

The Howard Government's Neoliberal Project in Indigenous Public Policy

Australian Indigenous public policy has repeatedly failed to appropriately address Aboriginal disadvantage. Instead, conceptions of Aboriginality and the 'indigenous problem' have been designed to fit the fluctuating needs-based discourse of the settler state (Dodson 2003, Altman 2009: 4). In many policy phases, the development of a strategy around a negative construction of Aboriginality and the indigenous/non-indigenous relationship has had adverse impacts, further degrading the wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people whilst advancing the state's interests. Likewise, the strategies of the Howard government's Indigenous policy phase were "poised to intensify the problems [they] purported to address", yet they were nevertheless pursued (Stringer 2007: 24).

This paper will critically discuss the Howard leadership's period of Indigenous policy-making, arguing that the image of Aboriginality and the 'problem' expounded by the government arose out of a neoliberal ideology that lay in contradiction to Indigenous interests. Furthermore, the point will be made that this policy phase revived settler motivations and continued the colonial logic of elimination under the guise of a fresh neoliberal justification. In essence, the assimilatory neoliberal project aligned with the monolithic modernisation agenda of the settler state.

The Neoliberal Ideology's Assumptions in Effect

I will first explore how the principles of the neoliberal ideology that dictated this policy phase eclipsed Indigenous interests. These were presiding assumptions of progress (primarily through economic development), 'even-handedness' and the need to build individualistic self-reliance. They ran counter to the values of sharing, land custodianship, and the rejection of material possessiveness emphasised in Aboriginal worldview (Graham 1991). Moreover, the hierarchical operations of the government's social structures directly challenged the communal approach to social organisation taken in many Aboriginal communities (Hughes 2005, Graham 1991). As a result, neoliberal policy strategies that sought to solidify these structures were often at odds with Aboriginal recommendations and frequently ignored indigenous interests and rights.

As neoliberalism amounts to a form of market fundamentalism, the proclaimed pragmatism of market-based principles largely underpinned this policy phase (Altman 2000, Howard-Wagner 2008: 62). Through this economic lens, Aboriginal rights (particularly those relating to land management and tenure) were often seen as subversive to 'proper' forms of liberal progress. Hence, policy often sought not to facilitate the Aboriginal organisation of things, but negotiate it away (Altman 2000). Furthermore, laws that aimed to provide substantive equality or reconciliation through entitlements to Aboriginal Australians (such as articles in the Native Title Act or Heritage Protection Act) were re-assessed as 'obstructive' to economic progress (Howard-Wagner 2008). Legislation pertaining to Indigenous rights was then effectively reframed to fit neo-liberal rationalities, thereby facilitating easier development access to land and communities (Watson 2009: 49). Aboriginal communities became targeted by many of these reforms as it was argued that their 'communism functionality' detached them from mainstream Australia (which was

said to function harmoniously as it abided by the same market interests and incentives) (Hughes 2005).

Another influencing motive of the neoliberal policy phase was its socio-political drive to engender responsibility in individuals. While the ideology of neoliberalism embodied a backlash against social welfare schemes, in practice it sanctioned state control over those who were not 'responsible' in order to build capacity (e.g. through 'workfare' regimes and income management) (Strakosch 2011: 12). Therefore, this notion that individuals needed to be *made* capable, rational and independent facilitated an increasingly paternalistic approach to policy-making. Howard's government "actively reconstructed the welfare sphere and particular conditions for indigenous society... in order for indigenous society to flourish in a particular neo-liberal way" (Howard-Wagner 2008: 61). For example, the *Community Development and Employment Project* was replaced with *Structured Training Employment Projects* with the intention of injecting indigenous labour into the 'real' economy/workforce instead of government-funded community projects. "Market-based principles were applied to transform the delivery of social assistance from 'passive welfare' to 'active welfare'" (Howard-Wagner 2008: 62). Many of these reforms were against indigenous recommendations. However, there were also supporters of this active welfare rhetoric. For example, Indigenous notable, Noel Pearson argued that the progressive policies of the self-determination era "denied Indigenous people the right to be free-choosing individuals, not only by rendering them passive dependents on the state's welfare" (Garond 2014: 9).

The government's neoliberal understanding and interpretation of 'even-handedness' also had damaging implications for reconciliation in the indigenous/non-indigenous relationship. This was because it ideologically dismissed the notion that a minority group should be granted separate rights as special citizens or First People (under the *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*). As an exemplar, John Howard himself asserted, "we cannot share a common destiny if these *rights* are available to some Australians but not all" (Howard 1997a). Under his gaze, measures facilitating specialised rights and programs for Indigenous people were an indication that the "pendulum [had] swung too far in favour of Aboriginal people" (Howard 1997b). This called for 'fairness' to be re-balanced with mutual obligation. Yet, typical of liberal thinking, the state presumed itself to be the natural adjudicator of that balance. The only statutory authority for indigenous self-managed government representation and administration (ATSIC¹) was abolished, thereby marginalising indigenous people from the policy-making process.

