

Right crucial to Aboriginal reforms

- Noel Pearson
- *The Australian*
- September 11, 2010 12:00AM

THERE is a rule in politics that only Nixon could have gone to China. Only a Republican US president with the anti-communist credentials of Richard Milhouse Nixon could establish a new era in Sino-American relations by meeting Mao Zedong in an unexpected 1972 visit to China.

The rule is that where there is an issue that is most strongly anathema to one side of politics, then only a representative of that side can take leadership of the issue in a way that is likely to carry bipartisan support.

A Democrat could not have done what Nixon did. If one had attempted to do so, then the outcry from Republicans and the American constituency would have been violently partisan.

There are times when reforms are achieved by narrow majorities in parliament in the teeth of steadfast opposition. Paul Keating's advocacy of Mabo and his passage of the Native Title Act in 1993 was such an instance, when a reformer goes out of his way to stand up for principled leadership.

But sometimes the Nixon-to-China principle is the only way reform can happen. John Howard's leadership of gun control in Australia went much further than anything a Labor government could have done.

Bob Hawke and Keating's economic reforms of the 1980s are another instance of the Nixon-to-China rule.

Education reforms - such as MySchool and performance pay for teachers - that challenged the education unions of the Left could only be carried by an education minister such as Julia Gillard.

It was pursuant to this rule that I said in my 2004 Judith Wright Lecture about constitutional recognition of Australia's indigenous peoples: "The basic consideration in relation to any proposal to amend the Australian Constitution is this: you need a majority of voters in a majority of the states to support a referendum.

"That is, you need the support of 80 to 90 per cent of the Australian people. You will need bipartisan political support.

"Only a conservative leader who enjoys the confidence of the most conservative sections of the national community will be able to lead the country to an appropriate constitutional

resolution of indigenous issues. It will take a prime minister in the mould of Tony Abbott to lead the Australian nation to settle the 'unfinished business' between settler Australians and indigenous Australians."

I wrote this at a time when Abbott was fifth in the batting order of the liberal leadership.

My assessment to independent Rob Oakeshott that Abbott was "a once-in-a-generation conservative who could lead the way on reconciliation" was based on this analysis.

Oakeshott has a different analysis from my reading of Henry Kissinger and believes that the decisions he and Tony Windsor have made this week are right for their constituency and the country.

During the next 10 months, neither of the main parties has a majority in the House of Representatives or the Senate. The recent parliamentary reforms mean that private members' bills will be given a fair chance.

Among the independents, in the Coalition, in the Labor Party and in the Greens, there are many MPs with a strong commitment to indigenous Australians. There is every chance for good policy based on personal conviction to be put to parliament, debated, judged on merit and transformed into law.

I understand that many indigenous people find it hard to accept that Australian conservatives can play a crucial role in the advancement of indigenous people's interests.

There is a legacy of resentment about the conservatives' previous policies.

I said towards the end of Howard's tenure that it would have been possible for indigenous people to have a dialogue with him. Whether or not indigenous people agree with this assessment is no longer important. The important thing is that the old tension between conservatives and indigenous people is now gone.

Bob Katter is a pioneer of the transformation of the Right. He was a member of Joh Bjelke-Petersen's Queensland government with which Aboriginal people had so many bitter disputes. But Katter initiated the very reforms in land title and housing that we are pursuing today. Katter was 25 years ahead of his time.

In recent weeks Katter has been driven by conviction and passion, having taken the unique step of elevating indigenous policy to the top of his list of political priorities. It was a great moment when Katter said at his press conference on that chaotic Tuesday that "indigenous affairs was a very burning question for me".

"My reputation and my history was staked upon what happened there and I'm not going to walk away from it."

Abbott himself is a representative of this new political Right.

Other indigenous Australians may disagree with many of the policies of Katter, Abbott and other non-Left politicians. But it's fair to say that the paternalism, resistance to indigenous

land ownership and power that characterised the old Right (and much of old Labor) is no longer relevant.

In my message to Oakeshott I made my case why engagement with Abbott is a real opportunity.

I said to him that most of the progress has been carried by the Left side of politics and without the Left's championing of Aboriginal title to land we would still be completely dispossessed.

The picture is, however, more complex than that.

There are junctures in history where conservatives have a role to play in the advancement of Aboriginal people.

Many people are familiar only with our social and economic policies in Cape York Peninsula. It was a calculated risk we took a decade ago when we called our program "welfare reform".

