

In the Most High and Palmy State of Queensland

Peter Beattie's effort to improve the lives of Indigenous Australians needs support

Palm Island, the deceptively paradisaical island off Townsville, has been rarely out of the news through the Christmas-New Year and summer holiday period. The national tragedy of Mulrunji Doomadgee's death in police custody on 19 November 2004, and a rush for 'closure' which has followed the 27 September 2006 report of Coroner Clements, has been batted around by media, commentators, and the 'justice' system. Related tragedies such as the suicide of Mulrunji's son and suicide of a key Aboriginal witness, have almost slipped beneath due attention.

Those outside Queensland need to understand exotic local factors. One is the suspicion that women in responsible jobs (coroner, state public prosecutor, lawyer, judge, *et al.*) are not really up to 'men's work' — like keeping Aboriginal people 'in their place'? Also, the Queensland police and their union through their words and deeds have revived fears about unhealthy police and local cultures that have no place in a liberal democracy.

In *The Australian* for New Year's Eve, of all moments, Queensland Premier Peter Beattie told journalist Tony Koch that he remains committed to Aboriginal peoples. The article recalled Beattie's visit as Premier to Pormpuraaw on Cape York some years ago, where Beattie's wife was welcomed back. She had been almost the only white child in the local school when her dad was Anglican priest there in the early 1960s. On that later visit Beattie had said to Koch; 'If, when I leave politics, indigenous affairs in Queensland have not been sorted out, I will consider I have failed.'

The final section ('Visions and Values') of Beattie's 'autobiography' *Making a Difference* includes a chapter titled 'Indigenous Australia'. The chapter is the worst sort of litany of past and present good intentions and programs, and mostly avoids Palm Island, only

making passing reference to it: 'Of course, the situation [in Indigenous Queensland] is still far from perfect, and communities such as Palm Island present major challenges.' The book was published well after the Palm Island death and riot of 2004. But let's not blame Beattie; it reads as if written by a bored summer student who had minimal contact with the hero.

I'm committedly critical of such official prose about Indigenous peoples (or other social issues). Australia today doesn't fool world media on Palm Island or Cronulla or Redfern, but manages to baffle itself.

Beattie is much criticised for his volubility on many subjects. On the Palm Island question he has not always seemed nimble enough for many commentators, but by what standard? Beattie is palpably alone in the midst of loud, angry, and aggressive forces, many of whom are playing their own hands for their own agendas, and few of whom are offering to take responsibility for action.

The history of Queensland Indigenous policy is grim reading — see *The Way We Civilise* by Rosalind Kidd — but Peter Beattie is certainly not the cause of that. It is an Australia-wide problem. Political bluster at election-time and 'law and order' reactions are counter-productive even if they win a day's breathing-space for an uninterested or unimaginative politician.

The problem of Queensland and other state governments was simply and clearly stated by Geoff Dow recently in the *Australian Financial Review* (11 September 2006) when he explained that Queensland's 'low tax mentality' means that health, water, child protection, education and Indigenous affairs are endlessly juggled around to manage inadequate revenue for modern public services.

In the current mess, Beattie has tried to remain respectful of all sides, and especially to resist the easy political

path of black-bashing. It is difficult. The various key groups involved would not be able to hold a coherent or rational meeting, even if some of them would stop grand-standing. He wants peace, he wants progress, he would dearly like social improvement and an end to low-level violence. Following the voices and comments it is not hard to hear that, Australia-wide, Aboriginal communities have finally had enough, that a threshold has been crossed.

On another continent a long time ago, I worked in a largely invisible small office under a very strong head of government. Normally, we only dealt with other invisible insiders. Indigenous issues required special priority, and I found myself for a critical period in the unusual position of being semi-visible and dealing with outside clients — indigenous leaders and organisations. I confided to friends in my office that I felt I was trying to defuse a bomb on TV — everyone was standing well back and shouting conflicting and mostly unhelpful advice, and a few epithets, but only I would be blown to smithereens if I lost my cool or made a mistake.

Premier Beattie may — or may not — have helpful supporters. I don't know. At the national level, Prime Minister Keating and his minister Tickner had very little help in the early 1990s but they went ahead with Indigenous reforms all the same, only to be abused by all sides including their supposed colleagues, friends and allies, then and later. Beattie needs all the moral and other support Australians can give him because what he is trying to do is vital for all Australians.

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