WORKING TOWARDS
LIBERATION

The divided Indigenous intelligentsia is a poor guide to the problems and possibilities of Indigenous life in Australia, writes **Joe Lane**

Black Politics: Inside the Complexity of Aboriginal Political Culture

By Sarah Maddison

Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2009

Indigenous issues are high on the national political agenda, but with significant disagreement on which problems are most important, as well as on policy responses. This diversity of views is reflected in several recent publications. Sarah Maddison's *Black Politics* is an illuminating exposition of the issues that concern the intelligentsia of the Aboriginal Industry. Peter Sutton's recent book *The Politics of Suffering* forcefully draws attention to the parlous state of remote Indigenous communities and, in the process, provides a stark contrast to the preoccupations of Maddison's interviewees.[1] At the same time, the picture is not all 'doom and gloom' as both Maddison and Sutton (in their different ways) seem to believe. Work I published with the CIS in May shows that in barely a generation, Indigenous people have built up a stock of tens of thousands of university graduates and home-owners in spite of generations of exclusion and social disadvantage.

Many issues, little consensus

Maddison, focusing on what she sees as a progressive and radical agenda, interviewed close to a hundred Indigenous 'leaders,' spokespeople, commentators, academics and community representatives. Many of them could justifiably be seen as the intelligentsia of the Indigenous Industry, including Mick Dodson, Warren Mundine, Jackie Huggins, Tom Calma and Larissa Behrendt. Between them, they canvas nearly two hundred issues, some realistic, some grand, and some parochial. Many of the issues are little more than pipe-dreams but some (such as land rights) are already on the way to achievement. What is immediately striking on reading the book is that, there is no real agreement among her interviewees on the core issues facing Aboriginal people. There is no attempt at agreed problem definition and practical solutions, just an overarching, if understandable, sense of grievance and unfinished business.

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Maddison exposes the conflicts in kin versus local community; local versus national community; smug old leadership versus discontented younger, better-educated, spokespeople. She also exposes the gulf between urban activity, change, ferment, and remote passivity and stagnation between the fluid, emergent and diverse ethnogenesis of city populations and the attempt to retreat from modernity in some remote areas. This gulf was incisively documented by Nicolas Rothwell in *The Australian*.[2] Both Maddison and Rothwell—and Sutton, for that matter—implicitly concede that there are now no overarching factors binding the Indigenous population together, as the Flag may have done in the early seventies.

Many of Maddison's interviewees slip and slide between definitions—for example, the grand notion of sovereignty (Behrendt, Mansell, Calma) morphs into personal integrity; a sufficient land base for economic self-determination (Mansell); group solidarity and identity (Hayward); the right to be listened to (Calma); and cultural preservation (Watson, Jones)—in other words, to expressions of equal rights under different names.

Clearly, again and again, one suspects that the key issue that preoccupies her interviewees but that nobody wants to spell out is personal power, one's rightful turn at the trough, and grievances that one's personal uniqueness and greatness are being ignored and 'disrespected.'

Perhaps this disunity, this 'floundering,' or the confusion between internal and external political issues and idiosyncratic use of terms is inevitable across such a huge country with its 40,000-year history of fragmentation and exclusiveness, aggravated by isolating mission and state control policies of the past 200 years. But it is highly detrimental to united action in a modern political arena. Of course, this individuality of stance is welcome in an open, democratic society. Yet, the fragmentation caused by this individuality means that nobody is compelled to accede to any particular agenda. The task remains to translate individual stances into sustained and unified activity of willing participants. Unless this is achieved, much of the radical agenda will remain little more than a multitude of wish-lists, safer than a hard-grind and struggle for complete and comprehensive equal rights, including the comprehensive rights of Indigenous people to all government services, which the Aboriginal Movement seems to have spurned some time in the early seventies.

Missing issues

Many of the critical and immediate issues that Peter Sutton amply demonstrates in *the Politics of Suffering* as demanding our attention, are ignored by Maddison and her interviewees. Issues relating to community despair, violence, abuse and substance abuse, are treated as black-box problems, not the responsibility of Indigenous people. Worse still, some interviewees try to excuse the worst behaviours: for example, Robbie Thorpe (p. 198) claims that domestic violence may occur because 'men haven't got a role.' The issues raised are often very long-range, even unattainable, distant in time and space, either dwelling on the nineteenth and early mid-twentieth century, or on conferences in Canada and covenants signed in Geneva. As one Indigenous acquaintance remarked, 'You know, they don't like talking about reality.' Genuine leadership means tackling all the issues and taking comprehensive responsibility for doing the hard yards and introducing reform. Only Noel Pearson and a handful of other leaders seem to be trying to face that reality. After all, politics is the art of reconciling the necessary with the possible.

