

Indigenes still in the political wilderness

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No time confirms the democratic impotence of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Australian commonwealth more than federal elections.

Australia's 500,000 indigenes, comprising 3 per cent of the national population spread thinly across the nation's electorates, count for near nought in our democracy.

The national parliament has had, since Federation in 1901, only two indigenous politicians out of thousands. Even since indigenous Australians gained citizenship in 1967, these two – senators Neville Bonner and Aden Ridgeway – still represent a fraction of a percent of the total number of politicians in parliaments during the past four decades. Three per cent of the population don't even get 3 per cent representation.

And when you consider the kind of parliamentary talent routinely elected across the country and the perfectly adequate indigenous alternatives it is just appalling.

North Queensland has been a hothouse, producing prominent and courageous indigenous leaders steeped in the labour movement – the Grogans, O'Shanes, Millers and so on – and yet none of them has ever been groomed by the ALP to stand as candidates in Queensland for a party to which indigenous people have long been faithful. (One member of the Grogan family has been elected to the Northern Territory parliament.)

In NSW, former ALP president Warren Mundine is still waiting for a place on the Senate ticket or pre-selection for a reasonably safe seat. His transition to the presidency signalled a new electable federal Labor when he shattered the progressive silence on indigenous policy and led on private school choice. It's scandalous that someone with his temperament and courage is still out on the woodheap.

This week Mundine told *The Australian*, "As for our side of politics, yeah, it is very disappointing that we haven't got candidates. It's 109 years and we haven't been able to get an indigenous person into the House of Representatives."

Labor should be the party most open to outsiders, but as the late John Button wrote in a devastating analysis in the *Quarterly Essay* in 2002, the ALP has become a party of insiders with a shameful predilection for dynastic rule rivalling the English aristocracy.

In New Zealand Maori are guaranteed six seats in parliament, and this model is a beacon for those who have advocated parliamentary representation of Australia's indigenous minorities.

My main problem is with policy. I am sick of poor policy and the waxing and waning of interest in indigenous affairs by politicians and governments.

For the mainstream majority, politicians and the governments they either lead or hold to account, never wax or wane in upholding their responsibilities. They are eternally under democratic accountability to the mainstream electors.

For extreme minorities such as Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the attention of politicians and governments is intermittent. The policy production is usually second rate, the leadership uneven, the attention to detail substandard, the resources inadequate or wastefully applied. The earnest hopes that we are vesting in Closing the Gap is really a triumph over experience.

The poor administration of indigenous affairs is a direct result of the poor power that indigenous people possess in the Australian democratic system.

I am not looking forward to another three years of maybe a new minister and a new senior bureaucrat sitting across the table from indigenous people who are trying to make a better life for their people. Because once again, the story will be the same.

The indigenous people will possess 90 per cent of the knowledge of issues and spend 90 per cent of their time thinking about the solutions, while the politicians and bureaucrats across the table will have 10 per cent of the knowledge and spend even less time and attention on the issues. And yet the politicians and the bureaucrats will hold 90 per cent of the power to make decisions, and the hapless indigenous people have only 10 per cent of the power. And do you think those in possession of the power at least acknowledge the absurdity of this disparity in knowledge and power?

I've seen more than my share of ignorant, if well-meaning, politicians and bureaucrats walk through the revolving door of indigenous policy, to say that this system is hopeless. The reforms and the progress people are making are achieved in spite of this lack of power. How much more progress would indigenous people be able to make if they were given true responsibility?

Not the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission-style "all care, no responsibility", but real responsibility to account for progress and for failure.

It is never in a mainstream political party's interest to advocate anything other than the most cursory policies concerning indigenous affairs during election time. It is understandable why this is the case. Blackfellas and their issues are seen as electoral poison, best not to be associated with them. So what to do in a federal campaign when there are issues of grave concern to indigenous Australians?

We are left with the dilemma of interest group advocacy. Most Australians do not realise that while they may prosecute their partisan causes with great vehemence and unbridled passion, whether the other mob get into power is only of marginal consequence. The great Australian mainstream is served by Labor and the Coalition regardless of how they voted or on whose side of the electoral argument they stood.

Not so with minority groups like indigenous Australians. Minority groups are vulnerable to vengeance and exclusion if their advocacy is too "political". They are vulnerable because they are readily identified and retaliation readily targeted. So blackfellas invariably stay quiet during election campaigns. Not only are their numbers inconsequential, but the dilemma represented by active democratic participation leaves them sitting on their hands.

A new indigenous national representative body was created with much fanfare earlier this year. I have not heard a single statement from them in this election context. I can understand why, but it leaves me depressed.

Many Australians hearing about this predicament may say that the democratic principle is shattered if special provision is made for indigenous representation in governmental institutions. Indigenous people's interests and needs are met by the elected representatives that they are entitled to vote for the same as everyone else.

There are two arguments in favour of taking indigenous representation seriously. First, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islander peoples are an indigenous people. It is the indigenous status of the Maori that gives rise to the provisioning made in NZ. Second, the social and economic position of indigenous Australians is out of proportion to the rest of the country. The colour blind electoral status belies the strong colour correlation with disadvantage.

Every country ultimately comes to make their own decisions about the design of their democracy. Democracy is not a standard template. One problem countries have grappled with in various ways is how to deal with distinct minorities. NZ has made provision for Maori without traducing their democracy. Parliamentary representation is not the only solution to the problem of the status of distinct peoples within nations and their relative power within the country's democratic institutions.

But in our present context it is probably not wrong to say that if Barack Obama were an Australian, he would still not have talent enough to warrant preselection in the Australian Labor Party.

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