

# Labor can benefit from real Aboriginal reform

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Present attempts to counter substance abuse by Aborigines are misguided because the decisive factor today is the widespread addiction itself. Justified anger about the treatment of Aboriginal people is no argument against the fact that addiction is not sustained by present problems.

The generally accepted long-term policy of "addressing underlying causes" of substance abuse is therefore inefficient or counterproductive. Present short-term policies that attempt to "minimise harm" and perhaps moderate consumption are insufficient; indeed, they sometimes facilitate abusive lifestyles.

Instead we must make individuals responsible for their behaviour, and coerce them if necessary. The most urgent "reform" in indigenous affairs, therefore, is intellectual, political, legal and moral support for organised intolerance of substance abuse.

This contention is the worst thing that "progressive" Australians have ever heard. I regret that people on the left side of politics almost invariably have unrealistic ideas about the issues most important to Aboriginal Australians.

The reality-evading left is not the only problem. There is a global upswing for "economically conservative but socially progressive" politicians, such as the new NSW Liberal leader, John Brogden. The socially responsible forces in the Coalition must make sure that this faction is not allowed to influence Aboriginal policy.

Federal Labor MP Warren Snowdon has conceded ("Noel Pearson speaks for Cape York", on this page on June 6, in reply to my article "Dr Lawrence, it's not a matter of right or left", on this page on May 30) that my ideas might be relevant in Cape York Peninsula, but he protested that his constituents in the Northern Territory "don't like being lectured to from afar". I am lecturing to Labor politicians like him rather than his constituents, but apart from that, Snowdon should not pre-empt such unanimity on behalf of indigenous Territorians.

In Aboriginal communities, some people are powerful or physically strong and many people are vulnerable. It is my experience that the less powerful individuals do not mind policies being suggested and driven by outsiders "from afar", such as Queensland Labor Premier Peter Beattie, if the reforms such allies suggest and enforce can assist the powerless to organise themselves, take control and restore social order.

Members of the Ngaanyatjarra communities in central Australia recently declared in a submission to the Attorney-General of Western Australia that they are "firmly of the view that substance abuse should be considered in the justice arena" and that "this is . . . close to the views expressed by Noel Pearson . . . (who) asserts that addiction becomes a root cause of substance abuse and needs to be managed coercively where other strategies have failed."

These people did not feel "lectured to". It is political leaders - black and white - who have failed to improve things for Aboriginal people, or who have an interest in maintaining the status quo, who "resent being lectured to".

Pro-reconciliation Australians need to realise that ineffectual people in power resist changes to a social structure based on passive welfare transfers and abuse.

Bad leaders will not hesitate to rely on a support base of dysfunctional and abusive people, and they will try to confuse and divide community members who yearn for change but lack insight.

If Snowdon still thinks I am unduly lecturing his constituents from afar, I will quote one of his constituents, indigenous Northern Territory Labor MLA Marion Scrymgour: "The truth is that within Aboriginal communities there is often a struggle that is played out between indigenous people themselves. On the one hand, there are those in the community with vision and concern for the future of their children and, on the other, the forces within the community that seek to defend and even further entrench the position of licensed clubs and drinking permit regimes . . .

"(I will) do everything I can to support and encourage the efforts of those community members who are fighting to prevent and minimise the poisonous affect that alcohol has had . . . I have seen with my own eyes the damage that has been caused to innocent women and children . . .

"It is no surprise that grog-fuelled abandonment of parental responsibility is the primary cause of the increase in cannabis usage, truancy and suicide among our children and teenagers."

Snowdon's main criticism of me is that I promote a stereotype of dogmatic progressivist politicians and unsuitable indigenous leaders impeding economic and social progress in uniformly miserable indigenous communities.

I have not done justice to everybody, because of the urgency in alarming the public to the two decisive but unrecognised problems in the reconciliation process:

1. Pro-reconciliation, liberally minded Australians' knee-jerk responses to substance abuse are not only futile but positively destructive.
2. The discussion about passive welfare and economic development is undeveloped compared to the debate about historical injustice.

There is a lack of balance in Snowdon's policies. His thinking about economic development is trite and his main emphasis is on "particular cultural imperatives", injustices and neglect that Aboriginal people have suffered, and services they are entitled to demand from the governments to rectify this legacy.

He fails to see that the legacy of injustice, indifference and insensitivity was a necessary but not sufficient prerequisite for the present disaster. The decisive blow to Aboriginal people was the past three-and-a-half decades of false progressivism on both sides of politics. Snowdon does not understand the primary causal role of passive welfare and the substance abuse epidemics.

Federal Labor's policies in Aboriginal affairs can be summarised as "progress through programs".

This is a representative quote from the ALP: "The Howard Government has underspent on domestic violence by \$4.3 million . . . Labor would ensure those funds go to the appropriate services."

Fine, but what are we going to when the \$4.3 million are spent, and undoubtedly more Aboriginal women than ever will be being beaten?

Many federal Labor MPs agree with our ideas in Cape York Partnerships. But those in the party who could and should argue for a policy shift have avoided conflict and instead chosen party consensus around traditional policies.

The reasons for this inaction are perhaps that a radical policy review would cause internal strife in the ALP, and that Aboriginal affairs is the least important policy area to the electorate. The reformers in federal Labor have chosen to concentrate on areas where votes can be won.

The party strategists should consider that if the emerging revolution in Aboriginal affairs delivers a noticeable improvement, Aboriginal affairs could gain unexpected prominence on the national scene. Not as a symbol for the already converted, but as an indicator of the parties' ability to facilitate social recovery in troubled areas - a question of great interest to many voters.