

More Uncle Toms than meet the eye

By Noel Pearson

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A deal was done behind closed doors with the Howard Government.

The deal shafted the poor black fellas from the remote communities of central, northern and western Australia.

The axe fell on more than twenty years of grassroots television development, in one fell swoop, in favour of big-city interests.

There they were, two Fridays ago, these Uncle Toms, Aunt Jemimas, Stepin Fetchits, Jacky Jackies – you come up with the term of abuse and I will hurl it – hobnobbing with federal Communications Minister, Helen Coonan, at the gala launch of NITV, the new National Indigenous Television Network.

Everybody who was anybody in the indigenous cultural and political scene on the eastern seaboard quaffed champagne and cheese at Sydney's Powerhouse museum, a long, long way from Alice Springs, let alone Yuendumu or Pukatja. Talk about rivers of grog.

It was genocidal in its audacity.

These uptown blacks had conspired with the Howard Government to rip the Channel 31 satellite carrier off the 20-year old community broadcaster based in Alice Springs, the now-funct if not finished, ICTV, Indigenous Community Television.

This rightwing, jackbooted, cowboy-hatted Howard government had stumped up \$48.5 million for the new network which was set up over the still warm body of ICTV. If he were not the author of this article, I would swear that right-wing fascist Lutheran mission mongrel Noel Pearson was in on this bastardry. Talk about black kids overboard, this was worse.

Frank Rijavec, a documentary maker and former manager of the Indigenous Remote Communications Association, wrote a long open letter of complaint to Helen Coonan, outlining the whole travesty.

It appears that the tussle between those who appear to want an Australian equivalent of BET, the Washington-based Black Entertainment Television, and those wanting to preserve the tradition of dusty-handheld-camera-following-lingo-talking-goanna-chasing-black-kids-from-the-desert, goes back some years.

It is a tussle between grassroots television content production and a new Sydney-based network that talks ominously about "production values". It is a tussle that those wanting to recreate a kind of *Ebony* magazine equivalent for the indigenes of the Antipodes have won comprehensively (why not just give every indigenous kid a subscription to the originals from the States rather than recreating pale imitations over here?).

I know nothing about this world of broadcasting, its aesthetics or arcane politics (and I certainly have no idea about the relative merits of ICTV and NITV, I just can't miss the urinary irony here). What I do know is that the broadcast footprint for the satellite carrier which NITV has stolen from ICTV does not include Sydney or anywhere in eastern Australia. The footprint covers Cape York Peninsula, the Torres Strait, central Australia and north-western Australia.

First there was stolen land, then stolen children and now there is a stolen satellite licence. And you got all these black fellas in bed with the Howard Government! In an election year! Being used by Howard! Gregory Phillips would be appalled at their naïveté.

Given the shameful treatment of the grassroots community media associations that had done so much work to develop indigenous television broadcasting for the remote communities, I thought protest against the Howard Government's and NITV's deal should be a natural fit for that impressive coalition of organisations and spokespeople who had condemned the Government so roundly over its land theft –

masquerading as humanitarian intervention – in the Northern Territory. Who better to naysay this outrage than this mob?

But then as I watched the news report, who should be the chief executive of the new usurpatory network but one of the leading members of the coalition, Pat Turner. What? Come on Patricia, say it ain't so, say it ain't so.

One minute she's bucketing the Howard Government for its outrageous depredations against the indigenous people of the Northern Territory – and particularly its use of the Trojan horse of child abuse to grab Aboriginal land – and next minute she's swanning around with Coonan, stealing a satellite carrier from the poor buggers in the remotest of communities. It was appalling.

I thought to myself, these bastards are drunk with power. I will be reporting my old friend Pat to my other old friend and now Professor Mick Dodson, that Pat Turner – like Mick and myself as employees of respective publicly funded universities – is on the Howard Government's payroll. Just remember that: she's on the Government's payroll.

I thought about the outrageous breach of indigenous protocol involved here. These people, in cahoots with the Howard Government, rode roughshod over the grassroots mob out in the remote areas and got their mates in the government to direct the budget and the satellite carrier to their show.

NITV are unapologetic about breaching Aboriginal protocol. I thought this should mean that Chris Graham, the white journalist who runs the National Indigenous Times (the title must be ironic) out of Canberra, will be able to lay off on the abuse of Noel Pearson and for one edition at least focus on this treachery. Especially given NITV are reportedly in discussions with the (evil Murdoch empire's) Foxtel network for content take-up!

But then how could the NIT do this when, to top off the irony, up to the microphone walks Professor Larrisa Behrendt, the chairperson of NITV and a columnist for the NIT. The Devil does indeed wear Prada. There goes my indigenous protocol complaint: the jurist herself is chairing this takeover so it must be completely culturally correct. Larrissa would not sanction the dispossession of poor black fellas from the grassroots. Michael Mansell would start abusing his protégé, and not me, surely.

One thing I will say though is that I was wrong to say this mob have a psychological incapacity to deal with the Howard Government. Completely wrong. They did a deal with these heartless, genocidal conservatives to stuff over the grassroots mob, so they can get their black television up.

They are more than psychologically able to be cold, pragmatic and ruthless, and to make alliances with the devil himself, when the issue suits them. You just gotta find the issue. Abused and neglected children and grog don't really fit the black pride narrative. Let's create a black television where we can manufacture black urban glamour, and we don't have to deal with the ordinary yet special, uplifting and depressing, mundane and surprising, profound and miserable realities of these red dust communities.

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