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# A New Provident



AFTER 200 YEARS of military assault, paternalistic protection, assimilation, multi-culturalism and quasi-governmental self determination with ATSIC and other packages of government policy pertaining to Indigenous Australia, there is, incredibly, still another chance for mainstream Australians to work harmoniously with the hundreds of indigenous nations and language groups that span the Australian continent. It is not a one-way relationship. The time is past saying sorry, or marching, or lamenting the state of Indigenous Australia, all these things have been done; something more, and yet something less, is required of non-Indigenous Australians.

In a speech on the state of Indigenous health in the Northern Territory John Ah Kit recently set out something of the terms of a new provident or partnership when he told the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly that "we must start to reach an understanding of the need for indigenous people to look to mechanisms and tools by which people can regain power over their lives. Again, I cannot help but agree with Noel Pearson who, speaking three years ago, emphasised ... *the fundamental issue of the economy of our communities*. Unless indigenous people have the capacity to properly engage with the broader economy under their own conditions and honouring their cultures and traditions, the future of indigenous people is dire. It is not just a linear argument that indigenous ill-health is an obstacle to economic advancement. Like the chicken and egg, economic strength is directly related to positive health outcomes. Any suggestion that we can isolate resources and devote them to either the chicken or the egg just will not work. ...In regional development, this means the development of strong local and regional governance structures across a variety of service delivery areas to increase indige-

nous control over their lives and the institutions they must manage; increased educational opportunity with a strong focus on language acquisition, literacy and numeracy; accelerated and expanded access to training and employment programs; a strong focus on indigenous economic development; and an integration of indigenous economic activities within broader regional development planning processes".<sup>1</sup>

What does this new provident mean for indigenous and non-indigenous relations? In a speech two years ago Kimberley Land Council CEO Wayne Bergmann said: 'We do not want mainstream Australia to walk behind or ahead, but alongside us'. These amplify the sentiments of Patrick Dodson's Lingiari Foundation and the wonderful words from Lingiari himself: '...Let us live together as mates, let us not make it hard for each other... We want to live in a better way together, Aboriginals and White men, let us not fight over anything, let us be mates...' (Vincent Lingiari, August 18th, 1974) After all the failures of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relations, generosity of spirit pervades Indigenous Australia.

But there is a limit to this generosity of spirit and there is a new strength of purpose. As Noel Pearson put it last year: "history tells us ... that land injustice is one of those tenacious wounds that never heal if no honest justice is done. If there is no just com-

promise, then land injustice will plague our nation long into the future. What Eddie Mabo had achieved with the Mabo decision was that he had forged the opportunity for a just compromise. ...the white fellas keep their land rights, the black fellas get what is left over, and we share some categories of land where the Crown title prevails over the native title in the event of conflict. Why is this form of compromise not reasonable?

Why have white Australians and their governments resisted this compromise? Do we not feel anxious about losing the opportunity that is Eddie Mabo's legacy to us as Australians – white and black?"

As partners and supporters it is imperative for non-Indigenous Australians to

see that resolving and finessing native title rights is fundamental. In other words, it is more than just ethically and morally correct to resolve these issues of land title expeditiously and justly now. Indigenous Australia needs resources to build opportunities for the next generations. Communities need to be given the chance to resolve, for the first time in 200 years, the problems of social inequality on their own terms and upon their own shoulders. New indigenous industries and companies need to be formed and new commerce needs to be created between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians based upon the solidity of an agreement that stands in time and acknowledges the millenia-long tenure of Indigenous Australians. This does not mean that there can be some simple transaction that will suddenly right everything that is wrong. It means precisely as Bergmann describes it, the beginning of a new and long walk together shoulder to shoulder.

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1. John Ah Kit, **Debates - Ninth Assembly, First Session - 17/02/2004 - Parliamentary Record No: 17 Subject:** Note Statement - Building Healthier Communities: A Five Year Framework for Health and Community Services

The resilience of Indigenous Australia is profound and strong, and despite the difficulties of the native title settlement process, all around Australia a vibrant Indigenous renaissance is underway. Too often a riot or trouble clouds the fact that something positive is emerging from within Indigenous communities. Indigenous Australians are the young population of an old civilisation, mainstream non-Indigenous Australia comprises an aging population of a relatively young civilisation. In these first decades of the twenty-first century dialogues about new partnerships are beginning between wise leaders across the communities and generations. Often this is happening despite mainstream political processes, but there is movement. On the mainstream non-Indigenous side, the

very best time for investment is *before the pack start to move*. Now is such a time for those with an eye to the future.

Indigenous Australians are clearly telling mainstream non-Indigenous Australia that, in the new partnership, there will be no more welfare or paternalism, there needs to be economic equality in all its dimensions. Native title is needed to build economic, cultural and social stability and independence. Where partnerships exist it will be to obtain mutual benefits. For many communities a future with no need of White Australian investment is a strong possibility. Many Indigenous communities are emerging with

the resources to make their own investments in their own peoples and industries of the future.

There should be no immediate assumption that mainstream Australia has something to offer. It is largely up to Indigenous men and women to decide what they can

use of mainstream Australia.

