instance the conceptions of others. The anthropological sense in which culture also encompasses, at a much deeper and more powerful level, 'unreflexive everyday practice' is generally not confronted in these intercultural dialogues (p. 238).

28. This document was later superseded, and many of the statements to which I refer here disappeared. This occurred after I had delivered, and circulated an earlier draft of, the present paper.

29. For example, Herron (2000). Actually, it is difficult for citizens not involved in high political and bureaucratic life in this country to know how much an official document is the creature of policy as formed by elected politicians and how much it is a creature of the public service and its own, legendarily durable, culture. When I refer to 'official' discourse and documents in this paper, my ignorance of the inside story of the origins of specific statements should be taken into account.

30. 'Parity of esteem' was a phrase of the late Gloria Brennan (Jacquie Lambert pers. comm.).

31. The government-created Aboriginal Reconciliation Council ceased operations in 2000, and a private body, Reconciliation Australia, took up the baton in 2001 under the leadership of Fred Chaney and Shelley Reys. The fact that reconciliation has developed into a 'people's movement' across much of Australia, one that has expressed a great deal of goodwill towards Indigenous people, has meant that it can now be taken rather more seriously than at its bureaucratic outset.

32. For example, on the same day that the Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs handed down his budget statement (Herron 2000), which emphasised 'practical reconciliation', the media release of the Chairman of peak body ATSIC (the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission) mainly argued that the government had failed to provide enough of a down payment on 'practical reconciliation' (*i.e.*, money for health, education, employment and housing) (Clark 2000). At the local level, especially in remote places, one can always expect there to be a relatively adversarial relationship between Aboriginal people and government so long as traditional dependency patterns, customary externalisation of blame, and a classical default relationship of animadversion towards out-groups persist—with or without substantial grounds for grievance.

33. With apologies to the Skyhooks.

34. By early 2001, a rights agenda had come to dominate the National Policy Office of ATSIC. Coming at a time when other issues were clearly far more pressing, this development beggared belief. Did it reflect tacit support for the pessimistic view expressed by a Labor parliamentarian in 2000 that trying to fix Indigenous welfare problems was 'like cleaning the toilets on the Titanic', or was it merely a last-ditch effort to stem the tide?

35. Aboriginal writer Philip Morrissey (2000:20), discussing violence, has said, for example, that 'the excuse of over-determining racism can be stretched to the point where it denies Aboriginal men the dignity of being responsible for their own actions'.

36. I am aware that the Reconciliation document discussed here was not in any simple sense the product of government ministers or their departments, but originated with a citizens' Reconciliation Council and, I hear from a colleague, was 'written by committee *ad nauseam*'. In its contents and language I see the omnipresence of official culture, however.

37. On demand sharing, see Peterson (1993). For some observations on the continuing role of demand sharing in restricting economic development among Aboriginal people in New South Wales, see Macdonald (2000).

38. By 'the state' here, I include a rather wide range, from the ministers of the ruling

parties of the day to the Indigenous paragovernmental body ATSIC to Indigenous corporations and councils. Different members of these groups may have rather different reasons for not wanting to announce their expectations of cultural change, as Ron Brunton has pointed out to me (pers. comm. October 2000).

39. The suggestion that Aboriginal school absenteeism is, generally speaking, a result of racism in school systems rests on no evidence and seems very easy to refute: schools with high absenteeism rates in the remote regions include some that have the highest Indigenous course content, the highest Indigenous enrolments, and the highest Indigenous staff numbers. People who use the 'racism' mantra in such cases are increasingly devaluing it as currency, and thus reducing the effectiveness of publicly exposing racism where it actually exists. This is shooting oneself in the foot.

40. See, especially, Brady (1992).

41. For example, some years ago, Martin (1993a) laid out the basic statistical facts of differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal homicides in Australia, and also referred to many of the relevant cultural differences that lay behind the contrasting figures. In fact, his paper, and in more detail his major study of a remote community (1993b), made most of the basic points about the cultural dimensions of disadvantage that I am making here. They are worth reiterating because they are still trying to be heard over the din of the simplistic and propagandistic messages that permeate public discourse in this field.

