

After Consensus:

Cultural Politics and Australian Indigenous Affairs Since 2000

Peter Sutton

ARC Professorial Fellow, Discipline of Anthropology, University of Adelaide and South Australian Museum

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INTRODUCTION

Noel Pearson broke the log-jam of public discourse about Australian indigenous community dysfunction, and the weaknesses of indigenous policy frameworks then in place, in several hard-hitting papers published in 1999 and 2000.¹ Those critical months can now be seen as a watershed in Australian indigenous policy history. In turn Pearson's publications had been stimulated by some searing journalism written by a fearless Tony Koch in the *Courier Mail* during 1999. Koch exposed the then dire state of certain Cape York Peninsula Aboriginal communities to a wide public.² This was Pearson's own region. Pearson has sustained his reform agenda from that time to this, and, along with others, has ever since been confronting one-by-one the more questionable planks of past practice and systematically proposing new directions.

But debates over Australian indigenous policy, formerly muted and largely between friends, have become muscular and public. They can now, once again, create enemies, as they did in the last changeover phase of about 1968-74.³ From that period, the new ideas of the Seventies vanquished the old ideas of the past, became the new orthodoxy, and by 2005 lay in pieces. Once again indigenous policy has become serious politics, without having significant electoral implications.⁴

¹ References

² References

³ cite Daniel Leo?

⁴ Indigenous issues have a habit of storming into public consciousness periodically, and then storming out again. The 'punitive expeditions' debate of the 1930s was an early such storm (sources), and later there were, for example, the death of Albert Namatjira (refs), the Stewart trial and Royal Commission (refs), the 'Warburton riots' (ref), the national land rights debate (1983? Ref), and a series of development-related controversies (e.g. Gove, Weipa, Kakadu, Coronation Hill, Noonkanbah, Olympic Dam, Hindmarsh Island).

In the last five or so years, journalists rather than academics have continued to play a central role in the public development of these issues, and in the dissemination of a newly widened variety of opinions within indigenous affairs. Think-tanks have also engaged with the issues and one, at least, has been set up purely to deal with indigenous policy.⁵

Around 2001-2 the 1970s-2000 progressivist consensus among indigenous affairs insiders was gutted almost overnight, as more and more people felt suddenly released from the past. There was a fair amount of catharsis, and of the crying game. There was also the overwhelming question for many Baby Boomers: had they spent or misspent their adult lives, to some extent at least, chasing moonbeams?

But it took longer for erstwhile or dug-in progressivist policy makers, bureaucrats and academics to begin to respond positively to the situation. The media quite rapidly discovered 'Aboriginal community dysfunction' in 2001, and then apparently rediscovered it in 2005-6. Memory can be short. In the interim, however, a lot had happened.

In the mid-2000s several issues gradually tended to become intertwined in the debates and furores that now came wave upon wave. These blasts were driven at least as strongly by media revelations and opinings as by any other factor. They were also driven by bureaucratic and political pronouncements, plus some academic noises off. In the long version of this paper I try to cover all of these fields, albeit with some difficulty.

The indigenous issues included welfare dependency, community autonomy, organisational corruption, the priorities and future of ATSIC, the frontier history wars, the causes of racially differential morbidity and life expectancy rates, poor school attendance and declining literacy/numeracy rates, substance abuse, violence against women, child sexual abuse, customary law as a criminal defence, staying in versus leaving versus orbiting in and out of the 'ghettoes', service mainstreaming, gang warfare and public rioting, the Aboriginal land entry permit system and community censorship of media access, the future of funding for indigenous settlements, and the imminent expectation of rocketing urban migration by Aboriginal people leaving failing outback communities. This last issue was the subject of public comment by the federal minister Mal Brough as recently as last Tuesday.⁶

The Australia-wide issues against which these need to be considered included the shaky fate of cultural relativism in the aftermath of 9/11, debates on the desirability of the cultural assimilation and social integration of Australian immigrants, the treatment of boat people, the causes of the Cronulla riots, the mounting of challenges to the ideological control of school curricula by the Left establishment, the loss of a credible ideological coherence in the federal Labor opposition, the emergence of a band of Conservative culture warriors and their critics, and the involvement of the peaks of politics in low-level cultural matters of a kind not seen since the days of Pig-iron

⁵ The Bennelong Society (ref website)

⁶ (Aust)

Bob.⁷ There were ominous forebodings about another states-rights battle and even about the abolition of states altogether.

