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❯ ESSAY

WHITE GUILT, VICTIMHOOD AND THE QUEST FOR A RADICAL CENTRE

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Back in those days the Boss had been blundering and groping his unwitting way toward the discovery of himself, of his great gift…nursing some blind and undefined compulsion within him like fate or a disease.

– Robert Penn Warren, *All the King's Men* (New English Classics, 1946)

THE AUDACIOUS IDEA of a Barack Obama presidency emerged when the first-term black Senator from Illinois was invited by John Kerry to deliver the keynote to the 2004 Democratic Convention. From a gatecrasher without a pass at the previous convention in Los Angeles four years earlier, Obama's exceptional charisma navigated by a (politically) precise moral compass led to the fortuitous invitation from Team Kerry. Good for Obama, maybe not so good for Kerry. It must have been akin to asking a before-he-was-famous Bill Clinton to introduce the paler, less gifted candidate. Like sending Jesus before John the Baptist.

From his star turn in Boston, Obama stirred the American imagination with the prospect of a first black presidency, and in a flash his 1995 biography *Dreams from My Father* (Three Rivers Press) was reprinted and in the bookstores. The beautiful writing promised to live up to the blurb, and with anticipation I read of Obama's work as an organiser in the projects of Chicago, hoping it would reveal deep insights into how extreme social dysfunction and deprivation might be tackled. Alas, the insights were lean and the rhetorical wind soon failed to sustain its ambitious sails. It took an effort to finish the book.

I well understand Joe Klein's assessment in his *Newsweek* cover piece: Obama is a bit thin on the ideas, a fact which charisma and mesmerising oratory cannot completely disguise. He is no wonk in the Bill, Hillary, Tony (and Kevin) class, but policy paucity is no disqualification for the world's highest office. It is his native lack of proximity to power: a dummy born to power can rule, but outsiders need more than extraordinary talents – they must, amongst other things, be capable of extreme ruthlessness when the time requires. Will Obama be prepared to do the equivalent of refusing clemency to a (black) mentally retarded 'death rower' on the eve of the primaries? Hillary and Bill were outsiders with cold steel veins; it remains to be seen whether Obama is prepared to have

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blood on his hands when called for. Hillary's blood in a bowl, courtesy of the (nice) tall, dark, handsome man, is probably what America will need if the Rubicon to a black presidency is to be crossed.

Obama's application for his 2008 candidature is set out in last year's bestseller *The Audacity of Hope* (Crown)*,* where he does nothing less than boldly set out his 'thoughts on reclaiming the American dream'. It is an impressive statement of beliefs, characterised by its intelligent analysis, a candour that may not be completely calculated and a carefully calibrated self-deprecation. It is counter-weighed by an understandable, but nevertheless disturbing, absence of doubt about whether the contradictions of America can really be resolved: the over-promise of leadership. Obama attributes the audacity of hope to the salt-of-the-earth characters he parades throughout his book (he uses this device with almost toast-masterish sincerity), but there is no doubt – it is really the audacity of his own ambitions that he has in mind.

Obama's great talent is that of Bill Clinton: a keen public moral compass that can provide persuasive direction through the dialectical thickets of modern conundrums, and a near-peerless capacity for summoning 'the better angels of our natures' even as the GOP's Lee Atwater and Karl Rove brought American (and therefore the world that follows) electoral politics to new pitiless nadirs, where devils are casually conjured from the body politic in pursuit of power. I am reminded of Robert Hughes' early rebuke of what would become the neo-conservative versus (by then old) New Left culture wars of the 1990s when he wrote in *Culture of Complaint* (Harvill, 1992): 'Against this ghastly background, so remote from American experience since the Civil War, we now have our own conservatives promising a "culture war", while ignorant radicals orate about "separatism". They cannot know what demons they are frivolously invoking. If they did, they would fall silent in shame.' But alas, the mutating lexicon of American political campaigning since Pat Buchanan first gave expression to wedge politics by advising Richard Nixon, 'If we tear the country in half, we can pick up the bigger half' has not paused for shame. America is riven.

My concern with Barack Obama is to ask whether he represents 'the radical centre' of the great dialectical tension in black leadership philosophy in the United States, between the omnipresent legacies of black American leaders Booker T Washington (1856–1915) and William Edward Burghardt Du Bois (1868–1963). Washington exhorted black Americans to work their way up from the bottom of society. He argued that moral self-improvement, vocational training, and securing the trust and co-operation of white Americans and government were necessary first steps, not confronting discriminatory laws. Washington fought discrimination behind the scenes, but Du Bois emerged as the public face of black protest. Du Bois argued that higher education and removal of discrimination should be more aggressively pursued, and he offered structural and social explanations for black crime, arguing that crime diminished as blacks' social status improved.

The history of the Washington-Du Bois dialectic continues to be the prism through which policies for the alleviation of oppression (what we are given to calling in this country – perhaps euphemistically – 'disadvantage') might best be understood. If Rev Jesse Jackson is Du Bois's heir, and Condoleeza Rice heir to the Washingtonian tradition, then Obama may be the closest thing there is to a synthesis: the radical centre. Black Americans have been mostly subscribers to the Du Boisian tradition, the tradition in which Dr Martin Luther King Jr stood and Rosa Parks sat: it is the predominant model of black advocacy for uplift. Booker T Washington's disciples, on the other hand, have been

mostly silent, living ordered and industrious lives, valuing education and enterprise, bringing up strong families who desire to take their share of a country much-built on the enslavement of their ancestors. When the doors of citizenship opened and Jim Crow was outlawed, these families quickly emerged as the nascent black middle class, using their sober sense of individual and family responsibility (and yes, a keening sense of class) to lower their buckets into the deep opportunities of America. Today they are a minority, but they are not small and their achievements are far from mean: five chief executives of *Fortune 500* companies, two successive secretaries of state of the world's only superpower attest to this.

If Obama ('I've never had the option of restricting my loyalties on the basis of race, or measuring my worth on the basis of tribe') does transcend the Du Bois-Washington paradigms, then his capacity to defy the enormous gravitational pull of the Du Bois orthodoxy probably stems from his unique biography: the son of a white American mother ('to the end of her life [she] would proudly proclaim herself an unreconstructed liberal') and an absent Kenyan father (now both deceased), with an Indonesian sister from her mother's second marriage. Obama is an African-American, but not part of the long history that began with slavery. The stigma associated with the Washingtonian legacy – the allegedly Uncle Tomish belief that American opportunity will reward discipline and responsibility – does not shackle Obama.

MY ONLY RESERVATION ABOUT the capacity of Obama to transcend the Washington-Du Bois paradigm is that, while his rhetoric is capable of embracing the validity of the Washingtonian responsibility thesis, he is by background, education, work experience (a civil rights lawyer and 'community organiser') and temper, a liberal whose starting point is the Du Boisian rights thesis. He moves from Du Bois to Washington, and not the other way around. Are the economic power and individual responsibility (and the limits of government) parts of Obama's philosophy just rhetorical genuflections and not innate conviction?

Let me explain my reservation with reference to Opposition Leader Kevin Rudd's critique of what he describes as the neo-liberal fundamentalism of the Howard Government: 'Modern Labor ... argues that human beings are both "self-regarding" and "other-regarding". By contrast, modern Liberals ... argue that human beings are almost exclusively self-regarding.' Rudd concedes that the self-regarding values of security, liberty and property are necessary for economic growth. He argues that the other-regarding values of equity, solidarity and sustainability must be added in order to make the market economy function effectively, and in order to protect human values such as family life from being crushed by unchecked market forces.

My reservation about this analysis is that it is mainly concerned with those who are not deeply disadvantaged in a cultural and intergenerational way. Kevin Rudd's father was a sharefarmer, and his untimely death brought hardship to his widow and children. But hard work and appreciation of education were passed on to Rudd from his parents. Rudd's ideological manifesto is concerned with the effects of neo-liberal policies on people who may have less bargaining power than the most sought-after professionals, but who are nonetheless firmly integrated into the real economy – not only because they have jobs, but because they are culturally and socially committed to a life of responsibility and work. I welcome the debate Kevin Rudd sought to revitalise about the long-term effects on most working people of neo-liberal policies: what will the effects be

on family life, on people's sense of security and purpose, on social cohesion? How great is the risk that families of the lower strata of the real economy will descend into the underclass?

These are real issues, but the important question from an African-American or Aboriginal Australian perspective is: what is the correct analysis of self-regard and other-regard in the context for those already disengaged from the real economy? Disengagement is the problem in Cape York Peninsula and in dysfunctional African-American communities.

The moderate left, as represented by Kevin Rudd, would probably argue that neo-liberal dominance increases the number of disengaged people and the difficulties of returning them to the working mainstream. This may well be true. However, disadvantage can develop and become self-perpetuating, even without neo-liberal government policy. In Australia, Aboriginal disadvantage has become entrenched during decades when social democrats, small-'l' liberals and conservatives influenced policy; many policies for Indigenous Australians have been liberal and progressive.

The insight which informs our work in Cape York Peninsula is that disengagement and disadvantage have self-perpetuating and cultural qualities – problems not covered by Rudd's analysis. These are the problems of the underclass, people who are psychologically and culturally disadvantaged. (Rudd does not spend time thinking about the underclass. In the scramble for the political middle, who does?) His is an analysis of the prospects of the upper 80 or 90 or 95 per cent of society, and how they will fare under social democrat or neo-liberal regimes. If Rudd's analysis were extended to the truly disengaged, his model would probably be interpreted like this: some people are successful and, as well as being self-regarding, they should be other-regarding. And then there are the disadvantaged.