42. Their paper was met by a fiercely oppositional response from 12 Aboriginal women (Huggins *et al.* 1991). Characteristically, this silenced neither Napurrula nor Bell. The drift of the Huggins *et al.* letter was as follows. They disputed that intra-racial rape was 'everyone's business'. It was 'our business how we deal with rape and have done so for the last 200 years quite well. We don't need white anthropologists reporting business which can be abused and misinterpreted by racists in the wider community. They feed like parasites to this type of thing'. They said it was unethical that Bell cited Nelson as co-author rather than as chief informant. They were, they said, closer to socialist feminists than radical feminists because they did not want to be jockeyed into fighting with and separating from their men. They also complained of whites setting urban blacks against traditional blacks. Finally, 'Sexism does not and will never prevail over racial domination in this country'. Nelson (1991) replied, explaining that her relationship with Bell had been long and close and she had asked Bell to write her stories.

Bell responded that 'The race card had been played and the actual abuse of women had been decentred' (1991b:508). This, I think, was the critical point. Bell's detailed responses to her critics in this case cannot be summarised here, where my focus is on the fact and method of attempts to silence non-Indigenous academics (but see Bell 1990, 1991a, b, 1996 and Larbalestier 1990). Bell (1991b:508) reported that a number of qualified researchers and potential researchers engaged in this subject area were 'intimidated/appalled/tired' by the 'tenor and raw emotions of exchanges such as these', a number of which had been at public events, and were 'tempering their reporting and withholding information for fear of an attack on their personal and professional integrity'. In Tom Wolfe's (1971) terms, at least some of these people had been mau-maued into silence, or were perhaps exhibiting what Bell called 'racial cringe' (1990). Mau-mauing is a technique that works or used to work especially well as a form of publicly disciplining the discourses of guilty white liberals, many of whom could be expected to wear what Wolfe called their 'shit-eating grin' as part of their public response to being confronted in this kind of way. Wolfe (p. 135) observed, with his usual touch of ratbaggery, that smiling at one's challenger in these circumstances 'just proves that he is right and you are chickenshit—unless you are a bad man yourself with so much heart that you can make that smile say,

“Just keep on talking, sucker, because I’m gonna count to ten and then *squash* you”’. Robust debate on the subjects I broach here is now more likely to occur, at least in Australia, without the roles of the debaters as representatives of ‘races’ becoming the central issue. There has been a shift since the 1980s.

43. Quotation from Bell (1990:164). I sent a version of the above paragraph to the editor of the Opinion page of *The Australian*, as part of a longer contribution, shortly after the Lane (2000) and Drennan (2000) pieces appeared, but had no response. A follow-up inquiry a little later was also met with silence. Contrary to political mythology, those anthropologists who have been reticent about going public with what they know about certain issues have held back for more than a single reason, including the view that it is no longer appropriate for non-Indigenous people to act as spokespersons for Indigenous causes, fear of their knowledge being misappropriated and abused by racists, a desire to avoid the stress of open conflict (see above on mau-mauing), and, for some perhaps, a belief that they can do little to help change the world.

44. Memmott *et al.* (2001). For a summary of this detailed report, see Memmott and Stacy (1999). The published version of the report (2001) is available on the website www.ncp.gov.au. For a recent report on Queensland, see Queensland Government Office of Women’s Policy (2000).

45. These were:

- lack of suitable sectoral partnerships for program delivery;
- lack of co-ordination at the local level;
- lack of training and skills amongst program staff;
- lack of funding or insufficient funding;
- unethical community politics interfering with program execution;
- programs not necessarily directly targeted at the worst forms of violence in a community which may appear too awesome to tackle;
- programs being predominantly reactive and not balanced with proactive components to reduce incidents of violence;
- lack of co-ordination or fragmentation between State and Commonwealth goals and programs;
- violence intervention staff themselves become threatened and/or assaulted by violence perpetrators;
- over-stress (‘burn-out’) amongst program staff through regularly dealing (both during and out-of-work hours) with the constant stress-inducing occurrences of violence in the community (Memmott *et al.* 1999:65).