Some also began to see a growing resemblance between the post-1970 fate of remote indigenous communities and the post-colonial fate of many Pacific Island countries. Many of the symptoms of social and economic malaise seemed similar or even the same. Just this last week the, shall I say, well-known and colourful John Pasquarelli warned the nation of an impending 'boat people' crisis involving Pacific Islanders and Papua New Guineans fleeing failed states and moving to Australia. Pasquarelli raised the subject of the massive rates of HIV infection in PNG. Linked up with this fear in the same week was renewed attention to the wider Australian presence of HIV/AIDS. Symptomatic of the times, there was an open debate in which it was alleged that the epidemic was again getting out of hand because the hijacking of the relevant public health programs by gay male activists had led to political correctness and a consequent loss of effect on those likely to be newly exposed to infection. The theme was familiar: self-defined progressives were accused of digging in to pursue symbolism and politics in the face of a real-world calamity.

Sticking with my chosen nebulosity, let me go a little further and briefly join up these two braces of issues with a favourite project of mine, which is trying to keep track of the rapidly shifting moral status of empires. As a child in the 1950s I would be sent off to school by my mother reminding me to be proud of the fact that I was a 'member of the British Empire'. I had no idea what that was, actually, and later when I did find out what it was, the time had already come for it to divest itself of most of its possessions and disappear. The French and other colonial powers more or less followed suit and the consensus in my part of the world was that that was a jolly Good Thing. The end of the Cold War has seen a second great de-colonisation of a different but parallel kind and it has similarly been met, initially, with liberal favour if not fervour.

But some post-colonial states have experienced destabilisation, and economic, social, educational and medical decline, rather like some of the post-internal-colonialism communities of remote Australia. Male life expectancy in Russia is now the same as it is for Aboriginal males of Australia. In some regions there is talk of returning, not to imperial structures of the old kind, but to federated structures that perform some of the unifying and supportive roles formerly carried out by imperial powers.⁸ Recall, for example, that the longest period of peace and stability in European history was the reign of the Roman Empire, and it was, as is now apparent, also a time of unusual affluence not only for the powerful but also for ordinary people.⁹ It offered unprecedented career paths and mobility, the rule of law instead of that of warlords, and so on, positives that must be considered alongside the negatives of slavery, conquest and the rest. But even a voluntary federated structure can in the end only function if it has the potential for coercion. Both in the Pacific and on the Aboriginal front within Australia, the notion of intervention was being mooted with more seriousness than usual.

⁷ Sir Robert Menzies, aka Pig-Iron Bob, Prime Minister of Australia 1939-1941 and 1949-1966, liked to make personal forays into Australian art standards; see Haese 1981: .

⁸ See Cleary 2006 on the idea that the NT should have only four regional bodies.

⁹ Ward-Perkins 2005.

The awful thing about repression is that there are times when it works. Which brings us back to Australian policy matters. Part of the new debate is over what some critics have referred to as the reimposition of colonial controls, versus the view espoused by Noel Pearson and others that the political cost of repression is worth the community advantage.

