



Moving and Removing

Relocation threatens people's wellbeing

The lead editorial of *The Australian* recently concluded, '[The] only issue relevant to the broader Australian interest—the appalling state of Aboriginal affairs in the Territory', must be the principal focus of the Northern Territory (NT) government (20 November 2006). While a national 'institution' got it right on one key issue — that the NT is centrally an Indigenous region — laying all the blame for problems at the door of Chief Minister Clare Martin and her government is surely unfair.

If one follows the news of the past year, the huff and puff of federal minister Mal Brough on NT Indigenous matters large and small has become a sort of comedy in which a loud and pushy former army officer shouts at Ms Martin and her cabinet, and she makes clear that NO, she and they will not be stampeded into actions opposed and/or resented by local peoples. As for Aboriginal communities, we recently read headlines about an angry old lady poking Broughie with a stick several times when he tried to speak to an angry community at Uluru.

Perhaps it looks good to Howard's voters to pretend the government is 'doing something', but manhandling Indigenous peoples and their concerns will never solve problems.

Worse, more and more non-Indigenous voices in Australia are calling for wholesale removal of hinterland people and communities to towns or cities in the name of solving community health and social problems, and locating people near the 'mainstream' economy.

This debate, once settled in favour of not removing people, has revived in Canada thanks to one or two particularly problem-ridden places. As the *National Post* commented editorially, 'It is always sad to see a community die out. But the continuity of a local culture, native or otherwise, must never take precedence over the well-being of its inhabitants. The people of

Kashechewan should be moved to Timmins where they can gradually begin to enjoy the social and economic benefits that most Canadians take for granted. They have already suffered enough in their impoverished, squalid hamlet. Let us not doom them to more suffering in the name of cultural sensitivity.'

As Waubeshig, to use Harvey McCue's traditional name, the renowned Indigenous affairs executive and educator pointed out in reply, 'If the residents of Kashechewan agree to it, the relocation proposed by (a new government inquiry) will result in their assimilation. The same would be true of any other isolated First Nations communities that accept this route' (*National Post*, 16 November 2006). He goes on that while the now notorious Cree village Kashechewan on the west (Ontario) side of James Bay, the southern extension of Hudson Bay, gets bare life support from senior governments, the Cree communities on the other side, in Quebec, are flourishing thanks to their local and regional self-government. These James Bay districts were once among the most isolated in Canada, but land claims settlement and school board, etc. — of which McCue was chief executive — gave the Quebec side a chance.

Perhaps the Canadian psyche is conditioned by the Highland Clearances in Scotland, the source of much Canadian population and tradition, but there is no facile groundswell opinion yet for removal. Over the past 40 years of 'education' as Canadians have learned to listen to and understand better the viewpoints and cultural imperatives of Indigenous people — thanks to one well-reported conflict or issue after another — many of us realise that ethnocide and assimilation are no road to a good future.

Some individuals will leave for the bright lights and use what they learn there to help the people back home. In the nineteenth century Ireland, Iceland,

Norway, and Sweden were desperate with much of their population escaping across the Atlantic on often unseaworthy ships. Those four countries are all strong and enduring cultures and societies today, and nobody would suggest that it would have been better to be rid of them.

In Canada, in post-war decades, there were remote area resettlement programs from 'outposts' to 'growth centres', as for Greenland's Inuit, and the Sami and other people of Northernmost Norway. These programs produced so many problems and such anguish that governments not only ended them but promised not to try such 'solutions' again. People still migrate — they always and always will if free to do so — but strengthening remote areas and allowing them more means to help themselves and make their own choices are the way to go.

Recently, Canada has got a new prime minister, Harper, who like Howard in Australia likes simple nostrums of cost-saving and liberal economic over all else. Neither man is a good listener, and both value stubbornness as a surrogate for strength. Harper is having some difficulty sorting out Indigenous policy because Canadians as a whole society have gone too far in 'reconciling' peoples and cultures within a comodious and flexible political space.

There was a time when the most powerful minister in the post-war Canadian government complained that it would be cheaper to put up all the Inuit in Ottawa's best hotel than keep them in the Arctic. Today that would be merely a bad joke. Remote and scattered as they were, the Inuit are setting the pace in many ways even while addressing the deep problems of social change and environmental challenge (not least from galloping global warming, *pace* Andrew Bolt) which fuelled their self-government, self-determination, land and sea rights movements.

Australians must be very wary of fast-talking city newspaper editors or Outback developers, not to mention governments who refuse to accept that Indigenous peoples know what is good for themselves. Moving people from their lands and cultural space only creates new and problems, not to mention being morally unacceptable in the contemporary world.

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