Dystopian solutions

Maddison sensitively and exhaustively teases out from her interviewees their thoughts on various issues. In the process, she shows the complexities of their arguments and the failings of their conclusions. These are surprisingly often impractical or ephemeral; some are quite dystopian and embedded in irresolvable conflict with other Indigenous 'leaders.'

One example of the dystopia touched on in the book is the radical-sounding call (the Aboriginal Provisional Government, pp. 48-51) for a separate state (combined with 'hard' forms of sovereignty). This is little more than a re-working of a very old, very conservative and very anti-Indigenous agenda, that of the Black State Movement of the 1920s. Under Colonel Genders, this movement campaigned for an 'inviolate' territory in the far north, with citizenship for 'full-bloods' only and a separate government run by white administrators: David Unaipon championed the proposal, seeing

himself at its president, but received absolutely no support from Indigenous people in southern Australia, to their great credit. Today, in drastically different circumstances, such 'brilliant' ideas would only reproduce the forcible exclusion of Indigenous people from Australian society and the Australian state, even their expulsion from their current locations and livelihoods. And for whose good? As the Native Canadian singer and activist Buffy Saint-Marie asked us in late 1972 when we were giving her a Flag, and when some fool made a similar proposal, 'Who would leave their own country to go there? And on whose country would they be living?' That did it for us.

The problem with getting analyses and prescriptions wrong on an issue like this is that, far from mobilising and liberating Indigenous people, they can easily foster new forms of colonialism: a more welfare-oriented, dependent, segregated, and remote population; and a large Indigenous bureaucracy, interposing itself between this dependent population and the state, can just as easily form the apparatus for a de facto system of apartheid, a re-colonialisation of Indigenous Australia. Whether or not this has already happened is for others to judge.

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The failures of the Aboriginal Movement

The use of over-statement and straw-man arguments, miss-statement, doomsday declamations, sliding definitions, false dilemmas and ambivalence weakens the arguments of Maddison's interviewees, and thereby Maddison's own agenda. Many of the issues/demands described take the form of 'unless A, then not B.' Of course, this is standard political grand-standing and bluster, sloughing responsibility onto others to bring A about and raging when inevitably it does not occur: stance, opinion and demand rather than political activity, 'the luxury of the powerless,' rather than the hard yards of political mobilisation.

The 'Movement' has made too many false starts and false promises. After many decades, there is now a deep distrust of it on the part of many former dedicated supporters, a suspicion of being deceived, that the Indigenous cause has been betrayed by charlatans and careerists, dashing the hopes of many wonderful people, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, whose hard work have been exploited and misused. Perhaps it would have been easier to keep a safe middle-class distance, to stay uninformed about realities and to maintain illusions, to give lip-service and to acquit one's obligations with little more than attending periodic marches and waving placards.

Currently, there appear to be three emerging (but increasingly irrelevant) political structures, overlapping but moving in different directions:

- A resurgence of traditional assertion[3] in many remote communities (the 'elders');

- Indigenous service organisations struggling against the implicit criticism of the Intervention to protect careers and patronage networks (the Industry);

- A mainly urban-based intelligentsia, spokespersons, commentators, 'leaders' geared to campaigns of complaint and protest—Maddison's interview base—and, to a large extent, the intellectual wing of the Industry.

All of these structures are unable, or unwilling, to tackle the real consequences of 40 years of dependence-inducing welfare policies: all blame the outside society for the critical problems that cry out for action. All three are antagonistic to an individual-oriented equal rights agenda and free participation in an open and civil society (attitudes to urban migration are a touchstone of this antagonism). But they are also irrelevant to the real successes of many effort-oriented Indigenous people in higher education, employment and home ownership. The Industry and community elites appear to be unwilling to acknowledge these successes and how they provide role models for the next generations.

Models for success

These approaches resist acknowledging the reality that there are now (mid-2009) nearly 24,000 Indigenous university graduates and record annual enrolments and graduations at universities. Perhaps 80,000 Indigenous people have at some time enrolled at tertiary institutions since 1980. Around three-quarters of Indigenous people are living in towns and cities, 45–50 percent in metropolitan areas. More than 60 percent are inter-marrying, with up to 95 percent in some metropolitan areas. From almost zero in the 1970s, Indigenous home ownership is now half the Australian rate. These factors point to a coming revolution in Indigenous identity and Indigenous politics which is currently being ignored.

