

CROCODILE TEARS FOR THE ABORIGINES

Many sections of the local media are generally trying to give the impression that John Howard had been moved by a kind of internal spiritual revolution to take a late look at the terrible state of the indigenous community in the Northern Territory. However, I cannot help the impression that this is a desperate election gimmick on the part of Australia's shrewd Prime Minister who, according to opinion polls, is up against the wall with his rival.



But why, some would urge, should Howard consider Aborigines in his election equation? After all, these 'First Australians' are not in any significant number in marginal seats. True, but the cynic in me suggests that John Howard wanted to flash the image across the nation that he is a firm and decisive leader with a strong moral dimension- the kind that Australians cannot afford to dump in these times of challenge. The gun buy -back after the Port Arthur massacre had impressed the electorate. The firmness in dealing with threats to national security did impress. Even the Iraq commitment, although in retrospect looks bad, at the beginning demonstrated a canny boldness against all odds on the part of John Howard. Even in refusing to "say sorry" to the Aborigines John Howard displayed diamond toughness against ranting socialist demands. Here is a leader with guts!

In comparing the situation in the Northern Territory to cyclone, Katrina that destroyed the State of New Orleans John Howard reveals an incredibly superficial grasp of the problem. On the other hand, our Prime Minister is a very intelligent man, which fact therefore suggests that he is knowingly approaching this problem for a short-term objective. Katrina was a crisis that came down suddenly to create a huge local emergency. The Aboriginal crisis did not come down suddenly but had been ongoing for ages although neglected by successive governments on both sides of the divide. Secondly, this crisis operates on a national scale. More importantly, its age and scale suggests that the problem must be looked at from the point of view of its social and cultural complexity requiring not mere flash-in-the-pan solutions of police intervention. The Prime Minister's plan does not go beyond the election period.

The trigger for the Prime Minister's 'emergency move' was a 316 page

report on child abuse in Aboriginal communities by the Northern Territory Labor Government under the caption: "Little Children Are Sacred". Howard announced what is effectively martial law in those Aboriginal townships across the Northern Territory where his Government began sending in troops to "deal with what we can only describe as a national emergency in relation to the abuse of indigenous children". Alcohol is to be banned in the Aboriginal land in the Northern Territory for six months; children are to be subjected to medical tests; school attendance is to be tied to welfare payments; welfare payments are to be used for buying food and essentials and police from other parts of the country are to be sent to maintain law and order.

The Howard government is acting as though the contents of the report is a sudden expose. This is far away from the truth as over the last 11 years numerous reports in the media had broadcasted the self-destructive happenings in these hapless communities. One of the authors of the report, Dr Judy Atkinson, makes mention in the body of her comments about a report she wrote in 1989 for the national inquiry on violence; a report she wrote in 1991 for [the Department of] Prime Minister and Cabinet; and a report she and others did on violence, including sexual violence, in communities in Queensland. In the year 2001, the Herald Sun



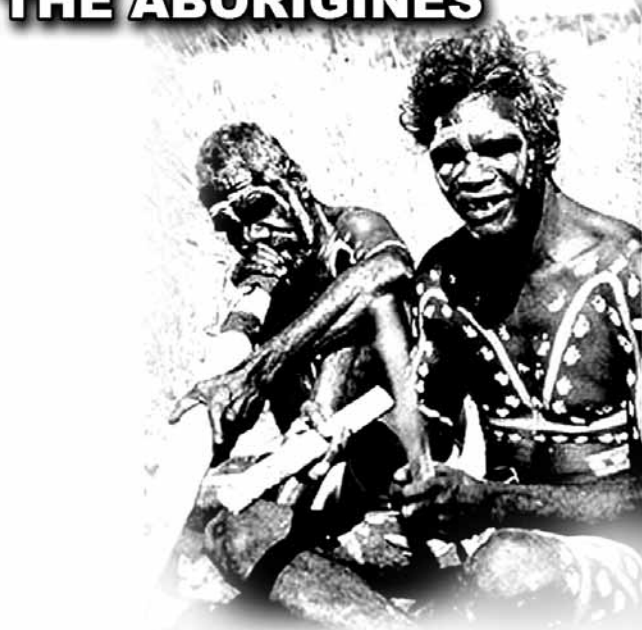
Shyamon Jayasinghe

ran a story by Debra Jopson headlined, "Black Australia: a picture of despair, rage and violence". Jopson's horrific story itself was culled from a 122-page report in which the lead author was Dr Paul Memmott of Queensland University. It included the paragraph: "A typical cluster of [Aboriginal] violence [in remote townships] would be child abuse, alcohol violence, male suicide, pack rape, infant rape, rape of grandmothers, self-mutilation, spouse assault and homicide."

Wrote Jopson: "[Researchers] found reports that groups of boys aged 10 to 15 had raped drunken women and that boys had traded younger sisters to older boys to pay gambling debts and to buy alcohol. Dr Memmott said he was relieved the report has finally been released. Governments needed to acknowledge the situation was worsening with each generation.

All John Howard's Government did was to sit on the report.

From the commencement of European occupation, the entire Aboriginal story in Australia has been one of criminal neglect and exploitation. This offers a sharp contrast to the successful manner in which New Zealand had handled the issue of its indigenous people. At the very start, the foreigners arrived with a terra nullius mentality, meaning that the latter regarded the land as 'empty of occupation' although over 500 hundred tribes had been settled for over sixty thousand years. Aborigines were chased off their lands, marginalised, and even poisoned and massacred. It was only after the Referendum in 1967 that Aborigines were officially recognised and came under the protection of the Commonwealth government. Then followed the infamous phase of forced racial assimilation where these indigenous people were compelled to 'behave like the white fellars'. It was not until 1993 in the wake of the Mabo decision by the High Court that the possibility of Native Title



was formally recognised by the federal Parliament. The era of 'multiculturalism' dawned after the predominant Anglo-Celtic demography expanded first into a European and, later, Asian complexion; yet little comprehensive attempt has been made to assist these communities build themselves. These once happy and closely-knit communities were allowed to wilt and become dysfunctional. Only their cultural artefacts are used and publicised to present a kind of cultural depth that the white society here does not possess.

The abysmal situation to which the indigenous people in Australia have fallen cannot be corrected merely by the kind of knee-jerk measures now proposed. It entails the long haul and it should involve the cooperation and co-option of community leaders in a huge effort of social engineering. The report now before the government gives detail proposals that have to be followed. It is strange that the government pays no heed to these long-term solutions.

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