IDEOLOGY AND INDIGENOUS POLICY

Biased policies have prevented remote Indigenous Australians from embracing change and moving forward, suggests **Sara Hudson**

Indigenous policy in Australia has been led by ideology rather than by pragmatism or 'evidence based policy.'[1] For the most part, people commenting on Indigenous issues are pigeonholed into two ideological camps—the Left and the Right—and never the twain shall meet. The dichotomy in Indigenous affairs has led to proposals for reform being identified with particular sides. Neither side takes the other's arguments seriously, with each side automatically assuming the other side's proposals have no merit. The divide is strongest in the debate over the Northern Territory Intervention (the intervention), with those on the Left tending to be against it and those on the Right tending to support it. For too long, Aboriginal people have been 'the meat in the sandwich of this ideological battle.'[2] Improving the lives of remote Indigenous Australians will require abandoning polices based on ideology and instead looking at practical, evidence-based measures that have been tested and proven to work.

The Centre for Independent Studies (CIS) argument for private property rights on Indigenous land is often misconstrued. Although my colleagues and I at the CIS have tried to explain that Indigenous landowners can prevent alienation of their land by imposing covenants to control who can buy or inherit leases, many on the Left are determined to view our efforts as an attempt to 'grab the land' from Aboriginal people to put into the hands of 'greedy' mining companies.[3] Likewise, the Left's arguments for cultural relativity frustrate us and other people identified with the Right—particularly the extreme Left's argument that Aboriginal people need to live separate lives to retain their unique cultural identity. The suggestions from the Right for Aboriginal people to move closer to job opportunities invokes hostility from the Left who say it denies the importance of traditional land to Aboriginal people and fails to appreciate Aboriginal culture.

Two books released in 2010 epitomised these extreme positions. In *Culture Crisis: Anthropology and Politics in Aboriginal Australia*, edited by Jon Altman and Melinda Hinkson, a group of anthropologists feverishly argued for the importance of culture; in *Aboriginal Self-Determination: The Whiteman's Dream*, ex-bureaucrat Gary Johns argued that culture (or at least the white man's interpretation of Aboriginal culture) is the root cause of Aboriginal people's ills.

The truth lies somewhere in-between: Culture is neither the saviour nor the destroyer of remote Indigenous Australians. The difficulty with culture, as anthropologists have found, is there is no simple definition; it means different things to different people. For some, culture means what anthropologists describe as 'high culture' or the arts—dance, painting and music; for others, it is the sum of our lived experiences. Culture cannot be separated from who we are and put in a box never to be touched again.

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Some elements of our lives make up a 'shared culture'—for instance, the Australian love of barbeques and the beach. This stereotype of Australianness has remained constant over several generations. But Australian culture is continually changing (and evolving). Australia in the twenty-first century is quite a different place than Australia in the mid-twentieth century. Influxes of refugees and migrants have made Australia more diverse, yet at the same time the core element of what it means to be Australian has remained. An example of the juxtaposition of different cultures in Australia is the burqini, a swimsuit for women designed by a Lebanese-Australian Aheda Zanetti.[4] To preserve Muslim modesty, the suit covers the whole body except the face but is light enough to enable swimming. The burqini allows Muslim women to follow Islamic practices and become that cultural icon of Australianness: a 'surf lifesaver.'

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This is just one instance of hybridisation—how one culture is influenced by another. Culture is dynamic, not static. The belief that Aboriginal culture could avoid this characteristic and be 'preserved and frozen in time' has contributed to the dysfunction among remote Indigenous Australians.

Romanticised notions of traditional Aboriginal life led to policies that sought to retain Aboriginal people's traditional culture at all cost. Selective memory afflicts both sides of the debate, with those on the Right ignoring the effect of colonial oppression on Aboriginal people, and those on the Left refusing to accept historical evidence that Aboriginal people's traditional lives were often harsh and brutal. An example of this myopic blindness is Mick Goodda's assertion that in traditional Aboriginal society, 'physical violence was very rarely used.'[5] Early historical records of the first European explorers to Australia documented considerable violence towards Aboriginal women. For example, in *Voyage de Decouvertes aus Terres Australes*, the zoologist Francois Peron wrote: 'nearly all [women] were covered in scars, shameful evidence of the ill-treatment of their ferocious spouses.'[6]

Disease and sickness were also present before white men came. For example, Yaws, a bacterial infection that leads to physical deformity and death was probably introduced by the Macassans, thousands of years before the arrival of Captain Cook. Dr Phillip Playford, a former director-general of the Geological Survey of Western Australia, visited the remote Kimberley region of Western Australia in 1959 as a young government geologist and encountered Aboriginal people living totally nomadic lives, with little to no experience of, or influence from, Western society. Many of the Aboriginal people suffered from Yaws, easily cured by penicillin but fatal if left untreated. One of the Aboriginal men, in his 30s, died because of his long-term Yaws infection a few weeks after Playford's encounter with him.[7]