46. Here I refer not only to Indigenous community members but also to long-term residents such as staff members, anthropologists and others, who are frequently socially integrated into networks of Aboriginal kin and develop long-term relationships with their members.

47. Note that Yarrabah is not in the Cape York statistical division referred to above, so different projection rates may apply there.

48. In relation to reported violence and its geographical distribution in, for example, Queensland, see Memmott *et al.* (2001:16).

49. For example: ‘From Port Keats, through Groote Eylandt, the Gulf of Carpentaria, and south to the Tropic of Capricorn, in every Aboriginal community, terror and hopelessness are the inseparable companions of every person’ (Howson 2000:24). This kind of extreme statement makes it difficult to take the author seriously. Yet he should have been taken seriously. He was, after all, the responsible federal minister at the

commencement of the policy period discussed here, and has been able to take the long view.

50. The old heartland of political support for Indigenous causes in Australia, the southern urban middle class, is now increasingly better read and better travelled. The family four-wheel drive holiday, and periods of employment in remote regions, mean now that even in Melbourne one increasingly comes across support-heartland members who no longer accept pollyanna-ish or over-simple, politically inspired accounts of outback life.

51. The idea that the likely alternative to a modern education would be a comparable traditional one, an idea at times espoused by some liberals (*e.g.*, Waterford 1993), is no longer likely to occur in a substantial way in any but a tiny minority of situations. One of the regular complaints of senior people in remote communities is that young people are learning very little of their elders' cultures. While this may at times seem to be exaggerated, it is frequently undeniable. A modern education at least offers the young a basis of economic and lifestyle choice, as against the dead-end of little or no education of either kind.

52. Calls for a thoroughgoing, as against a narrowly defined, recognition of Aboriginal customary law sometimes suggest this would magically redress the problems I speak of here. For a range of reasons that would take too much space to set out here, I do not believe this to be the case, nor do I regard such proposals as being based on realistic knowledge of the facts involved. Specific customary laws, where they demonstrably still hold sway and are not contrary to Australian law, are quite different from nebulously described whole systems of customary law dealing with, for example, violent acts against persons.

53. I do not accept as adequate those lists of causes for 'Indigenous disadvantage' that omit to mention the interplay between older cultural traditions and social dynamics and the destructive impacts of historically recent forces. Memmott *et al.* (2001) do include cultural forces such as child socialisation in their lists of causes of violence as proposed by others, but they surprisingly omit any persisting classical cultural factors from their own list of 'underlying factors of violence' (2001:11–14). They seem prepared to find a correlation between a long history of a community functioning as a removal centre or mission and high degrees of violence, but there is a deep anomaly here: the Queensland communities with the worst violence include at least two that recruited their populations almost entirely locally and in the main not until the mid-twentieth century, were not in general used for removals from other regions, and were places where cultural assimilation forces were the least applied (see 2001:14). The largely historical explanation is not sufficient.

Trudgen (2000:221–222) lists 43 primary causes for the 'secondary symptoms' Yolngu people suffer as a consequence of loss of control over their own lives, but even if one agrees with every one of them, this is also not sufficient explanation. It makes no reference to the interaction between the old and the new cultures and the persistence of forms of social organisation radically at odds with what the state might tolerate by way of self-governance. For example, Trudgen (pp. 49–50) recounts how the handover of bank agencies to local employees by Arnhem Land missions in the 1970s resulted in employees helping themselves to the money. He explains this on two grounds only: that the employees thought the money came from the Queen, and since nothing happened immediately after they stole it she cannot have minded very much; and the Commonwealth bank Balandas (white people) failed to learn how to communicate appropriately with Yolngu. If just these two factors were rectified, through education on both sides, does he seriously suggest that the outcome would be radically different? Other and more

profound cultural and social factors are usually at work in this common kind of situation. Twenty-five years after this experiment, and after plenty of opportunity for education programs, how many organisations in the region have local Indigenous financial controllers?

