



Indigenous insiders chart an end to victimhood

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Australian

3rd September 2008

GRADUALLY, persistently, over the past decade a revolution has been pushed through in our understanding of remote Aboriginal Australia and its many difficulties. It is a revolution that came from deep roots and had many participants. It was based on engaged, heartfelt observation and clear, precise analysis. Above all, it broke the colonial flow of ideas: it was the first shift in our picture of the traditional Aboriginal domain achieved and disseminated by indigenous intellectuals.

This revolution placed alcohol fair and square at the heart of the present-day indigenous crisis, as cause, not mere attendant symptom. It identified the controlling vice of passive welfare as the poison rotting away Aboriginal communities. Paradoxically, with these two bleak conclusions, which have been derided and resisted by many critics, black and white, it restored a degree of power and potential to indigenous people and gave an explanation of their failure, under the conditions of seeming freedom they now enjoy, to thrive.

Marcia Langton and Noel Pearson, the originators of these ideas, were viewed, throughout their early, tumultuous years on the political stage as radical activists, if ones of a particularly able, driven kind, burning with a desire to win land rights and obtain recognition for Aboriginal native title. They were campaigners, possessed of fierce devotion to their cause. But there was always a broader, more questioning aspect to their immersion in the thought-codes used by mainstream Australians to describe and administer the protean, elusive, unruly Aboriginal world.

Langton and Pearson were highly suspicious of the welfare paradigm, the broad set of remedial prescriptions endorsed and pursued by politicians and academics, by engaged, reconciliation-minded idealists and community workers. The belief in welfare as a panacea for indigenous ills stemmed, as a matter of logic, from the plain truth that remote communities were plunged in poverty and so needed assistance if they were to aspire to Western standards of life. Large, creative programs to direct and encourage this brand of social engineering spread across indigenous Australia. Money, and the commodities it buys and appetites it feeds, swept in but economic advancement stubbornly failed to materialise. It was only a short while into the welfare era that an urgent quest for a revised model began: work-for-the-dole programs, more purposive, culturally fitting forms of occupation were trialled, and all required their administrative teams.

Welfare had been conceived as a form of balancing aid to make up for pain, displacement and social trauma. It went hard against the grain to imagine that this seemingly benign force could itself be a destructive poison in the lifeblood of remote Aboriginal communities, or that it could be linked to the tide of alcoholism and drug

abuse that has been swamping the indigenous domain for years. But Langton and Pearson, in their separate ways, found themselves forced to sift the evidence: they made deductions, developed their ideas and then launched a protracted campaign of persuasion. It was one that played out against the wreckage of the traditional Aboriginal world and against a prolonged, carefully preserved discretion among the mainstream intelligentsia about this plight -- a problematic discretion, for if we are unable to describe the circumstances of our Aboriginal fellow citizens with a degree of accuracy and candour, there is scant hope of helping them escape their present difficulties. That pervasive culture of silence has been broken, in significant part through the words of Langton and Pearson, and through their key texts, among the most resonant, accusatory pamphlets and public broadsides of our time.

Step by step, their campaign, which has evolved and taken new forms to suit new circumstances, has succeeded in building a coalition of supporters across conventional party lines, and in creating the climate for radical change in the management of that strangely designated field, indigenous affairs. They have not only highlighted the appalling conditions in remote communities, they have succeeded in providing a new understanding of the causes of the crisis, and from that diagnosis flows a new set of prescriptions for action. The most obvious signal that this new thinking had hit home came, of course, in an abrupt stroke, just before midday on June 21, 2007, when the then prime minister, John Howard, and his minister for indigenous affairs, Mal Brough, launched their "emergency response": the intervention into remote Aboriginal communities across the Northern Territory.

But even before the intervention, the fresh portrait of the Aboriginal landscape sketched by Langton and Pearson had begun to exert a strong influence on public policy: shared responsibility agreements and regional partnerships were among its early, unripe fruits. The detailed provisions of the Howard intervention are now under review by the Rudd Government: but it is clear the underlying shifts in thinking will remain.

THE deep background to this crusade is illustrative. In its beginnings and its inputs, its spread and slow success, it shines a light on the landscape of ideas in this country, on the field of interracial understanding and on the fraught arena in which Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians play out symbolic roles for each other. It is also a tale of almost intuitive breakthroughs in our comprehension of how disadvantaged societies work -- and it is an intriguing detail that those breakthroughs were made not by the cluster of outside scrutineers, but by figures implicated directly in the realm under threat.