None of these efforts was gained on a plate; all of it is the product of determination and hard work. So the puzzle is, why don't writers and policy-makers have higher expectations for the efforts of Indigenous people themselves? Why is so little expected of Indigenous people in settlements? Particularly in issues that affect them so directly such as health, economic enterprises, and making sure their kids get a useful education? How crippling is the ethos of low expectations, how much is it a hangover from 'colonial' and mission days? Indigenous people are as able, as intelligent, as innovative, and as capable of hard work as anybody else, so why do writers almost invariably tiptoe around the issue of higher expectations? When I worked as a labourer on a mission in the 1970s, most of the guys there could work me into the ground, so I have always assumed that low expectations were an insult to Indigenous people. Indigenous 'leaders' with low expectations of their own people have no business 'leading' them. In this sense, Maddison is correct when she comments that 'self-determination … was never tried at all' (p. 241) And what can self-determination mean if it doesn't include effort from the people themselves?

But while remote settlements wallow in violence, idleness and misery, the increasingly urban Indigenous population is substantially getting on with business, regardless of the Industry, 'leaders,' or government policy. Urban environments allow, even require, agency and choice, the seizing of opportunities, whereas remote community environments sustain bureaucratic and traditional structural control and inhibit choice and opportunities.[4] Crudely put, in urban areas, agency is facilitated, while in encapsulated communities, structures rule. Ultimately, either way, Indigenous people have the agency, the initiative, and the responsibility.

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What is clearly happening across Australia is a process of ethnogenesis, identity-formation, with the Industry and its spokespeople attempting to channel it in particular ways. However, there are so many social, demographic and economic forces pushing ethnogenetic formation in many, many different directions at once that it's out of the control of any 'leaders.' Especially in the context of relatively rapid urbanisation that has facilitated individualised and idiosyncratic forms of identity-formation. So confusion reigns between internal struggles—ethnogenesis, cohesion, direction—and external conflicts with governments over vaguely defined issues such as 'social architecture' and 'sovereignty' and a Treaty.

Are some aspects of urbanisation and higher expectations part of the keys to general improvement in Indigenous fortunes? While they are not the only keys (surely it is clear by now that there are no panaceas, no silver bullets to overcome all Indigenous disadvantage), urbanisation has enabled enormous achievement to occur through the efforts of Indigenous people themselves. In spite of the hysteria from some quarters, urbanisation has not led to assimilation. Indigenous people have actively fashioned their own unique forms of accommodation and integration, with their identity as strong as ever, albeit constantly being modified. Even most Indigenous academics, invariably urban-based, would strongly deny that they have in some way assimilated themselves to white Australian bourgeois society. But clearly, as Tim Rowse suggests, the Indigenous population is polarising into an urban and a rural-remote

population, each with its own trajectory and direction.[5]

The need for strong debate

Far from obstructing the development of Indigenous political stances, as so many of Maddison's interviewees complain, it is more likely that governments, state and national, have taken a hands-off approach and relinquished control of public service provision to Indigenous organisations in a vain effort not to appear to be hampering Indigenous initiative. But the upshot has been a decline in healthy debate, in the interests of a spurious consensus, which in turn has obstructed the full expression of points of view by Indigenous people themselves.

As Sutton suggests, what may be needed is an end to bipartisanship, with the deliberate fostering of different stances and positions, if only to force claims to be debated rather than declaimed. What is desperately needed is recognition of differences of opinion as healthy and inevitable, so that issues can be thrashed out to their logical conclusions, but without chairs being thrown around the room. Can the Indigenous movement tolerate, even deliberately foster, devil's advocates, in order to clarify issues and positions—and to face the realities of the false juxtaposition of 'equality' and 'difference'? Or as Tim Rowse asks, is equality too much 'a liberal value of menacing proportions'?[6]

Maddison's new work gives us, as its sub-title promises, a greater sense of 'the complexity of Aboriginal political culture', and can be recommended for that. But neither it nor Sutton's *The Politics of Suffering* confront all the problems, or all the possibilities, of Indigenous Australians in contemporary Australia.

Endnotes

1   Peter Sutton, *The Politics of Suffering: Indigenous Australia and the End of the Liberal Consensus* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2009).
2   Nicolas Rothwell 'The local road to recovery,' *The Australian* (18 July 2009), 21.
3   As above.
4   John Taylor and Martin Bell (eds), *Population Mobility and Indigenous Peoples in Australasia and North America* (London and New York, Routledge, 2004), 14, 37.
5   Tim Rowse, 'Are Aborigines Rooted?' *Australian Aboriginal Studies* (2005), 1.
6   Tim Rowse, 'Official Statistics and the Contemporary Politics of Indigeneity,' *Australian Journal of Political Science* 44:2 (June 2009).