In Cape York Peninsula we are now beginning to see this new approach start to bite. Since severe alcohol restrictions were imposed on the Cape York Peninsula community of Aurukun in 2003, hospital figures as of late 2006 indicate that the average number of sutures required per week, as a result of trauma induced by physical conflict, has gone down by 90%.¹⁰ In the four years 1999-2002 there were 6 suicides and 6 homicides in this community of less than a thousand people. This would make the annual murder rate 150/100,000 which is nearly 40 times the national average. In the almost four years between the onset of alcohol controls in 2003 and the time of writing (December 2006) there had by contrast been only two suicides and only one case of death caused by 'trauma' (as yet unidentified as homicide or accident).¹¹ In Cape York Peninsula as a whole, in the period January 2000 – June 2004 there were nine murders, and alcohol was reported to be a factor in every one. By contrast, in the 18 months to 3 January this year, during the new alcohol prohibition era, there had been NO murders in Cape York Peninsula.¹² One that occurred after that date was in a community where no alcohol controls of the new type had been imposed.¹³ This system of externally imposed alcohol restriction has nonetheless had its critics.¹⁴ But there is no evidence of a mass exodus of residents to places where alcohol is freely available.¹⁵

The role of the media

In the longer version of this paper, I intend to survey the public words of editorialists, politicians, bureaucrats and academics as things changed after 2000. Here I only have time to comment on the role of media reporting in the development of the relevant public issues.

Although he had some precursors, and soon rapidly acquired plenty of likeminded company, there is little doubt that in 1999 Noel Pearson shattered the existing mould of Australian indigenous policy thinking. In that year he gave an address to the Brisbane Institute which was published soon afterwards (Pearson 1999). It appears this paper arose directly from Courier Mail newspaper reportage on the condition of communities in Cape York Peninsula, written by journalist Tony Koch, which appeared in May 1999 (Koch 1999). The state government responded at the same time, putting respected senior lawyer Tony Fitzgerald in charge of a Cape York

¹⁰ Peter Fenton (Director of Nursing, Aurukun Hospital), personal communication, November 2006, Aurukun.

¹¹ Register of deaths 1973-, Aurukun Community. Ms held at Aurukun Hospital, Queensland.

¹² Gerard 2006.

¹³ Pearson ref

¹⁴ sources

¹⁵ This is anecdotal in the sense that it accords with my impressions and discussions with people at Aurukun during two field visits in 2006, but I do not have mobility figures. The population of Aurukun hovered around 900-1000 people at this time. I was told, however, that some non-Aboriginal people left Aurukun when the restrictions came into force, given that they apply to all residents.

Justice Study which reported in 2001. This report had national impact, directly and via the media.

Pearson's Brisbane Institute paper formed the basis for his short book *Our Right to Take Responsibility* (2000), which was in turn followed in August 2000 by 'Dysfunctional society', a paper in *Workers Online*. It was, however, *Our Right to Take Responsibility* which had the signal impact which changed the course of thinking about Australian indigenous questions. The fact that Pearson had broken the taboos of public discourse about indigenous community dysfunction and the impotence of existing policy frameworks was a factor – not the only one - in my own decision to contribute to the emerging debate with the Berndt Lecture given here in Perth in September 2000, and published the following year as 'The politics of suffering' (Sutton 2001).

The national print media in various places took up this paper, and at their request I published abridged versions for *The Australian* and *The Age*. I preferred to maintain control of the story by being the author rather than the interviewee. In these complex inter-racial and cross-cultural contexts journalists are increasingly sensitive to the problem of establishing themselves as reliable sources of knowledge. We have seen the emergence of a cadre of journalists, including journalists of high calibre, who specialise in indigenous affairs, but, as Stephen Stockwell and Paul Scott said in 2001

The question of how media workers gain cultural competence remains a confronting problem. How can producers and journalists from predominantly privileged socio-economic backgrounds develop the moral imagination to appreciate the positions, passions and points-of-view of those from other cultural backgrounds when there are large sets of life-experiences, often including language skills, that the two groups do not share? A useful insight to this question was offered by Queensland journalist, Tony Koch as he accepted the 1999 Walkley Award for most outstanding contribution to journalism for, in part, his coverage of indigenous issues. Koch argued that the media could not conceive of the realities of life in remote indigenous settlements while they limited their exposure to such places to the time they spent in the company of government ministers on flying visits. His point is well-made. It is impossible to develop the cultural competence required to report in an accurate, balanced and ethical fashion without taking the time to talk with people, to observe the minutiae of their lives and to give people the opportunity to represent themselves to the 'blow-ins' of the dominant culture.¹⁶