But clearly there is a lot to be achieved together, and only rarely will the idea of a partnership with non-Indigenous Australians be turned down.

The positive forward movement is not an even process. All over the country, it is still possible to find vestiges of the last two hundred years. Colonial, military, protectionist, assimilationist regimes, or some terrible strain of them all, still exist. Ros

Kidd's documenta-

tion of the wages that are owed indigenous cattlemen and women and their families is like, native title, a seeping sore that needs to be healed once and for all. But even in these places and problems of general despair, one doesn't have to look far to see the seeds of a new beginning and new hope. In many communities where there is a change of focus, or dare it be said, a change in investment strategy, extraordinary things happen. Peter Mc Entee's paper in this edition is the result of a decade long process of negotiating the development of an indigenous pastoral industry in the Kimberley. The great thing about the pastoral franchise model

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**Noel Pearson**

that he proposes on behalf of KAPA (Kimberley Aboriginal Pastoral Association) is that it is a practical model for resolving a range of issues that have stopped the development of viable indigenous pastoral businesses. Like any other business there are problems to overcome when the interests of traditional owners, communities and managers are so closely inter-twined, the franchise model is the most interesting idea so far for resolving them in a satisfactory way.

Welcome to the future, the problems of Indigenous Australia and non-Indigenous Australians are not insurmountable, they are workable, and, above all, resolvable. This first edition of *Australian Prospect* is dedicated to this new beginning, new partnerships and a new kind of investment in and with Indigenous Australia.

What is this new model? Does it mean that we overlook the statistics of despair that show that Indigenous life expectancy, rates of disability, year 10 and 12 retention rates, post secondary participation and retainment, labour force participation, household and individual income, home ownership, suicide and self harm rates, child protection notifications, deaths from homicide, victim rates for crime and imprisonment and juvenile detention rates are far worse for indigenous Australians than any other ethnographic group? Of course not, it only means that we will never be paralysed by or mesmerised by these general and difficult problems.

A typical response is: how can talk of investment be held ahead of a discussion of indigenous literacy or child health? Mustn't the basics be done before we dare talk of indigenous business and economic development? The lesson of the last decade is that all of these problems must be tackled tactically, purposefully and with the best resources possible. It is certainly not simply a matter of just having a benevolent attitude or sympathetic viewpoint or gesturing towards a solution with a handful of gov-

ernment dollars. As Noel Pearson argues: "The people who are having success are these entrepreneurs. You don't send a bureaucrat in, you send a social entrepreneur into a situation. And those entrepreneurs don't have some kind of preconceived program, they're opportunists, they're people who can actually see that they're not just problems here on the ground, there's opportunities, there's talents, there's people, and if only we went in, not just with a kind of needs list, we actually go in and compile an assets list . ." <sup>1</sup>

This is also the message of Marcia Langton's paper in this edition. She argues that Israel's accelerated learning strategy is a useful model for Australia. There are of course many elements such as the unique historical circumstances of Israel's lost Ethiopian brethren that cannot be replicated. One of the most important elements of the Langton argument is that we should and can set the highest goals for Indigenous young people even in the toughest of circumstances. Most importantly, as Israel collectively embraced the Ethiopian nomadic people into their midst, so too must we start from the premise the Indigenous Australians are a much valued, central core of our culture and society that must be given the opportunity to achieve at every level. We need to create the right resources for each individual's needs. The Israelie formula is self esteem, tools and knowledge and a culture of mutual learning.

So what is the new partnership and the new investment model all about? There are many practical examples that are emerging in different parts of the country. The most notable is occurring on Cape York Peninsula. The indigenous organizations of Cape York are the youngest of the nation's indigenous representative bodies and they have a distinctive strategy. Noel and Gerhardt

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1. ABC Radio National, Paul Barclay, "Noel Pearson" October 29, 2000

Pearson recognised, early in their careers, that the ability to participate in the real economic world, to live in two worlds, was everything in contemporary society. Noel wrote: "The great tragedy of Aboriginal history in the last century was the Australian failure - when discrimination against Aboriginal people became untenable and citizenship was finally recognised in 1967 - to remove the discrimination that our people suffered in the mainstream economy, and keep us there. Instead, Australia's definition of the great benefits of removing discrimination and granting us citizenship was to take our people out of the real economy and dump us into passive welfare. Social welfare provided by government since the 1970s produced a revolutionary change in the Aboriginal economy of Cape York Peninsula. Aboriginal people withdrew from participation in the real economy. Participation at the low end of the real economy was replaced by passive welfare. The impact of the equal wage decision on Aboriginal labour in the cattle industry was decisive. People lost their place in the pastoral industry and were forced into the increasingly welfare-based economy of the settlements."<sup>1</sup>

The strategy on Cape York has been to reverse the contemporary welfare marginalisation of indigenous people as quickly as possible. The strategy has spawned new

organisations beyond that of the traditional Land Council. Cape York Partnerships – a community and social enterprise development organisation, the Indigenous Enterprise Partnerships – a venture capital organisation

designed to support economic and community development projects on Cape York Peninsula and Balkanu-Cape York's Indigenous Economic Development

Agency are the organisations that other indigenous communities and Federal and State governments are

now looking at closely.

