

SETTING THE AGENDA: NEO-LIBERAL THINK-TANKS AND THE GOVERNMENT

INTERVENTION IN THE NORTHERN TERRITORY

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Over the past twenty-five years there has been a remarkable global resurgence of a political and economic perspective opposed to any interference in the free market, leading to a restoration of class power and concentration of wealth. This phenomenon, called neo-liberalism (or economic rationalism), has been facilitated by an international network of think tanks generously funded by corporate resources. These think tanks successfully use techniques that enable previously unpalatable ideas, which serve the interest of the elite class, to become mainstream opinion. In Australia, the two main neo-liberal think-tanks are the Institute for Public Affairs (IPA), and the Centre for Independent Studies (CIS).

Both the IPA and the CIS receive significant support from large corporations, particularly mining companies, and have close links with government and the media, particularly with the Murdoch-owned newspaper The Australian.

These think-tanks have actively promoted neo-liberal ideas concerning economic liberalisation, deregulation, privatisation, reduced government spending and lower taxation. The Australian think tanks have been particularly active promoting a dismantling of the welfare state. Through their advocacy of these causes, they have had a significant influence on the ideological direction of the Howard government.

In recent years, the think tanks have also promoted policy changes in Indigenous affairs. Between 2000 and 2004, the IPA published 33 articles on Indigenous affairs. More recently the Bennelong Society has been the forum which has been used by the IPA (particularly Gary Johns, former Senior Fellow with the IPA and now president of the Bennelong Society) to advocate their perspective on Indigenous affairs.

The IPA articles, and most of the material published on the Bennelong society website, tend to promote some particular ideas about Australian Indigenous policy; in particular, that policies of Indigenous self-determination and land rights were failed socialist experiments, foisted on remote Aboriginal communities by 'Nugget' Coombs, and that these policies have led to 'separatism' and 'exceptionalism', which is excluding Indigenous people from benefiting from the mainstream Australian economy.

The CIS has developed an Indigenous Affairs Research Program over the past three years, led by Helen Hughes, a former World Bank economist with no previous involvement in Indigenous affairs. During this time, the CIS has published six monographs in its 'Issues Analyses' series, and many articles in mainstream newspapers on the topic, mostly focusing on the plight of remote communities. This year, the CIS published a book on this topic by Hughes called Lands of Shame.

Academic rigour is lacking in these publications. The think tanks generally publish their own monographs, or articles in non-refereed journals, to avoid academic scrutiny. The contents of their publications however are then republished in opinion pieces in daily newspapers, and repeated by sympathetic newspaper columnists or talkback radio hosts. In this way, they maximise their effect in the mainstream media and culture.

Think tank publications sometimes attempt to create a veneer of scholarship by citing other 'research' as evidence for a statement. However, the reference given often refers to a previous think tank publication, where the statement is unsubstantiated. In this way incorrect allegations get repeated through secondary citations and

become accepted as fact.

One such allegation that is has been repeated sufficiently to have achieved widespread acceptance is the suggestion that Aboriginal disadvantage is largely confined to remote communities, with the obvious corollary being that moving Aboriginal people away from remote areas would be beneficial.

The theme of the 2006 annual Bennelong Society conference was 'Leaving remote communities'. According to Gary Johns, 'Aborigines living in remote areas are worse off than their compatriots in town' and they should therefore be encouraged to leave in search of better opportunities. In his opening address, Johns said:

The challenge for government is to stop funding programs that militate against the migratory solution ... In looking after those who cannot be part of the change-of-behaviour regime, government will have to be careful to not make investments that may inhibit the ongoing migratory trend. The government has begun to stop supporting a recreational lifestyle in the name of preserving a culture. The extent to which Aborigines from remote regions will be more akin to refugees than migrants will be a measure of the difficulty of their adjustment to new

circumstances. Fortunately, Australia has vast experience at dealing with both.

This year the theme was 'The Task Ahead'. When the conference was held this month, the Commonwealth government was moving the task along, and speakers hailed the intervention in the NT as a justified facilitation of movement of Aboriginal people from remote areas to urban areas, as a desirable shift from an unsustainable lifestyle, and an inevitable response to labour market forces.