Koch had not only made an exposé of a kind that was later to become almost a commonplace, he had also taken on the then indigenous leadership. In an opinion piece he attacked long-time Queensland Aboriginal political figure Les Malezer for making prominent criticisms of the Queensland Native Title Act (Bill?) while not uttering 'a peep' about the extraordinary violence in certain Aboriginal communities.¹⁷ Malezer hit back.¹⁸ Elsewhere in the press Malezer's long-term residence in Geneva as a representative of FAIRA¹⁹ was combined with increasing public criticism of ATSIC to form one of the more memorable headlines of the era: 'Swiss bid for Seat on ATSIC'. It reflected, I thought, a new freedom from the

¹⁶ Stockwell and Scott 2001:7.

¹⁷ Koch

¹⁸ Malezer

¹⁹ Foundation for Aboriginal and Islander Research Action.

sequestering of sacred cows, and I still have it on my kitchen wall. But this is the sort of tongue in cheek that somehow seems less light-hearted and more brutal on television. As newsprint it had not much more tone than the SBS weather.

There are other relevant differences between print, radio and television. In the period since 1999 there has been an ongoing but narrowing gap between the major media outlets in their approach to this general story of community dysfunction. This may be a rough generalisation but it's my view that the print media led the way in terms both of honest reporting of the story and in terms of bringing the Aboriginal leadership to account. It's also pretty clear that the northern media led the way while the southern media trailed behind. In 2000 Peter Botsman made a scathing attack on the southern media for taking eighteen months to catch up to Tony Koch and Noel Pearson from the north.²⁰ His article was charmingly titled: 'Pearson, Weipa, and the damned southern media'.

Other changes were afoot. By the mid 2000s we were being regularly treated to news coverage of the indigenous leadership in a way that had formerly been inconceivable. More taboos came down. The private lives of indigenous leaders had tended to be under some kind of unofficial D-notice. Issues of personal behaviour now became intertwined with the politics of bureaucracy and policy. The two key behaviours here were violence against women and financial corruption. It's not really clear to me whether Geoff Clarke, accused of rape, and Sugar Ray Robinson, formerly convicted of rape, and investigated for corruption, were taken down by ATSIC's fall or whether the two descents are incapable of separation.²¹ About this time the Chairman of the Central Land Council was convicted of assaulting a woman with a tomahawk and lost his position.²² National figure Galarrwuy Yunupingu's court appearances over alleged violent assaults on one of his wives made front page pictorial news, not a fourth page paragraph. The key historical point here, I suggest, is that the indigenous leadership was no longer being quarantined by some kind of code of silence that didn't apply to non-indigenous public figures. The powerful were no longer racially segregated when it came to the purposes of public scrutiny. At times the attention was exceptionally intrusive and *ad hominem*, as when Mick Dodson's home in Canberra was displayed in the context of a renewed land tenure debate in 200?.²³

Curiously, some of the older media habits persisted alongside the new frankness. Good-news stories of the Pollyanna type, often announcing the start of a new initiative that one just knows will never be followed up in the same journal or on the same channel, sat uneasily next to the flood of negative accounts. As late as August 2006 a rose-coloured story on Aboriginal health appeared in *The Australian*. The headline said: 'Slowing in black disease death rate'. On top of three graphs was the sub-heading: 'GETTING BETTER'. It was only by reading the article in detail that one could learn that the good-news factor in the story was not that diabetes and heart disease were decreasing in the Northern Territory Aboriginal population, but that their rate of *increase* had *slowed*. In other words they were still getting worse, as indeed

²⁰ Botsman 2000b:1.