The lead concept in all that has happened on Cape York has been *partnership*. Over fifty ambitious projects have been developed over the past decade, all have involved, not just any partner, but the very best partners, that have something to contribute. Community capacity building, involving partnerships with schools and communities are occurring around cultural development and income management projects, social enterprise projects are emerging to strengthen communities and reduce welfare dependence, economic development projects have been formed to create new commercial enterprises and employment opportunities and infrastructure projects to address the many gaps in infrastructure on Cape York Peninsula. All have involved expert partners and new ways of doing.

This new approach does not mean that significant impediments to social and economic development are ignored. But in every community the priorities are different. In many Cape York communities sub-

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1. Noel Pearson, Dr Charles Perkins Memorial Oration, "On the Human Right to Misery, Mass Incarceration and Early Death", McLaurin Hall, University of Sydney, 25 October 2001

stance abuse and alcohol are the most serious problems facing indigenous communities. As such influenced by Mervyn Gibson from Hope Vale an unrelenting war has been waged against the problem. No compromises have been made even when it is embarrassing or hard for new Ministers and their aides to measure up to the tough community standards.

This is also the message of Milton James' remarkable paper on controlling petrol sniffing and an alternative intervention strategy for indigenous young people. James outlines the strategy that precedes the well known *Boys from the Bush* enterprise and argues that too often perceived benevolence and guardianship perpetuates the cycle of anguish. He indicts bureaucracy because it lacks the vigour and ability to innovate to solve profound social problems. This can only be done by the development of a new type of partnership, a new independent agency in which knowledge and responsibility is shared across communities, professional social workers and families. The great fear of the current environment of neglect in Queensland's Department of Families is that the ability to innovate and share responsibility will be lost as policy makers lurch from a crisis of inaction to a situation where State guardianship blots out sensible solutions. Again the issue is resourcing, bureaucratic departments are at their worst, when there is no budget to support new activities or innovations. The rule

book and dogmatic assertions of what can and can't be tend to arise as an excuse for inaction.

The same approach to innovation and partnerships is true at a business level. Balkanu have spearheaded business hubs in Cooktown, Weipa and Coen. More are

planned for Injinoo, Unmagicoo, Horn Island and New Mapoon, Kowanyama and Pormpuraaw.

Several businesses have been established from the many business plans that have been developed. But it is the corporate partners facilitated by the Indigenous Economic Partnerships group that make the difference. Westpac provide 25 staff per year on rotation to support the hubs. Other supporters include the Boston Consulting Group, the Body Shop and in a new development Opportunity International will be partnering with Balkanu to provide micro-financing.

The learning that indigenous and mainstream community organizations can take from Cape York is profound. In effect a series of interlocking organizations with complementary tasks have been created spanning social entrepreneurship, commercial business development, health, social enterprise, education and community development. This network of innovative organizations represents an alternative to the passive professionalised structure of governmental social welfare. There is no doubt this network of organizations will provide strong governance of eco-

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conomic and social development for Cape York indigenous communities into the future.

Can the Cape York model be developed and replicated? That is the hope of the COAG whole of government trials which target ten indigenous communities and regions: Tjurabalan, Wadeye, Anangu Pitjantjara, Murdi Paaki, Shepparton, Tasmania and the Cape York region. Like the early days of the Cape York partnership model, the beginning of the trial is about creating one negotiation table with all of government to solve problems and push community initiatives. It is a promising beginning for which the Howard government and supportive State governments deserve congratulations.

The future though will not be secured by government action. Leadership within communities is essential as are individual initiatives and ideas. You cannot bottle the ingredients that are required to make a renaissance of culture and society. The role of private companies and Indigenous social entrepreneurs are pivotal. Westpac - with their voluntary force on Cape York, Boston Consulting Group - who have supported indigenous organisational and economic development by ensuring that their best and brightest young consultants are working with indigenous colleagues and the Body Shop - with their hot housing of individual business initiatives have made pioneering contributions. It is undoubtably a challenge to these companies and their employees to work in different ways and to transfer knowledge and ideas freely with indigenous communities and it is certain that the companies themselves are benefiting socially, culturally and commercially from their experiences with indigenous communities and organisations.

What then are the for a new provident and stronger partnerships between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australia? In the immediate future, native title remains so

important, not just in terms of settlement, but in terms of economic development, not just in terms of courts, but in terms of commerce and industry that benefits all. The nation is waking from a deep sleep of fearful dreams only to find that the future for all Australians could be much brighter if these issues can be quickly resolved. Like many articles in this edition, it will also be a case of two steps backward, one step forward as the damage of social and economic neglect is repaired. But the great message of hope is that much can be repaired, new investments and new partnerships are possible. Australians, like their cousins across the Tasman, can become a more respectful and deep culture, when indigenous culture and society is in our hearts and minds. We can walk forward shoulder to shoulder together in a new and providential way.



In future issues of *Australian Prospect*

\* Family, Language, Region: New Strategies for Post-ATSIC Indigenous Governance