

# Aboriginal health and social crisis ignored in Australian election campaign

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The official Australian election campaign has been marked by a string of billion dollar spending promises from the Howard government and the Labor opposition, both of which are desperately attempting to win government through a carefully targetted campaign of bribery. None of this largesse, however, has been extended to Aborigines. The refusal of the major parties to address the chronic social crisis within indigenous communities again underscores their utter contempt for ordinary people.

This is most strikingly demonstrated in their policies for Aboriginal health. Indigenous people continue to suffer from appalling levels of disease and poor health, and have a death rate many times higher than that of other Australians. Life expectancy is just 56 for males and 63 for females—lower than that of “Third World” countries such as Papua New Guinea and Cambodia. Preventable diseases that have been eradicated in every other advanced capitalist country continue to plague indigenous communities.

Despite this, both of the major parties have flatly refused to make any commitment to provide funding for the amelioration of this crisis. Per capita federal spending on Aboriginal healthcare is just 74 percent of that for the rest of the population. In a report commissioned by the Australian Medical Association (AMA), Access Economics calculated that \$1.6 billion needs to be spent over four years to redress the deficit in indigenous healthcare funding.

The Labor Party’s election campaign announcement on Aboriginal affairs included a proposal to increase funding towards indigenous health by \$50.8 million over the same period—that is, only *three percent* of what is required. The Howard government has flatly refused to commit to any increase at all. AMA president, Dr. Bill Glasson, condemned both parties on Tuesday. “With less than a week till election day, the best offer on the table is Labor’s \$50.8 million over four years, but that is clearly just crumbs from the bountiful table of this election campaign,” he declared. “This election has seen considerable funding promised to people based on the need to win a vote. Today I call on some proper funding and programs to save lives and improve lives.”

Labor leader Mark Latham quickly dismissed the criticism. “Well, obviously health resources have to be used in an effective way,” he said. “We haven’t got unlimited spending. I wish we did in the health area, but we’re doing things in a financially responsible way.” This comment sums up the hypocrisy of the major parties. Billions can be thrown around to court “swinging

voters”, but “fiscal responsibility” demands that nothing be done to prevent the needless death and suffering of tens of thousands of Aborigines.

Latham attempted to link Aboriginal healthcare to his “Medicare Gold” policy, which promises free health care to those aged 75 and over. This fell flat however, when Pat Dodson, founding chairman of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, pointed out that very few Aborigines live to the age of 75.

The Liberal and Labor parties’ proposals for indigenous health are indicative of their approach to every other aspect of Aboriginal disadvantage. Aboriginal people form the most oppressed section of the working class, and continue to suffer from grossly disproportionate rates of poverty, unemployment, undereducation and imprisonment.

The lack of any attempt to address this crisis is ultimately bound up with a broader shift within the political establishment. Both parties are moving towards the abolition of all government assistance and welfare for Aborigines. Pro-business and “free market” measures are being promoted on a bipartisan basis as the only way forward for indigenous communities.

The complete disregard for Aboriginal issues in the course of the federal election campaign follows the government’s decision in April to dissolve the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC). The move was welcomed by Latham, who had already announced Labor’s intention to shut down the organisation. The opposition, he boasted, had “once again shown the way on policy”.

ATSIC has played a prominent role in official Aboriginal politics for the past decade and a half. The idea of a national organisation, staffed by Aborigines and responsible for the disbursement of funding for certain indigenous social and economic programs, was first proposed in December 1987 by the Hawke Labor government.

The formation of the new body was driven by the government’s determination to diffuse a growing political movement of the working class for justice and equality for indigenous people. In the late 1980s, popular demands were issued for immediate improvements in Aboriginal health, and an end to the growing numbers of indigenous youth dying in police custody. The widespread support enjoyed by this increasingly radical movement was demonstrated when people of all races joined mass protests during the 1988 bicentennial celebrations of colonial settlement in Australia.

Through ATSIC, the Labor government promoted a privileged stratum of indigenous politicians, bureaucrats and entrepreneurs, aimed at blocking any development of a politically conscious movement uniting Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal workers. Following the 1992 Mabo High Court decision, “native title” land rights became an important component of the drive to create an Aboriginal elite. ATSIC’s promotion of “self determination” meant, in practice, the use of native title rights to negotiate lucrative deals with mining and pastoral interests. As the Labor government had always understood, none of these developments had any positive effect on the living conditions of ordinary indigenous people.