The problem is that it is assumed that the life chances of the disadvantaged depend on the other-regard of the successful – either a precarious dependency in the absence of state institutions, or an institutionalised dependency which my people have come to know as passive welfare. In reality, *what is needed is an increase of self-regard among the disadvantaged*, rather than strengthening their belief that the foundation for their uplift is the welfare state and the other-regard of the successful. This, I think, is a deeply Washingtonian view.

WASHINGTON VERSUS DU BOIS

> *I remembered the legend of how he had come to the college, a barefoot boy who in his fervour for education had trudged with his bundle of ragged clothing across two states. And how he was given a job feeding slop to the hogs but had made himself the best slop dispenser in the history of the school; and how the Founder had been impressed and made him his office boy.*

> – Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (Penguin, 1952)

BORN A SLAVE in Virginia, Booker T Washington would ascend via an industrial education to be the first president of the famous Tuskegee Institute (now University) in Alabama. Washington became the most powerful black American in the post-bellum era, connected with philanthropists and industrialists: 5,000 common schools would be established as a result of his advocacy. He was consulted by politicians and presidents on black matters, and had a decisive say over appointments to government positions.

The 'Tuskegee Machine' was renowned for its powerful influence in black politics.

Washington's star rose with his Atlanta Compromise speech at the Cotton States and International Exposition on 18 September 1895. His thesis was that blacks should secure their constitutional rights through their own moral and economic advancement in the booming economy of the South rather than through legal or political channels ('Our greatest danger is that in the great leap from slavery to freedom we may overlook the fact that the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands.'). His central metaphor was both literary and instantly folkloric:

A ship lost at sea for many days suddenly sighted a friendly vessel. From the mast of the unfortunate vessel was seen a signal, 'Water, water; we die of thirst!' The answer from the friendly vessel at once came back, 'Cast down your bucket where you are.' ... The captain of the distressed vessel, at last heeding the injunction, cast down his bucket, and it came up full of fresh, sparkling water from the mouth of the Amazon River. To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in a foreign land or who underestimate the importance of cultivating friendly relations with the Southern white man, who is their next-door neighbor, I would say: 'Cast down your bucket where you are' ... Cast it down in agriculture, mechanics, in commerce, in domestic service, and in the professions ...

Although Washington's approach angered some blacks, many approved, including WEB Du Bois, the man who would later became the other important protagonist in the policy conflict. Washington's major achievement, however, was to win over diverse elements of the southern white population, without whose support the economic programs he envisioned and subsequently created would have been impossible. Washington's depreciation of political activism, and his acceptance of social segregation, was the key to the compromise with southern whites.

Du Bois was born free in 1868 in Massachusetts. Aided by family, friends and scholarships, he was able to attend university and ultimately received a doctorate from Harvard. The main feature of Du Bois's academic work, after the completion of his university studies and a short period of teaching, was that he closely studied disadvantaged black neighbourhoods. He was a founder of modern social sciences in the United States, and developed structural explanations for inequality. As he recalled in his autobiography *A Soliloquy on Viewing My Life from the Last Decade of Its First Century* (International Publishers, 1968), he advocated 'ceaseless agitation and insistent demand for equality' and the 'use of force of every sort' to remove racism and discrimination. In 1905, Du Bois solicited help from others for 'organised determination and aggressive action on the part of men who believe in black freedom and growth', and the Niagara Movement was launched from the meeting that took place on the Canadian side of the famous falls. This was subsequently superseded by an organisation formed in association with white liberals, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

Du Bois's eloquent and often vitriolic calls for action during his period as editor-in-chief of the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine were politically influential, but he would be frustrated at the lack of progress in removing discrimination in America. He then embarked upon a pan-Africanist crusade against colonialism, believing that the freedom of blacks in America was contingent on freedom of blacks in Africa. He would die a citizen of Ghana in 1963. Du Bois's biographer, David Levering Lewis, wrote in *The Fight for Equality and the American Century 1919–1963* (Owl Books, 2001) that Du Bois 'attempted virtually every possible solution to the problem of twentieth-century racism – scholarship,

propaganda, integration, cultural and economic separatism, politics, international communism, expatriation, third world solidarity'.

The Washington-Du Bois conflict is well-known. But it is critical to understand how *close* they were, despite their fundamental differences. Du Bois had congratulated Washington on his Atlanta compromise speech, which set out the accommodationist framework. Early in Du Bois's career, they were engaged in a courtship that included the possibility of him joining Washington at Tuskeegee. In the first cordial decade of their relationship they corresponded on legal strategies, planned conferences and sought ways to use each other to the advantage of each. The history of their relationship tells us that Du Bois understood and appreciated Washington's strategy and did not wholly disapprove. He knew the context and the limitations of black advancement as much as Washington. It is also now much better known that Washington devoted significant time, money and effort to surreptitiously fighting the race system behind the scenes through back-door lobbying, law suits and editorials, including financial assistance to Du Bois who was well aware of Washington's private opposition to the Jim Crow system, but also Washington's unwillingness to risk his influence through public agitation. Du Bois was a much more balanced and generous commentator and critic of Washington than many others who shared his view that discrimination had to be confronted.

But already in the 1890s Du Bois's relationship with Washington had begun to degenerate, and differences deepened in 1903 when Du Bois wrote *The Souls of Black Folk* (Dover, 1994), which contained a critical chapter entitled 'Of Booker T Washington and Others'. When Washington died in November 1915, Du Bois's judgement was harsh: 'In stern justice, we must lay on the soul of this man a heavy responsibility for the consummation of Negro disfranchisement, the decline of the Negro college and public school, and the firmer establishment of colour caste in this land.'

Whether or not Du Bois was right in this judgement, the salient question is not what Washington intended his (necessarily) one-sided advocacy to achieve, but what effect it had in practice. If it had the effect Du Bois contended, then this was not just the result of Washington's strategic folly but the inability of the advocates of the other side of the dialectic to produce a strong rights antithesis to Washington's responsibility thesis.

Washington's public conciliatory position brought him, especially in the latter part of his career, into direct conflict with black militants who sought to challenge white America. As the clash between these two approaches intensified, Washington and Du Bois found themselves on opposite sides of a polarised debate, which pitted militancy against conciliation, separatism against assimilation, and a 'Talented Tenth' focus on higher education against Washington's preference for trade school training that would equip the other nine-tenths who he understood must needs work by their hands. It was an irreconcilable dichotomy that would shape the race debate in America for the next century.

I can make no judgement as to this history; there is much evidence to support the modern black despisers of Washington and his faith that the white America which welcomed his Atlanta Compromise would open the doors to participation. White America simply did not deliver on the bargain. There was little black progress until after the Second World War when government social redistribution efforts started registering progress amongst blacks. I only wish to posit some of my own convictions about those aspects of Washington's philosophical conviction that were right at the time he expressed them, and I believe are still right today. In his famous address Washington

had two compelling lines, the first of which was: 'It is at the bottom of life we must begin, and not at the top.'

For a downtrodden people Washington's preference for improvement was a policy relevant to every black person ('No race can prosper till it learns that there is as much dignity in tilling a field as in writing a poem ... '). I don't think Washington disagreed that the black community would need its Talented Tenth to succeed. I think what he disagreed with was deprecation of the more humble learning and achievement. He declared: 'Excellence is to do a common thing in an uncommon way'. The excellent pig slop dispenser would one day have a child in Harvard. His second compelling line was: 'Nor should we permit our grievances to overshadow our opportunities.' This is a psychological point about how a people might deal with grievances of the past and the present, including the injuries sustained from racism. The best insurance is to become socially and economically strong by capitalising on opportunities.

DESTROYING THE CIVIL RIGHTS PROMISE

You're investing in steam control. And you're getting value for money ... People own the boilers, but that don't do 'em a bit of good unless they know how to control the steam.

– Tom Wolfe, *Bonfire of the Vanities* (Bantam, 1987)

SHELBY STEELE, ACCORDING to the shallow taxonomy of American political culture, is a black conservative. In his book *White Guilt* (HarperCollins, 2006), Steele tells how disconcerting it was for someone with his background – son of civil rights campaigners, young Afro-haired wannabe campus radical of the 1960s, fellow traveller with high hopes for Lyndon Johnson's Great Society – to be tagged with this label. That he came to question the post-civil rights trajectory of black America, and to advance a compelling interpretation of the strange twist in the aftermath of the civil rights victories – how retching defeat came from the bowels of victory – earned him the most dreaded black classification: Uncle Tom.

But even as Harry Belafonte denounced Colin Powell and Condoleeza Rice as 'White House niggers' in 2002, a critique was growing in black America that challenged the progressive consensus around race which has prevailed since the constitutional foundations of Dr Martin Luther King's dream were finally secured in 1964-65. Shelby Steele is one of the intellectuals leading this critique of the progressive orthodoxy. He raises troubling issues for those who see themselves as the heirs of the radical side of the dichotomy I described above.

Steele opens his book with reflections on the Monica Lewinsky scandal, and President Clinton's infamous denial: 'I did not have sexual relations with that woman.' Steele was surprised when he realised 'not only might [Clinton] survive his entire term but also that his survival ... spoke volumes about the moral criterion for holding power in the United States'. If similar behaviour had been made public in the 1950s, it would almost certainly have resulted in the resignation or removal of a president. Steele then asked himself what would have happened if President Clinton had been accused of using the word 'nigger' – as President Eisenhower was rumoured to have done. Would the same relativism protect Clinton? *No way.* In America today, there is no moral relativism about race. No sophisticated public sentiment recasts racism as a 'personal choice' or a 'quirk

of character'. Instead, America is unwavering in its stance on racism – Eisenhower's flippant use of the word 'nigger' would almost certainly have destroyed Clinton.