54. 'Many Aboriginal societies in the Northern Territory have never been dispossessed and yet the grog problem is crippling these same Aboriginal people. We argue that because alcohol is a powerful addictive chemical substance it is more causal than symptomatic. Once Aboriginal people are in the grip of alcohol they find it difficult or impossible to escape' (Langton *et al.* 1991:302). The extent to which chemical addiction is involved, whatever that may be, does not, however, account for the extraordinary levels of violence that are so frequently associated with drinking in remote Australia. Addicted or not, dispossessed or not, one's style for drinking is very much a product of one's socialisation (see MacAndrew & Edgerton 1970).

55. The document then went on to talk about 'benchmarking and accountability', 'delivery outcomes', and 'national performance indicators', which at best is in-house government-speak, at worst a hideous example of the distance between this document and reality. Above all, this was Reconciliation as an extension of the federal public service and its generous capacity to fund 'metawork', work about work. After I mentioned this in the Berndt Lecture in Perth in September 2000, Kingsley Palmer told me that we now have a recently added fifth layer in the national superstructure, a federal office of auditors who audit the auditors; so what they do must be metametawork.

56. DAA = Department of Aboriginal Affairs, later replaced by ATSIC.

57. For a detailed critique of 'culture'-based treatment programs, see Brady (1995b).

58. The idea that people drink heavily simply because of cultural loss will not bear scrutiny. Some of the heaviest drinkers I have ever encountered have been people who had the privilege of a bush upbringing, had never been deprived of their land, and had a rich grasp of classical high culture, including the holding of vast religious knowledge, and who were multilinguals of enviable facility.

59. 'The Murinbata themselves make a kind of picture of the articulation of the segmental groups. They use sticks or stones in such a way that what emerges looks a little like a branching tree or a flung fish-net. But it is not a picture of sociality. That picture exists in the dramatization given by *Punj* [public name of higher men's ceremony] in complex symbolisms of mime, song, dance and rite. The ontological reality stated there is not reducible to points of force on a network. A "theory" of that reality would have to be a rationalization of a reality which, if my account is correct, the Murinbata put to themselves as a joyous thing with maggots at the centre. It takes considerable temerity to try to improve on this imagery' (Stanner 1963:37). '[I]t is consistent [with earlier discussion] that a people in a hard environment, with a poor material culture and little detached knowledge, should develop a religion around the inexorable' (Stanner 1963: 167). 'Much evidence points, not to decadence, but to a lively and developing life on the plateau' (Stanner 1963:85; see also pp. 57, 151–152). See also, for example, Tonkinson (1991:133); Dussart (2000:22–23).

60. This is not to deny the existence of what T. G. H. Strehlow (1956) called 'the sustaining ideals of Aboriginal societies', and an edifice of 'right ways' such as those enjoined upon novices during initiation, but the grounding of such ideals was continuity with the past, not departure from it for a new and improved general condition.

61. Information from John Taylor of CAEPR (pers. comm.).

62. I would agree that the clear cultural differences between north-east Arnhem Land and the Western Desert region, just to take an extreme example, both reflect and also lie behind their rather different histories of engagement with the outside world.

63. See, for example, Eyre (1997 [1845]:II:322–333, 387); Curr (1965 [1883]:114); and Austin's early (1841–43) Perth reminiscences as told to Roth (1899:56, 59). Bronislaw Malinowski (1963 [1913]:67–84) surveyed much of the then available literature in his book on the family in Aboriginal society, examining 30 different statements as to the nature of husband–wife relationships. Although he found a 'large diversity of statements and much contradiction', he felt able to summarise the more consistent statements in terms of a 'standard' picture, in which 'although the husband had a nearly unlimited authority, and in some cases, when he had special reasons (and undoubtedly deemed himself to be within his rights), he might use his authority for a very brutal and severe chastisement, nevertheless, there was usually a mutual fondness and kindness' (pp. 74–75). From the fact that Aboriginal wives were as a rule happy, Malinowski concluded that 'this ill-treatment did not appear to them cruel' (p. 80).

