

Grip eluding PM's legacy

With so many matters in John Howard's political calculus beyond his capacity to influence or control – Iraq, Afghanistan, the Pacific crises, wheat scandals and water reform – he must be thinking it would be nice to have a hold on something. Especially if it becomes important for a political legacy. Targeted programs for some disaffected constituents needing stroking may well be on the agenda for this election year.

One constituency which will not be uppermost on the mind of John Howard is that of Aboriginal affairs. Why should he bother, he may well ask. There's no votes in it for him, and not much prospect of thanks. He never expected much praise and has been surprised, if anything, at how low the criticism level is – a sign, indeed, that the chattering classes have more or less given up.

He is in any event entitled, on the evidence that he has, to doubt whether anything on anyone's agenda will make much difference. Admittedly the natives of this country are restless, but their rage and frustration is at the moment more directed at state governments and the legal system, particularly in Queensland, than at the federal government. Distracted from the real game, in much the same way as they have been over the past ten years.

Furthermore, they are morally on the back foot. Out in the electorate, Aborigines are now well understood not to be victims or the dispossessed, but criminals, drunks, welfare layabouts, wife bashers, people who neglect and sexually abuse their children and do not send them to school. Honestly, what more could one do, he might ask. Maybe tough love, as applied to our Pacific neighbours, is in fact good policy?

Yet by almost any benchmark – social, economic or political – there is hardly any area of failure in Howard Government policy more abject than in Aboriginal affairs. For five years, perhaps, failure could be blamed on the legacy of the Keating years, or the fact that practical policy had not much changed, except in terms of what Howard would have called political correctness. In the past six years, radical new Howard policy has been in play, and it too is going nowhere. On the face of things, the Howard Government must be judged to have been routed in its war on Aboriginal poverty, disadvantage and disengagement.

John Howard had consciously abandoned the notion this was a struggle depending on symbolism; it was, he said, about "practical reconciliation" and material progress on the ground. Eleven years on from his taking power, and about five from the time he took an active interest, particularly with policies of mainstreaming, there are no bootmarks on the ground, just fresh ruins. The position of Aboriginal affairs is still going, irretrievably it seems, backwards.

The very few signs of progress – more Aboriginal doctors perhaps – are obliterated by signs of regress. There's plenty for Labor to criticise, but precious little to which they could hearken back with any pride. One might say, indeed, that March 1983 – the date of the election of the Hawke government – is as good a date as any from which, in retrospect, it can be said that things began going backwards again, after a decade or so of fitful progress.

Not that Labor is criticising. Or offering alternative policies. If there is a mystery greater than the question of what Labor thinks about what has been happening, it is what it proposes to do about it.

In recent times, there has seemed some scope for optimism or hope. A few years of dogged Howard refusal to adopt 'politically correct' agendas about saying sorry to stolen generations, to regard a generous Wik settlement as the panacea, or simply to regard the problem as one of throwing good money after bad led to changes of thinking among some Aboriginal leaders, and within the bureaucracy, pushed particularly by Howard's focus on practical action on the ground.

A new discussion began about how welfarism had entrenched Aborigines in their poverty, and created a climate of victimology from which, it was obvious, little progress could be made. Leaders such as Noel Pearson posed strong challenges to Aborigines about taking more charge of their lives, more responsibility for outcomes, and less dependence on money and resources from outside. He was echoed by others such as Warren Mundine, a Labor president approvingly reading speeches written – or altered – in Amanda Vanstone's office.

Pearson and others were also posing challenges to governments, state and federal, about matching their own soft and convenient phrases about accountability by making systems work, by better coordinating the efforts of the various layers and agencies of government, and by developing individual plans, based on a notion of contract, for individual communities.

At the same time both government and Aboriginal leaderships were shown increasing impatience with excuse-mongering, senses of helplessness and hopelessness, propensity to blame everything on external failures (particularly a shortage of money) or to hide unacceptable conduct, not least violence, sexual violence, alcoholism and drug abuse on 'cultural' matters. Likewise with failures to make the best of what are often plainly inadequate education systems.

