



And Hast Thou Slain the Jabberwock?

Aboriginal myths for white voters

Prime Minister John Howard moved indigenous affairs from the Immigration portfolio in late January, placing it 'more appropriately' in the Department of Family and Community Services. 'It reflects a continued determination of the Government to have more mainstreaming of indigenous affairs matters', he said at the time (24 January 2006). The new minister, Mal Brough — a male former army officer now in charge of women's issues, Aborigines and families — was quickly on air saying Aboriginal families were just like any others.

The Brough (or Howard) policy emerged in Brisbane's *Courier-Mail*. 'Aborigines fishing for direction, says minister', by Steven Wardill (25 February 2006). Beside a photo of Brough catching a small fish on a wharf in the Gulf of Carpentaria with two Aboriginal children, the article begins: *Aboriginal people are healthier and better educated when their remote missions are run by church groups, according to [the new minister] ... The demise of church-run missions had contributed to a decline in the welfare of Aborigines and their communities. Following a two-day tour of several depressed communities in Queensland and the Northern Territory, Mr Brough said self-determination had failed.*

For English-speaking readers, 'self-determination' in contemporary Australia is a word largely appropriated by the Right, including the Howard government, describing anything that happened before 1996, its symptoms being failure to achieve indigenous prosperity and happiness. The 'self' part of the term is meant to imply that Aboriginal peoples and Torres Strait Islanders can't make their own decisions. The term no longer means what it means everywhere else: a universal right to make decisions for one's community. That right in practice is often interpreted as political autonomy within nation-states resulting from negotiated agreement. Some of the local Aboriginal councillors did

not turn up to meet Brough on tour, in part because they disagreed with the proposals of Cape York indigenous leader Noel Pearson, whom government and others, such as the *Australian*, selectively use for policy. They disagreed with food vouchers replacing welfare payments, the *Courier-Mail* tells us. Also:

Mr Brough revealed the Federal Government would soon begin basing external experts at those communities deemed to be in crisis to assess the dynamics and individual problems. The experts would develop detailed multi-government plans to tackle those problems.

That is big news. The Howard government does not usually accept 'experts'. Perhaps these will be ancient missionaries — or bluff old army officers.

Shadow minister Senator Chris Evans made Labor's indigenous policy speech on 10 March. It contains accurate and useful critiques of the Howard government approach such as:

The community led by the Howard Government has begun to cool on the notion of true reconciliation and to abrogate any white responsibility for Indigenous circumstances ... Labor remains committed to Indigenous self-determination. There is a wealth of international evidence that indicates that this is essential in achieving lasting and meaningful change in Indigenous communities.

Contrition for past Labor failures to change significantly socio-economic outcomes is also stated in Evans' speech. The *Australian* and others leapt upon this admission to say that Howard's 'practical reconciliation' had won the day, as Howard himself began claiming several years ago (*Australian*, 6 May 2002), apparently on the principle that silence among critics was consent. It isn't. Howard, the *Australian* and a few others have created a fantasy monster of black fecklessness coupled with their white allies' manipulation to delude a trusting, kindly Australian taxpaying public, now righteously unmasked so that not only are we whites all blameless but can hector

blacks while keeping our tax money in our pockets. They have fought their imaginary Jabberwock in loud combat and often-heroic prose.

One of the worst frauds perpetrated in Australia occurred over the last 30 years of the 20th century by the rights and reconciliation lobby who claimed they had a solution to the deprivation of indigenous Australians ... [I]t created a generation-long disaster for Aborigines who could not climb aboard the gravy train of guilt ... We have reached the point where there are few if any credible defenders of the old orthodoxies.

This from an editorial, 'Practical Politics', 11 March 2006, one of many published in similar vein in the *Australian* in recent years.

Credible or not, some of us will continue to remind the public that Aboriginal affairs are not a 'discovery' of John Howard and his ministers; that indigenous ethno-politics do not need some new 'experts' and, as former minister Vanstone mentioned (see *Arena Magazine* No 78), are moving along quite nicely in friendly countries abroad; and that many eager commentators are self-deluding.

When Federal Labor announced its own policy on 10 March, one reaching out for bi-partisanship as of old, Brough's (or Howard's) office wrote a predictably petty reply:

While it appears that Senator Evans can see the need for more practical policy settings, we need to see a wider acceptance of this direction within the Federal [Labor party] before we can accept that they have abandoned ideology in favour of practical assistance.

As usual, the Howard government's priority is tackling Labor's image, not Aboriginal reality or needs.

'Lewis Carroll', i.e. the Reverend Dodgson, brilliant in several fields, created an epic monster that makes sense in *Jabberwocky's* nonsense verse, even adding a number of words to the English language. Right moralising and fantasy in indigenous policy since the mid-1990s, really taking off since mid-2001, is sterile and seems only to excite its own authors.

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