64. For a selection of relevant sources, see R. M. Berndt (1960–62:341); Berndt and Berndt (1970:92, 163); Berndt *et al.* (1993:34); Bolger (1991); Burbank (1994:16–43, 133–178); Goodale (1971:132); Hamilton (1981a:75, 1981b:148); Hart and Pilling (1960:53); Hiatt (1965: 107, 126); Kaberry (1939:128, 153–154, 229); Meggitt (1962:88–90); Myers (1986:253); Stanner (1963:163–164); Warner (1958 [1937]:79–82).

65. See the description by Watkin Tench (1996 [1793]:160–164). The woman was another man's wife, and her father was Bennelong's enemy. Both had attacked him on a previous occasion. He had taken her from Botany Bay to Port Jackson and was intending to kill her. After having given her two severe wounds on the head and one on the shoulder in the presence of the English officers and men, he is said to have added 'She is now my property: I have ravished her by force from her tribe: and I will part with her to no person whatever, until my vengeance shall be glutted' (1996:162). Tench commented, 'It is certain that no second instance of this sort [human sacrifices of prisoners] was ever witnessed by us' (p. 164). That physical assaults on women by men were at that time common in the area is asserted in some detail by William Collins (1971 [1798]:583), who wrote: 'The females too are accustomed to bear on their heads the traces of the superiority of the males, with which they dignify them almost as soon as they find strength in the arm to imprint the mark. We have seen some of these unfortunate beings with more scars upon their shorn heads, cut in every direction, than could be well distinguished or counted.' Fellow officer John Hunter's journal for 1790 noted that 'the women are certainly treated with great cruelty [in the Port Jackson area]' (quoted in Copley 1963:319).

66. The following material from Webb (1995) was published after the appearance of Williams and Jolly (1992).

67. Webb (1995:188) also studied juvenile remains, but found no overt sign of healed traumatic injury. This is consistent with numerous reports that children were rarely chastised physically.

68. Webb (1995:190) considered the incidence of this type of injury 'not large', except in the case of Desert men (10.5 per cent), and East Coast women from Brisbane south to the NSW/Victoria border (19.2 per cent).

69. Only at the Rufus River (Murray River region) were men's and women's cranial injuries of comparable frequency, a frequency nevertheless of over 25 per cent in each case (Webb 1995:204), but while the male samples there showed no occipital trauma, the female samples showed 4.3 per cent of this type of injury (p. 206).

While a proportion of frontal bone injuries may have been self-inflicted during mourning or may have been the result of formal duelling between people of the same sex, frontal injuries in total accounted for only an average 25 per cent of cranial trauma in the samples (Webb 1995:204). Parietal (side) and occipital (back) cranial injuries cannot be so readily explained in these two ways. 'With the exception of the central Murray,

females have a right [parietal] predominance, as though subjected to attacks from behind, perhaps during a domestic squabble. If this assumption is correct, the highest incidence of this type of attack is experienced by desert females who also have the highest amount of occipital injury' (pp. 205–206). In the Swanport and Adelaide samples on the South Coast, 'the overall frequency of female trauma reaches a very high 36.9 per cent and 43.8 per cent, respectively, while males have 19.3 per cent and 9.1 per cent, respectively. This difference clearly points to common aggression towards or between females rather than the whole community being involved in warfare'.

70. In the Desert samples, almost 5.9 per cent of female crania had three cases of trauma, for South Coast and Tropics the figures for female triple lesions were 4.9 and 4.8 per cent, respectively, for East Coast 3.5 per cent, Rufus River 2.4 per cent, and Central Murray 1.3 per cent. On a continental basis, male crania with double lesions averaged 4.3 per cent and females 9.2 per cent (Webb 1995:203).