How is it, Steele asks, that the moral preoccupation of America shifted away from personal (sexual) virtue and came to focus on issues of social import? He answers this by drawing attention to the legitimacy of institutions and of government being earned and sustained through fidelity to democratic principles. These principles include freedom of the individual, equal rights under the law and equality of opportunity. Freedom, Steele asserts, is what follows from adherence to these principles. It is not a state-imposed vision of the social good, but the absence of an imposed vision, which allows individual choice.

Freedom is eroded or lost, he argues, when societies decide that some social good is so important that it justifies suspending the discipline of democratic principles. America's imposition of white supremacy is the pertinent example: 'White Americans presumed that white supremacy was a self-evident divine right, so freedom's discipline of principles did not apply where non-whites were concerned.' Over time, however, the moral authority of American democracy and its institutions was undermined by this failure. The turning point for America, and what Steele refers to as the 'disciplining' of the country's democratic principles, was the civil rights movement. This movement established that race could not undermine individual rights. Multi-racial democracies demand that race (along with gender, ethnicity, class and sexual orientation) cannot obstruct rights. This was, then, the 'concept of social good that would make democracy truly democratic, and thus legitimate'.

The crux of Steele's thesis comes from looking at the effects of the civil rights movement on institutions and figures of authority in mainstream America. By the mid-1960s, he argues, following acknowledgement of racial hypocrisy, institutions across America suffered a moral authority deficit. He recounts an occasion in his youth when he and a gang of black students burst into the office of his college president with a list of demands. Expecting to face resistance, even disciplinary action, Steele describes the experience as revelatory: he realised the college president 'knew that we had a point, [and] that our behaviour was in some way connected to centuries of indisputable injustice. The result was that our outrage at racism simply had far greater moral authority than his outrage over our breach of decorum.' This was one of Steele's first encounters with *white guilt* – the notion that past injustices perpetrated on a group of people absolve subsequent generations of that group of standard responsibilities.

For Steele, white guilt is a product of the vacuum of moral authority that comes from knowing that one's people are associated with racism. Whites – and, he asserts, American institutions – must acknowledge historical racism to atone for it. In acknowledging it, however, they lose moral authority over matters of social justice and become morally – and, one could argue, politically – vulnerable. To overcome this vulnerability, white Americans have embraced a social morality, designed to rebuild moral authority by simultaneously acknowledging past racial injustices while separating themselves from those injustices. Steele calls this dissociation.

Where white guilt forces white Americans to acknowledge historical injustices, social morality may absolve them of it, restoring authority and democratic bona fides. With authority restored, power relations may continue as before. Critically, Steele argues, 'social morality is not a dissident point of view urged ... by reformers; it is the establishment morality in America. It defines propriety ... so that even those who harbour

racist views must conform to a code of decency that defines those views as shameful.'

But Steele does not limit his analysis to white America. He expands his argument to assess the effects of white guilt on the freedoms – tangible or otherwise – of black Americans. In a critique of the 'black consciousness' which challenged traditional American authority, Steele draws a connection between increasingly militant messages of black power and burgeoning manifestations of white guilt. For a generation of black leaders, racism existed within this context – in a society suffering a lack of moral authority. The new black leaders (adopting a neo-Marxian structural analysis) redefined racism as systemic and sociological. Racism was larger than individual acts, and defined social and political events and decisions.

Because racism, as it was interpreted by militant black leaders, did not manifest on an individual level, the mere absence of an overtly racist act – using the word 'nigger', for example – was not enough to prove that racism was not in operation. Even a hint of racism proved the rule, and the only way to address it was a systemic solution. So, Steele notes, despite the fact that current generations of black students across America have not suffered the oppression or subjugation of their forefathers, 'much less been beaten by white policemen', they enjoy affirmative action (the systemic redress) with a clear sense of entitlement. Black entitlement and white obligation have become interlocked.

Steele's thesis contends that racism became valuable to the people who had suffered it because it 'makes the moral authority of whites and the legitimacy of American institutions contingent on proving a negative: that they are not racist'. The power of white guilt is that it functions in the same way as racism – as a stigma. White Americans and American institutions are stigmatised as racist until they prove otherwise. What began as 'an almost petulant alienation from traditional authority', Steele asserts, has now evolved into a sophisticated manipulation to elicit an increasing sense of obligation. In a perversion of civil rights-era aspirations, racism is no longer a barrier to individual black Americans, but one of the factors contributing to the assurance of their rights.

Pushing the argument one step further, Steele unpacks the effects of the interplay between black consciousness and white guilt. Black consciousness, he argues, led many black Americans to talk themselves out of the personal freedom won by civil rights activism, for the sole (and unworthy) purpose of triggering white obligation. In a reactionary drift, race became seen as more important than individuality, the primary determinant of a person's ability to advance. One's identity became primarily that of the group (race) rather than that of an individual, one of whose characteristics was colour. In this way, identity played a destructive role in the advancement of black Americans.

Few who live in liberal democracies today would contest the idea that freedom is crucial to a decent life. A related – although perhaps more frequently debated – assertion is that only by being responsible for one's life can one assume agency for it. Agency, Steele believes, is what makes us fully human. With the rise and rise of black consciousness, however, the idea that black Americans must take personal responsibility to get ahead was subverted by the idea that responsibility was a tool of oppression and white America was responsible for black American advancement.

The first step in that argument – that responsibility was a tool of oppression in the age of racism – is not without historical justification. Steele's father, born in the American South in 1900, had 'plenty of responsibility' – the same responsibilities as whites – 'but not

much possibility'. He could not join the union, and therefore had to raise a family on a lower wage. Steele calls this a 'crucible', 'an absurd bind that ... denies one the opportunities to meet adequately the burden of responsibility one must carry'. 'Thus,' Steele continues, 'a heavy and often futile responsibility was the primary *experience* of racial oppression ... this Sisyphean struggle with responsibility was the condition of oppression itself into which all the other indignities – discrimination intimidation, humiliation – were absorbed.'

When his peers raised their consciousness and embraced the neo-Marxian theories of institutionalised racism, Steele argues they began to think of responsibility as something that made blacks complicit in their own repression. Paradoxically, this historically justified insight started influencing black American ideology at the same time as discrimination and oppression were rapidly and formally being removed from the society.

The realisation that white America had a diminished moral authority to tell black Americans to be responsible led many – black and white – to conclude that white America was *obliged* to demonstrate its reformation by taking on the burden of responsibility for black Americans. White America – as in President Johnson's Great Society and the introduction of affirmative action policies by the American college system – thus assumed considerable responsibility for improving the socio-economic status of blacks. Underpinning this was the unspoken assumption – rooted in America's history of racial injustice – that it was morally wrong (or unnecessary) for blacks to bear full responsibility for 'their own advancement'.

Having drawn out these ideas, Steele examines how they are connected: the new social morality, underpinned by white guilt, dictated that black Americans, as victims of racial oppression, could not be expected to carry the same responsibilities as others: 'American society no longer had the moral authority to enforce a single standard of responsibility ... [and] no-one – least of all the government – had the moral authority to tell me to be responsible for much of anything.'

The devastating effect of this redistribution of responsibility for black advancement to (white) institutions, however, is to perpetually project blacks as weak and incapable of achieving advancement on their own merit. Nevertheless, white Americans and American institutions promote policies of affirmative action to demonstrate their social morality, and at the same time legitimise their own moral and intellectual authority. No group in human history, Steele asserts, has been lifted into excellence or competitiveness by another. No group has even benefited from the assistance of others without taking responsibility for itself. And herein lies the nub of his thesis: that social justice is not a condition of, but an agent or mechanism for, an equitable world. In other words, it cannot be delivered in the same way as basic services. It cannot be absent one day and present the next. Social justice requires work and collaboration; if it is not accompanied by *individual* efforts to 'get ahead' it is unlikely to generate a better life.

In America, then, social morality has become more important than individual morality, effectively de-linking social justice and individual responsibility in the quest to improve the socio-economic conditions of black Americans. White guilt now underpins a sense of white obligation to lift blacks up, with disastrous effects. In a 1999 *Harpers* essay, Steele nailed his argument:

> Right after the '60s civil-rights victories came what I believe to be the greatest
> miscalculation in black American history. Others had oppressed us, but this was to

be the first 'fall' to come by our own hand. We allowed ourselves to see a greater power in America's liability for our oppression than we saw in ourselves. Thus, we were faithless with ourselves just when we had given ourselves reason to have such faith. We couldn't have made a worse mistake. We have not been the same since.

AUSTRALIAN PARADOX AFTER 1967: BLACK RIGHTS BECOME WHITE RESPONSIBILITIES

You sharpen your axe on the hardest stone.

– Kevin Gilbert, *The Cherry Pickers* (1968)

THERE ARE COMPELLING parallels between what happened with black Americans from the time of civil rights and voting rights in 1964–65, and black Australians from the time of the 1967 referendum, when 90.2 per cent of Australians voted to amend the Constitution to count Aboriginal people in the census and to empower the Commonwealth Parliament to make laws in respect of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

The American rights guarantees were substantive: they provided freedoms and protections denied to black Americans since the abolition of slavery. So, from the time of their passage, blacks in America could invoke federal law in order to combat discrimination in respect of a wide range of civil rights. The Australian changes did not immediately provide any substantive rights; the Commonwealth Parliament was merely empowered to make laws – a power previously the exclusive province of the states.

