

Australia:

Anti-welfare agenda behind moves to oust Aboriginal leaders

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It has become something of a *modus operandi* in Australian politics to use allegations of petty corruption to pursue a definite political agenda.

In late 1997, the so-called “travel rorts” affair, involving unsubstantiated claims for travel expenses, claimed the political lives of three Howard government ministers, just months after the 1997 Budget failed to deliver the economic measures demanded by the banks and major corporations. Within months, the chastened government reinstated plans for a consumption tax—the GST—which had previously been shelved, broadened its “work-for-the-dole” program, and announced spending cuts to nursing homes and aged care.

Three years later, the “telecard affair,” concerning misuse of an official telephone charge card, essentially ended the career of Prime Minister John Howard’s preferred successor, Peter Reith. Reith had become something of a political liability after his involvement in the attempt to smash the waterfront union in 1998.

In the latest instance, the Howard government itself, backed by the mass media, is utilising accusations of graft against Aboriginal leaders to effect a fundamental shift in official indigenous policy. A campaign to oust the elected office holders of the official Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) has become the spearhead for dismantling what remains of Aboriginal welfare and social services.

ATSIC chairman Geoff Clark last month received a “show cause” letter from Indigenous Affairs Minister Philip Ruddock demanding that he give reasons why he should not be removed from his post. Days earlier, ATSIC deputy chairman Ray Robinson was pressured into resigning over alleged financial irregularities.

The chief charge against Clark is that he wrongly took his wife Trudy with him on a \$31,000 trip to an indigenous affairs conference in Ireland last year. Even if the claim is correct, the amount involved is minor compared to the officially-sanctioned travel expenses of other political figures. Ruddock spent more than \$235,000 on international travel for himself and his wife last year, while Prime Minister John Howard, his wife and entourage spent \$3.5 million.

Nevertheless, the Labor opposition and a section of the Aboriginal establishment have lined up behind the government, urging it on. Opposition indigenous affairs spokesman Bob McMullan said Clark should resign or be sacked as soon as possible. Labor’s former ATSIC chairperson, Lowitja O’Donoghue, said Clark should go because he had “let his people down”.

Clark and Robinson have been targetted as part of wider plans to either abolish ATSIC or strip the indigenous affairs body of all but token responsibilities. ATSIC established by the previous Labor government in 1989, has been a mechanism for disbursing limited funds and subsidies to Aboriginal communities and businesses, paying lip service to ameliorating the poverty, ill-health and lack of elementary facilities experienced by the

vast majority of Aboriginal people.

Aboriginal politicians and bureaucrats were placed in charge of certain programs, primarily Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) work-for-the-dole schemes, housing projects and legal aid services, while federal, state and local governments maintained the purse strings for major services such as health, education, public housing, water supply, sanitation, electricity, roads and communications—all of which remain severely under funded.

In effect, ATSIC was utilised by the Labor government to develop a privileged caste of Aboriginal entrepreneurs who, in the name of providing economic and other assistance, established indigenous corporations to operate services and business ventures, using local people as cheap labour. Under the CDEP schemes, Aboriginal workers became guinea pigs for the universal work-for-the-dole regime that the Howard government has since imposed on all unemployed workers.

The current ATSIC leaders have willingly complied. Only last September, Ruddock and Clark issued a joint media statement boasting that the number of CDEP participants nationally had risen to a record 35,000—a 28 percent rise since 1995. Until recently, Clark has enjoyed cordial relations with the government, which was perfectly willing to turn a blind eye to the nepotism and favouritism that these policies inevitably produced.

But the government has now seized upon the record of perks and benefits enjoyed by ATSIC’s leaders to push for the dismantling of welfare and employment programs.

Ruddock began the campaign against the ATSIC leadership in earnest last September, when he fed information to Brisbane *Courier-Mail* journalist, Michael McKinnon, about police investigations into Robinson’s affairs. As revealed last week by an audio tape of Ruddock’s telephone conversation with McKinnon, Ruddock used the interview to blacken Robinson’s reputation and foreshadow a new crackdown on alleged “misbehaviour” among Aboriginal leaders.

Last November, Ruddock announced a sweeping review of ATSIC’s functions and introduced new regulations boosting the government’s power to dismiss ATSIC office-holders. The new rules widened the definition of “misbehaviour” to include failing to “disclose relevant information in order to receive an allowance”—the precise charge levelled against Clark eight months later.

Ruddock’s three-person ATSIC review panel, which includes former federal Labor minister Bob Collins, issued an interim report on June 18, predictably declaring that ATSIC had “reached a crisis point in respect of its public credibility” and had to be restructured or “become irrelevant or face abolition”.

On July 1, without waiting for the final outcome of his review, Ruddock handed ATSIC’s employment and social services to a new government

agency, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Service (ATSIS), which is tendering the services out to commercial operators. Ruddock instructed ATSIS to apply so-called “best practice” to its funding decisions, including “market testing and competitive tendering,” thus insisting that market forces dictate the provision of Aboriginal services.

Two weeks ago, ATSIS rejected an application for \$600,000 in funding for the National Aboriginal and Islander Legal Services Secretariat (NAILSS), forcing many Aboriginal legal aid offices to shut down overnight. The closures, which could strip thousands of Aboriginal people of legal representation, went virtually unreported by the media. Dozens of other Aboriginal services are similarly threatened.