Mobilising a Pathology of Aboriginality

From this very quick examination of the Howard government's neoliberal assumptions, it can be seen that the strategies flowing from them isolated Aboriginal people from their rights and ability to self-manage and self-determine. Nevertheless, this approach was legitimised by a pathology characterising Indigenous people and Aboriginal communities as dysfunctional and irrational (Garond 2014). Under the pretext of *finally* having 'frank' and 'pragmatic' discussions, public discourse was steered to a place wherein it became "politically feasible to contest accepted explanations of racial disadvantage" and rationalise it as a product of the race itself

¹ *The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission*

(Strakosch 2011: 18). This was a reversion to the early-colonial understandings of indigenous affairs that removed Aboriginal disadvantage from the historical context of their subjugation. The Howard government made, what Altman describes as, a “concerted conservative critique of the perceived lack of socioeconomic progress” (Altman 2014: 117). Aboriginal people were seen as having achieved insufficient improvement with the privileges given to them and were portrayed as passive dependents on the government, socially impaired by a lacking sense of responsibility. This understanding of the Aboriginal ‘condition’ ignored and downplayed the impact that settler colonisation and colonial policies had on the making of an Indigenous underclass (Garond 2014: 15).

Aboriginal communities were similarly subjected to enormous scrutiny. Being known as Australia’s most ‘authentically Aboriginal’ places, any socio-economic malaise within them was comprehended as a reflection on Aboriginality. Therefore, an understanding of these communities and Aboriginality as inherently dysfunctional surfaced: indigenous communities were considered to be places in which the Aboriginal sense of social obligation was practically non-existent (Garound 2014; Macoun 2011: 523). This condition was then attributed to their ‘defective’ social and economic organisation, “and Aboriginal land rights in particular” (Stringer 2007: 14). Such an explanation often justified interventionist economic development and paternalistic measures in response to social issues (Howard-Wagner 2008: 62). The consequences of consistent under-funding or chronic and historical disadvantage were rarely recognised (Stringer 2007: 14). Instead, legitimate social problems within indigenous communities were repeatedly assumed to result from their ‘inefficient’ communal organisations.

A cutting example of this was the 2007 Northern Territory Intervention in reaction to the *Little Children are Sacred Report*. It is widely argued that the government used the qualified authority and emotional appeal of this report as a basis to achieve its own interests. It construed the context and scope of the problem of child abuse to depict it as an inherent symptom of Aboriginal communities, paralleling Aboriginality with violence (Watson 2009: 55). In the public discourse, Aboriginal communities were condemned as toxic cesspools implicated in cruelty. Aboriginal adult voices were rendered illegitimate in this discussion, as they were portrayed either as abusers or complicit to abuse (Macoun 2011: 521). Thus, under the assumption that Aboriginal men represented a threat to be suppressed, and women and children needed protection, the government sculpted a public image for itself as a ‘heroic’ protector, dismissing opposition voices (Watson 2009: 54).

In the general public belief, this reasoned total social micromanagement in a paternalistic, militarised, interventionist scheme that impacted every aspect of Aboriginal life in the targeted communities. It embodied a response similar to that of an acute emergency as opposed to a chronic social problem such as child abuse (Arabena 2007: 30). Many critics have argued that the protections put in place were disproportionately and punitively focused on the economy. Measures largely related to the land tenure, business management and labour forces of targeted communities as well as the corporatisation of indigenous governance – a blatantly inappropriate response to a complex social and familial problem. Rebecca Stringer makes a convincing argument that details how the intervention mobilised “child sexual abuse as a pretext for an unrelated agenda” that essentially legislated away indigenous rights

(Stringer 2007: 8). Others have further claimed it reflected “the colonial imperative to steal land” (Arabena 2007: 29).

With these convincing arguments in mind, the Northern Territory Intervention can be examined to further exemplify how the neoliberal fundamental of economic progress overshadowed Aboriginal needs or interests in approaching a problem. For example, the micromanaging paternalistic measure income management displayed the neoliberal endeavour to engender ‘responsibility’ in individuals. Ultimately, the scale and validation of the intervention holds a chilling resemblance to settler colonial purposes. The discursive terrain that rationalised the intervention also demonstrated how a conception of Aboriginality was once again mobilised to “serve... the interests and aspirations of those who constructed them, the colonising or ‘modern’ state” (Macoun 2011, Dodson 2003: 33).

One can look at the entire Howard period of indigenous policy-making and see a similar pattern. Negative conceptions of Aboriginality and the nature of Indigenous communities promoted by the government “served a broader purpose of reflecting back to the colonising culture what it wanted or need to see in itself.” (Dodson 2003: 36). Mainstream Australia was a safe, functional, ‘colonised’ model of society in comparison to the ‘uncivilised’ Aboriginal communities. Thus, modernisation (both economically and socially) was seen as a reasonable pursuit for both sides of the indigenous/non-indigenous relationship². It facilitated a slow absorption of the Indigenous lands and rights that were economically obstructive.

