PAUL Keating's most lethal ability was being able to identify the essential vulnerability of his political opponent, to needle and manoeuvre, and to drive the dagger into the opponent's heart. In public life people necessarily accumulate armour and the essence of a person's weakness can lie hidden under protective layers of real capabilities, strengths and bravado. The carnivorous nose for the chink is what set Keating apart as a political killer. It was a key weapon in a vivid repertoire, more impressive because it was all employed toward that most noble of ends: the public good. It enabled Keating to achieve a politics-to-policy conversion rate unequalled in Australian public life.

Keating's destruction of John Hewson in the lead-up to the 1993 election is Australian folklore. Less known is that the essence of Kim Beazley - that he lacked the ticker for the top job - was an insight of Keating's long before John Howard delivered the fatal analysis.

Don Watson invited me to launch his biography of Keating, Recollections of a Bleeding Heart, at a Sydney Town Hall packed with acolytes, Labor luminaries and the media. After my long and probably tedious lecture, which Mark Latham would later complain in his diary was inappropriate for a book launch, Keating rose to take the microphone in darkest and barely restrained dudgeon. It had been uncertain whether the subject of the biography would appear at all. I stood beside my mate Don while the man we truly adored gave a variously erudite, humorous, vicious and thoroughly mesmerising black performance. I could feel the biographer's flesh being surgically pinned to the wall, with no licence to even squirm in protest. It was like watching a sea hawk pin its kill with its talons on the perch and slice live fish into still-quivering sashimi. Don's biography is an Australian masterpiece, but I have never asked him whether it was worth those 15 minutes.

To be on the receiving end of a scarifying Keating vivisection was to truly know political combat. I experienced that same gasping, involuntary compression of the solar plexus when the team of indigenous negotiators led by Mick Dodson and Lowitja O'Donoghue told the nation that negotiations with the commonwealth government on the Native Title Bill had broken down.

That day, October 8, 1993, was dubbed Black Friday. It was the acuity of Keating's riposte that cut to the quick.

Keating reached for the essence of our collective weakness when he said, at a press conference responding to our own: "I am not sure whether indigenous leaders can ever psychologically make the change to decide to come into a process, be part of it and take the burden of responsibility which goes with it. That is, whether they believe they can ever summon the authority of their own community to negotiate for and on their behalf. I am not sure whether we would ever reach the stage where the Aboriginal community would have said that this bill is fine. In fact I don't think that it was ever possible and I have never looked forward to it; even though I would like to see it, I don't think it was even likely."

My first reaction to the scalding observation was to grasp for that perennial indigenous charge: he can't say that, that's racist. But it was the truth that burned.

Two weeks ago the Cape York Institute hosted a conference with Australian and international guest speakers on the theme Strong Foundations: Rebuilding Social Norms in Indigenous Communities, following the completion of our report to the federal Government on proposed welfare reforms for Cape York Peninsula.
Treasury secretary Ken Henry declined to patronise us when he made the following remarks: “If you want to be involved in the development of policy you really are going to have to get a lot better at the job of policy advocacy. Of course you are a minority group in Australia. There are extraordinarily effective political minority groups in Australia. The most effective minority group I know in Australia is the pharmacy guild. Much more effective as a group than indigenous people.

"It's your responsibility to actively engage yourselves in the development of policy: to come up with policy ideas and articulate them in such a way that the case is absolutely compelling so that every politician feels under pressure to implement your idea. And if you don't, you should not be at all surprised to see governments coming with their own ideas, and implementing those ideas where they perceive a crisis situation to have emerged.” The conference coincided with the federal Government's intervention in the Northern Territory.

The most momentous presentation did not attract the attention it deserved. In a similar vein to Henry, Marcia Langton challenged the audience with an analysis of the dramatic political events that were unfolding hourly, but her comments distinguished themselves from the statements of other indigenous leaders and non-indigenous champions of reconciliation.

Many of these people have expressed some or all of these objections to the Government’s intervention policy:

* The Government's primary motivation is the next federal election, not concern for Aboriginal children’s welfare.

* The Government has a hidden agenda of taking control of Aboriginal land.

* Strategic intervention should build on approaches that are already working instead of draconian measures that will fail if there is no community ownership of the policies.

* Some of the interventions will do more harm than good.

Langton did not need to dwell on these issues in her speech. She has struggled against all forms of racism for decades. It is well known where she stands on land issues, in particular the acquisition of and defence of communal land.

Langton cut to the chase: the non-conservative indigenous and non-indigenous peoples’ failure to take sufficient political and practical responsibility for social functionality in indigenous communities made the recent intervention by conservative leaders inevitable. Of course the conservative leaders would ultimately intervene, Langton explained, and it is hardly surprising that their plan is shaped by their conservative ideology.