71. The flogging figures are from Dening (1992:63).

72. See, for example, *Natives of New South Wales. As seen in the streets of Sydney*, by Augustus Earle c.1825–28 (often reproduced, e.g., in Smith 1992:152).

73. Tonkinson (1988:67; see also Tonkinson 1978, 1982) described the problems encountered at Jigalong when the missionaries departed and a new policy of self-management began in the mid-1970s. In relation to children running out of control in unprecedented numbers, he noted 'white staff members refusing to intervene because to do so would contravene self-management policy', while the Aboriginal people experienced a certain nostalgia for the departed authoritarian Christians. Casual administration might work to an extent where restraint is thoroughly internalised, as in those historically rare societies characterised by an unusually powerful development of what is commonly called conscience. However, Stanner (1963:57) said of a classically oriented Aboriginal society in the north-west of the Northern Territory, 'As far as one can tell from outward show the formations of conscience are not strong', and this statement can be extended to other traditional societies in Australia and probably many other parts of the world.

74. These liberal views pose a problem for those who also support, for example, male initiation involving circumcision. On one view, this ceremony involves coercive genital mutilation, something the same people would reject in the case of girls. On another, circumcision is integral to customary man-making ceremonies each summer across a vast area from the Great Australian Bight to the Kimberleys and Top End, and in this sense circumcision is a matter of freedom of religion for many Aboriginal people.

75. Many of us had high hopes for the 'outstation' or 'homelands' movement that began in earnest in the 1970s, as a means to decentralisation and to a more controllable rate of engagement with the non-Aboriginal world. Only a minority have decentralised in this way; many homeland centres are unoccupied much of the time, and movement out of ghettos into towns and cities, or residential alternation between Indigenous settlements and towns, seems to have been the solution preferred by bigger numbers—although I am not aware of survey figures on this.

76. Similar patterns are reported as follows: Tiwi Islands: Gary Robinson (pers. comm.), Mount Isa area: Robyn Mobbs (pers. comm.), Doomadgee (Queensland Gulf country): David Trigger (pers. comm.), Wik region, Cape York Peninsula: Martin (1993b: 22–23), Pilbara and western Western Desert areas: Jan Turner (pers. comm.). Somewhat similar cases of deliberate infliction of pain on babies followed not by encouragement of revenge but by suckling are reported for the Maningrida area by Hamilton (1981b:30, 33–34).

77. Governments have at times been averse to meeting Aboriginal demands for locally stationed police in remote settlements, and police have at times been reluctant to apply

the law rigorously in the same places. Wilf Douglas (1978:117–118) listed ‘The poor manifestation of White law enforcement’ as one of several causal factors in the evolution of a ‘rampage of destruction’ in a desert community in 1975, noting that, in the minds of both the Aboriginal elders and of offenders, the general picture was that ‘White law does not operate efficiently’ and ‘White Australians do not take their law seriously’ (p. 118).

78. In this instance, the boy was allowed to consume the whole container.

79. The demands referred to here were for women as wives. In an unpublished paper dealing with north-east Arnhem Land, Gerrard (n.d.) has proposed a strong link between the way children are allowed to treat their mothers as property and as sources who cannot refuse their demands, and adult men’s attitudes towards women, in a region where assaults by men on women, including rape, were found by her to be far more frequent than in, say, Sydney.

80. In recent years, there has been some shift away from the paradigm in which Indigenous advancement in Australia was principally to be achieved through political, legal and administrative reform, especially since Noel Pearson’s forceful promotion of a move out of the welfare economy into the ‘real economy’. That this is unlikely to be achieved solely through political, legal and administrative reform within largely unchanged parameters should by now be apparent.

81. There are times, however, when the individuation such people enjoy is seen as disloyalty by others. This is an experience shared by people other than Aborigines. My own family had to deal with resentments when we formed part of the post-war diaspora from Port Melbourne, where we had been for four generations in what was then a very close, clannish society in which neighbourhood politics and employment were deeply entwined with kinship and denominational factionalism.

82. Brady (e.g., 1995c) has been conducting research on why Aboriginal people give up alcohol.

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