

Australian Reconciliation Minister's comments denounced

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Racist comments about Aborigines made by the Federal Minister for Reconciliation, Philip Ruddock, in two interviews with the international press have received considerable exposure in the Australian media in recent weeks. In the aftermath of the Olympic Games, which focused heavily on the issue of Aboriginal reconciliation, the remarks have been used to renew attacks by sections of business on the Howard government, and to foster the illusion that something positive is being done to address Aboriginal oppression.

Just before the Games, Ruddock told the French newspaper *Le Monde*, and subsequently the *Washington Post*, that prior to European colonisation Aborigines had no knowledge of the wheel and no experience of a more advanced civilisation. He claimed that this low level of development may explain why the indigenous population is still disadvantaged today. “Contact between indigenous people in Australia and others really only developed in the last two centuries, and if you were looking at for instance North America, contact was over a period of four centuries. I'm not offering it as an excuse, it's merely a factual matter.”

Ruddock's comments highlight the narrow-minded, right-wing orientation of the Liberal-National Party coalition government. Since coming to power the government has sought to scapegoat the most disadvantaged groups in society to deflect opposition to its policies, and to inflate its shrinking electoral base by appealing to backward and racist social layers in country areas. It has repeatedly resisted international pressure to soften its stance on mandatory sentencing and Aboriginal “reconciliation”, and this has sparked opposition among sections of business, who see their own international interests threatened by such an openly hostile stance.

Prime Minister John Howard and several coalition backbenchers quickly came to Ruddock's defence after the media seized on his remarks. National Party MP Ian Causely claimed that Aborigines were disadvantaged because they would rather go hunting than get an education. “Even though the governments over the years have tried very, very hard to give them a good education, it's not their inclination. It's very difficult to keep Aboriginal children at school once they get to a teenager. It's not their thing I guess, they tend to go out and do their hunting things.” Similarly, the Federal Liberal Member for Kalgoorlie in South Central WA, Barry Haase, claimed that it was inappropriate to judge the substandard living conditions that many Aborigines lived in according to the same criteria as everybody else because among the majority of indigenous people “there is no desire to be Westernised, so to speak.”

While racist claims of this type on the part of the official establishment were the norm in the past, they have become increasingly incompatible with the demands of global capital. To participate in the global economy, nations are now obliged to appear to uphold international human rights. This has become the new rationale for imperialist interventions—economic, political and military—aimed at shoring up the financial and strategic interests of the major powers. If Australia is to play a role in Asia and the Pacific, and defend its considerable stake in the region, Australian politicians must be seen to be standing up for Aboriginal reconciliation, equality and justice at home.

Ruddock made his comments just prior to and during the Sydney Olympics. But they were not publicised until after the Games were over, in order to more effectively drive home the message and strengthen the assault on the Howard government. The Games provided an opportunity for business leaders to sell

Australia to the world and attract foreign capital, and the success of this depended to a large degree on its image as a forward thinking nation, in the process of freeing itself from the baggage of the past. Reconciliation and harmony were the most prominent themes in the opening ceremony and throughout the entire event. Against this backdrop, Ruddock and the Howard government were viewed as an anachronism.

Various self-styled “spokespeople for reconciliation,” including the opposition Labor party's Aboriginal Affairs spokesman Bob McMullan, Democrat Senator Aden Ridgeway and Greens Senator Bob Brown, condemned Ruddock and called for his resignation as Minister for Reconciliation. Opposition leader Kim Beazley argued that Ruddock was misinformed about history and that Aborigines were actually more technologically advanced than some other races. “There is a very high likelihood that they were the first to discover the opportunity of movement by sea and that they arrived here not by crossing land but crossing oceans, that far back they go.”

While quick to label Ruddock as a racist, his critics could offer no other explanation as to why the majority of Aborigines remain so shockingly disadvantaged more than 200 years after European colonisation. All they could do was defend Aboriginal culture and rail against racism. To delve any deeper would reveal the role which successive governments, both Labor and Liberal, have played in oppressing the Aboriginal people.

Behind the veneer of humanitarianism donned by Ruddock's media, business and political critics, the real source of Aboriginal oppression—its class basis—has been left unquestioned and untouched.

Aborigines form the most oppressed section of the Australian working class. They have limited access to jobs, decent housing, education and health care, and have borne the brunt of cuts to welfare and social services.

But their plight, the product of policies implemented by every government since colonisation, is the most extreme expression of the situation increasingly confronting immigrants, refugees, single mothers, pensioners and tens of thousands of families constantly struggling to make ends meet.

“Contact between indigenous people in Australia and others” did not, as Ruddock implies, bring

“civilisation” to the Aboriginal people. It brought disease, alcohol and a deliberate policy of genocide. As an impediment to the capitalist class, which needed to clear the land for development, Aborigines were hunted down and massacred, their drinking water poisoned, and the survivors rounded up and sent to reserves. Half-caste children were forcibly removed from their families well into the second half of the twentieth century, and Aborigines did not even have the right to vote until 1967.

The result has been that Aborigines have a life expectancy 20 years lower than the rest of the population. Health problems such as diabetes and heart disease abound, exacerbated by alcohol and drug abuse. A 1999 study by the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare found that while Aborigines make up just 2 percent of the population, they comprise 12 percent of the homeless population and 19 percent of the prison population. The imprisonment rate for adults is 14 times higher than that of non-Aborigines, while 40 percent of all children in corrective institutions are of Aboriginal descent. The unemployment rate for Aborigines is three times higher than non-Aborigines, with unemployment in some rural communities reaching 100 percent.

Ruddock's remarks to *Le Monde* and the *Washington Post* were designed to place responsibility for this state of affairs squarely onto Aboriginal people themselves, by depicting them as organically primitive. But none of Ruddock's detractors could even begin to lay the blame where it really lies—with the capitalist profit system and all of its apologists.



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