²¹ sources

²² sources. His predecessor had been Rupert Maxwell Stuart, who had long before been convicted of the rape-murder of a small girl in South Australia and whose trial, and the handling of his case in a subsequent Royal Commission, became a major controversy (refs).

²³ source

they had been doing ever since 1977. There was a real drop in obstructive pulmonary disease beginning in the 1990s, but the wider picture was not good. Without any comment, the article then produced this sentence:

Co-operative Research Centre chairwoman Pat Anderson said the report challenged the popular belief that Aboriginal health was getting worse.

No it didn't. But this kind of unchallenging and unhelpful approach is, happily, in decline.

Television journalism by and large trailed behind both the northern and southern print media. It crossed its Rubicon when television brought remote Aboriginal communities into the living room both as evening news, and as investigative and documentary journalism later at night, in an unprecedented series of programs in the mid 2000s. Big indigenous prime-time news stories during 2000-2006 included the riots at Redfern, Palm Island and Wadeye (Port Keats), the killing of Cameron Doomadgee which sparked the Palm riots, the death of Thomas 'TJ' Hickey which sparked the Redfern riot, the tragic suicide of Rob Riley, and the story of the Swan Valley community of Robert Bropho infamy.

Abuse of minors and women in Central Australia became national news when the ABC's *Lateline* aired a story based around an interview with Alice Springs prosecutor Nanette Rogers in 2006. A follow-up story, one of several, took the unusual step of identifying local Aboriginal men and their criminal records at a named community, Mutitjulu. The temperature soared not only because of this, but because the *Lateline* series became embroiled in federal politics and in warfare between journalists.

This was something of a turning point in the relationship between the liberal media and the indigenous-affairs political Left. For a long time this relationship had enjoyed something of a sweetheart deal. But now, for example, Warren Snowdon, long time Labor MP for the Northern Territory, attacked Suzanne Smith, a *Lateline* journalist with strong Aboriginal affairs connections and a history of commitment to indigenous causes.²⁴ Her program was also attacked in print by Alan Ramsey, a Sydney Morning Herald journalist, and others.²⁵ The Chief Minister of the Northern Territory, Labor's Clare Martin, became involved on the attack, but then had to defend claims that she had covered up her prior knowledge of paedophilia accusations made against a man who had been resident at Mutitjulu, a story that had been broken by *Lateline*. It has recently been alleged that there was an orchestrated letterbox campaign to exclude the *Lateline* team from gaining a 2006 Walkley Award.²⁶ The loss of consensus was now extended to the ethics and politics of revelation. Greg Combet, leader of the trade union movement, has raised as a national issue the loss of consensus itself.²⁷

In the past, pro-Aboriginal activists and commentators were supporting all Aboriginal people, not just one gender. To some there now, I think, appeared some kind of moral choice, a choice that was being forced upon them: Do I defend the vulnerable, especially the children, elderly and women, against their own men by publicly

²⁴ source

²⁵ SMH source

²⁶ explain significance of Walkley Awards etc, source?

²⁷ Combet 2006

exposing what men are doing to them in certain places (not only men, but mainly so)? Won't that just further alienate indigenous men? Or do I avoid the risk of stigmatising indigenous males and thus risk exacerbating the situation for the rest? The media began to report indigenous men experiencing feelings of having been stigmatised by the outburst of media coverage. *Lateline* itself, late in 2006, devoted a story to this problem, and presented sympathetic interviews made by Suzanne Smith with several Aboriginal men..