It is clear enough by now, however, that however legitimate the criticisms, there was nothing much on offer about practical alternatives, and no real ideas or grand visions, let alone anything in the way of plans to realise them. Pretty much everything has stalled, and rhetoric, grandstanding and blaming the victims has overtaken policy formation. Programs, whether under new or old guidelines, are still foundering at community level, and scarcely impacting at family level. And not only for old reasons – such as the incompetence of the old (and now disbanded) ATSIC – but also for new ones – the incapacity of new administrative measures to conceive, plan, consult or deliver.

The failures are perhaps most starkly underlined by the plain lack of success of the Secretaries' initiative on indigenous affairs. It was a scheme very much the baby of Peter Shergold, head of the Prime Minister's Department, and of Howard, Premiers and Chief Ministers at the Council of Australian Governments. Top federal bureaucrats were going to take charge of six pilot areas around Australia to demonstrate to everyone just what could be achieved by more effective co-ordination of resources – whether between federal agencies, or between federal, state and local government agencies.

The pilot areas were, admittedly, not chosen for being easy, but the most charitable thing which could be said at the moment is that there is little evidence of material or spiritual progress in the lives of the people targeted by this system, and in most of them the drift is in the opposite direction. Wadeye, in the Northern Territory, might perhaps be the best example of actual regress, but things are hardly looking good in other areas, and few could boast of any particular achievements.

But one cannot blame only the secretaries, or the disparate mainstream bureaucracies into which ATSIC public servants were scattered. The failures are also underlined by the grandstanding of the minister now responsible for Aboriginal Affairs, Mal Brough, and his increasing tendency to blame Aborigines themselves for all that is ill.

Brough's original instinct – say, of rejecting out of hand any excuse or prevarication for sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities – was sound enough, indeed welcome enough, not least to Aboriginal women and children. Far less worthy was his creation of an Aunt Sally – Aboriginal tradition and its recognition by the legal system – as the cause of the problem.

Beyond that, however, it is difficult to see that anything he did is making any difference. A big focus was on more police in Aboriginal communities. Even if they have been delivered – and generally they haven't – this would not make much difference, least of all in bringing offenders before the courts.

He has moved on to hectoring other communities, including Wadeye of course, and to making his own actions and assertions, rather than those of others, the arguing point, as with his victimisation of Mutijulu for the sins of one (already departed) individual. But there is very little evidence of patient progress, or of improvement in service delivery anywhere. No progress on developing policies focused on families rather than communities, on improving school attendance, or even making it possible, or in developing employment opportunities, whether at home or elsewhere. Nor any efforts to increase economic activity by promoting commerce, or to get Aborigines into the mainstream economy.

In the meantime, too, he has made casual statements that belie government hostility to outstation communities and mini-settlements – on the basis that residents have effectively removed themselves from the working economy. This is an approach that simply cannot live alongside a flat refusal to develop housing, economic opportunities or training schemes in towns and cities.

If, for example, Aborigines ought to get off outstations – where there is no prospect of work and no services – for towns and areas where there might be work, how is Alice Springs, itself in deep trauma from existing overcrowding and high Aboriginal unemployment, to be cleaned up, as he seems to promise. He has made it clear that he rejects extra housing money as any sort of pathway. Perhaps he has Adelaide, or Griffith, in mind.

My despair about all this is prompted in part by the 'revelation' by Paul Sheahan, in the Sydney Morning

Herald, that those accused of being responsible for the bashing murder of a Griffith teenager recently were 'feral Aborigines' of the local district, and that their conduct is all too common around Aboriginal country towns. Sheahan is right, of course.

As he points out, many of the children of this underclass are from generations of dispossessed, angry and unemployed people, where cultures of violence, family dysfunction and disintegration are all too common. I'm not sure that throwing everyone into jail, or forcibly separating the children from the adults will help much, however.

We need to deal with the root causes – poverty, disadvantage, disengagement and despair. As things stand, net per capita government spending, at federal state, or local government level, or collectively, on Aboriginal Australians is still well below average spending on other Australian citizens anywhere, and even more significantly, below spending in white communities in comparable degrees of isolation, aridity or other disadvantage. Funny how this translates into worse outcomes.