ATSIC presided over the continuing deterioration of indigenous housing, health, education, and imprisonment rates. The hostility with which ordinary Aborigines regarded ATSIC was demonstrated with the inability of the organisation’s leadership to rally any protest in their defence. Ordinary Aborigines dubbed ATSIC “Aborigines Talking S— in Canberra”, and derided its staff as “Abocrats”.

The organisation’s failings, however, were not simply the result of the inadequacy of Aboriginal leadership and personnel within the body, as the major parties loudly insist. ATSIC’s corruption, waste and mismanagement were the inevitable product of the nature of the organisation itself, which was never designed to resolve the social crisis afflicting Aboriginal Australians. The Liberal and Labor parties are cynically condemning a body that they created, precisely to perpetuate inequality and to preside over the oppression of the vast majority of Aboriginal people. Now that ATSIC is sufficiently discredited, the political establishment is using the resultant anger, confusion and even demoralisation to instigate sweeping attacks on all forms of Aboriginal welfare.

ATSIC’s prominent role in the 1990s was, to a large extent, a product of a general consensus developing within the political establishment that the country’s image needed a major overhaul, particularly within the Asia-Pacific region, and especially on the issues of race and the treatment of the Aboriginal people. This was bound up with an attempt to forge a new nationalism, more conducive to Australia’s burgeoning economic interests in Asia. As a result, the media and prominent business interests began championing “reconciliation.”

ATSIC’s demise signals the end of this strategy. “We are starting to see a recognition that the emphasis that’s been placed on the rights and symbolic agenda over the last 20 or 30 years, to the detriment of a greater sense of community responsibility and personal responsibility, has been an error,” Howard declared earlier in the year. Latham echoed the right-wing nostrum that it was up to individuals to “lift themselves out of poverty”, without any government assistance. “Australia needs to find new ways of giving indigenous Australians the opportunity to take responsibility for their future,” stated Labor’s policy release on ATSIC.

Ideas such as “self-determination” and “reconciliation” are now regarded as burdensome diversions by important sections of the ruling elite, particularly when they involve government assistance for ATSIC’s various social and cultural programs. The older generation of Aboriginal officials, having played out their role,

have been abandoned in favour of a new layer of young right-wing entrepreneurs.

The most prominent member of this group is Noel Pearson, an Aboriginal lawyer with the Cape York Land Council, who has been widely promoted for his “radical” thinking on welfare and Aboriginal poverty. Pearson denies that the terrible social problems afflicting Aboriginal communities must be addressed in the context of Australia’s history of violence, racism and dispossession of its indigenous population, and instead insists that the problem is individual laziness and irresponsibility. He is a leading figure in the “Indigenous Enterprise Partnerships” project, which aims “to assist indigenous economic development bodies to create self-sustaining enterprise and real economic opportunities that break welfare dependency”.

The project has nothing whatsoever to do with improving the living conditions of ordinary Aborigines. Its goal is to unleash the unrestrained forces of the market on impoverished communities, forcing people to work for poverty-level wages. The only winners will be the corporations profiting from cheap labour, and a small layer of indigenous entrepreneurs. The ruling elite’s *modus operandi* of promoting a tiny stratum of privileged Aborigines remains the same—but now the “middle man” of the ATSIC bureaucracy has been bypassed in favour of a more direct relationship with Aboriginal entrepreneurs.

Lessons should be drawn from the record of ATSIC and the present right-wing offensive against ordinary Aborigines. None of the problems facing indigenous people can be resolved within the framework of the profit system. It was this system, now touted as the answer to all the problems of indigenous communities, that was responsible for the dispossession and genocide of Aborigines that followed Australia’s colonisation.

The solution requires nothing short of the complete reorganisation of society, based on an economic system that embraces public ownership and democratic control, not private profit. Only a society organised around socialist and internationalist principles can ensure genuine social equality, with decent living conditions and health standards for everybody.

The Socialist Equality Party is fielding candidates in the federal election to lay the basis for a mass political movement of the working class that will fight for this perspective. We call on all workers and young people, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike, to join us in the struggle for a socialist alternative.



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