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# Labor's ideas mature

By Noel Pearson

*The Weekend Australian*



## Cape York Institute

For Policy & Leadership

J Block, Newton Street, TAFE Campus  
PMB 1, Cairns. QLD 4870

Telephone: (07) 4046 0600  
Facsimile: (07) 4046 0601

Email: [info@cyi.org.au](mailto:info@cyi.org.au)  
Web: [www.cyi.org.au](http://www.cyi.org.au)

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Morally, and for sheer humanitarian reasons, indigenous policy is the most important domestic public policy issue, but it is electorally the least important. This is the difficulty: Australia's most profound problem is its least important. There is goodwill across the community, from the cities and the regions. There is goodwill across the political spectrum, from the Nationals to the Australian Greens. So why has this goodwill not translated into reform?

I think the first reason is that a rigorous and comprehensive policy reform agenda has never been adopted by a national government. I have often made the observation that the federal Labor Party has held policies that are strong on indigenous rights and hopeless on indigenous responsibilities. And the Coalition is the inverse: strong on indigenous responsibilities but lacking honour when it comes to indigenous rights.

The second reason is that no national government has made the implementation of a rigorous and comprehensive policy reform agenda a national priority that can be sustained through the decades necessary for reforms to have effect. This means the national government must be held to account for making the policy work.

I do not want to give the impression that I do not think there has been an indigenous leadership failure to develop the required policies. There has been and there still is a failure on this front.

I also do not want to give the impression that it is governments that must undertake the necessary reforms and that only they should be held to account for their failure or success. Success will never come unless indigenous people take command of our own problems and solutions. Government must be honourable in relation to indigenous rights and must provide the necessary support and institutional capacity for indigenous people to take up their responsibilities, but government cannot do anything for us that we are unwilling to do for ourselves.

During most of the past decade, both sides of politics have failed to develop the requisite compelling road map for indigenous reform. However, Labor's indigenous affairs spokesman Chris Evans (at least until the naming of the new Labor frontbench) and Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough are both showing signs that they have moved beyond the torpor of past approaches.

For several years after the 1996 election, native title dominated the federal politics of indigenous affairs. But neither side of politics developed new policies for economic and social development.

Evans could be the best federal Labor frontbencher with responsibility for indigenous affairs that we have had. His performance goes largely unnoticed because of the relative indifference towards indigenous affairs. Evans observed in a speech earlier this year that "indigenous affairs in Australia ... is so much on the periphery. It is regarded as politically unimportant, something to be managed, not highlighted."

He has not yet developed a large body of detailed policies but he has begun the job in the right way. Evans did not just continue to manage inherited policies and did not rely on the conventional progressive thinking about reconciliation. Instead, he started out by rethinking the fundamental principles and the philosophy of the Labor Party's policies.

In his own words, he "recognised that both sides of politics had failed Aboriginal people (not without some consternation from some Labor people)."

Labor's present policies have been developed in a series of speeches and essays by Evans and Bob McMullan. Evans and McMullan have taken a balanced approach to indigenous rights and responsibilities.

They have made some important statements about issues that indigenous organisations in Cape York Peninsula have been driving for many years. McMullan writes that "if drug and alcohol abuse is not

targeted directly, it will be impossible to resolve other problems”, and Evans says “Labor must engage more and adopt a less ideological stance...in the welfare debate”. These are important statements about policy areas where, Evans admits, “many of us (in the Labor Party) are not comfortable to go” because this debate takes “many on the Left of politics into the territory of very difficult and negative aspects of indigenous life.”

In relation to indigenous rights, the Labor Party has consistently advocated indigenous representation at regional and national levels.

Evans’s and McMullan’s first attempts to develop Labor’s stance on indigenous representation lacked substance.

They spoke about the need for benchmarks and stressed the importance of accountability of governments to indigenous people.

Labor said nothing about any powers being vested in indigenous institutions or other means of compelling government agencies to perform better. It was therefore an important development when Evans, in an under-reported speech at the National Press Club in Canberra, said: “We need a national indigenous body (that) has the power to make governments – federal and state-territory – accountable. No government, Labor or Coalition, has ever made a serious attempt to give indigenous people the power to hold government to account.

“Labor is determined that (there) will be a strong and independent voice for indigenous people. And we are determined that the accountability mechanisms will differ radically from the ones in place now.”

Evans is concerned about the Coalition Government’s recent record in indigenous affairs, criticising the federal Government and the Canberra bureaucracy for taking a big-government, paternalistic approach. He alleges that significant reform initiatives led by the federal Government have failed. The Government’s approach has alienated many indigenous people in the communities that are in greatest need of improved living conditions, which has stalled progress.

It is true that the first eight years of the Howard Government were wasted years in indigenous affairs and it is certainly true that government policy can be criticised on many points. However, Brough’s great merit is that he understands that indigenous affairs is an arena where people need to be running for reform. The problems are too urgent to tarry. Brough has a sense of priority and urgency.

The most important area where the federal Government is expressing unequivocal support for reform is passive welfare. The Government is working in partnership with us in Cape York Peninsula in planning welfare reform trials.

I think Brough’s recent proposal about quarantining a proportion of welfare payments to ensure the welfare of children needs further development, but it is the right starting point.

The Government is showing that it is prepared to take on a hard debate about welfare, which is one of the most important policy areas for indigenous Australians.

The question is, would a federal Labor government show the same determination in policy areas where opposition from well-organised welfare lobby groups is a certainty?

Evans and McMullan have made statements that seem to be in favour of policies for welfare reform, control of supply of addictive substances, and restoration of personal and family responsibility and social norms. It will be a measure of Labor’s policy maturation if it follows the lead that Evans has charted.

As much as I support key aspects of the Coalition’s thinking on indigenous policy, I think there are still serious gaps and shortcomings that, if not addressed, will always diminish the returns we get from what are otherwise correct policies.

For example, I believe in the need for mobility for Cape York Peninsula youngsters seeking

employment away from their communities, be it picking fruit in Victoria or working as diesel fitters in the West Australian mining industry. But I don't believe that support for mobility means that remote communities should be shut down by government fiat.

Labor's Evans has set the pace by producing competitive policy thinking.

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