Protection from racial discrimination was not available to black Australians (or anyone else) until the Commonwealth Parliament passed the *Racial Discrimination Act* in 1975.

Nonetheless, the symbolic significance of the 1967 referendum, which was the culmination of a concerted ten-year public campaign and redressed the complete exclusion of Australia's Indigenous peoples from the federal compact of 1901, marked the beginning of a new era in Indigenous history and policy. It was a hopeful and positive event, and is still mostly seen as such.

Substantive rights and protections for Indigenous Australians were enacted in the years before and after the referendum. Voting rights, where they did not already exist, were granted from 1962, although Queensland lagged until 1965; an attempt to protect Indigenous Queenslanders from discriminatory laws was legislated in 1975, as was protection against racial discrimination; land rights were legislated for the Northern Territory in 1976; legislation establishing the Human Rights Commission was enacted in 1986; and a range of state legislation outlying discrimination was also promulgated in the 1970s and 1980s. But legislation providing affirmative action and access to educational and other institutions was never introduced in Australia. Affirmative action programs have only ever occurred as voluntary policy decisions by public or private institutions. There has been no Australian law to compel affirmative action.

It is not these rights and recognition events of the 1960s that I (or Shelby Steele and the growing like-minded critique in the United States) question. They were seminal achievements; it is their aftermath that requires reconsideration.

In the aftermath of the civil rights victories, the politics of 'victimhood' became the

predominant methodology of black advocacy and the reigning paradigm of public policy thinking. Victimhood relied on a phenomenon within the dominant white societies that had two faces: *white guilt* and *moral vanity*. The rise of victim politics meant that, even as there was increased recognition of black rights in the post-citizenship era, there was also a calamitous erosion of black responsibility.

I have often reflected on the downside of the events surrounding citizenship, at least for the remote communities of northern Australia with which I am familiar – particularly Cape York Peninsula. In the light of the problems with which we are grappling today, I see three factors as decisive contributors to the descent into hell three decades later. These factors appeared to be positive developments designed to address inequities, but whose unintended consequences – particularly for Aboriginal men – were negative:

- The equal wages decision of 1966, which mandated equal payment for Aboriginal stock-workers, contributed to the large-scale exodus from the long-standing employment and lifestyle Indigenous people had carved out in the pastoral industry of northern Australia (and elsewhere). The removal of Aboriginal people to the fringes of country towns and into missions and settlements meant that young men had lots of idle time.
- The Commonwealth Government's solution for Aboriginal people displaced from the pastoral industry was to provide access to social security payments, and the relevant government department undertook a drive through the 1970s to sign people up to income support. This provided young men with work-free income.
- Citizenship brought to Aboriginal people the right to drink.

Young men with idle time, free income and the right to drink led to the start of an alcohol abuse vortex which would increase in terms of the chaos it caused and its negative impacts, and would widen out to later include women and older people who had not previously been drinkers. I saw this pattern spread in the three communities with which I am intimate, from my childhood in the late 1960s to the present.

Equal wages, access to social security income support and giving Aboriginal citizens the right to enter pubs and to drink alcohol were progressive measures. Not all the consequences of these measures were unforeseen: it had been clear to the Commonwealth Government in the hearings before the Australian Conciliation and Arbitration Commission that a ruling in favour of equal wages would result in the large-scale removal of Aboriginal stock-workers from the stations of northern Australia. The Commonwealth's solution was to make social security available. The Commission ruled: 'If any problems of native welfare whether of employees or their dependants, arise as a result of this decision, the Commonwealth Government has made clear its intention to deal with them. This is not why we have come to our conclusion but it means we know that any welfare problems which arise will be dealt with by those most competent to deal with them.' The then President of the Commission, Sir Richard Kirby, would later tell his biographer Blanche d'Apulget (*Mediator*, MUP, 1977) that the case would 'be seen as the greatest contribution he and other members of the Commission made to Australian society'.

THE STORY OF the past four decades is, of course, more complex than this. There were other factors driving the decline in the pastoral industry. The dismantling of the systems of social and administrative control by governments and missions led to growing

social chaos. Even where strong and functional social and cultural norms were maintained by Aboriginal people themselves, their maintenance was broken down by values and standards imported from the wider society and the shutting down of Aboriginal authority through the intrusion of the legal system. Legal Aid services to Aboriginal offenders probably did more to undermine the authority of elders and other local justice mechanisms (in Queensland, the Aboriginal Courts presided over by local Justices of the Peace) than any other intervention. A workable system of social order based on moral and cultural authority was forced to comply with legal authority – and ultimately had to defer to the law. This moral and cultural authority which had provided structure to life in the settlements withered away.

The decline of religion and the influence of the churches in the communities are also part of this story, including the historically problematic role of the churches in the administrative management of Aboriginal communities. In the case of my hometown, I served on the Hope Vale Aboriginal Community Council when the last vestiges of the Lutheran Church's administrative involvement in the affairs of our people were removed in the late 1980s. We cut these last ties with a relishing sense of historic reckoning. The awful truth is that we threw the baby out with the bathwater: the role of the church in the secular and spiritual life of our community was conflated; both the church and our people should have found a way to move beyond the paternalism of the past without destroying the moral and cultural order which had been such a strong quality of our community. But the transfer of moral responsibility that Shelby Steele identified in the United States also played out here. We now repent a social and moral wreckage.

But these are details. The larger context was the growth of the culture and politics of victimhood, which came to be the accepted basis of the relationship between Aboriginal people and the rest of the country.

Prior to reading Shelby Steele's thesis on white guilt – and how the success of civil rights transmogrified into the failure of victim politics – I had been thinking about the various positions Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians take in relation to questions of history and race. There is a dichotomy in popular discussion of racism. It is assumed that people and ideas come from one of two possible sides: those who are racists and those who are not, those who are subject to racism and those who are racists, those who believe that racism is a major social ill and those who do not, and so on. In Australia, the divide is generally seen as being one between those who believe Australia has a problem with racism, and those who believe that Australia is not a racist country.

Since the 1960s, heavily influenced by international norms established by the United Nations, decolonisation in Africa and Asia, and by the civil rights movement in the United States, Australians from the left and right have altered their views on racism for the better. Whilst, historically, racism was widely acceptable across Australian society (the 'White Australia' policy was championed by the Australian Labor Party), political opinion and social values shifted fundamentally towards an understanding that overt racism, at least, was unacceptable.

Today, whilst leading conservatives and liberals (notably former Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser) are avowed opponents of racism, the polarity between those who consider racism a serious problem and those who do not is generally seen as a left-right split. As progressive people predominately come from left of the cultural and political divide, the ALP (and the progressive minor parties) are generally regarded as opponents of racism, whilst the Liberal and National Parties are considered racist – or at least indifferent to

racism. Individuals from both sides often contradict this generalisation.

This dichotomous view of racism is simplistic and misleading. My analysis looks at six positions which Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians take in relation to race and history concerning the country's original peoples. This is an arc for non-Indigenous Australians that goes from denial to moral vanity, to acknowledgement and responsibility. For Aboriginal people, this arc ranges from separatism to victimhood, and to pride and principled defence.

There is a strong tradition of *denial* in Australia. The eminent ethnographer WEH Stanner named this tradition in the country's historiography up to the late 1960s the 'Great Australian Silence' (Boyer Lecture, 1968). There is a very large constituency which denies that the treatment of Indigenous people in Australia's colonial history (and up to the present) was as bad as those historians who have contributed to the genre known as 'Aboriginal history' demonstrate. These people deny that racism in Australia against the country's Indigenous peoples is a serious problem. Keith Windschuttle's refutation of massacres and violence on the frontiers, and Pauline Hanson's galvanising resentments against alleged preferences to Aboriginal people (and other racial minorities) are just the most egregious representatives of a wide constituency which adopts a position of denial. Denial is a strong word. It is only a general characterisation of a spectrum of views amongst non-Indigenous Australians which range from David Irving-style ideological denialism to those who acknowledge the depredations suffered by Indigenous people through history and the racism in our society, but who minimise its nature and extent ('we shouldn't dwell on the past'). Many join this constituency because of political and cultural affiliations with the political right.

There are two important things to understand about this constituency. First, most of them are defensive about their own identity and heritage. The accusation that they are racist and their colonial heritage is a catalogue of shame and immoral villainy – and they should therefore feel guilt for racism and history – makes them defensive. If race and history are raised in such a sharply accusatory and unbalanced way, then people who may otherwise be prepared to acknowledge and take responsibility for the truth end up joining the hard-core ideologues. There is some truth in the proposition that 'political correctness' has had this effect. There is also truth in the proposition that the political right has deliberately and wilfully galvanised this defensiveness by mischaracterising the progressive position as being about guilt, rather than what former Prime Minister Paul Keating referred to as 'open hearts' in his landmark 1992 Redfern speech. This has provided great fodder for the right in their prosecution of the culture wars.

The denialists also keenly understand how debilitating it is to adopt the mentality and outlook of victimhood. It is easy for them to say that victim-hood is worthless, as it grows out of their ideological contempt for interventionist social policy that seeks to ameliorate the impact of the market even on the most vulnerable, but this does not make them wrong. Those on the cultural and political right are therefore more correct than their opponents in recognising the folly of the impact of policy that turns people into victims.

