

Hunt for the radical centre
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ON the eve of the 40th anniversary of indigenous policy, Australia is still divided into two ideological tribes. One tribe comprising most indigenous leaders and possibly most indigenous people (but by no means an overwhelming majority) and their progressive supporters holds the view that the absence or insufficient realisation of rights is the core of the indigenous predicament in our country.

The other tribe comprises most non-progressive, non-indigenous Australians and their conservative political leaders (including substantial numbers in the Labor Party) who hold the view that it is the absence of responsibilities that lies at the core of our people's malaise.

There is a third group comprising indigenous leaders such as me and ALP president Warren Mundine, who are trying to advocate a synthesis of the rights and responsibilities paradigms. I believe that a substantial proportion of ordinary indigenous people also believe that rights and responsibilities must be acknowledged and realised together. No such synthesis has coalesced and those seeking what I call the radical centre in this policy struggle are left straddling an ever-widening gulf between the two paradigms. In the lead-up to the federal election later this year, and with the prospect of a competitive ALP breaking the conservative hold on our national government, the rights tribe is emboldened and hopeful.

The responsibilities paradigm is ascendant, and Mundine and I are associated with this and have strongly contributed to it. Though we advocate a synthesis, and I have been involved in advocating and (more important) achieving human and land rights for my people, the way politics works in practice means that the weight of my contribution is perceived to be on the responsibilities side of policy. Only the primary leadership of society can lead the country to a synthesis of the kind that is needed in indigenous policy. While it is possible for individual advocates to have an intellectual appreciation of how dialectical conflicts can be resolved, only prime ministers are positioned to induce the necessary historical resolution of a new position.

That indigenous policy is still at such a juvenile stage of two insistent and deafly opposed camps was plainly apparent on Jeff McMullen's panel discussion on the ABC's Difference of Opinion last week.

It was not just federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough's performance as representative of the Government's vigorous commitment to the responsibilities agenda that made this apparent. It was not just indigenous leaders Pat Dodson and Olga Havnen as representatives of the rights agenda (and Warren Mundine with his fork intolerably stretched trying to straddle the ideological gulf).

It was the weight of indigenous opinion in the audience that was most telling: young, educated, largely urban-based, indigenous people captive to the old rights paradigm. They applauded with gusto points made in favour of rights and frowned on any points in favour of responsibilities. It bodes ill for indigenous progress that young indigenous people who are thinking about the issues conform to this only partly correct paradigm.

Brough and the federal Government are correct about the responsibilities agenda: welfare reform, economic engagement, home ownership and social order are imperative. But they are wrong about the rights agenda. Our rights to our ancestral lands, languages, traditions and recognition as an indigenous people of this country must complement the responsibilities agenda.

By all means, they should be concerned about (and opposed to) incorrect conception and implementation of rights leading to separatism and segregation, but the pluralist recognition of peoplehood is not antithetical to integration and unity. Dodson and Havnen are correct about aspects of the rights agenda. The achievement of the kind of fundamental national settlement, the search for which has been Dodson's lifework, will in fact necessarily involve a strong synthesis of indigenous rights and responsibilities paradigms.

But this will require three things to happen. The first is that the advocates of indigenous responsibility must not yield in their advocacy and their practical work in this direction of a synthesis. Welfare reform, home ownership, personal responsibility, intolerance of substance abuse and confrontation with the victimhood mentality prevailing in indigenous communities: this work must continue regardless of its unpopularity with some progressive people.

There is every sign that this will happen. The second is that the advocates of indigenous rights must become ascendant with their advocacy because this agenda -- while counting many subscribers within the indigenous community and the progressive mainstream -- is weak and nearly politically irrelevant. There is no sign that this will happen, for reasons that I will soon outline.

The third is national leadership by the Prime Minister. Only society's principal leader can take this national conundrum to its radical centre. People may say that prime ministerial leadership should be numbered first. But all leaders respond to the currents in the national electorate. If compelling indigenous rights and responsibilities agendas became equally strong currents in the thinking of the Australian community, and the basis and necessity of a synthesis penetrated the national agenda, then prime ministers could perform the synthesis. Only where a principal leader possesses strong conviction and the necessary intellectual insight can they lead the country to the kind of fundamental settlement that Dodson calls for.

Mostly, however, the other imperatives must be pressing and the community at large must be receptive to the proposed settlement.

There is no sign that Howard will provide this necessary leadership. He does not understand the necessity for the strong synthesis of indigenous rights and responsibilities, and what such a settlement will involve. To be fair, there is no reason to believe at this stage that Kevin Rudd possesses any greater intellectual insight or conviction on these questions. The ALP's indigenous policy is much more rounded than the federal Government's policies, and it is certainly more clear about indigenous rights, but they are still short of a high-tension balance between rights and responsibilities.

That there is no national leadership is first and foremost the responsibility of indigenous people. It is our failure. The first people who must get their thinking straight is ourselves. If we don't get the rights-responsibilities synthesis, then we don't even understand the nature of our predicament or the pathway out of it. If we think somebody else is going to provide the rigorous intellectual analyses (while we cling steadfast to the old nostrums), if we think somebody else is going to make the strategically acute calculations (while we fantasise about social justice and salvation via international covenants), and we think somebody else is going to take the necessary sophisticated political strategies (while we whinge in our sandpits and preach about our victimhood to the converted), then we deserve the kind of uninterested national leadership that we get.

Let me conclude by pointing out three problems with the indigenous rights agenda as it is now presented. First, it is just not credible on too many questions. Ordinary Australians are simply not convinced that land rights and culture alone will solve social problems. Ordinary Australians can see through the fact social order is an urgent imperative, and Brough is right about this. Ordinary Australians are not like old progressive converts. They are sceptical about the old lines. They can no longer be sold slogans. The evidence of social and economic disrepair is too obvious for them to accept the old solutions. Those seeking indigenous rights must come up with more compelling justifications for the policies they propose.

Second, the advocacy must be more sophisticated and have more of an impact. Complaining in our own forums and resignation in the face of insuperable institutional and ideological barriers will get us nowhere. And nothing is insuperable. Instead of retreating into righteous impotence, the rights advocates must become a lot more competent than they have been.

Third, those concerned about rights must understand that most rights - the right to better health and education and safe and healthy children - cannot be delivered by insisting on rights alone. They require behavioural responsibility on the part of our people. And this is why the recent launch by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma of Closing the Gap, the health action plan proposed by the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations and Oxfam, is only partly convincing.

They are part right: indigenous Australians have a right to properly funded health services and the \$400 million shortfall in funding long identified by the Australian Medical Association must be remedied. But their plan is unconvincing because there is

no mention of the other side of the right to better health: the responsibilities of indigenous people to take charge of the behavioural dimensions of better health.

The gap will not close unless we have a plan that is as forthright about these responsibilities as it is about rights.

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