

Soundings

A forum for analysis and debate on issues of religion, ethics and public policy in Australia and internationally

No. 69 – 13 November 2007

Making Indigenous poverty history

by Rod Benson

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the referendum authorising changes to the Australian Constitution that removed discriminatory provisions relating to Aboriginal people. Contrary to popular opinion, the referendum did not grant them Australian citizenship or the right to vote. It essentially gave the federal government a clear mandate to make laws and implement policies in respect of Aborigines, and enabled Aborigines to be counted in population statistics (whereas previously, for statistical purposes, they were considered fauna).

The referendum did not end discrimination against Aboriginal people, but it did provide a symbol of their political and moral rights. And it offered an opportunity for Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to work together for reconciliation and racial harmony.

To mark this anniversary, [Reconciliation Australia](#) developed a year-long program of activity designed to:

- Raise the profile of reconciliation as an important issue in contemporary Australia;
- Promote to all Australians a greater understanding of what reconciliation looks like in many different settings; and
- Enlist measurable long term action plans from businesses and other organisations towards the overarching objective of closing the 17-year life expectancy gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous children, including health, education, employment and relationship building.

Significantly, on 21 June, although not in celebration of the 1967 referendum, Prime Minister John Howard launched his unprecedented [Northern Territory intervention](#), which has relieved and confused and offended Aboriginal people. I have commented on this [elsewhere](#). The sudden arrival and huge scope of the Intervention drowned other Indigenous policy initiatives in a sea of legislation and commentary, but I fear it will contribute little to overcoming Indigenous disadvantage or encouraging reconciliation.

The churches celebrated the symbolism of the 1967 referendum, but the 40th anniversary passed on 27 May with muted recognition, despite the fact that it also marked the beginning of National Reconciliation Week. Catholics have led the way, with the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference releasing a challenging [Pastoral Letter](#). In recent months Professor Frank Brennan has made several passionate speeches on Aboriginal reconciliation and public policy, perhaps most notably [an address to the School of Philosophy](#) at the Australian Catholic University, titled “Whatever happened to reconciliation?” Other church agencies used the occasion to highlight the plight of Aboriginal people, or [urge the Prime Minister](#) to issue a formal apology to Aboriginal people. Some churches responded with deafening silence.

Longterm failure to overcome Indigenous social and economic disadvantage is a major barrier to genuine reconciliation and equality. To address this, the National Council of Churches in Australia, through its National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Ecumenical Council ([NATSIEC](#)), sponsored an impressive campaign to “Make Indigenous Poverty History” (MIPH). This campaign is associated with the global [Make Poverty History](#) campaign, a non-partisan coalition of more than 60 aid organisations, community and faith-based groups promoting the United Nations’ [Millennium Development Goals](#). According to its website, the MIPH campaign

aims to ensure that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) do not overlook the poverty suffered by Indigenous Peoples around the world, especially in Australia. The MDGs do not specifically target Indigenous Peoples yet, worldwide, they are most affected by extreme poverty

and usually rank at the bottom of most social and economic indicators. This is certainly true in Australia where statistics show that Australian Indigenous peoples are living in poverty: our children are twice as likely to die in infancy; we suffer from more preventable diseases, higher unemployment, lower house ownership, lower engagement with education and, in some places, we are six times as likely to be murdered.

Poverty is a very real and debilitating experience for many of our people. We believe that the MDGs must be aligned with poverty reduction strategies that address the particular needs of Indigenous peoples. Without the meaningful participation of Indigenous Peoples our marginalisation and exclusion will continue. In particular we are calling on the State and Federal governments to make a commitment to adapting the MDGs to ensure that by 2015 the living standards and levels of health and wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples are comparable to those of the rest of Australia – not to the poorest of the world's poor.

It is now two years since the launch of the Make Indigenous Poverty History campaign. What impact has the campaign had? In my conversations with Aboriginal leaders, the consensus is that there has been no identifiable impact on public sentiment in favour of overcoming Indigenous disadvantage, or on public policy to address it. The campaign is a worthwhile venture, focusing attention on specific target groups and specific policies easily overlooked by the global Make Poverty History campaign. It is all very well for activist young Christians (and others) to click on the website, and buy the T-shirts, and wear the wristbands – but that is hardly the point of the campaign, and it will not end the social and economic disadvantage.

What is needed is bipartisan support for compassionate public policy; adequate and ongoing public funding to support policy initiatives; greater opportunity for Indigenous leaders to participate in research and policy formulation; strong, inspiring leadership from our Heads of Churches and from the NCCA and similar agencies; and informed support by the people of Australia, especially Christians.

If nothing else, the Make Indigenous Poverty History campaign should highlight the specific problems and needs of Indigenous communities throughout Australia, and provide a platform for enlightened policy and funding by federal and state governments aimed at overcoming Indigenous disadvantage.

Pie in the sky, you might say. People probably said the same in the lead-up to the 1967 referendum, and the Mabo ruling in 1992, and the Wik decision in 1996. Making Indigenous poverty history is an achievable goal in Australia, especially at a time when the federal government is collecting more revenue than it knows how to spend. Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage is an important element in achieving reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Reconciliation can only proceed on the basis of mutual understanding and trust. But as Robert Manne points out in the latest issue of *The Monthly* (November, p. 11), “Reconciliation necessarily involves a relationship between two peoples.”

I would add that success in overcoming Indigenous disadvantage, and in achieving Aboriginal reconciliation, may well require an influx of compassionate Christian spirituality, and Australia should look to Indigenous Christian leaders for wisdom and guidance. But [the final word](#) today goes to Frank Brennan who, in his July ACU lecture, invoked the wisdom of the great Australian anthropologist W.E.H. Stanner, contending that:

it is impossible for most human beings to straddle [the Aboriginal and European] worlds without a deep, nurtured and nurturing spirituality. Those of us who have never had to straddle two such diverse worlds are not those best placed to advise how to overcome the “social disintegration and personal demoralization.” Governments which place a deep faith in the Market and in law and order policies enforced by instrumentalities of the State may be well intentioned, but unless they consult and work collaboratively with local Aboriginal leaders, they will be sure to make big mistakes, wasting precious resources and forfeiting trust.

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