Reconstructing the thought-world of the decades before one's own is always a tricky task, and in Australia, where the achievements of the previous generation are routinely consigned to the flames, it becomes doubly difficult. It was in the 1960s, a time of grand designs, when Aboriginal affairs were rather less central to the nation and less coated in despondency that were sown the seeds of the present social landscape in the bush. The passage of the 1967 referendum, which embraced Aboriginal people as equals under the Constitution, coincided with a period of vast disruption in remote central and northern Australia. The equal wages ruling in the cattle industry in 1965 had the paradoxical result of ending, almost overnight, the large-scale employment of Aboriginal stockmen. Those stockmen, most of them

skilled, proud men in the prime of their working lives, moved to little settlements and newly established communities with their wives, children and other dependents: there was no alternative wage-based economy for them to fall back on. Reliance on a system of welfare payments became entrenched. Soon the land rights age dawned in the Northern Territory; many indigenous groups thus found themselves land-rich and job-poor, with fledgling representative councils set above them staffed by politically committed experts and campaigners from urban backgrounds. Much about today's institution-choked Aboriginal landscape stems from those days, when indigenous people became of interest to academe, when Aboriginal protest movements gained a critical mass and the Left took up and identified strongly with their fight. A generation of young, idealistic Australians gave themselves to the Aboriginal movement and many of them have since spent their working lives in the remote world, engaged in a twisting, continually metamorphosing journey of struggle, making up a kind of informal, self-perpetuating civil service cadre dedicated to the cause of Aboriginality. Several competing templates for conceiving the indigenous future were circulating in those foundation years. The dominant minister with responsibility for Aboriginal affairs in the '60s conservative government, W.C. Wentworth, much admired the economic ideas of Peter Bauer, an expert on development aid projects in West Africa. Bauer had made the terrifying discovery that foreign aid, in the post-colonial context, tended to breed corruption and dictatorial politics, and that intentions, in the field of development, were no guarantee of results. This led him to a broad and principled scepticism about welfare: he went on to become one of Margaret Thatcher's intellectual gurus.

By contrast, Labor politicians were receptive to the ideas of another economist, H.C. "Nugget" Coombs, whose guidance in the Whitlam era helped determine the land-rights regime in the north. Coombs believed that communal tenure was essential for the preservation of Aboriginal life-ways -- and who knows, perhaps his core instinct was right and it was only through this land-based retention of group identity that the tides of modern assimilation have been resisted. It is certainly a policy that has formed the landscape, and collective title remains at the heart of remote indigenous society today.

In her days as a young researcher, Marcia Langton was much influenced by Coombs, as she was by two other prominent mid-century Australian intellectuals: anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner and archeologist John Mulvaney. These figures had a strong sense of their duty as thinkers articulating ideas for the broad public and there was a pronounced moral component to their engagement with the world of policy and debate. By the late '80s, Langton, for all her fervent activism, had absorbed a wide range of idea streams from different traditions and perspectives regarding her people and their place in Australian life. She had worked for the Central Land Council as a land claims anthropologist and she knew the structures of government bureaucracy. Above all, she knew the grassroots: she had been raised in south-central Queensland, in the wide, haunting brigalow country, which still brings thoughts about the vanished Aboriginal past to mind.

Langton took a post with one of the endless succession of landmark inquiry commissions that seem to measure out the record of our progress in indigenous affairs. This was the 1989 royal commission into Aboriginal deaths in custody, headed by Elliott Johnston, QC. Its report did much to convey to the broader nation

the depth of the grief and chaos hanging over the remote reaches of the continent. Langton and her assistants in the grandly named Northern Territory Aboriginal Issues Unit wrote a special annex for the commission: it appeared as Appendix D(I): "Too much sorry business". At its heart were strictures about alcohol. It was written in words of fire that, almost two decades on, ring with the disturbing tone of fulfilled prophecy. In perfect 20-20 vision, it predicted the future of remote Aboriginal Australia. Had the recommendations of that appendix been implemented by the Country Liberal Party government of the Northern Territory at the time, we almost certainly would not be quite where we are today, with a civilisational crisis on our hands so grave the survival of remote Aboriginal society is in doubt.

