

## **Calma approach proves too timid**

Noel Pearson

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There is nothing the government (or anyone else) can do for the Aboriginal people of Australia that the people are unwilling to do for themselves.

If people from the progressive side of the political divide reflect on this principle, they will agree. They would realise what they think of as self-determination is consistent with this principle: nothing will work if the people who are the subjects of reform efforts are not willing to make the reform.

If people from the liberal and conservative side of the cultural and political divide reflected on this principle, they would also agree. After all, it is one of their own classical nostrums about the relationship between government and citizens. They would think of it as the necessary responsibility that must be held by citizens.

Properly understood, what the Left calls self-determination and the Right calls responsibility are one and the same thing: the power that people must have to take charge of their own destiny.

In Australia the two sides have failed to recognise this commonality. This is because those on the progressive Left side (including the majority of indigenous leaders) came to interpret self-determination as all power, no responsibility. This was the problem with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission: it gave some substantial powers to indigenous people, but the mentality was one of “we want power, but it’s all the governments’ fault when there is failure”. It’s true these powers were residual and many areas of failure – not the least health and education – were in fact state and commonwealth government responsibilities, rather than ATSIC’s. But the defining feature of the old ATSIC paradigm was power without responsibility.

Those on the liberal-conservative side, on the other hand, have also failed on responsibility, for two reasons. First, when it comes down to it, Australian liberal-conservatives are still big believers in government. They think overwhelmingly that it is government that needs to be the main actor in the salvation of the indigenes. Like their social democrat opponents, they see it largely as a matter of state service delivery rather than what we have come to call in Cape York Peninsula supported self-help.

Second, while they are keen for individual responsibility, they would prefer to ignore any group, community or people as holders of responsibility. Their aversion to collectivism makes their position too extreme. So they want to abolish indigenous organisations, and replace them with what? Large, mainstream, welfare-delivering non-government organisations like the Smith Family, Mission Australia and so on? As if they do a better job of delivering welfare.

The fact is indigenous Australians are peoples in an important sense. That means we share communal identities (not the least in relation to the ownership of traditional lands). There are many aspects of language, cultural traditions and heritage that mean we are not just individuals, but we are members of groups as well.

It is true that the great majority of indigenous Australians, including those who have been closely involved in contributing to Tom Calma’s blueprint for a new national indigenous representative body, largely function as individuals in the Australian mainstream. These are said to number 400,000 while another 100,000 live in discrete communities, usually in remote areas. While vast gaps in social and economic conditions exist across this spectrum, it is plain that the crises in the discrete, remote communities are of a particular kind.

My point for the moment is this: the liberal-conservative Right cannot just wish away the people dimension when it comes to discrete communities in particular. To continue to insist on utter assimilation is madness, and it’s the wrong idea anyway.

The fact is that rather than there being two choices: individualism or peoplehood, what has to happen to Aboriginal society is what has happened to all traditional societies on entering the modern era. Aboriginal individuals need to split in two: part of their life must be conducted as individuals pursuing their lives in the modern world. They must be animated by their own self-interest and their families must be their first priority. They must be able to have access to opportunity without going through collectivist procedures and they need to have a private life that is separate from collectivist politics. Their pursuit of their individual interests must be fully legitimated as the best (and only) means of social and economic uplift.

The other half of the Aboriginal individual's personality will constitute their identification with their people: their lands, their languages, their traditions, their heritage. This is not a sphere of life that provides any chance for socioeconomic development. It serves those more intangible human needs for culture, spirituality and identity.

Calma's model for indigenous Australian representation is a tragically wrong-headed outcome of what was clearly a hopeful exercise involving many indigenous people earnestly trying to find a way to a better future.

It is difficult to add anything more to Nicolas Rothwell's penetrating analysis in *The Australian yesterday*. Rothwell's conclusion is devastating: "For some time it has been clear Aboriginal self-determination has had its day. Calma's report lays it in its long-prepared grave."

It is a strange outcome. It's clear that the long shadow of ATSIC dominated Calma's process and the product they have come up with shows the psychological terrors under which they laboured. They were anxious (like the Rudd government) not to give the impression that they were trying to revive the dead monster, ATSIC: yes, we only want advisory powers and will have no involvement in service delivery. They were anxious to ensure proper representation for women. They were anxious to prove the new organisation's commitment to ethics and probity, and have made extraordinary proposals in this regard. They did not want government to be in a position to abolish the organisation, so they have opted to establish a company rather than a legislated body. They think that philanthropic and corporate funding will provide some financial independence to the new organisation, with little appreciation that there is small hope of this.

Understandably, given the opprobrium that came to be attached to ATSIC, they are running so scared from the ghost of ATSIC that they have proposed a model that can be summarised as all voice, no power, no responsibility. The worst result of all: they have the ability to complain but no ability to influence or take responsibility.

The recognition of indigenous Australians as peoples should be a matter for commonwealth legislation at the least. If there were problems with the arbitrary interferences and changes by governments, then the search should have been for solutions that protect against such events. In any case the need for government funding still leaves the most decisive power in the hands of government. The erstwhile representative company may still survive, but without government funds?

The position of indigenous Australians is reduced to that of a representative function of approximately the status of the Australian Native Grasslands Protection Association or the Australian Philatelic Society (if there be such organisations). Except that it will have the formal role of complaining about the torment of powerlessness afflicting Australia's first peoples.

Calma and his team have not grappled with the whole problem of the governance interface between indigenous Australians and the Australian commonwealth. One nation, several peoples. Finding the equilibrium between the 97 per cent Elephant and the 3 per cent Mouse so that the Mouse can do for itself those things that the Elephant will never be able to do for the Mouse. Individual socioeconomic development in the private sphere, cultural development in the sphere of the people.

Thoughtful members of the Rudd government should treat the Calma report as a kind of embarrassing *Oliver Twist* moment in the relationship between black and white Australia. Embarrassing for the whites as much as for blacks. They should ask Calma to go back to the drawing board and give indigenous Australians the opportunity to think through these issues outside the shadow of ATSIC. To accept Oliver's pathos would be the worst act of political cynicism.

*Noel Pearson is director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership.*