I have supported the federal Government’s intervention in the Northern Territory. If Queensland Premier Peter Beattie had not already tackled the supply of grog (legislation requiring alcohol management plans was enacted in 2003), had not radically overhauled and reformed its child protection system (Queensland’s new child safety system was introduced in 2005), and had not increased its policing effort in indigenous communities (before the Northern Territory emergency the Beattie Government had allocated 29 additional police in its 2007 budget), then I would be supporting federal intervention in Cape York Peninsula as well.

This is my two-step reasoning for supporting intervention.

The first step is that you have to know what happens in these communities week in, week out. Urban-based critics simply do not know the realities. Neither did 90 per cent of Australia until recently. There is now no excuse because there has been a major expose and official report in almost every jurisdiction.
The second step is that once you have knowledge of the realities, you must find its continuation unacceptable. Therefore you support intervention. By all means, we can argue about the kind of interventions that should be undertaken, but two things are not negotiable in this discussion.

The first non-negotiable point is timing: action had to be taken immediately. There is no time to waste when children and adults are not living in safe environments.

Clare Martin's Northern Territory Government had already wasted six weeks before making the Anderson-Wild report public. And they didn't even have a plan at the end of their procrastination.

The second non-negotiable point is that there had to be primary focus on safety and the restoration of social order by increasing police services and controlling the "rivers of grog".

I have been accused of being unfair to those whom I accused of naysaying intervention to assure the protection of children. My most cogent criticism has come from someone whose record on questions of indigenous social dysfunction and courage in devising practical solutions is unquestionable: Marion Scrymgour, a senior minister in the Martin Government.

In its first term the Martin Government was leading indigenous policy reform in the country. John Ah Kit, Peter Toyne and Scrymgour were pushing fundamentally important agendas aimed at the restoration of social order in indigenous communities.

The laws relating to petrol sniffing were far ahead of Queensland's and I wrote to Beattie urging him to pass similar laws. I hoped they would lead the way with measures such as compulsory treatment for addicts, so that Queensland would follow for the benefit of our people in Cape York.

I do not follow politics in the Northern Territory closely, but it seems that the reform momentum was not carried through into the second term. Martin put more energy and political angst into combating Lateline and federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough in relation to the Alice Springs town camps than into addressing the problems that were exposed.

While I admire Scrymgour, it is disingenuous to characterise the coalition of spokespeople and organisations as being involved in an action that was anything other than naysaying. The fact is the Canberra press conference reacting to the Government's announcement was a moment in political time. Whatever the nuances of the individual participants' and organisations' various positions on the intervention, the political reality of the moment was that they represented the following view: the federal Government was wrong to intervene on child abuse in the way it had.

Scrymgour and I both support social order and land rights. Both of us would prefer there to be no need to prioritise one over the other. But if political circumstances became such that one was forced to prioritise, I would place social order ahead of land rights. That this is how the dilemma is seen by some is evidenced by the statement by the South Australian Aboriginal Affairs Minister Jay Weatherill on July 5: "The communities have consistently said they will not sacrifice land rights for human rights; they will not sacrifice hard-won land rights to get something they should be entitled to, that is, a basic level of shelter and housing."

But has it really come down to such an intense dilemma? Or is Pat Turner's "Trojan Horse for land grab" and Greg Phillips's alleged alibi for seizing uranium just overstating the land problem?

Of course the land problem is being overstated. I have constantly asserted that the Howard Government's one failing in indigenous policy is that it has Tourette's syndrome on some ideological questions. I find the land provisions more clumsy and ill-conceived from the point of view of workability than undermining land rights. If there is a "land grab", then it is principally being grabbed for the benefit of Aboriginal families obtaining private leasehold title for housing and businesses. We are waiting for the Beattie Government to provide the same facility for communities in Queensland.
The problem with the naysayers in relation to child welfare is that they want to delay decisive action. And the actions that they propose are not decisive at all.

Our mob may be steeped in the politicks of indigenous communities, but we are not so in politics. The psychological incapacity to step up to politics in mainstream Australia is one of the reasons why our people continue to lose in this country.

There is a range of reasons why Keating's pinpointing of the psychological constraints on our leadership is still true. A few years ago Keating gave wise counsel to a group of young indigenous people aspiring to leadership when he told them that our mob have to get past the politics of moral indignation.

In my darkest hour, consumed with febrile hatred for the Howard Government in the lead-up to the 1998 election, following our harrowing battles in defence of native title during the Ten-Point Plan, Keating gave me wise counsel: "Don't get mad. Get even." He also told me: "Don't hold on to shit that doesn't work, or is in the past. Move on."

The principal psychological problem of indigenous leaders is they are bitter about the Howard Government and its history over the past decade. Our progressive non-indigenous supporters can afford to devote all of their energies to willing the New Jerusalem - after all, even a conservative government looks after them, notwithstanding their contempt - but our people cannot afford this indulgence. We have to deal with the Government and the politics of the day and devote our maximum energies and talents towards making good of things that otherwise seem bad.

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