

MAJOR CHANGES TO ATSIC ARE NOT THE ANSWER

*Strategic advice and fresh thinking is the area of
ATSIC's greatest failure. Diminishing the power of
ATSIC will not improve the quality of advice argues
Chief Executive of Cape York Partnerships,
NOEL PEARSON.*

UNLESS ATSIC reforms itself, Philip Ruddock will soon permanently remove from the (elected) ATSIC board the power to make decisions about grants and loans.

Christopher Pyne's radical proposals in his recent speech to the *Victorian Liberal Speakers Group*, is further evidence of the determination of the Coalition to reform ATSIC.

Federal Labor has supported comprehensive change, so it will happen.

It is therefore important to look at the Coalition's thoughts about the causes of Australia's obvious failure in indigenous policy and their ideas about what our goal should be.

Three decades of misguided policies

My analysis is that on top of the historical burden of trauma, neglect and injustice (for example, confiscation of meager wages), both sides in politics and all other parties including the indigenous leadership failed during the last 35 years to stop the introduction of factors in the lives of indigenous communities that inevitably led to further social disintegration – passive welfare instead of low-paid work, addictive substances, and addictive behaviours like

gambling, and a mistaken belief in "social engineering" at the expense of consciously upheld social norms.

The question asked before every decision should have been: "Will this bring about passivity and assist the spread of substance abuse epidemics?" – but that question was not asked.

Some mores of traditional Aboriginal society are unacceptable to modern society, but it was strict and based on a "real economy": gather and hunt or starve.

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After the disaster of dispossession, people such as my grandparents and parents built the beginnings of a new social and economic functionality. The opportunity they and their contemporaries in other communities created for us was squandered.

Old thinking is still influential

The old left-liberal consensus about the nature and causes of

Aboriginal dysfunction is so entrenched that even Christopher Pyne repeats it in his criticism of ATSIC, finishing off with the obligatory reference to the diversion "deaths in custody":

"In some Aboriginal communities alcoholism and petrol sniffing are prosthetics for hope."

Aboriginal families have been overrun by the symptoms and by-products of poverty - social decay, substance abuse, poor literacy and numeracy skills, chronic unemployment and deaths in custody."

This is a classic example of the 'symptom theory' which I refuted in my Dr Charles Perkins Oration in 2001 (see www.capeyorkpartnerships.com).

Many people in the Coalition repeat this conventional thinking even as they explicitly refer to Cape York Partnerships and my texts. I have argued that the main problem is not our relative "poverty" and that substance abuse and dysfunction are not "symptoms" of poverty.

Aboriginal dysfunction is today maintained by a self-perpetuating vortex of passivity and abuse, not primarily by our poverty or traumatic history.

Many communities are

today dominated by people caught up in passivity, addiction and abuse, and these states are today *primary causal factors* and not just symptoms.

Rejection of "separatism" is not unproblematic

Christopher Pyne and others in the Coalition blame Labor's "symbolic" and "separatist" policies for many of the current problems.

The Coalition respects indigenous people's right to their culture but want to see indigenous people fully integrated into mainstream society.

I agree that our goal should be full command of the English language, economic integration and geographic mobility for indigenous people.

However, the Right is wrong to believe that "the abstract ideal of self-determination" is exclusively a product of leftist folly.

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Christopher Pyne talked, perhaps scornfully, about our "dying languages".

I come from a Guugu Yimithir speaking community and what I fight for is not only "skills that will allow [us] individual self-determination", I fight for the future of the

language in which my father spoke to me. My mother spoke her own people's language, Kuku Yalanji.

The driving force behind our struggle in Cape York Peninsula for social order, business development and digitisation of our traditions is our desire to take our rightful place as one of the two peoples of this nation.

In connection with his appreciative assessment of the new thinking that indigenous people in Cape York Peninsula and elsewhere have developed to grapple with their problems, Prime Minister John Howard said that "[o]ne of the accepted cornerstones of our immigration policy has always been that you shouldn't allow ghettos or enclaves to develop. Yet in a way ... that is exactly what has happened and it is one of the difficulties we have."

I agree that Australia has failed to integrate indigenous people, that remoteness is a problem and that increased mobility is necessary, but I am concerned that assimilation of immigrants was the comparison that came to the Prime Minister's mind when he thought about indigenous policy.