It may be an important factor in these recent developments that women have come to the forefront of the debates and also of the media coverage. Through the early and mid 2000s, spokeswomen such as Banduk Marika, Evelyn Scott, and Mantatjarra Wilson made unprecedented public statements on violence and sexual abuse in the Australian indigenous world. Female journalists such as Suzanne Smith and interviewees such as Nanette Rogers may, like those women, carry a certain added moral authority as women when these issues are being aired. But I want to suggest that more than an 'insider-co-victimhood' moral politics is at work here. Nebulous as this again probably seems, and perhaps is, I would suggest that what we are seeing in part here is the rise of the force of gender equality and solidarity as against considerations of respect for racial or ethnic differences, and of ethnic solidarities, world-wide. In recent years political feminists in the West have repeatedly been castigated for failing to take up the cause of Muslim women, or publicly challenged to make their minds up between gender equality and cultural relativism, or between gender equality and anti-Western sentiments that valorise 'mediaeval' ways of life. This is another facet of the same issue. The moral politics of relativism is increasingly coming off second best to the moral politics of equality.

Conclusion

The collapse of consensus on indigenous policy has been paralleled by, and preceded by, the collapse of coherence and unity of focus in the practice of anthropology and other related academic disciplines including archaeology. If we take the bourgeois vantage point that underlies everything from multiculturalism to the marketing of garlic-flavoured tomatoes - namely, that diversity is, in and of itself, a good thing - then living in an age of policy incoherence and lost intellectual consensus or lost scientific direction should not be too disturbing. But diversity is no longer the idol that it once was, while concern for social and cultural cohesiveness is back in business, moving higher up the scale of things of value, at least in the West.

And here lies a great irony, or perhaps a paradox. The old Seventies consensus on indigenous policy and on a host of related, value-laden matters of public interest, was important to the sense of solidarity its adherents enjoyed among themselves. This is one of the reasons why it managed to outlive its usefulness. It was a bond that gradually became disengaged from reality.

Initially oppositional, it was born out of a certain kind of comradeship. Learning that we were under Special Branch police surveillance in Queensland in the late 1970s, my Brisbane-based colleagues and I were even further bonded not just as people with certain beliefs but as friends. This position also bound us politically and personally with many Aboriginal friends, and even some who were never friends. The first page

of my first Queensland field notebook, dated June 1970, was a list of people to contact in Brisbane before heading north to the Gulf country. Among the names were John von Sturmer and John Taylor at the University, colleagues with whom I am still in communication, and Dennis Walker at the Tribal Council. A few pages later I added Don Brady's name. On other visits I spent time with Mick Miller and Clarry Grogan at the North Queensland Land Council, an early predecessor of the Cape York Land Council and a focus of political activism in far north Queensland. In retrospect I now recognise the political demise of Mick and Clarry, Dennis Walker and Bob Weatherall, as occurring quite suddenly. The crunch point was a public attack on Marcia Langton by Mick, Bob and Clarry, in a conference held near Cairns in 1991. I was there. They castigated Marcia for working inside the Queensland Government on the newly developing land rights legislation and other policy shifts under the Goss Labor Government. A very young Noel Pearson came to Marcia's defence and mounted what in the end was an eloquent but lethal attack on the old guard of Seventies activists who sat before him in the front row of the conference hall at the Ramada Hotel. Terry O'Shane immediately backed Marcia. The meeting overwhelmingly defeated the motion to censure her. It was the end of the old activist framework. It also reflected the rise of a national indigenous intelligentsia of university-educated and articulate people who could write persuasive texts.

Not long later in Brisbane, as Noel and his Cape York Land Council representatives sat negotiating articulately with Premier Goss, who was accompanied by Kevin Rudd, Frank Brennan and other advisors, I mused on the changing of the guard that was audible at that moment. Outside we could hear the old guard activists' traditional street-march demo as it reached the entrance to Parliament House, and the hard men of the Seventies proceeded to tear the gates off their hinges. I realise now that this moment was a foretaste of the end of consensus. Personal networks and their failure to overlap were part of this story of a parting of the ways, but the basic cleavage in terms of ideas was between the symbolic and rights agenda that had justifiably made activists' careers in the past, and the embracing of the complex pragmatics of governance that was to make leadership careers in the future.

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