Langton conceded that the standard factors routinely adduced by Western experts did form part of the picture in leading to custodial deaths: poverty, dispossession, lack of education and so on. She then wrote that "from an Aboriginal perspective and from the Aboriginal experience alcohol plays a primary role in both the reasons for detention and for the subsequent chances of deaths occurring", and she went on to argue that alcohol was, in the indigenous realm, a drug of dependency. It was the alcohol that needed to be controlled, in order to set drinkers free. But this idea ran counter to the universalist claim that everyone had basic rights and should be treated equally, and those rights included the right to drink, a right that had been denied Aboriginal people in the bush for much of the mid-20th century. Langton's argument, which provoked a storm of hostility from health and social-affairs experts, was based on bitter, plentiful remote-community experience: she knew it not just because she had seen it, but because it was affecting her own people. She felt bolstered, too, in her diagnosis by an odd, fluent submission, sent to the inquiry by a senior traditional man from Cape York, who has since died. Langton asked about this submission: it had been written, it turned out, with the help of Noel Pearson from Hope Vale, then a very young trainee lawyer, whom Langton had met, briefly, once. This was the start of a close intellectual alliance, with influences running both ways.

Soon after the release of "Too much sorry business" Langton moved to Cairns, where Pearson was setting up the Cape York Land Council. A certain insight into this meeting of minds that has done so much to reshape Aboriginal policy was given by Langton in a pivotal lecture, delivered for the radical literary journal *Overland* in autumn 2002. She looked back a decade, and more; she sketched her impressions of the young Pearson; she gave a rather memorable cameo of her subject listening to hard-core black rap in his student quarters at the University of Sydney, before she moved to her main theme: an excoriation of the Australian Left for its failure to speak out on the true conditions of Aboriginal life and its preference for airy, symbolic issues. This was not a turn to the Right, or anything remotely so crude: Langton remains in many respects a pure Aboriginal rights campaigner, with a strong sense that race and racialised thinking are key features of the Australian landscape. No, she had decided to articulate a distinctly Aboriginal, rather than ideological, set of priorities. She had reached the view that being used, and owned, by the Left as a moral weapon was a kind of trap. She was aware, as only an urban-based bush Aborigine can be, of the way indigenous causes serve the psychological needs of the progressive class. (This was very much a distinguishing trait of the Howard era, when the cause of reconciliation and the desire for a stolen generations apology became markers of enlightened social outlook.)

At the time of this lecture, Langton had recently accepted a professorial post at the University of Melbourne: it was a period when she was spreading her wings and taking her distance from the bruising, male-dominated world of Aboriginal politics. She also began publishing a series of majestic essays on indigenous art, explored through her particular perspective as an intellectual sunk in the field of aesthetic studies, and as an Aboriginal woman conscious of all the order and tradition that she felt shimmering in her blood. Her style, in those years, underwent an intriguing evolution: it took on a rich, almost Augustan roll and confidence and yet it was bush-accented and brisk, and there was another register lurking inside her words as well, a kind of reverential involvement in the intricacies of desert and Arnhem Land traditions, a tone so grand it seemed to match the sweeps of ceremonial belief it described and conjured up.

These shifts in Langton's life and thought and writing were matched by developments on Cape York: Pearson was moving fast to establish a network of social reform projects. Even as he commanded the national headlines, negotiating with Canberra to determine the new native title regime, on the local scale he was recasting the traditional role of the land council, exploring co-operative schemes with the private sector, attempting to find a new pattern for his people and for the whole region. He had become the master of his own traditional languages, his sense of place was strong. Pearson is a private figure, with a firm conviction of his own worth and a desire to be the author not just of his fate, but of his own image, and so the crucial influences operating on him remain opaque. But the strong Lutheran strain in his background at Hope Vale is clear, as is his fascination with English common law, a coded system he deploys with a fluid grace. He loves the essay form, and the testing and pursuit of logical arguments in written words and, unusually among indigenous intellectuals, he takes all human experience, rather than his own ethnic subset of it, as his legitimate subject and as a model for his work. Thus he is an enthusiast of Indian economist-philosopher Amartya Sen, whose notion of layered identities appeals to him; like another of his overseas heroes, Barack Obama, he knows well how to exploit his position and prominence on the political stage. But above all Pearson deals in pure ideas, he believes in their power, and their power to convince, he lives the life of the mind -- and this makes him, in the context of Aboriginal far north Queensland, one of the loneliest, most self-sustaining intellectuals on the surface of the earth. His remoteness from fad and fashion has its benefits, as well as its costs.