The strategy of the Coalition

The "practical reconciliation" strategy of the Coalition in indigenous affairs seems to be to improve the outcomes of service delivery by ridding it of leftist ideology until indigenous people can take their place in the mainstream.

Indigenous-specific institutions and programmes are seen, I suspect, as something that is necessary during a transitional period due to factors such as remoteness and the scale of dysfunction.

Liberals like Pyne propose to move all funding

responsibility from ATSIC to Commonwealth and state government departments, and that departments should deal directly with indigenous communities, a view that has not as yet been endorsed by Philip Ruddock.

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Problems with the Coalition thinking

There are some problems with Pyne's proposals. First, there is no guarantee that government politicians and bureaucrats will be more competent to attack dysfunction and lack of development. The support we in Cape York Partnerships have received from Commonwealth ministers and bureaucrats has been vital, but insightful government assistance cannot be taken for granted.

One example: harm reduction as a response to substance abuse is the prevailing ideology among the political class and in the bureaucracies. Conservative leaders such as John Howard and Tony Abbott are unable to stop the growing acceptance of addiction to an increasing number of substances as an endemic problem that can only be managed, not cured.

I cannot sweepingly dismiss all policies introduced in the name of harm reduction, but I maintain that the harm reduction ideology is inadequate when it comes to curbing the substance and behavioural abuse epidemics in indigenous

Australia.

My experience is that it is easier to discuss with indigenous people what needs to be done than many influential white people.

Another example: We proposed a "matching scheme" for business investment (dollars from the government for dollars saved by an indigenous person). This was changed by the Commonwealth to a loans scheme because "indigenous people on income support have no surplus to save". The same year an anthropologist showed that a small remote community spent \$4,000,000 every year on alcohol! Government departments are not free from low expectations of indigenous people.

Indeed, the single biggest threat to our enterprise in Cape York Peninsula is the struggle for responsibility which is taking place between ourselves and the Queensland Government bureaucracy which still sees progress through the prism of 'government service delivery' – rather than understanding that government must retreat and relinquish responsibility in order for there to be a restoration of responsibility in our society.

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They don't understand that government 'service delivery' is part of our passive welfare problem: government activity is usually at the expense of indigenous responsibility.

Second, the biggest failure

over the last decades is that we have not managed to encourage the growth of a strong and able regional indigenous culture of political, social and economic leadership in most parts of Australia.

The structure of ATSIC has not caused the lack of progress in indigenous Australia, and comprehensively changing ATSIC will give a false impression of having attacked the core problem.

Third, Pyne suggests transforming ATSIC into a strategic advocacy body.

When Maxine McKew alleged that ATSIC does not focus on substance abuse, five ATSIC commissioners replied that "indigenous health, including substance misuse programs, was transferred from ATSIC to the Department of Health and Aged Care in 1995, with ATSIC retaining a statutory advisory role."

But in my opinion strategic advice and fresh thinking is the area of ATSIC's greatest failure, and diminishing the power of ATSIC will not improve the quality of advice.

Fourth, the Coalition must be bolder than to think that "improved service delivery" leading to the "skilling" and "economic empowerment" of individuals will solve the crisis.

It must understand the immensity of problems surrounding each individual in many communities.

"Dealing directly with communities" as Pyne suggests, will be problematic because of the magnitude of dysfunction. What if the group still fighting for social order, often women and elders, is too weak in a community?

Regionalise ATSIC

Instead, those community members who are determined to

fight dysfunction must be given the chance to unite regionally and have the support of regional indigenous organisations.

More of ATSIC's power to make decisions about grants should be shifted to the ATSIC regions, which is a better level for a concerted effort toward social recovery than the national or community levels.

Government departments cannot perform the regional strategy development, and the regional linking of community groups working against disintegration. Only indigenous people can do that.

The nationally renowned attempts by people in Cape York Peninsula to develop solutions did not follow the mechanism outlined by Pyne: offering "practical reconciliation" grants to community groups and introducing "ongoing reviews of funding based on performance".

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I am convinced that the solutions to our problems will turn out to be very different to what bureaucracies would be inclined to do.

For that reason we need many tax-funded agencies to forge partnerships with – state government, federal government and ATSIC – as well as private and philanthropic partners.

Removing the funding power from agencies led by elected indigenous representatives is not the way forward. o
