

Noel Pearson: Reconciliation a building block

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WARREN Mundine's call for greater private ownership within communally held lands, and the Prime Minister's support in response to similar calls from the Wadeye community, have generated a debate that conflates two different issues.

For one thing, land reform - which enables community members to own their homes, facilitates the development of private enterprises and encourages external investment on Aboriginal lands to enable indigenous development - is a legitimate agenda. But re-contesting land rights is not. The indigenous community fears that any re-contesting of land rights will be aimed at diminishing indigenous rights.

We should take John Howard's word in good faith: that changes in land title arrangements will be aimed at the development needs of Aboriginal people, not giving governments and third parties more power over land use and access at the expense of Aboriginal rights. But there is a danger that the debate will lead to the usual polarisation of positions, which will obscure the real policies that require reform. We need land reform to enable indigenous development. There is a need to give more space for individual and family initiative and responsibility.

One of the success stories of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission era was that body's home loan program. Thousands of indigenous families now own their homes thanks to this program. Home ownership decreases indigenous disadvantage and the loan facility established by the commonwealth Government has been key to this. It needs to be greatly expanded because many more indigenous families are on the waiting lists for loans.

But the home loan program has only been able to operate off Aboriginal land -- in the mainstream towns and cities. On Aboriginal land, housing is mostly a disaster. There is no home ownership and all houses are under some form of tenancy, usually with a local council or organisation. The rate of write-off of houses because of tenant abuse and lack of care is high. The problems of tenancy in the mainstream bear no comparison: on Aboriginal land, evictions are near impossible and passive welfare is the dominant context.

Overcrowding, poor construction and poor maintenance services also help to explain the degraded housing, but the lack of stakeholding is a real problem. More funding for housing is needed, but we cannot continue to waste the investment by failing to reform.

Furthermore, we must not lose sight of the fact that improved government services and increased personal economic independence on ancestral lands are only part of the solution. Indigenous social, educational and economic progress depends at least as much on increased geographic mobility and economic interaction with the national and global economies.

Because of remoteness and the low average incomes of community members, market solutions to home ownership will be difficult to achieve. My counsel to those families in Cape York Peninsula who can afford a mortgage is to purchase a house in mainstream communities such as Cairns or Weipa, so that their house can represent a market asset for them and their children, and possibly a capital gain.

Aboriginal people are now at a critical juncture in the confrontation between our culture and the imperatives of the modern world. The communal nature of our society and our landholding is at the core of our heritage, and will be an enduring part of our future -- notwithstanding the view of many people that we should simply abandon it as a debilitating encumbrance.

But there are serious challenges involved in trying to reconcile the imperatives of the modern world and indigenous people's ancient culture of communal ownership. The Prime Minister recognised the challenges involved in his Menzies Lecture in 2000 when he said that "the inconsistencies between indigenous and non-indigenous approaches remain at the root of much of the current difficulty".

He went to say: "It is captured in what one commentator recently described as the gaps 'between immediate sharing and individual accumulation, between loyalty to kin and impartiality to all, between individual autonomy and the authoritarian practices of the school and industrial workplace, between individual advancement and remaining at one with the community, between exploiting land and living with it'."

Are these inconsistencies challenges that can be successfully reconciled, or insuperable contradictions? Over the past 30 years we have assumed that some kind of organic reconciliation would evolve; it

hasn't. Progressive policy thinking failed to come to grips with Bill Stanner's prescient advice towards the end of his distinguished career in Australian anthropology: "The social situation of many Aborigines will change with rapidity over the next decade. Many will die wealthy, in possession of money or other assets for which their traditional law provides no disposal procedure. There will be conflicts of interest between Aborigines which may be insoluble unless their own doctrine of what I have termed rights, duties, liabilities and immunities can be developed. The 'Aboriginal problem' thus goes beyond the 'retention of their traditional lifestyle': there is a problem of development as well as one of preservation."

The communal will always lie at the core of our tradition and identity: it is what some might call the spiritual hearth. But social development requires families to come to the fore; and economic development requires individuals to come to the fore, to be mobile and not look to the communal for material sustenance. We must reach the point where our relationship with our tribal hearth is one of asking not what our community can do for us, but what we can do for our community.

Our ability to take up Stanner's advice depends on two things. It will require non-indigenous Australians to accept that there are two profoundly different cultures at stake here, and that the complete assimilation of one into the other is not the solution. And it will require indigenous Australians to accept that our challenge is one of development as much as it is one of preserving our culture.

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