The second major constituency in contemporary Australia is *morally vain* about race and history. Its members largely come from the liberal left and are morally certain about right and wrong and ready to ascribe blame. For them, issues of race and history are a means of gaining the upper hand over their political and cultural opponents. The primary concern of the morally vain is not the plight or needs of those who suffer racism and oppression, but rather their view of themselves, their understanding of the world and

belief in their superiority over their opponents. There are two things about this constituency which need to be understood. This constituency contributes most to, and actively supports, the outlook that casts Indigenous people as victims. Its members have no understanding of how destructive, demoralising and demeaning this mentality is. Their most telling catchphrase in rebuke of their opponents, whenever there may be a suggestion made about the personal responsibility of Indigenous people (or indeed the disadvantaged at large), is 'don't blame the victims'. They excuse and provide a justification for those on whose behalf they are advocate, in order to avoid responsibility. They infantilise Indigenous people by not allowing those whom they seek to protect to face the consequences of their actions: Indigenous people's status as victims means they require protection from the real world.

Moral vanity is perhaps an unfair characterisation. There is a broad spectrum of views within this group, and many within this broad spectrum have decent motivations. They empathise with the plight of Indigenous people who face racism and other real injuries; they acknowledge what has happened through history and recognise that the present is not unconnected with the past. They understand the hypocrisy of the prescription to forget the past, especially in a country whose most famous lapidary exhortation reads: Lest We Forget. But at some point empathy and acknowledgement turn into moral superiority, and the relative failures of one's cultural and political opponents become the basis of accusations of insensitivity or racism. At this point, race becomes a useful club to beat the Neanderthals from the right, and racism serves the cultural and political purposes of the progressive accuser rather than the humanity of those subjected to it.

Let me offer an example: the enforcement of laws to prevent drinking in public places which results in 'homeless' Aboriginal people binge drinking in the parks (policies that are tried in Australia) could be combined with controlled management of income support to 'homeless' people so that accommodation, food and other essentials are provided and cash for alcohol is not (policies that have not been tried in Australia). If this were proposed, it would be characterised as racist by morally vain progressives and vehemently opposed. Indeed, these people run campaigns on behalf of 'long grassers' to the effect that the homeless have a 'right to sleep'. Long grassing is romanticised as some kind of final act of resistance against authority, but patently people do not 'choose' to live like this.

Rather than denial or moral vanity, the optimum position for non-Indigenous people to take is that of *acknowledgement* – of the past and its legacy in the present, recognising that racism is not a contrivance, that Indigenous people endure great hurt and confront barriers as a result of racism. They need to take *responsibility* for the fact of racism, and work to answer and counter it.

On the Indigenous side, the extreme position is that of *separatism.* In the United States, black nationalists such as Marcus Garvey actively pursued separatist agendas. The separatist rhetoric and strategy of Malcolm X was real. There has been no such equivalent in Australia, despite rhetorical flourishes and stunts such as the Aboriginal Provisional Government. Separatist posturing has largely been a tactical device in Australia, not entirely without (tactical) effect; however, separatism has not been the subject of a real and serious strategy, despite a profound sense of alienation experienced by many Indigenous people.

The largest constituency on the Indigenous side subscribes to *victimhood.* Again, this is a strong term which covers a broad spectrum of outlooks. People will object to my

interpretation of the dimensions of victimhood because what many of our people regard as radical, separatist and resistance politics, I say is victim politics. Further, what many of our people regard as pride and necessary defensiveness against racism is, I believe, victim politics. Argument arises here because of the dynamic way in which the cultural and political currents of political economy evolve and change over time: what may have been a truly radical act at one time, such as the Tent Embassy in 1971, degenerates into a sad symbol of defeatist, victim politics as is plain with the squalid demountables at the Tent Embassy site in 2007.

Argument arises because it is one thing to properly analyse whether some outlook, mentality or action proceeds from victimhood, and another to analyse the political or social effectiveness or utility gained from it. I am *not* saying the politics of victimhood have not (and do not still) yield returns. They have and do, but at an enormous cost that is sometimes hard to recognise. As Shelby Steele has explained, *white guilt* is a resource blacks in America and Australia have learned to mine.

I want to talk about two problems with victimhood. The first is that we pay a high price for casting ourselves as victims in the morality field. The *tactic* of victimhood moves from an outlook and a mentality to become an identity. The long grassers and under-the-bridge dwellers are the most visible, end-stage subscribers to this tragic and self-harming tactic. It damages our people wherever they are – from the young student who believes that academic achievement at school is 'acting white' and defeats him or herself with such a pernicious outlook, to those who tolerate domestic violence because it is 'understandable' given the history of the people concerned.

We indigenes of Australia are confused in our cultural understanding of victimisation and victimhood. Yes, individuals and groups in our society are *victimised* in a variety of ways. But it is a terrible thing to encourage victims to adopt a mentality and outlook of victimhood, to see themselves as victims. To adopt this mentality is fatal because it concedes defeat, and it can also literally kill. Victims do not take responsibility for what they eat and drink, for their health and mental well-being; their families become dysfunctional and their children are damaged even before they are born. The worst indulgence is to take away the one power victims need to survive, to defy victimisation. To say: 'Yes, I have suffered victimisation – but I'm not giving in by becoming a victim!'

This is the difference between the responses of Rosa Parks and Vincent Lingiari to the racist victimisation they endured – and the victim politics which the post-civil rights and post-citizenship leadership cultivated. The gap between members of the NAACP in the United States and the Federal Council for the Advancement of Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders (and like organisations) in the lead-up to freedom and the generation that followed became profound.

The second problem with victimhood is that the access and opportunities it produces are of mixed quality. Whether it is education or other opportunities, the 'soft bigotry of low expectations' tends to characterise the quality of what is yielded to people who are taken to be victims. In America the hot button issue is affirmative action. If you take Steele's view, affirmative action is a policy constructed for victims which does not help them rise out of their victimhood. I will not engage in a discussion of affirmative action here, other than to say that three thoughts are on my mind in relation to it. Firstly, I think Steele is right about the problematic consequences of affirmative action for black Americans: the disincentive effects are serious. Secondly, black Australian participation and achievement is even worse than that of black Americans, and we have never had

affirmative action, and I am not convinced that all doors open from the outside. Thirdly, if we consider affirmative action for Australia, it should be aimed at breaking class barriers rather than race barriers.

Characterising Indigenous people as victims leads to an emphasis on the need for recognition of rights – human rights and land rights – which are undeniably good things. The rights question is complicated in the Australian context. In America, it focused on recognition of formal equality between blacks and other citizens. In Australia, it is not so simple: Indigenous people possess certain rights that flow from their unique position as the first Australians. Therefore their rights to land, language and other matters concerning their status necessarily involve different rights to those guaranteed other citizens. Where rights could be enjoyed as a result of political and legislative fiat, there were beneficial developments. But where they could not be simply granted (such as better education and better health outcomes), and where state-provided service delivery could not achieve better outcomes without behavioural change, the behaviour of the victims simply could not be confronted because victims could not be responsible. This is what Shelby Steele calls blameless poverty, and it characterises many Aboriginal communities today.

So, instead of confronting behaviour – even when the first wave of programs did not work, and indeed produced a set of secondary problems – the welfare state builders of the original Great Society simply increased their commitment to the idea that the victims could be rescued from deep poverty through co-ordination of service delivery. This is still the dominant response today, even as the failure of passive welfare is apparent.

Of course, the leadership that campaigned for the 1967 referendum gave way to what would become the new victim leadership of the 1970s. Thomas Wolfe's perspicacious observations of the radical chic posturings of morally vain whites, and the mau-mauing of the flak-catchers by the angry 'radicals' in America all played out here too, right through the 1970s and '80s. Acquisition of an undergraduate command of some key ideas in international and human rights law led to the new language of 'sovereignty'. I was once told a hilarious story by the late Charlie Perkins of an Indigenous gathering in a Returned Serviceman's League hall in a country town where the entire morning was spent debating whether a portrait of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II should remain gazing down at the proceedings as the owners of the establishment intended it to. Those seeking to make a point about the wrongful usurpation of Indigenous sovereignty by the Crown succeeded in their motion, and the rest of the day was spent looking for another venue because the gathering was immediately ejected from the premises.

In my (relatively) short experience, I have endured my fair share of fanciful separatist rhetoric – and plenty of inane stunts and speeches – founded on vague and insufficiently grasped theories. As long as some key words and concepts are sprinkled amidst the denunciations, then any lunatic can be a leader. I've often had the sense that we are playing delusional games in our own obscure little sandpits. We want our sovereignty recognised by the International Court of Justice, and in the meantime I'm off to the TAB and the pub.

During my law studies in Sydney in the late 1980s, I expressed my interest in seeking work in an Indigenous organisation to a white trade unionist, who was well acquainted with some key figures of the 1970s Indigenous leadership. I was taken by this kindly man to the separate work offices of two of the pioneers of the post-Tent Embassy leadership, now 'running things' like Leo and Giovanni Casparo (aka Johnny Casper) in the Coen

Brothers' film masterpiece *Miller's Crossing*. Nothing came from my introductions. But my most vivid memory is sitting in the office of one of these characters, dressed in a black skivvy and smart sports jacket, smoking a cigarette through an elegant cigarette-holder. It could have been a scene out of a 'blaxploitation' film starring Jim Kelly across 110th Street circa 1975.