The Neoliberal Project an Echo of Old Policy

I argue that the collective legislations aiming for economic modernisation enacted a “programme of assimilatory neoliberalism” (Stringer 2007: 24). Its implications and assumptions held distinct resemblance to the motivations behind previous Australian Indigenous policy phases (Altman 2014: 116). For instance, in 1961, the Australian government identified the policy of assimilation to mean that:

[All] aborigines and part-aborigines are expected eventually to attain the same manner of living as other Australians and to live as members of a single Australian community enjoying the same rights and privileges, accepting the same responsibilities, observing the same customs and influenced by the same beliefs, hope and loyalties as other Australians³.

One can make uncanny comparisons to this definition by looking at the Howard government’s welfare reforms, diminution of land rights, disbandment of indigenous representation and the Northern Territory Intervention. These cumulative strategies were aimed to: 1) merge Aboriginal communities into the dominant economy in order for Aboriginal people to ‘**live as members of a single Australian community**’; 2) give Aboriginal people ‘**the same rights**’ as any other Australians through the reduction of their own specialised indigenous rights; 3) make Indigenous people ‘**accept the same responsibilities**’ as other Australians by being *made* capable

² Note that this view of modernisation as the reasonable way forward also positioned the indigenous voices opposed as seeming ‘unreasonable’.

³ Commonwealth of Australia, *Parliamentary Debates [Hansard]*, House of Representatives, 20 April 1961: 1051

through active welfare (etc.); and 4) ultimately see Aboriginal people accept and observe market-based needs. From the likeness to the above definition of assimilation from the 1960's, it can be debated that this period of policy-making was assimilationist in nature, merely differing in its re-imagined neoliberal rationale of market fundamentalism and individualism. This neoliberal project of assimilation still ultimately aimed “to endow Aborigines with the capacities that would make it no longer necessary to discriminate against them” (Goot and Rowse 2007: 30). This is acutely visible in how the policy phase often targeted what were perceived as the most ‘insufficiently’ colonised areas (remote Aboriginal communities) with its most punitive measures.

It was not just the strategies of the policies that were retrospective, but their justifications too. Under the liberal appeal of logic and pragmatism, it became permissible to racialize the ‘Aboriginal problem’. The dominant explanation of Aboriginality returned to European philosophical tradition, legitimising suppression by characterising Aboriginals as violent in need of control and also “primitive and in need of development and assimilation into the settler order” (Macoun 2011: 523). Their capability was also once again put into question, as the stigma of supposed Aboriginal ‘dysfunction’ equated to seeing them as irrational actors (Garond 2014: 16). In colonial liberal thinking, this judgment of the indigenous capacity has historically justified Aboriginal subjugation throughout the eras of the frontier, separatism, protectionism and assimilation. Many arguments were also built on comparisons between the superior civilisation of mainstream Australia and the disaggregated state of Aboriginal communities. These judgements were blatantly imperialistic; nevertheless, they formed the dominant paradigm of conversation⁴.

A Continuation of Colonial Modernisation

From this analysis of the motivations, justifications and strategies of the neoliberal project in comparison to previous indigenous policy, I make my encompassing argument that this policy phase coincided and continued the monolithic colonial task of modernisation. In a lateral sense of the settler state's history, it represented another move in the direction of colonisation under a new socio-political agenda of economic development. Essentially, the indigenous location within the settler state was still sought to be erased – this time with their economic organisation seen as the least colonised aspect about them. The logic of elimination (as described by Patrick Wolfe) continued simply with a fresh justification of neoliberal needs.

I shall give a final example that demonstrates the bulldozing of Aboriginal rights under the neoliberal project. In the first term of Howard's government, there was a contestation over access to land for the Hindmarsh Bridge development. Aboriginal women claimed the space to be protected under the Heritage Act for cultural reasons. Nevertheless, the government adjudicated the contestation by effectively deeming their cultural practice as illegitimate in law (Howard-Wagner 2008: 48). This was an early example of Howard's erasure of the Aboriginal voices that were impeding economic interests. It sharply displays how the logic of elimination was in full operation, enacting cultural assimilation and dispossession with neoliberal reasoning

⁴ I would add that the reactive nature these discussions had following the self-determination era gave them a particular political traction that likely made them more admissible among conservatives at the time.

as its new cloak (Wolfe 1991, Strakosch 2011).

In conclusion, the Howard government's era of policy-making reshaped and reframed the scope of indigenous affairs to suit its neoliberal ideology. Its imperatives often contradicted Aboriginal rights as it sought to subsume Aboriginal Australia into mainstream society and economy. The entirety of the policy phase was blatantly colonising in its assimilatory and paternalistic methods. Furthermore, the framework and conception of Aboriginality that it activated echoed early settler justifications. Essentially, the actions of Howard's government continued the colossal modernisation scheme of the settler state with the new political ideology and order of neoliberalism giving it a fresh rationale.

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