Once he had based himself definitively in his home country, Pearson began reflecting on the drinking culture he saw around him; he ranged widely in his research, but his core insights were personal. He remembered the old Hope Vale, and could see what had happened to it; he knew the Cape's various communities and the bizarre drinking canteen system operated in them with the approval of the Queensland government. They were the grim laboratories in which patterns of alcohol dependency could be watched: theory became clothed in human flesh. Pearson assembled his thoughts: word of his work began to spread.

AT which point, for a moment, the focus should widen: for this story, even though it traces a set of indigenous breakthroughs, involves the wider world. There is a further cast of characters, who were themselves moving towards the analysis Langton and Pearson had reached, men and women who worked with them, anthropologists and

land council researchers, social scientists, even politicians and priests.

At about this time, in the late '90s, the spring time of the Howard era, I had become caught up in the landscapes and the writing of north Australia. I was travelling extensively across that region and turning my thoughts to the life ways of remote communities. In the course of these journeys, I would often cross the path of John Herron, the newly appointed federal minister for indigenous affairs. Herron was already in his late 60s when he accepted this contentious post. He was a distinguished surgeon; he had done volunteer work in Rwanda during the aftermath of the genocide. He proved to be one of the most appealing men I have encountered in politics.

Herron actually liked bush Aboriginal people and spent much of his term in the ministry fighting to have the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Council budget redirected towards remote communities. He had 10 children, itself an impressive credential in the Aboriginal domain. His biography was intriguingly dark: he came from a hard-scrabble Irish background in far north Queensland and went through a roving phase in his teenage years, jumping the rattlers, scouring the silent western corners of the state, until an impulse brought him to walk conventional paths.

But not that conventional: he read, and was much influenced by Luke Rhinehart's '70s cult novel, *The Dice Man*, and lived his life, for some while, under the guidance of its alarming precepts. When he was a successful young doctor, he came home from work one day and saw his home spontaneously ignite in front of his eyes. This episode left him permanently opposed to possessions or ownership of any kind: when we travelled together, I could not help noticing that he only ever carried one spare shirt and a single pair of socks, and he washed them himself each night. Herron was in no doubt about the factor that lay behind the travails of remote indigenous communities -- it was drink.

His essentially medical understanding of the crisis in the bush and his insistent presentation of that view to his ministerial colleagues and to the higher reaches of the bureaucracy did much to pave the way for new policy thinking in the last years of the Howard government. Dry, confiding, languishingly witty, he would regale those travelling with him with wild tales from the world of indigenous politics, and one of those anecdotes in particular stayed in my mind: it concerned his vague attempt, at the outset of his term, to interest Pearson in the chairmanship of ATSIC -- a conjuncture that would have sent shock waves through the political scene in those days, when Pearson seemed a Labor-flavoured man and was even spoken of as a possible ALP Senate candidate.

"Absolutely," said Herron, "You should catch up with David Byrne, and talk to him about all that: he knows the story."

There was a pause. The ministerial plane's engines droned on high above the red dunes of the western desert.

"You mean the singer from the Talking Heads?"

"Well, I like the Talking Heads," Herron said, "very much. But actually I was thinking

of David Byrne from the Cape York Land Council."

Two weeks later, after a drive down rough dirt roads on through the back blocks of the Atherton Tableland, I pulled up near the ghost town of Topaz. Before me was a wide green paddock. Mt Bartle Frere, cloud-flecked, loomed close by. A house, or rather an exiguous shack with a tiny veranda, stood in the distance. Inside it I found a tall, solemn man, with a slightly lugubrious expression, clutching a farming journal in one hand. Byrne, by that stage in his eventful life, had already been an Augustinian monk and the youngest Liberal member of the Queensland Parliament; he had lived in the scenic community of Bamaga at the very tip of Cape York; he had been a vital backroom figure in the land council and had served as Pearson's intellectual sparring partner. Now, though, he was devoting himself to his extensive herd of cattle, brahmans, each one of which he knew personally. He controlled their movements, as if by magic, through the simple expedient of stretching out his arm and creating an imaginary fence-line, which the cows extended in their thoughts and took as real. After much discussion -- cows, and their temperament, which was preferable to that of humans, the availability of attractive dairy farming land, nearby -- he got around to indigenous affairs, sketched the drastic new thinking being done by Pearson, and produced a dog-eared document. I leafed through: it was a faint photocopy: maybe 80 pages in total, densely argued. It was an early version of *Our Right to Take Responsibility*, a soaring, intense text that set out Pearson's first conclusions on drink, dependency, the welfare culture and their many connections. I pocketed it, or tried to.

