**As the Twilight Fades...**

For my farewell column in this now defunct newspaper I had at first decided to write a reflection of the issues I have written about in *Tracker* over the past three years. But then as I got to thinking about some of the events and issues over that period since 2011, and as I thought about how my own personal thoughts and attitudes might have continued to evolve during that time, I began to wonder just how deeply my ideas have changed since I was a young, firebrand, loudmouth, political activist of my callow youth. So perhaps my final column for *Tracker* might constitute a last public rethink on my part of politically where I came from, where I have been and where I consider myself now to be politically as I approach the edge of my twilight years.

Readers of my Tracker column for the past three years will know that I am a product of the Black Power movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s. That was a period when a generation of Aboriginal people abandoned a passive and submissive approach in the historical struggle for justice and political independence. It was a time when Aboriginal activists aggressively forced their issues on to the national agenda through major street demonstrations and brilliant political stunts such as the 1972 Aboriginal Embassy action. It was a period in Australian history when not only did the vast majority of the Australian people support our quest for justice (as shown by the 90% vote in the 1967 referendum), but we also had strong support within the mainstream media, importantly and remarkably including newspapers in the stable of Rupert Murdoch.

It was during that time in Australian history that Aboriginal political activists made the greatest social and political gains since the invasion that largely took place during the 19th Century. It also saw the development and emergence of the first Aboriginal community-controlled organisations such as legal services and community health clinics. These were organisations that were the living embodiment of the Black Power movement’s ideas about self-determinations and self-reliance. Whilst these policies were a blend of ideas that were drawn from a variety of sources including the popular liberation movements of that era, as well as aspects of traditional Aboriginal cultural values of egalitarianism (or as the late Chicka Dixon used to say, “caring and sharing”), they nevertheless enabled a nationally disparate polyglot number of Aboriginal groups to unite and become a formidable political force for change.

Just how powerful the Aboriginal political movement of that era had become was clear when the 1972 Aboriginal Embassy brought an end to the assimilation era when then Opposition Leader Gough Whitlam announced at a meeting at the Embassy that he was ending the bi-partisan assimilation policy that had been in force since Federation. Whitlam announced that if he were to be elected Prime Minister in the December 1972 election then his Labor party Government would grant Aboriginal Land Rights. When Whitlam was duly elected six months later he declared that the Aboriginal Embassy had played a key role in the final destabilisation and demise not only of the McMahon Liberal government, but also 23 years of uninterrupted conservative Government in Canberra. Thus it can be seen that the Black Power movement had led the Aboriginal political movement to a strong position of political influence by the end of 1972.

But Whitlam did not live up to his promise of granting Land Rights and state and federal governments ever since have expended much time, energy and money in making sure that Aboriginal people never again become as strong and united as they were during the Black Power era. Aboriginal people nationally have since been politically subjected to setback after setback in the never-ending quest for justice, equity, independence and peace. In the meantime we have seen the emergence of a creature that did not exist at the time of the 1972 Aboriginal Embassy, a politically influential black middle-class. On one level that was to be expected, but the Australian black middle-class is not a phenomenon that naturally evolved. Rather, I contend that the emergence of an identifiable Aboriginal middle-class in the 1980s was as a result of deliberate government policies that were designed to defuse and diminish the political power that Aboriginal people had asserted during the Black Power era. Governments were determined to destroy the grass-roots power that had existed and replace that with a new and more conservative and compliant black leadership with whom they could deal.

Thus a new leadership evolved as government policies to disperse the strong urban Aboriginal communities such as Redfern (from whence most of the Black Power movement had derived) and promote urgent policies of recruiting potential future Aboriginal leaders into lucrative positions in the public service. This policy of recruitment into the public service was (and still is) a particularly insidious idea because it enables government to politically emasculate future Aboriginal leaders by depriving them of their voice. This is done via the requirement that all public servants as part of their contract are not allowed to make public statements on political issues. Thus not only have some of the brightest Aboriginal minds of the past 40 years been silenced, but also the public service indoctrination enables Governments to create their own *ersatz* (fake) Aboriginal leaders that are then unleashed on the Australian public espousing support for dodgy government ideas and policies.

If people want to know why the Aboriginal political movement has lost the sting it had 40 years ago then these are some of the major reasons why. Government policies that have emerged since the 1980s have all been designed to undermine and remove the gains made during the brief period of strong political action of the Black Power era. Not only that, but blatant falsehoods are now actively praised and promoted as great gains. For example, the concept of *native title*.

The Mabo decision was in 1993 and the subsequent *Native Title Act* were hailed by most of the Australian commentariat (black and white) as the delivery of land justice to Aboriginal Australia. The loudest voices in praise were those of the government’s hand-picked, tiny and unrepresentative group of Aboriginal “leaders” who negotiated and signed off on the deeply flawed *Native Title Act*. The reason most people still believe the nonsensical proposition that the Act delivered land justice to Aboriginal people is because almost nobody who thinks that has actually read the legislation. Although now some 30 years after the *Native Title Act* came into existence, most Aboriginal people are beginning to realise that my mantra of “Native title is NOT Land Rights” is correct. The “Land Rights” that the Black Power movement envisaged was a notion whereby land would be granted in freehold title, whereas native title is not land ownership at all. The simple truth remains that native title is the most inferior form of land tenure under British law. It is not land ownership!

But many of these misconceptions have been deliberately implanted in the minds of black and white Australians by governments of all political persuasions over the past 30 years. Governments seem to have been very successful in their determination to defuse and destroy a strong black political movement. The insipid and vacuous nature of the debate in Aboriginal affairs these days is evidence that governments and other vested interests have managed to contain and regain control of the agenda. It is therefore very tragic that a misguided decision has closed this last strongly independent Aboriginal newspaper. But I suspect that those who were complicit in the decision to close *Tracker Magazine* may well discover that in the long term that history has a habit of revisiting such occasions and that their actions could well come back and bite them on the arse.

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