Aboriginal lawyer and entrepreneur Noel Pearson has become the most vocal spokesman for this policy shift. With increasing stridency he has declared “passive welfare dependency,” together with alcohol and drug abuse, to be the primary causes of Aboriginal poverty and squalor—not two centuries of dispossession, exploitation and impoverishment.

“Aboriginal dysfunction is today maintained by a self-perpetuating vortex of passivity and abuse, not primarily by our poverty or traumatic history,” Pearson stated in a lecture delivered in April. “Many communities are today dominated by people caught up in passivity, addiction and abuse, and these states are today *primary causal factors* and not just symptoms.”

Calling for the termination of all basic services to Aboriginal communities, Pearson denounced Queensland government officials who were reluctant to comply. “They don’t understand that government ‘service delivery’ is part of our passive welfare problem: government activity is usually at the expense of indigenous responsibility.”

Pearson purported to find support for his blueprint in the “mores of traditional Aboriginal society,” which he declared, were “strict and based on a ‘real economy’: gather and hunt or starve”. In reality, his views are based on far more recently developed “mores”—those of free market capitalism.

His lecture is featured on the web site of Indigenous Enterprise Partnerships (IEP), a pro-business organisation established by Pearson, backed by leading corporate executives, to encourage investors to move into Aboriginal enterprises. IEP’s directors include Graeme Wise, an Australian director of The Body Shop, Ann Sherry, CEO of the Bank of Melbourne, Colin Carter, a director of Boston Consulting Group, Professor Christopher Bartlett from the Harvard Business School and Charles Lane, CEO of the Myer Foundation.

According to IEP’s web site, its mission is “to assist Indigenous economic development bodies to create self-sustaining enterprise and real economic opportunities that break welfare dependency”.

Pearson was prominent at Howard’s July 23 “summit on indigenous violence,” the purpose of which was to indict Aboriginal people themselves, men in particular, for the deteriorating conditions, economic stress and breakdown of personal relations facing many indigenous families. The participants pointed to terrible statistics indicating a high rate of domestic violence among Aboriginal families, but no-one mentioned figures showing corresponding rates of unemployment, poverty, homelessness and ill-health.

The summit marked another turning point in the official repudiation of any approach based on addressing these underlying social problems. The discussion at the three-hour gathering echoed the old racist stereotypes depicting Aboriginal parents as hopeless drunkards. Similar scapegoating of the poor—unemployed workers, sole parents, disabled pensioners and refugees—has been a central feature of the Howard government’s ongoing campaign to abolish the last vestiges of the welfare state.

At the summit, handpicked Aboriginal leaders discovered newfound common ground with Howard, praising him for sharing their determination to crack down on “family violence.” Notably, not a cent was offered for remedial social programs.

Pearson distinguished himself by insisting that the causes of violence were self-induced drug and alcohol abuse, for which there was no answer other than prohibition and increased law and order. In the name of fashioning a “traditional” solution, Pearson in effect called for a return to the colonial policy of segregation, denial of basic democratic rights and police repression.

Pearson has been at the forefront of government attempts to groom a new generation of Aboriginal leaders, willing to enforce such a reactionary program.

On July 28, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation promoted a typical Pearson protégé on its *Four Corners* current affairs TV program. Entitled, “Positions Vacant,” the segment supported the government’s offensive by retailing accusations of intimidation and patronage against Clark and Robinson.

It began with reporter Peter George announcing: “Wanted—young, aspiring Indigenous people ready for a challenge. Candidates for these leadership positions must be at home with their own traditional culture and with the demands of a 21st-century economy. Rewards may be great for successful applicants who can go the distance without burnout.”

Tania Major, a 22-year-old criminology graduate from Sydney University who recently became the youngest person ever elected to ATSIS’s board, declared that she was ready for the challenge. George explained that Pearson had been her mentor since she was 12, sponsoring her through school and university.

“I agreed with all his philosophy about, you know, welfare recipients and how welfare is so induced and in these communities and how the communities are turning into these ghettos,” she told George. She took the reporter on a tour of her hometown, Kowanyama, on the western side of Cape York, pointing out a group of people engaged in gambling. “You know, our worst enemies are our own people,” she said.

Ruddock has been working with Pearson and the government-funded Australia Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS), headed by another Hawke and Keating-era Aboriginal leader, Mick Dodson, to train the likes of Major. AIATSIS recently received \$400,000 to run an “Indigenous leadership program”.

The economic model that Pearson and the government have in mind for Aboriginal communities can be gauged by a media release issued by Ruddock on July 7, publicising his visit to the Torres Strait to open “a spectacular new five-star eco resort on Poruma Island”.

Ruddock hailed the luxury tourist venture as an example of the kind of business operations that indigenous people needed to “build sustainable opportunities for employment, economic growth and preservation of traditional culture”.

The profitability of such projects will hinge on catering to the rich, utilising Aboriginal youth as cheap labour and beating corporate rivals in the highly competitive and unpredictable tourism industry.

Pearson and others are agitating for the conversion of “native title” rights, which retain some aspects of communal title, into freehold title, so that Aboriginal businesses can buy and sell, or borrow against, tracts of land. True to form, Clark has echoed these calls, recently urging Howard to “consider the prime importance of enabling Indigenous peoples to gain some economic capacity from their lands”.

But the years of service squeezed out of the older generation of Aboriginal officials and entrepreneurs have thoroughly discredited them in the eyes of ordinary people, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike. Both the government and the media are now cynically utilising this widespread hostility to replace them with a new layer, modelled on Pearson, whose program dovetails more closely with the requirements of the “free market”.



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