The risk was that our policies would be thought to be narrowly aimed at Aboriginal people's welfare payments.

However, we thought it was necessary to make clear to the Left that without a change in the passive welfare economy there would be no improvement.

Abbott understood at an early stage that our argument was that Aboriginal disadvantage is not different to disadvantage in the non-indigenous mainstream, but is an extreme case of the effects of passive welfare and substance abuse epidemics.

Our model for progress in Cape York is the staircase model. The stairs are built on a foundation of social norms, which we are rebuilding in our communities.

Second, the structures underpinning the stairs are investment in capabilities: government investments in health, education and infrastructure.

Third, incentives and their rational alignment shape the stairs that individuals need to climb. This is a simple point that has hitherto been obscured in thinking on social justice: each rung on the stairs must be climbed by individual human beings.

The stairs are narrow and only allow individuals clutching their children to their breasts to ascend two by two. There is no mass elevator for entire communities.

There is a strong social democratic flavour to the staircase metaphor, but it is not surprising that socially responsible conservatives such as Abbott accept that government has a responsibility for opportunity.

On the other side of politics, Labor leaders have accepted some of the liberal and conservative elements of the staircase model.

Jenny Macklin has repeatedly referred to "rebuilding social norms" as a prerequisite of successful policy. So, in this policy area we have achieved an increased bipartisanship.

Unfortunately the former Rudd government's Closing the Gap policy framework still betrayed a failure to understand the importance of individuals, families and communities taking charge of their lives.

Our call, consistent with Katter's longstanding policy approach, for private property titles on Aboriginal lands and ownership of homes, rather than public housing, was not heeded.

The same story can be told about employment reform under the former government: the Community Development Employment Projects, called work-for-the-dole reforms, simply resulted in shifting Aboriginal people from that program on to Newstart.

The other big question where we need to achieve bipartisanship is a national settlement between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians. Abbott's private member's bill to overturn the Queensland Wild Rivers legislation is one example of the fact that Aboriginal rights is not a clear-cut Left v Right issue, where the Right has no positive contribution to make.

It was heartbreaking to us that the Labor Queensland government made a deal with the Greens about a conservation regime that is being enforced without the consent of the traditional owners.

Abbott's bill would restore traditional owners' property rights that were infringed by the Wild Rivers legislation.

Katter included the restoration of our rights in his letter to Gillard and Abbott. Whichever side was going to form government, it was one of the most important issues for us in Cape York peninsula that the independents make sure that parliament overrides the discriminatory Queensland legislation.

Last year I wrote a Quarterly Essay explaining our education policies, which aim to make sure that all students in Cape York become fully numerate and literate in English, and receive high-quality secondary and tertiary education.

But I also wrote that for the sake of Australia's soul, contemporary forms of Australia's own indigenous languages and cultures must survive and develop.

The most encouraging reply to my essay came from Abbott. He wrote: "Pearson has the capacity to surprise both his backers and his critics. His call for a longer school day so that Aboriginal children can receive a sound general education is a challenge to the political Left. His bigger challenge, though, is reserved for the Right. Pearson wants the longer school day also to accommodate serious, sustained teaching in traditional Aboriginal culture and language.

"The challenge," Abbott continued, "for those who have been Pearson's philosophical fellow travellers up till now, is to accept that biculturalism, at least for Aboriginal people, is a worthy object of Australian government policy and is worth paying for [my emphasis]. Because it is unique to our country, support for Aboriginal culture is a responsibility of Australian government.

"In his final scripted speech as prime minister," Abbot concluded, "John Howard acknowledged how far he'd come in his attitudes to Aboriginal issues. Undoubtedly, his late flowering friendship with Pearson was a key factor in his personal journey from resistance to engagement. Over the years, Pearson has prompted quite a few conservative Australians to a change of heart. He's now inviting us to go a little bit further than the former prime minister was prepared to, but it's a project that we should be ready to support."

We would perhaps find just as strong support for our cultural and language agenda on the political Left. My point is, however, that a policy for indigenous culture can only be achieved through bipartisanship, when a leader with Abbott's convictions leads the conservatives.

A common misconception is that our policies are only for remote Australia, or only for Cape York Peninsula. I told Oakeshott that I shared his concern that indigenous Australians in regional and urban settings participate in the formulation of new policies.

The present situation presents great opportunity.

In this process, I have no greater say than anybody else. My first contribution to this discussion is that if the opportunity is to be fully seized, the conservatives should be seen not as the problem in indigenous affairs, but as a crucial part of the solution.