All of this was victim politics, no matter the radical pretence. It was scratching bark, not digging out the roots. A prideful and principled defence against racism is what we need as a people. Many ordinary Indigenous people possess this dignity and strength. We must make it the dominant outlook of our people.

PEOPLEHOOD

An inclusionary and involuntary group identity with a ... shared history and distinct way of life ... everyone in the group, regardless of status, gender, or moral worth, belongs.

– John Lie, *Modern Peoplehood* (Harvard University Press, 2004)

HERE IS ONE respect in which the discussion of Indigenous Australian policy differs from the African American discussion: the question of Indigenous 'peoplehood'. In this sense the position of Native Americans is more relevant. The African-American struggle is for socio-economic advancement and equality. Steele describes the aspiration to 'advance through education, skill development, and entrepreneurialism combined with an unbending assault on any continuing discrimination'. Steele believes that the main obstacles to African-Americans taking their rightful place have been removed, and that 'blacks are no longer oppressed in America', that the main burden weighing them down is the advocacy of flawed policies and ideologies.

Steele does not see African-Americans as a minority people. Although some radical African-Americans have advocated separatist policies and argue that they constitute a separate people with national rights, that view is not widely held. Generally, African-American issues are thought of as 'race relations' with a goal of ending public programs and practices which recognise African-Americans as a distinct group. Americans to the left of Steele argue that policies which go beyond the abolition of official discrimination and the elimination of overt racist attitudes are necessary, but they do not advocate perpetual special measures; rather, they see them gradually disappearing as irrational racial prejudice recedes and equality increases.

The Indigenous Australian struggle is for socio-economic advancement and equality, but it is also about the recognition of status and rights as a people. The goal here is to preserve and win legal recognition of cultural distinctness as well as citizenship. Indigenous Australian political issues are 'peoplehood issues'. It is regrettable that this word is so little used in English-language debate. Berkeley professor John Lie has defined it as 'an inclusionary and involuntary group identity ... It is not merely a population – an aggregate, an external attribution, an analytical category – but, rather, a people – a group, an internal conviction, a self-reflexive identity.'

The word peoplehood is needed in the analysis of national issues because it unambiguously conveys this concept. We are all familiar with the 'inclusionary and involuntary' identity which Lie describes, but we have no generally accepted word for it.

The word 'ethnicity' is sometimes used to cover the hole in our linguistic map, but this word suffers from connoting, in Lie's words, 'external attribution' – an anthropological origin. One can imagine people claiming their rights as 'Yorta Yorta people', but hardly as 'the Yorta Yorta ethnic group'. Nor is 'nationhood' the word we need, because it confuses the issue that needs to be discussed – namely the tension between the current world order of approximately two hundred sovereign states, and the several thousand distinct peoples who have demonstrated their desire for recognition. 'Nationhood' is more or less synonymous with the creation of a sovereign nation state, and is therefore misleading and unhelpful. The term peoplehood, if it came into common usage, would be perfect. It is self-explanatory and refers to something other than nation states and formal citizenship. It is also likely to convey two desired connotations: 'outcome[s] achieved through the efforts of the population itself'; and 'result of a historical process'.

As a result of a global historical process, diverse populations have developed a 'self-reflexive identity', an 'internal conviction' about the bond that unites them. The notion of peoplehood has evolved and become politically more important. As a consequence of the rise of nationalism, the relationships between peoples forced to coexist within the borders of sovereign states deteriorated during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and today are a chief source of some of the world's most intractable conflicts.

I strongly object to the modern tendency to categorise people according to a system of exclusive identities. Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen has called this 'the illusion of singular identity' (*Identity and Violence*, Norton, 2006). We labour under impoverished conceptions of identity. The identity of a group is assumed to be singular – arising from some salient characteristic. The identity of an individual within an ethnic group is also assumed to be singular – again arising from some salient feature of the group. Instead Sen argues that we should recognise 'competing affiliations' or 'competing identities'. His choice of words is unfortunate; I have proposed a better metaphor: 'layers of identity'. These layers include identification with cultural and linguistic groups; citizenship; religions; places of birth, upbringing, residency and death; local and regional geographic communities; regional, provincial and national polities; and professional, literary, recreational, philosophical and other sub-cultural groups.

A Rugby Union-following Lutheran Aboriginal with a love for the literature of England shares much with many other Australians that he does not share with his closest kin – but he does share an identity based on people-hood. A pluralist and united world is one which has strong bonding identities between those who know each other, and bridging identities with strangers.

Indigenous Australian issues are peoplehood issues. The main difference between Australian and American policies is that the basis for Australian policy is (or should be) the legitimate claim of Indigenous Australians to their recognition as a distinct people with constitutionally recognised rights. The point of this essay is that the black American comparison is germane – because race relations are relevant here too.

UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES

If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change.

– Guiseppe Lampedusa, *The Leopard* (Pantheon)

'UNINTENED CONSEQUENCES' IS a concept derived from liberal economics:

positively, the consequences of choices made in the marketplace are never certain and cannot be completely anticipated; negatively, they are the inevitable product of state planning. By impeding and superseding decision-making in the market, ambitious rationalist social planners cause unintended consequences by using the state to plan good societies and good futures for citizens, when they do not have the capacity to do so. Unintended consequences can therefore be seen as a liberal critique of statist socialist planning. As Friedrich von Hayek might have said, the road to serfdom is paved with good intentions.

There is also a possible Marxist explanation for the phenomenon: the ruling forces that dominate society inexorably transform progressive movements into regression. The opaque nature of the ideological and cultural superstructure built on society's material base means that movements that might be viewed as progressive may be regressive when the question is asked: 'What is the objective effect of this movement?' Unintended consequences arise when radicals fail to maintain an objective analysis, and naively maintain a subjective view of what is progressive.

It is not necessary to decide which is correct – liberals and Marxists can agree that there is a ubiquitous phenomenon in the history of human policy that unintended consequences occur. A theoretical explanation of the phenomenon is not my principal concern. I indicate the framework only to introduce a policy analysis I have become convinced about: that the distance between good and bad policies is most often very fine – not poles apart. People from either side of the cultural and political divide usually believe the distance between their own correct policies and their opponents' wrong policies is substantial. Politics is given to stark caricatures. Intellectual discussion in service of politics is also similarly inclined.

This polarisation leads to problems – a failure to distinguish between a potentially correct policy (policing relatively minor misdemeanours to restore order to crime-ridden, disadvantaged neighbourhoods) and an obviously incorrect one (police harassment and violence). Typically, the left opposes zero tolerance policing, although it would be truly progressive to restore social order to disadvantaged neighbourhoods, and such policing is probably critical to achieving this. So the champions of certain reforms end up being the opponents of the means needed to achieve them. I see this time and time again in my consideration of the plight of the disadvantaged people who are my concern, Indigenous Australians. (This was the theme of my essay in *Griffith Review 2: Dreams of Land*.)

This polarisation leads to a failure of the left to appreciate the correctness of policies promoted by the right (and vice versa) because the fine difference between the correct and the incorrect policy is too subtle for (and I use the following phrase advisedly) usual public discourse, which only sees stark tensions that suggest bald contradictions rather than close, more intense tensions that suggest paradox and potential synthesis.

The tensions involved in the policy debate on crime in neighbourhoods centre around the question of freedom and social order. (Obviously) too much social order undermines freedom. (Less obviously) too much freedom with low social order in fact undermines freedom. People who live in optimally free and ordered communities often fail to appreciate the fact that it is the high degree of social order which underpins the freedom they enjoy. Libertarians are either blind to (or careless of) the advantages they take from the strong social order provided by invisible social norms: this is why classical libertarians come from privileged classes. (Lower class libertarianism is, of course, the

very definition of social dysfunction.)

Where black people are involved, then the tensions of racial discrimination/non-discrimination and advantage/disadvantage are also intertwined in the freedom and social order dialectic. Where the existing problem in disadvantaged neighbourhoods is high rates of blacks offending, then measures aimed at strengthening social order (such as zero-tolerance policing) actually deliver advantage and freedom in the long run. The argument against such measures is that they will result in even greater rates of imprisonment of black people. And indeed, in the short and intermediate term they will. There will be a spike. But if we want black neighbourhoods to enjoy freedom, we need to ask the question: 'What is it about advantaged neighbourhoods that guarantees freedom for their denizens?' The answer is: 'They have social order'. If we don't take the hard policy decisions to increase social order where it is weak because we fear that black involvement in the criminal justice system will increase, then we will never solve the egregious (and, in the case of my home state of Queensland, increasing) over-representation of black people in prison. Not until we have socially ordered neighbourhoods.

The 'radical centre' may be defined as the intense resolution of the tensions between opposing principles (in this example, the principles are freedom and social order) – a resolution that produces the synthesis of optimum policy. The radical centre is not to be found in simply splitting the difference between the stark and weak tensions from either side of popularly conceived discourse, but rather where the dialectical tension is most intense and the policy positions much closer and more carefully calibrated than most people imagine.

Before I turn to my thoughts on the radical centre in policy and leadership, I should make some final points. First, it is intellectually difficult to analyse and identify the correct (radically centrist) policy because commanding ideologies hold sway and limit the capacity of people to abandon wrong policies and search for better ones. But even where the right policies have been identified and adopted, their implementation is susceptible to distortion. The correct policy can easily turn sour because of incompetent implementation, because the calibration is lost: if a police force does not understand the aim of restoring social order to crime-ridden communities and that racism and sharp practice must not be tolerated, policy will degenerate into abuse and victimisation. Even when optimal policies are competently implemented, one must be mindful of the dynamic nature of social, political and economic currents. A progressive measure at one time can produce regressive results later. Policy must take account of the effluxion of time and the stage of historical development.

