

# TO WHAT EXTENT HAVE WE MOVED BEYOND THE 'SOFT BIGOTRY' OF LOW EXPECTATIONS?

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Good morning.

Before I begin, I would like to acknowledge the Turrbal and Yugara as the First Nations owners of the lands where the Queensland University of Technology (QUT) resides and pay my respects to their Elders, past and present, and emerging, and to Aboriginal Elders of other communities who may be here today.

## 1. PURPOSE

In December 2018, I presented a paper to the annual Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) conference of that year entitled:

*"Towards embedding a narrative of high expectations and positive thinking into the policy framework regarding the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children".*

The purpose of the current paper is to outline the results of some efforts towards embedding such an approach in the national platform of the Australian Labor Party.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

In presenting my AARE paper last year, I noted that the background to that year's Sambell Oration, delivered by Professor Chris Sarra, highlights the:

*"low expectations and deficit thinking (that) have for too long framed Indigenous education",*

and how implementing Sarra's positive approach regarding the education of Aboriginal children might also:

*"unlock the potential of other Australian children".*

In the course of his Sambell oration, Professor Sarra referred to policy intent - some people think that "policy success lies in making Aboriginal Australians just like everybody else ... The policy intent here has always been about taking Aboriginal Australians from surviving to complying. We must instead plot a course that takes us from surviving to thriving".

During last year's presentation, I also referred to Ken Wyatt, Australia's first Indigenous member of the House of Representatives, and (now) Australia's first Aboriginal Minister for Indigenous Australians, who once wrote:

*"I know what it is like to be denigrated for my race, to be told to leave school and to get a job on a farm because 'Aboriginal kids don't succeed'".*

### **3. A WIDER CONTEXT**

As Nicola Berry observes, whilst that phrase, the 'soft bigotry' of low expectations, which is credited to former George W. Bush speech writer Michael Gerson, and is one originally used to describe the detrimental effects of societal attitudes towards people of colour, it can also be applied to other people.

The widespread nature of the practice is illustrated Berry (2019) in which she, as a person from a foster care background, recalled tutors who have said they 'never expected anyone from my background to be in this class, because outcomes are so poor'.

In doing so, one must not forget the importance of embedding a narrative of high expectations and positive thinking into the policy framework for *all* students. This is nicely expressed by Allen, who writes that:

*(although) "Australia spends significantly more per student than the OECD average ... our benchmarking data – both nationally ... and internationally ... is showing a decline in educational standards".*

Allen further notes that:

*"... if we wish to remain internationally competitive, we must extend our brightest – not just ensure minimal standards for those who might be falling behind".*

## 4. BACKGROUND

Vass *et al.* observe that in Australia, in a similar vein to Canada, issues of difference and education in Australia have tended to be examined through the lens of multiculturalism or interculturalism, rather than race.

Vass *et al.* contend, however, that the presence and effects of race and racism continue to shape the priorities, experiences and outcomes of:

- *Learners;*
- *Educators; and*
- *Education researchers,*

in school and higher education settings.

It may be asked:

*'Is it appropriate to add policy makers to that list?'*

It is in trying to answer that question, and the question asked in the title, by placing in context a number of events that occurred during the past year, some positive, some negative, where the focus of the current presentation lies.

## 5. OTHER PAPERS DELIVERED TO THIS CONFERENCE

Before proceeding, I refer to several presentations delivered to this conference, which are most relevant to my presentation.

The first of these papers that I refer to, "Education research and influencing government policy", given by QUT's Pro Vice Chancellor (Indigenous Strategy) Professor Barney-Leitch, goes to the heart of what researchers must do to see their work leading to a change for the better.

Several other papers delivered to this conference refer to this issue, among others, Kevin Lowe's "A failure to deliver: A post structural analysis of education policy in Indigenous education".

On this point, John Guenther's "10 Years of My School. Are we any wiser? Implications for remote First Nations education", and (with Sam Osborne) "Instruments of power and control in First Nations remote education" both demonstrate how policy developed and implemented (at great expense) to

promote increased school attendance actually led to declining rates of attendance.

Another conference presentation that I should refer to, "Exploring social problems through critical discourse analysis as an analytic method", given by QUT's Dr Jennifer Alford, underlines the impact of different modes of expressing concepts (whether by words, images, or through other means), directly relates to the phrase in the current paper's title .

Stephen Fitzpatrick, in an article, "Reconciling a Policy Mess" (not presented at this conference), writing about the Closing the Gap Program, finds that:

*"the overwhelming conclusion is that long-term failure has been the result of a lack of consistent Indigenous voices in policy making".*

Fitzpatrick observes the abrogation of repeated government promises to do things "with, not to" Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. He notes, reflecting on why the "Closing the Gap Program has been such an underwhelming enterprise".

## **6. A PERSONAL NOTE**

Let me say that when I first joined the ALP Victorian Branch's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Policy Committee, of which I have been a member for some twenty years, sometimes serving as its Secretary, there were no Indigenous members. Now, most of the Policy Committee members are Indigenous, as also are both its President and Secretary.

It is, perhaps, not surprising that it is the Victorian Branch's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Policy Committee that I have been involved with more than any other. Many Jewish people, such as I, feel a strong affinity for the causes that Indigenous people are still fighting for today. This was underlined by Noel Pearson, in the course of his delivery of the 2018 Sir Zelman Cowen Oration on Indigenous Self Determination and the Uluru Statement from the Heart.

Noel Pearson specifically made mention of the activism of William Cooper of the Yorta Yorta, who not only advocated on behalf of his own people, but when he read about Kristallnacht in late 1938, wrote a protest letter and then organised a march from his home in Footscray to the German Consulate,

and Yad Vashem has officially recognised William Cooper's actions as the only known private protest about Kristallnacht anywhere in the world.