The fear that Aboriginal people would lose their culture if they became too westernised led to communal ownership of Indigenous land and the ghettoisation of Aboriginal people in remote outstations. There is no doubt traditional land has deep spiritual meaning to Aboriginal people, and many embraced the opportunity to return to their 'homelands' when given the chance by the federal government in the 1970s and the 1980s. However, government policies made the return to country a one-way ticket and created the crisis now facing homeland communities. The Permit system keeps travellers and the general population out, while poor education has locked Aboriginal residents in.

Aboriginal people may be living on their traditional land but they are not living traditional lives. The door to a traditional life was well and truly shut when Aboriginal people started receiving welfare and buying televisions. Nowadays residents only hunt and fish for recreation. Access to media has made Aboriginal people distinctly aware of their relative deprivation, leading to frequent calls from them and activists for government to provide more funding to address Indigenous

disadvantage. Since the 1970s, the emphasis has been on government responsibility and not personal responsibility.

Traditionally, Aboriginal people had to be self-reliant. If you didn't hunt you starved. Universal welfare without any compulsory work requirements has taken away Aboriginal people's self-reliance and sense of responsibility. Like all cultures, Aboriginal culture has not remained static. But the absence of the conditions and norms experienced in mainstream Australia has meant the changes have been more maladaptive than adaptive. The lack of education, skills and work ethic needed for employment has led to alcoholism and a reframing of cultural values so that positive Indigenous values such as the responsibility to share with relatives have been corrupted by alcohol abuse and transformed into negative values of exploitation and manipulation.[8]

Left to itself, without government influence, Aboriginal culture could have evolved as Aboriginal people became more urbanised and educated. An example is the renaissance of Maori culture in New Zealand. Following World War II, many Maori chose to move from their tribal and rural communities to find work in the cities. Not all traditional practices were lost as some Maori established traditional institutions such as urban maraes (meeting houses/villages) in the cities. As urban-based Maori became educated, they established a Maori-language education system and started industry initiatives such as fishing, aquaculture and farming. The Maori people have demonstrated an amazing ability to adapt, drawing on elements of Western culture while retaining their unique identity.[9]

Unfortunately, many Aboriginal people in Australia believe that Western education equals assimilation or even cultural genocide, as the following quote from an Aboriginal man illustrates:[10]

> The school is stealing all our kids ... it's assimilation policies. But in a 'nice' quiet way. Make our children's [sic] all coconuts, that's what the school is doing. Yapa with a white man inside. We won't think Yapa way anymore—nothing.

However, education is not an enemy but a liberator and vehicle for freedom. The sooner more remote Indigenous Australians realise this, the sooner they can start practising real self-determination—not the charlatan self-determination introduced in the 1970s. As Anthony Dillon writes, real self-determination is not possible as long as remote Indigenous people rely on welfare.[11]

Adaptation, particularly for those who have only recently emerged from nomadic lifestyles, is a difficult and painful process but every culture has to adapt when it encounters another. To not adapt is to stagnate and die. Ideally, in making the journey towards integration, it would be best if remote Aboriginal people themselves decided which aspects of their traditional culture to retain and which to discard. Real change has to come from within. There are, however, several problems with this approach. As Bess Price says, when Aboriginal people follow their own law, they break 'white fella' law; when they follow 'white fella' law, they break their own law. Many remote Aboriginal people are caught between these two world views and can see no way of reconciling them.[12]

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Aboriginal people have two choices—adapt or continue to live in a no-man's land. Living on government welfare means they are not living traditional lives; even if they were willing to forgo government entitlements to welfare, health and housing, outside influences will continue to affect them. There can be no return to a romanticised past (as it never existed in the first place), only courageous steps forward.

To make an informed choice, Aboriginal people need the right tools. The absence of decent schooling on Indigenous land has kept many residents largely ignorant of Western society. On a recent trip to Central Australia, I heard this story of an Aboriginal man who had no idea about the tax system. When someone

explained to him that everyone who works pays a portion of the wages as taxes to government, and that government uses that money to pay for social welfare, the man went quiet for a while. Eventually, he said: 'so that's why all those white fellas don't like us—they're paying for our welfare.'