THE RADICAL CENTRE IN POLICY AND LEADERSHIP

When a team is running in attack, the key player is not the player with the ball but the player off the ball – that is, the player he will pass it to. He is the one under pressure to be in the best possible position to receive the ball ... The player running in support has to decide whether to go inside or outside, whether to run close or wide and when to call for the ball. Furthermore, before he calls for the ball, the player running in support has to manoeuvre himself into a position from which he will be able to do something constructive with the ball once he receives it.

– Mark Ella, *Running Rugby* (ABC Books, 1995)

I INITIALLY CONSIDERED the role of dialectical tension in creating the radical centre when I thought about leadership. My first official job was on a task-force appointed by Queensland Premier Wayne Goss in 1991 – led by his *wunderkind* head of the cabinet office, Kevin Rudd – to develop Aboriginal land rights legislation. In opposition since time immemorial, the fledgling Labor government dreaded its commitment to introduce land rights legislation in the most conservative of states. In dramatic circumstances, at a national conference hosted by Premier Goss as part of Justice Tony Fitzgerald's Fraser Island Inquiry, the Premier announced the government's intention to develop land rights legislation. I was there with a delegation of Cape York elders and colleagues; I had begun my own trajectory in pursuit of land rights for the people of Cape York Peninsula by forming the Cape York Land Council the year before.

Kevin Rudd and Wayne Goss eventually produced miserable legislation – an opinion that I have not changed sixteen years later. The new law provided for a slightly different form of title to replace that previously granted by the National Party government of Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen. The practical effect of the title transfer was negligible and did not grant any more land than that already under Aboriginal ownership. Most of these title transfers have still not taken place.

Provision was made for Aboriginal groups to claim lands on the basis of their traditional affiliation or historical association, or economic and social need. National parks and vacant Crown lands were the only land that could be claimed before a specially established Land Tribunal – but only those parcels of land that the executive government had decided were available. This provision, which Kevin Rudd designed, enabled the government to control what could be claimed, and when it could occur. There was no right to claim land other than what government determined. In the sixteen years of this legislation, very few parcels of vacant land were ever gazetted for claim: I know of only one claim that went through the process. Around a dozen national parks were made available – principally in Cape York but also the Great Sandy Desert National Park in the south-western corner of Queensland – and they were all successfully proven before the Land Tribunal.

I represented the traditional owners in the first claim to the Flinders Islands and Cape Melville National Parks in 1993. The claim was successful. However, the Yiithuwarra traditional owners have still not received title to the park. They have no role in its management, and not one of them is employed by any of the plethora of government agencies responsible for the 'natural resource management' of these lands and seas. The managers are all white. Half of the Yiithuwarra who gave evidence in the 1993 claim, including almost all the elders, are now dead. The implementation of the original commitment to hand over title and management of national parks to traditional owners has been in abeyance during the three terms of Premier Peter Beattie's government. The government fears an electoral backlash if it proceeds with the Goss/Rudd scheme.

I recount this story first to make the point that if I had a dollar for every time I heard that phrase 'social justice' fall easily from the lips of a Labor politician in my home state, I would be an extremely wealthy man.

My first experience of the *realpolitik* of fighting for Aboriginal rights was bitterly hard. The most shameful thing occurred on the day Premier Goss tabled the Bill. It contained nothing to distress the miners or the farmers, whose interests were fully accounted for.

Then Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane Peter Hollingworth duly came out and gave the government's paltry legislation his extraordinary blessing. It was the Premier's language that was shocking. He and his advisers had determined that the best way to sell the new law to an unsympathetic Queensland public was to make it clear he was not giving any free handouts to the blackfellas. The grab on the evening news was to the effect that the provision for the payment of royalties for mining would not allow any Aboriginal 'sheiks' to drive around in Rolls Royce motorcars. It was appalling. True to his promise, the minor provision for the payment of royalties for mining applying to only one of Queensland's numerous mines – the Cape Flattery Silica Mines owned by Mitsubishi on the land of the Hope Vale community – has not paid one cent of royalties to the community sixteen years later.

I learned a bitter truth through this experience: that Aboriginal people are lepers in the Australian democratic process. I have watched with awe how the progressive lobby turned al-Qaeda recruit David Hicks into a relentless, irrecusable and finally triumphant national cause – from Taliban terrorist to latter-day Nelson Mandela of Guantanamo Bay. It has (occasionally) been said that it is not the man, it is the principle. There is a much clearer principle involved in the breach of the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination* by operation of the Australian Government's *Native Title Act*, but this could not be made a *cause célèbre*. In terms of marketability, it is easier to sell a terrorist than an Australian Aborigine subjected to ongoing racial discrimination by the country's laws relating to native land title. Australia's democracy is telegenically allergic to blackfellas.

This got me thinking about pragmatism and realism in political leadership. The new breed of Labor apparatchiks running state governments after the disasters of the 1980s were more hard-headed about the imperatives of holding on to power: no more Whitlam-esque indulgences, no more socialism. Goss, Rudd and Swan were the new pineapple heads of the Sunshine State. I understood that Aboriginal causes were political hard-sell. I felt at the time that Premier Goss could have produced more just legislation without cutting his government's throat in the process. I thought about low-level, poll-driven pragmatism versus ideals. Wayne Goss had been part of the Labor lawyer brigade who had spent time working in Aboriginal Legal Aid, yet in two electorally handsome terms his government did nothing to improve the lot of Queensland's most abject people.

Later the albatross of Australia's lepers hung around the throat of Paul Keating's prime ministership in 1996. Never before, and likely never again, would indigenes be invited in from the woodheap to sit at the main table as they did during those Keating years. This just confirmed the opinion that Aborigines are electoral poison. No more bleeding hearts. No more prime ministerial insistence that the blackfellas come in from the cold.

WE ARE PRISONERS of our metaphors: by thinking of realism/pragmatism and idealism as opposite ends of a two-dimensional plane, we see leaders inclining to one side or the other. The naïve and indignant yaw towards ideals and get nowhere, but their souls remain pure. The cold-eyed and impatient pride themselves in their lack of romance and emotional foolishness: pragmatism and a remorseless Kissinger-esque grasp of power make winning and survival the main prize every time. Those who harbour ideals but who need to work within the parameters of real power (as opposed to simply cloaking lazy capitulation under the easy mantle of righteous impotence) end up splitting the difference

somewhere between ideals and reality. This is called compromise. And it is all too often of a low denominator.

I prefer a pyramid metaphor of leadership, with one side being realism and the other idealism, and the quality of leadership dependent on how closely the two sides are brought together. The apex of leadership is the point where the two sides meet. The highest ideals in the affairs of humans on Earth are realised when leadership strives to secure them through close attention to reality. Lofty idealism without pragmatism is worthless. What is pragmatism without ideals? At best it is management, but not leadership.

As one rises above the low denominator compromise, it takes skill, creativity, strategy, careful calculation as well as bold judgement, prudence and risk, intelligent analysis, insight, perseverance as well as preparedness to alter course, belief and humility, great competence and an ability to make good from mistakes to bring ideals closer to reality. One must be hardheaded in order to never let go of ideals.

Idealism and realism in leadership do not constitute a zero-sum game. This is not about securing a false compromise. It need not be a simple trade-off where one splits the difference. The best leadership occurs at the point of highest tension between ideals and reality. This is the radical centre. If the idealism is weaker than the realism, then optimum leadership cannot be achieved. And vice versa. The radical centre is achieved when both are strong.

Otherwise, you get the problem of skewing. This occurs when one side of (what I will call) a classic dialectical struggle is weak and the other pronounced. Skewing also occurs through history; the balance of tensions may be optimal at one point, but it can change over time. As we have discussed earlier, even ideal policy is not static and what might be truly progressive policy at one time can become regressive. To refer back to an earlier example, Legal Aid for Aboriginal offenders has treated wrongdoers as victims and contributed to the undermining of social order and norms within Aboriginal society. Legal Aid pointed to the criminal justice system as the principal problem, not the behaviour of Aboriginal people towards their kith and kin, and resulted in a vicious spiral downwards with even more offenders appearing as a consequence of the breakdown of social order.

Skewing occurs not just because the intellectual analysis is faulty or weak, but because of the issues involved in working out interests in the real world and the great challenges of reality for any policy and leadership seeking a better resolution in the radical centre. No leadership is immune from the forces that impel confrontation with reality and ideals. Leaders are buffeted by reality and must contend with it – they cannot choose it. Leaders' ideals are not just innate qualities: they are often forced by events and by those around them who most ardently press such ideals. Some of the greatest leaders achieve their apex as much by being compelled by external forces as by their own preferences.

My example may be predictable: Abraham Lincoln. Like Winston Churchill, he brought together the highest ideals and the hardest realism. Lincoln starts with his First Inaugural Address ('I have no purpose, directly or indirectly, to interfere with the institution of slavery in the States where it exists. I believe I have no lawful right to do so, and I have no inclination to do so.') and ends up leading the country towards emancipation. The journey is not Lincoln's alone: leaders are not gods. As Doris Kearns Goodwin's perspicuous account reveals (*Team of Rivals,* Simon & Schuster, 2005) shows, Lincoln's

competitors for the Republican nomination (Salmon Chase, William H. Seward, and Edward Bates) led the President to a better result than he would otherwise have achieved, but his decision to bring his rivals into his team marked the nature of the man's leadership.