Aside from both of our peoples historically suffering the most serious discrimination, with its dreadful consequences, Noel Pearson also made several references to the deep links between people of our faith and Aboriginal people, not the least of which resides in our respective peoples' deep spiritual connections to land.

In November 2017, I attended a National Schools Forum at Melbourne University in my role as a member of the Education and Youth Affairs Policy Committee of the Victorian Branch of the Australian Labor Party. My membership of the Education and Youth Affairs Policy Committee arose for me to represent the Victorian Branch's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Policy Committee.

The Forum was led by the Shadow (Federal) Minister for Education and Training, the Hon. Tanya Plibersek, and facilitated by the Hon Mary Delahuntly (previously Victorian Minister for Education).

A range of topics were discussed, but of particular interest to me was an impassioned speech on the topic which is the subject of the current presentation, from Dyonne Anderson, President of the National Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Principals Association, previously Director, Service Delivery, of the Stronger Smarter Institute.

## **7. THE CURRENT POLICY**

The current National Policy of the Australian Labor Party is silent on the subject of:

*“embedding a narrative of high expectations and positive thinking into the policy framework regarding the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children”.*

However, the current (Policy) Platform of the Victorian State Government, which it took to voters at last year's election, takes a somewhat different approach in that it

*“supports Aboriginal communities to take a leadership role in the implementation of Marrung, Victoria's new Aboriginal Education Plan, that*

*seeks to ensure that our education system is inclusive, responsive and respectful of Aboriginal people at every stage of their education”.*

Geraldine Atkinson, President of the Victorian Aboriginal Education Association Incorporated (VAEAI) observes in its *Introduction*, that:

*“the Marrung ... will ensure that Koorie families, and Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander people from other parts of Australia who live in Victoria, have the doors held wide open to all learning and development services, from early childhood onwards”.*

Atkinson further records that the VAEAI aspires:

*“for success for every Koorie child in education, achieving their developmental potential and their ambitions for life”.*

This is underlined by the many references in the *Marrung* to “*high expectations*” for the educational achievement of learners.

## **8. DEVELOPING NEW POLICY (& HOPEFULLY HAVING IT ADOPTED)**

### **STEP 1**

Those of you who attended last year’s AARE Conference may recall my reporting that, early on in 2018, in anticipation of the Party’s National Conference later in the year, we (individual ALP members, branches and other constituent bodies) were invited to study the Draft Platform, and to suggest amendments.

I, for one, proposed amendments in several areas, including an amendment that specifically relates to the subject of this presentation.

That amendment was reviewed by the Victorian Branch’s Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Policy Committee and (also) by the Branch’s Education and Youth Affairs Policy Committee. Both Committee’s adopted almost identical modifications to the originally proposed amendment, which read (in part):

*“... In Section 7 “A world-class education for all Australians”, Subsection “Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians”, insert following paragraph 59, an additional paragraph:*

*“Labor supports the innovative work towards embedding a narrative of high expectations and a strength-based approach in the education of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children.”*

Just because a Victorian Branch ALP Policy Committee adopts a policy position does not mean that it necessarily becomes a part of Federal Labor's Platform.

As I was soon to find out!

## **STEP 2**

For reasons that we have been unable to ascertain, the proposed amendment was not formally put to the Party's 2018 National Conference, and the Federal platform does not reflect its suggested approach.

## **STEP 3**

However, all was not lost.

Both the Victorian Branch's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Policy Committee and its Education and Youth Affairs Policy Committee have communicated with relevant Shadow Ministers in the Federal Parliamentary Labor Party advocating the approach suggested by the proposed amendment.

Furthermore, several local branches of the Victorian Party adopted resolutions in line with the sentiments expressed by that amendment, whilst two delegates to the November 2019 Victorian State Conference of the Party submitted an Urgency Resolution on the subject.

However, almost as a classic illustration of the long, and at times difficult, process that policy development involves, the November 2019 Victorian State Conference Agenda Committee determined that resolution to be “Not Considered Urgent”.

Notwithstanding this disappointment, proposer of that resolution, David Imber, took the opportunity, when the Education and Youth Affairs Policy Committee presented its report to State Conference, to speak to Conference of the proposed policy's importance.

He specifically noted the fact that *Victoria's Aboriginal Education Plan* is the *Marrung* with its many references to "high expectations" for the educational achievement of learners..

Fortunately, and also somewhat ameliorating this disappointment, the Agenda Committee referred the resolution back to both the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders Policy Committee and the Education and Youth Affairs Policy Committee for further consideration.

#### **STEP 4**

I am therefore hopeful that the Agenda Committee's referral will result in a similar resolution being submitted to both next year's State and National ALP Conferences with the result that this story will then have the happy ending of the policy being formally adopted by the Party's National Conference.

#### **9. CONCLUDING REMARK**

I conclude by again referring to the paper delivered by QUT's Pro Vice Chancellor (Indigenous Strategy), Professor Barney-Leitch, "Education research and influencing government policy".

Ultimately, the framework of any government policies, good and bad, emerge from the workings of the major political parties, albeit that their details are developed by dedicated public servants.

However, we are now in an era of diminishing direct involvement in the workings of the political system on the part of ordinary people.

To illustrate - for example, membership of each of the two major political parties, Labor and Liberal, which was once over 100,000 in both cases, has halved over recent decades.

I put to you that this diminishing direct involvement in political parties on the part of ordinary people has led to failures in policy development

I therefore conclude by suggesting that, notwithstanding the long and difficult process, the more ordinary people become directly involved in the political party of their choice, the more likely will be the emergence of sensible policy decisions on the part of government.

Thank You.