"Hang on," Byrne said. "I didn't say you could have it. You can read it, though, here, and make notes, if you like."

For a couple of hours, I sat there, transcribing the document in shorthand, and perhaps it was because of that unusually concentrated immersion in Pearson's thought-world that the thrust of his interweaving arguments, their originality and the sparks of genius in them seemed so immediately clear. Pearson's subsequent speeches and lectures, columns and addresses have explored and publicised those notions with such effect that the ideas he was then developing have come to seem almost commonplace: at the time, both they and their concatenation were quite new. Not only did he see the link between the large-scale provision of passive welfare and the erosion of social capital in remote communities, he understood that drinking and drug-taking were best conceptualised as syndromes, or self-perpetuating diseases, rather than symptoms of overarching social ills.

With the subtlest empathy, Pearson had penetrated the mindsets of the drinkers and drug-takers around him. He had not turned away from them, or scorned them, or seen them as helpless victims of their circumstances. He knew them as if from within. His theory of drink and its effects in the Cape York Aboriginal setting had much in common with the 12-step program of Alcoholics Anonymous: it sees alcoholism as a condition that relies on enablers, those who allow or encourage the drinker to drink, and those who simply fail to understand the impossibility of social drinking for an alcoholic. Pearson had expanded that insight to the world of Aboriginal remote communities. State policies that condoned or even encouraged drinking were enabling policies. More than that, the passive welfare system had much in common with enabling. Pearson had here reached one of his core insights:

not only passive welfare schemes, but the agencies committed to delivering them, were among the key problems that his people, and all across indigenous Australia, now faced.

This quick X-ray simplifies Pearson's thought flow to the point of near caricature: he includes, as if in multiple overlay, historical, geographic and traditional patterns in his analysis. But at its heart there is a tense, urgent causal chain being identified, one that has proved deeply unwelcome to the bureaucracy, which fitfully resists its conclusions to this day. It is no longer an isolated view: historian John Hirst, a clear, disturbing voice on indigenous affairs during the past 15 years, has moved, step by step, towards the same position: "Every aspect of Aboriginal society (taken to be) dysfunctional has been supported, encouraged and protected", he concluded recently, "by those Europeans who deal with Aborigines in some official capacity." This can be distilled further, almost to a syllogism: for if one foregrounds the thought that autonomy is critical, it follows that social programs cannot produce what a healthy community needs: self-control, order and good morale. "The longer the list of programs, the more it presages failure": Hirst's formula is so accusing and terrifying it seems to hunt one down.

Almost at the same time Pearson began presenting his ideas in speeches and small seminars, a startling paper by one of the country's most brilliant anthropologists was doing the rounds. *The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Policy in Australia Since the 1970s*, was a detailed, impassioned lecture-text, delivered before the Australian Anthropological Society by Peter Sutton in September 2000. News of its content filtered out slowly: Sutton, one heard, had gone over the top, his personal grief at the deaths of his Aboriginal friends had spilled into his work, he had been close to tears while delivering his mea culpa on stage. I had known of Sutton for a while: my dear friend Warren Osmond, former foreign editor of *The Sydney Morning Herald*, now dead, but still present in my thoughts, had been in the same year at a small Christian Science school with Sutton and it must have been a rather elevated classroom, with these young prodigies, dragooned by the austere code of their cerebral faith, duelling for attention and pre-eminence.

Sutton went on to specialise in the ethnography of Cape York and the Wik people of Aurukun: he collaborated in writing the catalogue for *Dreamings*, the first international exhibition of modern Aboriginal art. He became known not just for his finesse of mind but for his unstinting commitment to the cause of Aboriginal rights. I tracked down *The Politics of Suffering* only after long search, months later, in a land council library: it had been filed in the closed area, where confidential materials, sacred songs and images were kept. "Please, take it away," the librarian said: "That thing! -- You can have it!" It was a preprint, slated for some academic journal: it had been covered with reproofing comments in red ink. Sutton's paper was indeed emotional: it was a sharp, demolishing attack on the pieties of anthropology and the "helper" professions. His arguments, subtly spun out, meticulously marshalled, formed a kind of complement to Pearson's views: but they were directed rather at the intellectual group, and the generation, that had conceived the passive welfare trap for remote communities.