The founder of the Bennelong Society, former Liberal minister for Aboriginal affairs Peter Howson, wrote an article in Quadrant in 2005 entitled Aboriginal land rights: the next battle ground, in which he gave an indication of why the think tanks are so eager to see Aboriginal people leave remote areas. He stated that there are two reasons to reform land rights. One is the fact that 'the Coombsian policies of the last 35 years have been responsible for the social and moral disintegration of many Aboriginal communities'. The second reason is the prospect of the resurgence of the world's nuclear power industry ... the NT has long been regarded by exploration geologists as a uranium province of world class, and the prospects of uranium exports worth

billions of dollars is ... a very enticing one.

Misleading health statistics are also frequently used to justify intervention in remote communities. Helen Hughes suggests there is a conspiracy among health organisations to hide the truth; she tells us that Aboriginal health is much worse in remote areas, but this is hidden from us because the only available statistics are averages across the whole of Australia. In fact, the most accurate statistics available are those from remote areas, and Aboriginal disadvantage is spread across all geographic areas. Hughes says that the Western Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey showed that 'remote child health is worse in every instance than overall Aboriginal child health' The citation Hughes gives for that statement is not the survey itself, but a report about it in The Australian newspaper. If she had read the report, she would see that she is wrong: the survey shows clearly that on many indicators, particularly relating to mental health, Aboriginal children in remote areas do better than urban Aboriginal children. There is also good evidence that the health of people living in the most remote communities - those currently targeted for closure - is better than those on larger more centralised communities. Hughes ignores this data. As Tim Rowse said in recent review of Lands of Shame: 'Helen Hughes is not

encumbered by evidence'

The questionable scholarship in think tank publications might not be such a concern, if they did not have such a significant influence on policy makers. In 2006, the Minister for Health and Ageing Tony Abbott called for 'new paternalism' in Indigenous health. In his speech he quoted extensively from Hughes's work as though he was citing rigorous research. When the new paternalism was enacted this year, with the Commonwealth Government intervention in the Northern Territory, a raft of components which appear to have little connection with protecting children was included. They are, however, actions which were foreshadowed in think tank publications.

In *Lands of Shame*, published in May this year, Helen Hughes made the following recommendations:

- * small communities should be consolidated into what she calls 'core concentration centres', with health services and schools limited to these centres;
- * A health audit of all children should be conducted;
- * Mainstream local government should replace local councils, and if local government proves to be dysfunctional a government administrator should be appointed;

- * Communal title should be converted to leasehold;
- * Public housing should be converted to privatised housing, with new houses and funding for maintenance to go only to those communities with 99-year leases;
- * The 'pernicious' permit system should be abolished;
- * CDEP should be ended;
- * Customary law should be ended;
- * The powers of the Lands Trusts and the Land councils should be 'reined in'.

Over the following months, most of these recommendations have been implemented by the Commonwealth government in the Northern Territory, under the guise of protecting children, despite the fact that the recommendations are not based on evidence, but on a neo-liberal ideology.

In a recently published book of essays on the NT intervention (Coercive reconciliation, edited by Altman and Hinkson), one of the most interesting pieces was by John Sanderson, a former Chief of the Australian Army and governor of Western Australia. In his essay, entitled Reconciliation and the failure of neo-liberal globalization he states that in the intervention

Little recognition is given to the much studied and widely understood deleterious effect on physical and mental health and cultural and social disempowerment. Such an assimilationist approach is most unlikely to work, because it is once again inflicted on Indigenous people rather than generated by them. It is founded on an ideology that may eventually be hotly contested at its source anyway.

He is right about the effects on health: we should draft into the PHA, because this is a public health issue. The assimilationist approach may not work for benefit of Aboriginal Australians, but it is questionable whether this is the main aim anyway. One hopes that, as Sanderson suggests, the neo-liberal ideology is contested, but at present it is enormously powerful, and its application to Indigenous affairs could have disastrous consequences.