

The Secretary  
Senate Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs  
Parliament House  
Canberra.

Dear Secretary,

I wish to make this submission to the Senate Select Committee on the Administration of Indigenous Affairs. I have been involved with Indigenous people and organisations since 1963 in Queensland, Western Australia, the Northern Territory and the ACT. I was a social worker employed by the Welfare Branch in Darwin 1965-68 and 1973-77. My Masters of Social Work was conducted in association with the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Community of South Brisbane.

### Brief Summary

The main points I wish to make are that:

- (a) seldom, since the invasion in 1788, have governments - state, local or federal - dealt with Indigenous Australians on just terms,
- (b) the reason for this stems from many motivations,
- (c) from the early 1960s until 1996 there was a growing recognition that Australians (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) needed to resolve outstanding issues and injustices,
- (d) since 1996 there has been a retreat from this recognition, which has gone hand in hand with the increasingly shrilly-expressed notions of racial superiority,
- (e) mainstream government agencies consistently fail to understand Indigenous people, their needs or their aspirations,
- (f) this has led to gross misperceptions of the reasons the health of Indigenous Australians is a national disgrace and why on many social and economic measures, the majority of the Indigenous population can be found in the bottom decile, and
- (g) coupled with failing to understand Indigenous people, their needs or their aspirations, has come a series of state and federal government misinterpretations of the social factors impinging on poor people generally and Aboriginal people in particular.

**Points (a)** *seldom, since the invasion in 1788, have governments - state, local or federal - dealt with Indigenous Australians on just terms,*  
**and (b)** *the reason for this stems from many motivations,*

I have discussed these points elsewhere (Tomlinson Income Insecurity:2003, Chapters 4 & 5. There have no doubt been non-Indigenous individuals who acted with the best of intent (Reynolds 1998) but the overwhelming majority of non-Indigenous people who lived on the frontiers were driven by greed and feelings of racial superiority (Reynolds 1981, McCartney, Lincoln & Wilson 2003). Those on the frontier were at the sharp end of the dispossession, rape and genocide but they were supported by a non-Indigenous population who were, with few exceptions, motivated by racism or indifference (Beams 2003/4). One of the interesting features

of hegemonic racism, which has existed since before the 18<sup>th</sup> century and which continues to pervade Indigenous and non-Indigenous interactions, is that non-Indigenous writers tried to explain such racism as being inspired by “social Darwinian thought” as if this somehow made it all right in the past. Such an analysis conveniently ignores the fact that Darwin did not publish *The Origin of Species* until 1859 and Indigenous Australia had by then experienced 80 years of racist assaults.

**Point (c)** *from the early 1960s until 1996 there was a growing recognition that Australians (both Indigenous and non-Indigenous) needed to resolve outstanding issues and injustices,*

The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines (which was subsequently renamed The Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders) built upon State and Territory based Indigenous action groups and it began turning around some of the more violent and racist attitudes in Australia. The success of the 1967 referendum that allowed Aborigines to be counted in the Census and also allowed the Commonwealth Government to make laws in respect of Aborigines, freed many Australians to start to come to terms with our past. The overwhelming vote demonstrated that non-Indigenous Australians wanted to come to an accommodation with the original owners of this land.

**Point (d)** *since 1996 there has been a retreat from this recognition, which has gone hand in hand with the increasingly shrilly-expressed notions of racial superiority,*

The divisive campaigns waged by the Liberal and National Parties, mining companies and pastoralists in the wake of the Mabo Judgement undermined the Keating Government’s attempts to move Australia towards coming to a reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous citizens. Then came Pauline “please explain” Hanson and John Howard as Prime Minister both determined to win the culture wars. Howard who had exposed his anti-Asian racism in 1988 used Hanson as a battering ram to defeat decency in the Wik /Ten Point extinguishment Plan. The widespread detention of asylum seekers, the assaults on the social wage, the cuts in social welfare, and the run down of public health and education when coupled with increased competition and globalism came together in an uncaring conglomerate which Howard called a “social coalition” inspired by “mutual obligation”.

**Points (e)** *mainstream government agencies consistently fail to understand Indigenous people, their needs or their aspirations,*

**and (f)** *this has lead to gross misperceptions of the reasons the health of Indigenous Australians situation is a national disgrace and why on many social and economic measures, the majority of the Indigenous population can be found in the bottom decile,*

Since the 1960s all but the most obtuse bureaucrat or politician should have been able to see the failure of mainstream government agencies to effectively serve the interests of the Indigenous people of this country. The Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission has documented many failures of mainstream Departments and agencies in their dealings with the original owners of this land.

The current results of 216 years of “mainstreaming Indigenous services”:

- Indigenous health is appalling.
- Incarceration rates are horrific.
- Unemployment - once you take out the CDEP (a form of work for the dole) is anywhere between 20% to 90% in many Indigenous communities.
- Well over 100 communities don't have clean drinking water.
- It would take more than \$3 Billion to abolish the housing backlog faced by Indigenous people.
- Schooling is not provided in a way which is attractive to the majority of the Indigenous community, and
- there are many other social pressures on Indigenous communities.

If this is mainstream success then it will be even worse when Indigenous agencies such as the Aboriginal Legal Service, the Aboriginal Health Service, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission etc are disappeared.

**Point (g)** *coupled with failing to understand Indigenous people, their needs or their aspirations, has come a series of state and federal government misinterpretations of the social factors impinging on poor people generally and Aboriginal people in particular.*

What this racist Howard Government is saying is:

“It must be **the grog**, it can't be the government.”

The present Federal Government is so devoid of sensible ideas that it mouths the inanities of Noel Pearson as if there was some scientific justification for his pronouncements about Indigenous “welfare dependency” (Tomlinson 1999). The Howard Government is so duplicitous that it is difficult to decide whether:

- they have just conveniently forgotten that it was ex-Minister Jocelyn Newman (who received 3 parliamentary superannuation pensions) who started the current round of myths about “welfare dependency”, or
- that it is just useful to use Pearson's lack of knowledge about Indigenous social welfare to promote ill-informed racist views in the wider community.

## **Conclusion**

Whilst Australian governments refuse to come to a just agreement with the Indigenous owners of this land there is no way that decent Australians can feel pride in this country. I am ashamed by the criticisms, levelled by various United Nations bodies, of Australia's treatment of Aborigines in relation to the 1998 Native Title Act amendments and of our treatment of refugees.

The Howard Government failed to apologise for the Stolen Generations, it has at every turn undermined the reconciliation process, it refuses to allow Indigenous self-determination, it has abolished many Indigenous representative agencies and refuses to try to understand the symbolic issues impinging upon the Indigenous community.

Since 1996 it has persevered with its narrow “practical reconciliation” policies which have done little if anything to improve the social or economic situation facing Aboriginal Australia. The average age of death is the same now as in 1986 for Indigenous people (Tomlinson 2004).

It's time to adequately fund an elected Indigenous body with a charter to abolish the differentials in health, housing, educational, employment and social welfare that exist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The 216 years of mainstream government agencies pretending they can assist Indigenous Australians must end.

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I would appreciate it if you would notify me that you have received this submission.

Yours sincerely

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