

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE UNDER ABBOTT

I have never met Australia's new Prime Minister Tony Abbott. While he seems to be a conviction politician he did not quite come close to claiming that he will 'Close the Gap' like he will 'Stop the Boats' or 'Scrap the Carbon Tax'.

But he has made it quite clear that Indigenous affairs is going to be a high priority for his government.

It is hard to get a sense in what way things are going to change in the next three years during the first term of an Abbott Government.

The Coalition's Policy for Indigenous Affairs was released a couple of days before the election.

This was poor timing for the thousands of Indigenous voters mainly in remote Australia who had already mobile voted before knowing what they were voting for, or against. But if the document had been available earlier I suspect it would have made little difference.

It has very little substance.

I have complained long and hard about the cosy Canberra consensus in Indigenous affairs since the Rudd Opposition acquiesced to the NT 'National Emergency' Intervention just over six years ago. And so just as Rudd endorsed the Intervention and then negotiated the COAG National Indigenous Reform Agreement to Close the Gap; the Nelson, Turnbull and then Abbott Oppositions have broadly agreed with the Closing the Gap policy framework.

Not to do so would be politically damaging. Just as 'Little Children are Sacred', so is the right of every Indigenous Australian to be a gap free subject.

Not to support the Closing the Gap framework is to support the persistence of gaps in employment, education and health outcomes, not to mention imprisonment rates, poverty, housing inequality and much more.

The Coalition's Policy for Indigenous Affairs is quite inconsistent on whether it endorses the Closing the Gap framework, or not.

At once the Policy states that 'you do not have to look very closely at the Prime Minister's [Julia Gillard] recent report on Closing the Gap [February 2013] to conclude that Labor's approach to Indigenous Affairs has not worked'.

I note here that there have been five annual Closing the Gap reports since 2008 but never did the Coalition Opposition suggest that Labor's approach was not working. Instead there was unusual bonhomie and bipartisanship.

As reported in the mainstream media ‘Mr Abbott also welcomed Prime Minister Julia Gillard’s candour in delivering a mostly positive, but mixed, report card on progress towards meeting six targets that were agreed after former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd delivered the formal apology to the stolen generations in 2008. “We need this level of candour to achieve genuine progress and genuine closing the gap”.’

And then the Policy states ‘The Coalition will continue the current level of funding expended on Closing the Gap activities, but will examine the costly programmes to make sure that they are directly working to meet the Closing the Gap targets’.

This suggests a commitment to the same targets and funding but with better outcomes.

It is stated that Labor’s problem was that it failed to monitor and evaluate Indigenous programmes and this has led to chronic waste and lost opportunities.

The Strategic Indigenous Housing and Infrastructure Programme (SIHIP) that has now transformed into the National Partnership Agreement for Remote Indigenous Housing is singled out for special belated criticism as an ‘absolute disgrace’ even though it appears to be meeting its admittedly inadequate targets according to the ANAO.

A meta-analysis ‘Too much ‘Dreaming’: Evaluations of the Northern Territory National Emergency Response Intervention 2007–2012’ by Susie Russell and myself completed in December 2012 suggests otherwise: it enumerated 98 reports, seven parliamentary inquiries and hundreds of submissions in one jurisdiction, the Northern Territory, alone. There has been no shortage of evaluation.

Deploying the authority of the ANAO (ignored with respect to housing) the Coalition Policy looks to sheet home much responsibility for ‘bureaucratic failure and incompetence’ to the key Australian Government agency responsible for Indigenous programmes (FaHCSIA) for failing to adequately perform its lead agency role.

So how will the Abbott Government achieve this difficult objective that has bedevilled Indigenous policy for decades now? The challenge is not just how to coordinate Commonwealth Indigenous specific and mainline programmes, but also those of other levels of government in Australia’s federal system.

The answer seems primarily to involve altering the machinery of government by transferring responsibility for Indigenous programmes to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet so that under the Abbott Government ‘Australia

will in effect have a Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs and a dedicated Indigenous Affairs Minister’.

This is an interesting proposition on several grounds.

On one hand it is reminiscent of arrangements 20 years ago during the Keating years when there was a dedicated Minister for Indigenous Affairs and an Office of Indigenous Affairs in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. But at that time few programs were run by the Prime Minister’s Department and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) had mandated responsibility for coordination and for administering \$1 billion of Indigenous-specific expenditure.

On the other hand it is as yet for from clear what transfers to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet will actually take place.

Even if programs transferred were limited to those run by FaHCSIA the size of PM&C will increase several fold, it will inherit a regional bureaucratic presence, and the department will shift from being primarily a policy department to a programme delivery department.

Additionally, an Indigenous Advisory Council of five members (already referred to as the IAC) to be chaired by Warren Mundine will be formed to ‘help ensure that the Indigenous programmes achieve real, positive change to the lives of Aboriginal people’. Just how this appointed Council, the anointed ‘Gang of Five’, will do this is difficult to imagine.¹⁶

Its chair was a member of the earlier selected rather than elected National Indigenous Council that superseded ATSIC and that was ineffective in helping the Howard Government (of which Abbott was a key Minister) achieve practical reconciliation, the now overlooked and failed quest to reduce Indigenous material disadvantage in the areas of health, housing, education and employment.

And another high profile member of the IAC membership announced as this is penned, Peter Shergold, was not only head of PM&C during the late Howard years, but also presided over the implementation of connecting government to respond to Australia’s priority challenges and the new mainstreaming in Indigenous affairs post-ATSIC.

These ‘innovations’, mainly based on New Labour precedents in the UK, failed to deliver either practical reconciliation or coordination or better outcomes than during the ATSIC years. Now he is back for another go.

¹⁶ After the election the number on the Indigenous Advisory Council was quickly increased to twelve with a process of self-nomination that was far from transparent resulting in the current ‘Gang of Twelve’.

In a speech to the now defunct Bennelong Society in September 2004 Tony Abbott started by stating:

For 200 years, nearly every speaker on Aboriginal policy has dwelt on problems: the difficulties of preventing conflict, building relationships, generating resources and dealing with dispossession. Problems there are and they can't be ignored or glossed over. They are among the most serious and intractable problems our society faces.

Indeed.

And how will the Abbott 'new' arrangements help to solve them? Not, I would suggest, by recycling unelected and contentious people from the past as his key advisers, people who while individually successful have no track record of delivering success in Indigenous policy. Nor by marginalising well-established bureaucratic institutions like the Productivity Commission and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare or a host of other more independent research institutions at arms-length from government. Monopolistic advice from like-minded people is not the way to foster the sort of competition of ideas and advice that will be needed in the increasingly complex 21st century to address increasingly complex Indigenous development challenges.

Of particular concern, while critical of the absence of proper monitoring and evaluation under Labor, no new institutional mechanisms have been proposed to monitor how the new government will measure its performance in meeting the national Closing the Gap goals. Here Abbott has struck it chronologically lucky because results from the 2016 Census will not be available till well after his first term; and results from the National Aboriginal; and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey to be conducted next year are likely to be dismissed as too early to reflect his 'new' approach.

Evidently, the Coalition believes that Indigenous Australians deserve a better future, with more job opportunities, empowered individuals and communities, and higher standards of living. But despite neoliberal commitment to transparency, there are no targets or performance evaluation frameworks in the Coalition Policy. Nor is there any attempt to establish representative political mechanisms like ATSIC to ensure that Indigenous people actually have voice in judging the performance of the Australian government.

It would be good if by and by the self-labelled Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs were judged on his portfolio performance. But I suspect that Australian democracy won't work quite like that.

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