Sutton left little intact: he took aim at the "exhausted '70s paradigm", the flawed beliefs of Nugget Coombs, the tendency of well-known Aboriginal spokesmen to live

their lives far from communities, the under-acknowledged plague of domestic violence, the pitfalls and incoherencies of the reconciliation dream. Obfuscations in language, reluctance to hear bad news, the tendency to blame colonial history -- he ran through them all. At the Stygian core of Sutton's paper was the idea, which he has since elaborated, that certain patterns within traditional Aboriginal societies may not actually be well-designed for the promotion of cultural survival in the modern Australian context. Sutton's thoughts reached, and branched, repeatedly: the paper contained in embryonic form pointers to many of the most critical dilemmas emerging to confront remote Australia today, almost a decade on. Intervention was a word he used often in his text, with a medical sense.

For newspaper reporters then out in the field, attempting to frame what they were routinely seeing -- petrol sniffing, family violence, copycat suicide -- this document was a key aid: it provided at least the beginnings of a framework, and a liberal intellectual context, and it was, eventually, given a slight quantum of media coverage, in a broadly indifferent environment. It is hard to imagine any anthropologist or administrator reading Sutton's words, or seeing him at the brink of tears on stage at the University of Western Australia when he was delivering them and not being troubled at heart.

Yet *The Politics of Suffering*, a vastly sophisticated document and also a call to arms, was soon pushed from sight. It resonated in the shadows, quietly, while the old guard pursued their researches and complex new kinds of welfare-to-work projects were conceived, and the patterns of chaos in the bush intensified. Herron had left his ministerial post by then, and was busy representing Australia as ambassador to Dublin and the Holy See, and dictating his memoirs -- tantalisingly, they have yet to be published. It was the era of Philip Ruddock and Amanda Vanstone, and late Howardism, when ATSIC was being closely scrutinised and was failing fast. After Mark Latham, in the run-up to the 2004 federal election campaign, declared Labor's opposition to ATSIC's continued existence, it was promptly dismantled. Potent Canberra bureaucrats, who had heard and absorbed the headline components of the Pearson position, began implementing cosmetic reforms: a pre-revolutionary atmosphere, tense, like a build-up season sky, mantled the indigenous policy realm.

By this stage, a new Labor government had come to power in Darwin, after more than a quarter-century of conservative control, and high hopes were invested in its reform program. Prominent bureaucrats came north to help direct the change in course; among them were Mike Dillon and Neil Westbury, who, some years later, after their disillusioned retreat south, co-authored a succinct manifesto on Aboriginal policy. *Beyond Humbug* contained a brisk summation of the state of play in the world of the communities: it concluded that remote indigenous Australia was a "failed state" within the greater nation. The view, from high-flyers at the airy apex of the public service, was plain: massive investment and engagement had become necessary. Indeed, structural change was already quietly under way. By the early months of last year, Pearson was deeply involved in preparing a local agenda for the Cape. His ambitious welfare reform project had received federal backing, the first steps were going ahead -- it at last began full-scale operation on July 1 in four communities, including Hope Vale.

Pressure had been building for similar steps in the Northern Territory, the Kimberley

and desert South Australia. In the Anangu Pitjantjatjara lands, report after report had indicated devastating social meltdown and a rampant drug culture. In the far north Kimberley communities of Kalumburu and Forrest River, sexual abuse and youth suicide were the salient features of the human landscape. But it was the centre, rather than these more inaccessible redoubts, that gained national attention. In Alice Springs, crown prosecutor Nanette Rogers went on television in May 2006 to detail the tide of child sexual abuse cases she had dealt with in the communities and camps around the town.

In all these areas of Aboriginal Australia, the interlock identified by Pearson and Langton was to the fore. Alcohol and drugs were invariably a factor in violence and abuse: passive welfare money paid for the intoxicating substances; the dependency culture, with its slow, empty rhythm, created the anomie that was damped down by the drink and drugs. Faced with the intensely public broadside from Rogers, the NT Government naturally commissioned an inquiry. As is well known, the ensuing document, *Little Children Are Sacred*, confirmed the impression of widespread child abuse. The NT Government under chief minister Clare Martin unconscionably delayed releasing and reacting to the report. Howard and Brough seized the moment, and launched the intervention, which has been so much reported on and analysed in the year since. Troops and medical teams fanned out across the centre and the north to restore a degree of order. A line, deep, and definite, had been drawn.

