

## The Howard government's approach to the policy of indigenous self-determination

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**Abstract:** In this paper, I discuss Dominic O'Sullivan's target article and extend his discussion on the Howard Government's approach to Indigenous self-determination in Australia. The Howard Government's approach is explored and it is argued that its strident opposition to Indigenous self-determination has turned back the clock of Indigenous Affairs policy in Australia.

**Keywords:** Australia, indigeneity, John Howard, self-determination

In his paper, Dominic O'Sullivan makes a number of substantive points concerning the politics of indigeneity. He argues that Indigenous peoples are entitled to collective rights on the basis of being Indigenous peoples (O'Sullivan, 2006). He also argues that Indigenous self-determination is essential for Indigenous peoples. In this paper, I extend O'Sullivan's brief mention of Australian Prime Minister John Howard's attitudes towards assimilation and nationalism concerning Australia. In particular, I explore the Howard Government's approach to Indigenous self-determination and argue that in their ten-years of power, the Howard Government has dramatically reduced the opportunities for Indigenous peoples to exercise their self-determination.

Even prior to becoming Australian Prime Minister in 1996, John Howard had expressed his strong opposition to notions of Indigenous self-determination and separateness. Howard strongly condemned the efforts of the Hawke and Keating Labor Governments to acknowledge the unique status of Indigenous people within the wider Australian nation, such as the introduction of an Indigenous representative body, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and the official recognition of the Aboriginal flag (Howard, 1989; Howard, 1995). Once elected in 1996, the Howard Government quickly abolished the bipartisan policy of Indigenous self-determination. This policy was introduced by the Whitlam Government in 1972 and had been supported, in various guises, by subsequent governments for the next twenty-four years. As Prime Minister, Howard criticised what he saw as the previous Labor Government's support of 'political correctness' and special interest groups (Howard, 1996a; Howard, 1996b). Howard condemned any notion of separateness within the Australian community, particularly the long-held policy of Indigenous self-determination. He argued that ATSIC lacked public accountability and had misused public money (Howard, 1996c). He then imposed significant budget cuts on ATSIC of approximately \$400 million (Howard, 1996d). Further, the budget cuts were not made to those ATSIC programmes that focussed on housing or employment, but rather were made to 'political' programmes such as land acquisition, cultural activities and self-determination.

Over the past ten years, the Howard Government has also attacked Indigenous self-determination and separateness on a number of other occasions. In 1996, following alleged financial mismanagement by several Indigenous legal services, Senator John Herron, the then Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs, argued that not only should there be an audit of the services, but that the Indigenous legal services should be abolished (Herron, 1996a; Herron, 1996b; see also Nicoll, 1998, p.179). Also in 1996, the Howard Government rejected the previous Labor Government's substantive Social Justice Package and instead merely stated a commitment to improve Indigenous socio-economic conditions (CAR, 1997, p.13; Tickner, 2001, p.46). In 1998, Alexander Downer, the Minister for Foreign Affairs, requested the term 'self-determination' be removed from the United Nations *Draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (Forbes, 1998, p.7). More recently, in 2004, the Howard Government introduced Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRAs). These SRAs required Indigenous communities to implement better social practices, such as higher rates of school

attendance and literacy, in order to receive improved community infrastructure, such as health clinics and petrol bowsers (McCausland, 2005).

The most significant example of the Howard Government's attack on Indigenous self-determination was its decision to abolish ATSIC. In announcing this decision on 15 April 2004, Howard (2004) argued:

We believe very strongly that the experiment in separate representation, elected representation, for indigenous people has been a failure. We will not replace ATSIC with an alternative body. We will appoint a group of distinguished indigenous people to advise the Government on a purely advisory basis in relation to aboriginal (sic) affairs. Programmes will be mainstreamed, but arrangements will be established to ensure that there is a major policy role for the Minister for Indigenous Affairs ... it [ATSIC] has become too preoccupied with what might loosely be called symbolic issues and [has showed] too little concern with delivering real outcomes for indigenous people

This decision was criticised by both Indigenous leaders, such as Bill Jonas and Jackie Huggins, as well as by a Senate Select Committee established by the Opposition parties. Further, the critics argued that if ATSIC were to be abolished, it must be replaced by another Indigenous representative body (Maddison, 2006). However, the Howard Government ignored these criticisms and passed the *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission Amendment Bill 2004* on 16 March 2005. Further, the Howard Government did not replace ATSIC with another Indigenous representative organisation. Rather it introduced a non-representative, government-appointed advisory board, the National Indigenous Council.

In discussing the abolishment of ATSIC, it is important to record the role of the opposition Labor Party. In a similar vein to the New Zealand Labour Party's adoption of elements of the National Party's race relation policies (see O'Sullivan, 2006), the Labor Party failed to provide leadership regarding self-determination. In March 2004, then Labor leader Mark Latham pre-empted the Howard Government's announcement on ATSIC when he announced that, if elected, the Labor Party would abolish ATSIC (ALP, 2004). Robbins (2006, p.83) argued that this announcement provided the opportunity for the Howard Government to abolish ATSIC.

The period of the Howard Government, from 1996 to 2006, has resulted in significant changes to many aspects of the Indigenous Affairs policy area. The most significant change has occurred in the policy of self-determination, a policy that, along with ATSIC, has now been abolished. The Howard Government has consequently turned back the clock on Indigenous Affairs to a time, prior to the 1970s, where assimilation policies ensured that Indigenous people had little chance to determine their own future and Governments regularly developed Indigenous Affairs policies without little, or no, genuine consultation and negotiation with Indigenous people. O'Sullivan's (2006) discussion on the politics of indigeneity and the attempts by the major parties in New Zealand to develop public policies devoid of notions of indigeneity certainly draw a strong parallel with recent political events in Australia.

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