This simple story highlights the vast gaps between what we in mainstream society know and what many Aboriginal people know. Arguments for cultural relativism have tended to be one-sided, with non-Indigenous people expected to appreciate where Aboriginal people are coming from by being more 'culturally respectful' or 'culturally appropriate.' The same attention has not been paid to explaining Western culture to Aboriginal people in a way they can comprehend. Too often, it is assumed that Aboriginal people understand what we are saying, but deeper questioning often reveals they do not. One misconception is that government gives a house to every white person!

Moving forward will require abandoning the polarisation in Indigenous affairs and determining the essential building blocks for reform.

With ideological biases resulting in some unfortunate government policies, it may seem as though ideology should be abandoned altogether when formulating policy. But it is unrealistic to expect policy to exist in an ideological vacuum. However, testing these polar opposite positions might put to bed some sacred cows in Indigenous policy. One way of reducing the influence of ideology on government policy is by trialling these ideas or hypotheses in a controlled manner. However, the Left have had 30–40 years to test their hypotheses and these have been found wanting. Overall, Aboriginal people have not benefitted from living separately in remote communities away from health services, decent schooling, and employment opportunities. Perhaps it is time to test different hypotheses.

Ross Farrelly, in his article 'How to Make Real Progress in Closing the Gap,' in this edition of *Policy* suggests that randomised trials could help policymakers discover what works and what does not. Such trials may also help policymakers and commentators see beyond their own ideological framework and recognise that not everything is black or white or Left and Right. Moving forward will require abandoning the polarisation in Indigenous affairs and determining the essential building blocks for reform. If trials prove that a particular approach works, does it matter where the idea came from?

Gary Johns, in *Aboriginal Self-Determination*, does not think Aboriginal people living on Indigenous land can successfully integrate into Australian society. However, the situation is not quite that hopeless. While Johns may be correct in saying that few remote Indigenous Australians will transition to a better life as long as they live on Indigenous land, we will never know what remote Aboriginal people (as a whole) are capable of until they receive the same opportunities as all other Australians.[13]

If the opportunity for private property rights was established on Indigenous land, and education was improved to mainstream standards, it would help separate those communities that can make it and those that cannot. Ideally all communities should be the subject of reform. It seems cruel to play with people's lives when we know that current policies are failing. However, implementing widespread reform in all remote Indigenous communities will require significant government resources, and it may be more practicable for government to provide intensive support to particular communities. Farrelly believes communities should be selected for trials randomly. However, it is my belief that reform is more likely to happen in communities where residents have already demonstrated their willingness to adapt. Communities that want mainstream education and individual leases for homeownership or private businesses must be supported. A wholesale approach to Indigenous policy has not been successful because it does not recognise the individual capabilities of residents and the differences between communities. To improve efficacy in Indigenous policy, policymakers need to harness individual effort. This can only occur when residents have the skills and incentives to change.

Endnotes

1 Nils Karlson, 'Pragmatism vs Ideology,' speech (Sydney: The Centre for Independent Studies, 22 November 2011).
2 Thanks to Barry Morgan for supplying me with this phrase.
3 Peter Robson, intervention, 'Green *Left Weekly* (23 July 2011); and Antinuclear blog 'A second Australian Government Aboriginal Intervention to provide land for the uranium industry.'
4 *Australasian Leisure Management*, 'Aussie Burqini a Global Success' (14 September 2009).
5 Mick Godda, *Social Justice Report 2011* (Canberra, Australian Human Rights Commission, 24 October 2011), 58.
6 Quote in Louis Nowra, *Bad Dreaming: Aboriginal men's violence against women and children,* (Melbourne, Pluto Press, 2007), 12.
7 Phillip Playford, 'Report on Native Title Welfare Expedition to the Gibson and Great Sandy Desert,' *Records of the Geological Survey of Western Australia* 1964/10 (10 June 1964).
8 Noel Pearson, 'Outline of a Grog and Drugs (And Therefore Violence) Strategy' (Cape York Partnerships and Apunipima Cape York Health Council, 2001), 11–12.
9 Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal, 'Māori—Urbanisation and renaissance,' *Te Ara—the Encyclopaedia of New Zealand* (3 March 2009).
10 Independent Media Centre, Australia, 'Town camp leader outraged by Bess Price claims on ABC Television's Q and A,' media release (15 April 2011).
11 Anthony Dillon, 'When self-determination becomes self-detriment,' *The Drum* (5 September 2011).
12 Sara Hudson, 'Straddling black-fella and white-fella laws,' Ideas@TheCentre newsletter (Sydney: The Centre for Independent Studies, 25 March 2011); Jajirdi Consultants, 'should customary law be recognized by the courts,' blog (December 2009).
13 Individual remote Aboriginal Australians, notably Noel Pearson, Alison Anderson, and Bess Price, have demonstrated they are capable of achieving success in mainstream society given decent education.