Perhaps the most striking feature of the federal intervention was the hostility it engendered among broad sections of the intelligentsia, among many indigenous leaders and even among territory politicians faced with the prospect of an extra billion dollars being spent on their neediest constituents. The negative reaction was sharp, and instinctual: many reasons were given; many others were plain beneath the surface. The money committed, so the critics said, was to be spent haphazardly, and new layers of control were being brought in. Compulsory acquisition of township leases was an outrage; income management an insult; the alcohol bans iniquitous. These new measures were restricting the basic rights of bush indigenous communities, and, by highlighting a shocking pattern of behaviour, they served to stigmatise all Aboriginal people.

There was much in this vein: Howard and his government had always been disliked by the urban indigenous world and by the progressive classes for whom reconciliation and an apology were key questions of national life. And much of the critique was quite justified: for the intervention was a rush job, it was broadbrush and uncalibrated, it applied collective sanctions to very varied individuals and communities. But with all its shortcomings, it did have one important consequence: like a thunderclap, it marked the end of the passive welfare age -- and this was well understood by many of its most perceptive and determined critics.

Just 90 days after the "emergency response", the chief intellectual forces arrayed against it released their denunciatory reply. *Coercive Reconciliation*, like most campaign volumes, seems somewhat dated now, with the Howard government swept away, Labor in control in Canberra and Kevin Rudd and Jenny Macklin clearly disposed to preserve several aspects of the initial intervention. The book, however, tells much about the deep landscape of Aboriginal affairs. It collects a range of essays, by mainstream and indigenous academics, bureaucrats, lawyers and

columnists; and many of its themes were to the fore in the city protest rallies held in the wake of June 21. A progressive, sharply politicised interpretation of the recent history of indigenous Australia formed the basso continuo of these arguments, which were often covertly targeted against Pearson. I attended a seminar in Darwin at this time, filled with the academic gratin of the Charles Darwin University and the public service class. There were various windy speeches, before a mid-level adviser to the NT Government, Kim Hill, today the director of the Northern Land Council, took the stage: "I am not Noel Pearson," he began -- and the auditorium burst into thunderous applause.

Such was the mindset in those heady days, so short a time ago. But Coercive Reconciliation is most intriguing now for the tone that emerges from it in retrospect: it exudes not just anger but a kind of grief, and it is the grief of mourning for the lost paradigm. At the heart of the progressive academy's world view for the past generation has been an attractive, almost Edenic dream: the idea of the Aboriginal outstation, or homeland -- and the future of the homeland movement was very much at the centre of the first intervention diatribes.

Perhaps Jon Altman, the supple, combative director of the Canberra-based Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, and the co-editor of Coercive Reconciliation, best illustrates the depth and appeal of these ideas. Altman works as an economic development expert, but his temperament is artistic: in fact his ideal job might be as an upscale newspaper editor, for he clearly spends a great deal of time reading newspapers and writing tart little letters to them, correcting errors in the reportage of indigenous affairs. He came to Darwin some years ago; we met on campus, in a frigid research office; he sat very close to me, locked eyes and, for an hour, breathed over me his sweet breath, exuding friendship. So it was something of a surprise, some months later, when I received a rebuking email about a story of mine on a promising new trend in indigenous job-creation. Wasn't he in favour of Aboriginal economic advancement? I decided to investigate, and what I found was intriguing. I take Altman not to make light of him or falsify him, but because he both marshals and incarnates an important trend in thinking about the Aboriginal domain. He did his doctoral work in the hinterland of Maningrida, a large, troubled coastal community in north Arnhem Land. He remains close to some of the best-known traditional indigenous artists of the region, chief among them John Mawurndjul. Altman is a proponent of the idea that a "hybrid economy" can be nurtured in remote Australia, or at least parts of it, based on land use and management, art production, maybe even remedial control of the effects of climate change. Such a life-path would be consistent with the intense ceremonial calendar of Aboriginal people living in the homelands, and there are little pockets of the Top End where something vaguely akin to this model is, at times, lived out.

