

Aborigines need to turn radical

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On April 3 last year, Anna Bligh used the occasion of the Australian government signing up to the International Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples to reveal that her government had made three declarations under so-called Wild Rivers legislation.

Having left these intended declarations secret during the course of the 2009 state election campaign, Bligh's post-election revelation was political sleaze.

Bligh chose this year's 18th anniversary of the High Court decision on native title in the Mabo case to make a fourth declaration - of the Wenlock River, north of Weipa. The timing reveals the level of respect Bligh and her ministers hold for Aboriginal people and their rights to land.

Bligh has done this in the face of a comprehensive report produced by the Anglican diocese in Brisbane, which investigated the claims and counterclaims of Aboriginal people on the one side, and state Natural Resources Minister Stephen Robertson and the Wilderness Society on the other.

The Anglican report found that "the Wild Rivers legislation negatively impacts the wellbeing of the indigenous population within this area as it reduces the ability of Cape York indigenous communities to engage with the real economy". It called on the Bligh government to revoke the declarations made last year, to accept a moratorium on any further declarations, and to obtain the consent of Aboriginal landowners for any such effects.

Only in the past fortnight the Anglican Dean of Brisbane, Peter Catt, wrote to the Premier reiterating the church's position on a moratorium, particularly in relation to the Wenlock River. The church received no response.

Bligh and Robertson delivered their response on Mabo Day on Thursday.

When Bligh announced her program for Wild River declarations for Cape York Peninsula, she described it as a "down payment" on her government's commitment to the environment.

Rather, it was a down payment on electoral debts that she owed to environmental groups for her 2009 election win, particularly to the Wilderness Society.

It is a testament to its electoral power that an organisation that is split in two - between the old sorcerer Alex Marr's old TWS and his apprentice Lyndon Schneiders's Save TWS - can still run the Queensland government's land management policy. Though TWS is embroiled in a life-threatening struggle for power between Marr and Schneiders, Labor ministers still do its bidding. Robertson and his department have ceded all key power to TWS. The state government has effectively outsourced responsibilities to a lobby group in whose electoral debt it sits.

The extraordinary thing about Bligh's action this week is that she has done it despite the attempted intervention of federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Jenny Macklin. Together with federal Environment Protection Minister Peter Garrett, Macklin has been trying to broker a resolution of the Wild Rivers matter.

Macklin spoke to Bligh in the past fortnight, urging her to see the opportunity for a resolution that achieves river protection objectives while preserving economic development opportunities for Aboriginal people.

Bligh has ignored Macklin's attempt to broker a peace deal.

It is not possible to convey the intensity of the feelings I harbour for these bastards. It is not their contempt for Aboriginal people. It is not their utter lack of principle. It is the torment of our own powerlessness that gets me. The powerlessness of Aboriginal people to hold a position of dignity in this state - in this country, which is supposed to be our country, too. How can the 3 per cent mouse deal on a level playing field with the 97 per cent elephant? How can Aboriginal people be dealt with fairly in a governmental system in which we have no adequate representation?

Just think about this Wild Rivers situation. The Aboriginal people of Cape York are represented in parliaments by representatives who seem to have no capacity or desire to represent their interests. They will one day be replaced by others, who will join their predecessors and return south to the big smoke to pursue post-parliamentary lives.

In 2003 the Queensland parliament established a committee to inquire into the question of political representation of indigenous peoples in the democratic institutions of the state. The committee reported on measures taken in jurisdictions such as New Zealand, where special seats are allocated to Maori people.

After receiving submissions and undertaking its own research, the Struthers committee gave its report. It recommended nothing of substance to address the powerlessness of Aboriginal people in government.

I am convinced of one thing: the individual and social disempowerment of Aboriginal people is ultimately underwritten by our lack of structural power within the government of the state and nation. We will go a long way through individuals taking their own power to pursue better lives in their own interest and that of their families. But we will be thwarted in our progress if we do not also have the structural power to defend our rights to such things as property and equality of treatment under the law.

If this leader of this system of government in Queensland has done anything, she has made the choices clear for our people. Either there is structural reform that accords to Aboriginal Australians sufficient power to hold our own in the institutions of government in this country, or the Aboriginal rights movement will have to become more radical than it has ever been.

The proper Latin meaning of radical is root. The root cause of our malaise as a people is the torment of powerlessness we endure at the hands of those in power, who see us as nothing more than a mendicant people.

Bligh redoubled our awareness of our condition this week. We either become steadily weaker and sicker as a result of this torment, or our call for power must become more radical.

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