

Through the class ceiling

By Noel Pearson

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There is a gulf in indigenous Australia. The gulf that I perceive is not between remote and urban, or north and south, as Professor Larissa Behrendt often argues in her commentaries; rather, it is the gulf between the indigenous middle class and the rest of the mob, particularly those who live in concentrated communities, whether in urban centres or regional and remote areas.

There is much commonality in the social circumstances of people living on The Block in Sydney's Redfern or the old Cummergunja reserve on the Murray, and the remote communities of Cape York. There is not much difference in terms of the social and economic problems, and indeed the cultural density of these communities: kinship and demand sharing are intense in any of these settings.

The profound difference is between the members of the indigenous middle class – of which Behrendt and myself are members – and those with working-class and underclass means and lifestyles. This middle class includes all of the recognised indigenous leaders in politics, the arts, academe and the professions. They are usually university-educated, have good incomes, most of them own their own homes, many go on overseas holidays, and they frequently send their children to private schools. Their children are likely to succeed in education and build on the achievements of their parents.

The indigenous middle class has grown and continues to grow. This is as it should be. Let me not at all be interpreted as casting aspersions on the idea that the ranks of the indigenous middle class should continue to expand.

That I even have a concern about being misinterpreted is testament to how equivocal we are about the concept of middle-class blacks. Given the close association of indigenous political causes to the Left, there is something slightly unpalatable or embarrassing about the idea of blackfellas being openly thought of as bourgeois.

But the truth is that in terms of incomes and lifestyles – and milieu – many blackfellas are objectively of the middle class. Like our friends from the Left, we have to face the fact that if there is such a thing as class struggle, then no matter our professed loyalties to the proletariat, we are part of the bourgeoisie.

Perhaps it is discomfort with this idea that leads indigenous identifiers with the Left to focus their interpretation of societal struggle and oppression almost exclusively on the basis of race, rather than the old leftist analysis of class. This movement away from class to cleavages based on a range of other diversities (race, culture, sexual preference and so on) is part of the general cultural and political trajectory of the middle-class Left. What was an oxymoron under the old Left analysis is now an exercise in obfuscation or amnesia: how in hell did we end up with this strange and incongruous creature called the Middle Class Left?

But let me return to the indigenous middle class. We are caught in the same contradictions as other people of the Left whose parents, grandparents or great grandparents were of the working classes, but who themselves are certainly not.

The only difference is we are mostly first-generation ascended. If there is not an identity crisis, there is a papering over of fundamental tensions.

Most members of the indigenous middle class trace and maintain, to varying degrees, some connection with a community with which they are historically or traditionally associated. Some of these connections are strong and intimate, while others have been weakened by the forces of individual and collective history, and by choice of the people concerned.

I have come more and more to the view that discrete indigenous communities, whether they be on communally held Aboriginal lands, on the fringes of country towns, or in urban centres, are by their very nature – thick with kinship and embedded relationships, obligations and traditions – places where alcohol almost inevitably becomes problematic and indeed

anathema to the social and cultural health of the people in these communities. I am yet to be told of any such community that uses alcohol without incurring intolerable levels of harm compared with the functional Australian mainstream. I know of none myself.

I assert that among those who drink at all in such communities, it is only individuals who have adopted middle-class mores in relation to the use of alcohol whose use is not problematic. Grog is a problem for the black middle class only in the same way as it is for the white middle class: the limited alcohol problem in the functional mainstream bears no resemblance to the gross social and cultural harm that is inflicted on dense indigenous communities.

So how are members of the black middle class to deal with the fact that grog is so problematic in their old home communities, where they no longer permanently reside?

We can deny that grog is the problem: no matter that the realities are as plain as the noses on our faces when we visit home, we find other explanations for the problems (overcrowding, under-funding, lack of programs and so on). This we have done for decades now and it has availed nothing for our people in the communities.

We can harbour vague assumptions that the members of our communities will learn to “live with alcohol”, as the longstanding NT policy promised, and learn to drink responsibly like the black middle class. But we don’t acknowledge the profound difference in the mores of alcohol consumption that the middle class has adopted and those that characterise Aboriginal drinking cultures in the communities.

We even pretend that relatives and friends from communities do not have obvious problems with alcohol. When relatives visit us in our suburbs or in our homes, and they have problems with alcohol, why do we pretend that they do not?

When our countrymen and -women resident in the long grass, or down under the bridge, ask us for money in the streets of Cairns or Walgett or Broome, what do we do when we know they are putting together the price of a cask?

Why are the most vehement opponents of those policy changes that are aimed at turning around the crisis in our home communities often members of the indigenous middle class? When our children are safe and go to good schools? When grog is not a problem for us, but it is for the mob back home? When we have police and no noise at night, while our home communities do not? When we own our own homes and they do not? When we take meaning and vigour and purpose from being employed, while passive welfare is a real issue among our mob on the ground?

The majority of the black middle class do not hold such double standards. They see their own privilege and understand what is needed to underpin safe and happy families, and they support reform.

It is unfortunately those of us privileged indigenous people who are engaged in advocacy who are most susceptible to double standards when it comes to crucial policy questions around welfare reform, substance abuse, housing and education. It is on our heads that there has been a longstanding failure to come up with (and put into practice) better ideas than bringing in the police and stopping the grog and the pornography. It is in the absence of our better ideas that the federal Government has acted in the way it has.

Last weekend (“More Uncle Toms than meet the eye”, *Inquirer*, 28-29 July) I could not pass up the opportunity to highlight the irony of the situation whereby various people who opposed the Howard Government on the Northern Territory intervention are apparently at odds with territory community organisations on the issue of television broadcasting to remote areas, and have secured support from the federal Government for their new network.

I chose to satirise the conduct of the proponents of NITV by using a collection of arguments and abuse that have been levelled against me, indigenous magistrate Sue Gordon, chairwoman of the Northern Territory Taskforce, and the Government. I thought my use of deliberately excessive language directed at the NITV people (“Uncle Toms”), at myself (“right-wing fascist Mongrel”) and at the Howard Government (“genocidal”) would make abundantly clear my satirical intention.

Indeed, I thought there was no risk of alienating people whom I respect greatly, such as Rachel Perkins, who understand broadcasting and to whom I would readily defer, because my irony and satire was so obvious. But alas!

It appears people have read iron-bar rather than irony, and my attempt at satire fell flat, because everyone took my (yes, mischievous) piece literally.

Wikipedia explains my problem: “Satire usually has a definite target, which may be an attitude or a social practice. Because satire often combines anger and humour, it can be profoundly disturbing; because it is essentially ironic or sarcastic, it is often misunderstood. Common uncomprehending responses to satire are accusations of poor taste (just not funny) and the misapprehension that the satirist is completely earnest.”

However, my irony and satire didn't work because representatives of NITV felt compelled to reply angrily to my “accusations”. Either I have a problem with my writing or my readers have a problem with reading: given that both supporters and detractors of the article read the thing in the same way, I may have to concede the former.

Finally, in satirising the NITV launch at Sydney's Powerhouse Museum, I wrongly employed the cliché that champagne and cheese were consumed, when in fact the organisers specifically excluded alcohol from the function. For this I apologise. I attend too many art gallery openings of work by indigenous artists from remote communities who either do not consume alcohol at all, or who have problems with alcohol, where grog seems so incongruent and wrong.

Perhaps the NITV launch has established a precedent and tradition for the presence of alcohol whenever an indigenous community comes together in fellowship and celebration.

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