But this dream relies on vast external inputs and on layers of control and help and management, and at present the broad educational and social landscape of remote communities and their satellite settlements across the face of north and central Australia is decidedly unpromising. The nodal centre of Maningrida, a large multi-tribal township, is often regarded as a showpiece, and its outstations as state of the art. It is in fact a place with grave social problems, which was in the news last year because of an awful gang sexual abuse case. Set against this kind of metropolis, the local homelands shine -- but they depend on subsidy, are rain-isolated for much of

the year and are less than popular with many young people. Nor is the case clear-cut that indigenous health is better in such remote outposts, though the claim is often confidently advanced. Whether plausible or implausible in the long perspective, the homeland dream, with its weird mix of tribal separatism and zoo-like dependency, has failed, for now, to convince the official echelon of policy. In the late Howard era, plans were afoot to rationalise services to satellite communities and to develop a spoke-and-hub model for the delivery of services into the deep bush -- and that preference is still ingrained in the Canberra departments that hold the funding for these settlements in their hands.

Altman and his fellow travellers on the road to the new Eden may have indigenous backers and allies, but they are the campaigning spokespeople -- and here we reach the nub of things.

THERE'S a lot of ventriloquist-like "speaking for" in indigenous affairs. Western intellectuals, who know what "their" traditional subjects think; urban Aboriginal political leaders, who see the indigenous struggle as a contest for rights and acknowledgement, politicians of all stripes, who wish to "solve" a problem, to "close the gap", and whose default settings tend towards a dream of ultimate integration in a harmonious, smoothly levelled world.

Pearson and Langton, by contrast, seek no one's authority: they seek to speak to what they see on the ground, and they believe conditions have to change. In her phosphorescent essay early this year in *The Griffith Review*, Langton bluntly advised opponents of the intervention that "those who did not see it coming were deluding themselves", and that the time had arrived for dismantling "the shibboleths of the old Left, who need perpetual victims for their analysis to work". Hence her focus on fostering direct agreements between mining groups and indigenous landowners, mediated by grassroots native title representative bodies. Hence Pearson's low-key concentration on the new Family Responsibilities Commission, a Queensland statutory body charged with overseeing the new conditional welfare system he helped create. Hence, too, the support by Langton and Pearson for a plan to provide, with federal Government blessing, 50,000 indigenous apprenticeships.

Behind them they leave a transformed landscape and several disturbing questions. During the political and ideological struggles of recent years in this domain, almost the entire Australian intelligentsia, mainstream and indigenous, tended to highlight complex, near-theological issues such as treaties and reconciliation, native title and representation. But the all-dominating plague of alcohol dependency and the sapping curse of welfarism were constantly swept to the margins of public discussion.

There are obvious reasons for this record: progressive thinkers often accepted the idea that alcohol was the result of disadvantage, a pleasing, almost consoling idea, because disadvantage can be remedied, of course, by such tools as welfare, and if past oppression is the present, hidden cause of trouble, that trouble can be tactfully excused and subtly, constructively, addressed. The enlightened class wished to give no help to their grim conservative adversaries, while the majority of indigenous intellectuals found themselves unable to "let down their own side" and talk plainly about the alcoholic syndromes that had trapped their cousins in the bush.

And so silence reigned. The spokesmen would not speak. It was left to a pair of indigenous thinkers to take back power and responsibility.

Naturally there is a tragic aspect to this saga: a generation of well-intentioned figures, whether intellectuals or activists, hands-on community workers or discriminating scholars of indigenous life-ways, found it their fate to preside over a grinding social crisis that their best efforts failed to solve. Indeed, the Aboriginal societies they wished to help fared worse and worse. This was a spectacular failure of understanding, one that which will stand out clearly in the record of Australian history.

But there is a darker twist. Indigenous societies across Australia today are intensely studied, watched and surveyed. How minutely detailed our surface knowledge of them has become: we operate, in truth, a kind of collective Truman Show. Yet changing the fundamental behaviours of those societies has long seemed an elusive, distant goal -- and this may well be precisely because of the mainstream presence there. In today's Australia, there are very few purely Aboriginal spaces left: the frontier is closed, and closed forever. All through the remote indigenous world there are outside helpers, the enabling army, delivering services, building capacity, looking on through engaged, compassionate, post-colonial eyes. With their art, and their troubles, their spirituality and their mesmerising difference, Aboriginal people in the bush have become ever more necessary to the mainstream. It is a strange dance: as we waltz into the future, a relationship of co-dependency, marked out by the bright ring of racial thinking, controls our fate.