

# The Iraq War and Indigenous Australia

By Noel Pearson

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The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Justice Commissioner Dr William Jonas, who recently handed down his annual report on social justice, is right that the situation for indigenous Australians is precarious and in many ways getting worse.

However, he is wrong when he says that bipartisan support for reconciliation and the capacity to overcome indigenous disadvantage have been undermined. First, the policies that have been developed over the last decades have not shown any “capacity to overcome indigenous disadvantage”.

Second, one of the most important achievements of indigenous people in Cape York Peninsula and elsewhere is that now many leaders on the conservative side of politics and in the private sector, as well as some of our traditional supporters in the Left, are genuinely enthusiastic about helping indigenous people to take responsibility. This is more important than bipartisan support for formal policy goals.

Dr Jonas is right that we haven't seen much real improvement yet, and that policies are undeveloped, but there is a new spirit.

I am worried about what will happen to this spirit after the war in Iraq. The war could become a great success in world public opinion or it could become a bloody mess affecting large parts of the world.

Public opinion could also remain divided, but if there is a clear outcome, positive or negative, it will be the most important turning point in Australian political history. The politicians and intellectuals of the Right or the Left will lose all credibility.

In this context we may define Right and Left as supporters and opponents of John Howard respectively. The position of the Right has been determined by the Prime Minister. He did not need to take his stance on Iraq for tactical reasons; the Coalition's lead is so great that it would be irresponsible to risk it for the uncertain prospect of further marginalising the opposition. But conviction was probably decisive for his decision, not tactics. The future of the Australian Right now depends on the competence of the US leaders.

The Left would have spoken out against this war under any circumstances. But why has the Left staked everything on one card, ignoring the risk that they will be permanently marginalised if the peoples of western Asia greet the outcome of this war with relief and the Iraqi regime is proven to have breached its obligations?

One reason is of course that the Left has nothing to lose, because it cannot break John Howard's dominance in any other way.

A more important reason is the Left's hatred of John Howard and those around him. Personal aversions and allegiances play a great part in political and cultural life. What I have learnt from indigenous affairs is the necessity to move beyond personal grudge. I have not moved to the Right in recent years, but I have invited both sides in politics and also organisations in the private, public and philanthropic sectors to find out how their ideas and their abilities can improve life for indigenous people in partnerships with indigenous people.

Indigenous people need powerful and enthusiastic allies in all quarters. I fear for a future Australia characterised by triumph for one camp and total defeat for the other.

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