THERE ARE AT least ten classic dialtectical tensions in human policy: idealism vs realism, rights vs responsibilities, social order vs liberty, individual vs community, efficiency vs equality, structure vs behaviour, opportunity vs choice, unity vs diversity, nature vs man, and peace vs war. This list traverses an entire universe and history of philosophy, policy and politics, and it is not my purpose to set out a prolonged discussion of each of them here.

My contentions are these. First, it is important to correctly identify the fundamental dialectical tensions that define human policy and political struggle. Second, the resolution of each of these tensions lies in their dialectical synthesis, and not through the absolute triumph of one side of a struggle or a weak compromise. Third, other subsidiary struggles fall out of these classical conflicts. Fourth, complexity arises because questions of human policy are not confined to the neat and isolated categories of a ten-point list. Rather, they involve a number of tensions simultaneously.

I have discussed the tension between idealism and realism and between social order and liberty. Economist Arthur Okun set out the basic quandary between social and economic policy in capitalist democracies in his classic 1975 essay, *Equality and Efficiency: The Big Tradeoff* (Brookings): too much equality is inefficient and too much efficiency drives inequality. The discourse on rights and responsibilities is so ubiquitous as to be almost sterile – but the fact that two tribes still face each other on either side of the ideological divide between rights and responsibilities demonstrates that, while the radical centre may make common sense analytically, it is uncommon to see it emerge in practice. The predominant view in Australian Indigenous policy, from a progressive and Indigenous perspective, remains that rights are the real imperative and responsibilities are an ideological diversion. Their opponents hold exactly the contrary view. I will return to this when I come to discuss my own contribution to this discourse.

I will leave the last three on the list, but will briefly discuss the tension between opportunity and choice and structure and behaviour because they are germane to this essay. In our reform work in Cape York Peninsula, we have come to greatly appreciate the insight of Nobel Laureate Amartya Sen in *Development as Freedom* (Oxford University Press, 1999), who believes that it is not enough to say individuals have the right to choose their own path – they require some basic capabilities, such as good health and education, to be able to make real choices. Sen's theory is an important gloss on the powerful principle of individual choice, for without capabilities, choice can be a bare conceit. In Western democracies, whilst the power of individual choice has largely been accepted, there is a social democratic insistence that there be 'opportunity' to make choice real (indeed during the long reign of the pre-Hayekian consensus in the twentieth century, even large L liberals and capital C conservatives came to accept the notion of universal opportunity). Social democrats look to the (welfare) state to ensure universal opportunity, yet the welfare state's provision of opportunity has had mixed success. What I call classical welfare has been undeniably successful, but passive welfare has not only failed to spread opportunity, but has increased the incapacity of certain sections of society. Putting aside the debates as to how the universal guarantee of basic

opportunities might best be delivered, there is a strong consensus in Western democracies that opportunity must accompany choice.

Sen has put an important gloss on choice, and I propose a similar gloss on 'opportunity': it must be accompanied by responsibility. Opportunity alone will not produce capability. Rather, individuals, families and communities must fulfil their responsibilities if opportunities are to become real. This was a strong conviction of Booker T Washington: that his people had to take responsibility so that whenever opportunities came knocking, they would be able capitalise on them. He deprecated opportunity without responsibility. Indeed, Washington's support for property qualifications being attached to suffrage – provided that blacks with those qualifications could also vote – underscores his tremendous belief that no opportunity or right should accrue without responsibility. Whether it is correct to make rights and opportunities conditional on responsibility, it is nevertheless true that without responsibility they do not produce the capacity that enable people to make choices needed to pursue better lives.

Finally the dialectic between structure and behaviour: Shelby Steele points to the malignant effect of theories that underpinned leftist politics on black race thinking and politics from the 1960s: 'The Marxian emphasis on structures and sub-structures gave the new militant leaders of the time an infinitely larger racism to work with, a systemic and sociological racism that was far more "determinative" than the simpler immoral racism of Martin Luther King's era.' Steele is dismissive of structural explanations which absolve individuals from personal responsibility and agency, and which have made race such a heavy burden and an insuperable barrier to opportunity in America.

He is correct in identifying the baleful and shallow theories on which the New Left constructed a cultural and social folly, but this does not mean that there is not a structural dimension to black problems; they are both behavioural and structural. For example, welfare dependency is clearly a behavioural issue, but it also has a structural explanation; similarly, welfare dependency came about for structural reasons but became a behavioural issue. Taking another example, there is a passive welfare industry within government bureaucracies and non-government organisation 'service deliverers' with an entrenched interest in cultivating and maintaining behavioural dependency by their many clients. Tackling welfare dependency is not just a behavioural challenge: it is a massive structural and institutional challenge.

The problem with discussing structures is that it can become an excuse for failing to deal with behaviour. People are absolved from their behaviour because of the sheer daunting scale and nature of the structural explanation. This is what Steele means when he talks about 'social determinism': structures are so omnipresent and overwhelming that there is no possibility of human agency and responsibility. Progressivist thinking in this area has failed to distinguish between explanation and the policy prescription which occurs in the light of such explanation. It is one thing to have a greater understanding of the reasons for certain behavioural problems, but it does not by itself suggest a solution. The problem may have a history, but illumination is not itself a solution. We will still need to deal with dysfunction and poverty as much as we seek to tackle those structural dimensions that can be reformed.

Some explanations, such as structural violence in history, are beyond contemporary policy reach in any case: we have to deal with what we face now. Some structural problems, such as racism, may not be amenable to reform, and if we premise black progress on its elimination or substantial diminution, we might be waiting until kingdom

comes. In other words, we are liable to leave ourselves impotent and defeated in the face of racism, and this is infinitely more tragic if we have imagined the barriers of racism to be greater than they really are.

It is one thing to have a structural analysis, but at the end of the day it is through individual agency that structures can be challenged and reformed. Behaviour is ultimately about agency – first personal and then social. The mistake of the structural analysis of the black predicament in America and Australia is that race has been treated in the same way as class. Race is really only an instrument of class. It is an easy and more convenient marker than others.

Flannel shirts, mullet hairstyles and 'hotted up' cars marked the 'plebs' when I attended private boarding school in Brisbane. 'Rat-tails' and other ghastly markers declared the class identity of their innocent offspring. Race is just more explicit. The privileged college I attended was adjacent to a less privileged high school, and the two main roads from these schools met at a Y junction that led to the train station and shopping centre. Students from my college with regulation haircuts, carrying violins and book bags and dressed in hats, ties and blazers, met their nemeses at this junction, in a spirit of mutual contempt and abuse. I recall walking down our side of this road one day with some students from my hometown when a group of unruly white kids on the other side of the road, half-dressed in an indeterminate school uniform and long hair, started calling us – who were smartly dress in blazers and ties – 'Abos' and 'Coons'. After an initial shock, we shouted back 'Plebs' and 'White Trash'. We urged them to 'Get back to Inala', the symbolic home of the lower classes in Brisbane in my youth where, in fact, a large Aboriginal population lived in fibro homes that looked dreadfully similar – but were in fact superior – to our families' fibro homes back at the mission.

I began to learn then that race matters, but it is not destiny. Class matters more, but it also need not be destiny. The most profound debility caused by racism is not the externally inflicted harm, but the internalised acceptance of its power as destiny, which can become an excuse. If you want 'black consciousness', it is the consciousness of Bill Cosby, Shelby Steele and John McWhorter that is sorely needed, not the victimhood and false separatist consciousness of post-'60s black leadership.

I WILL FINISH by setting out some reflections on my experience of driving an agenda of rights and responsibilities in Indigenous policy. By the end of the last millennium, it was not possible to continue in this area without facing up to the gaping responsibility deficit. It was a deficit of which I had long been aware, but the prevailing currents were averse to this particular R word. Two other Rs – rights and reconciliation – were ruling. I have never doubted the correctness of our claim to rights; I have made a contribution to the struggle for the rights of my people in Cape York Peninsula, and have continued this contribution. Our rights to our traditional lands, to our languages and our cultures, our identities and traditions are a constant part of our work for a better future for our people.

When I decided that we could no longer go on without saying that our people held responsibilities as well as rights, is was not a repudiation of rights. It was just that all of the talk, all the advocacy, all the analysis, all the leadership, and all the policy and politics was about rights. There was no talk about responsibility. So when we talked about child malnutrition, we spoke of the rights of the children and the responsibility of governments, but we didn't talk about the responsibilities of parents. We didn't ask 'how come children are malnourished?' It can't be because the parents have no money, because in Australia the government provides money to all those who don't have an

income. It can't be because there is no food available – there are shops in these communities where the malnourished children live, as well as bush food.

There was a widespread refusal to even think about responsibility. If there were no practical consequences to our failure to talk about responsibility – and strong strategic reasons not to make the responsibility concession to the political right – then this situation could have continued. But there are practical consequences galore! It is simply not possible to see how any social or economic problem can be solved, or opportunity seized, if we don't first accept responsibility. No progress can be made without filling the gaping deficit.

My view is that the main reason why people have refused (and still refuse) to talk about responsibility is not for strong strategic reasons, but because they actually believe that better health and better education and better housing and better life expectancy and better survival of traditional languages are rights that can be enjoyed if other people – specifically governments, but also the wider society – take the necessary actions to make them materialise. It amounts to this absurdity: my rights depend on you fulfilling your responsibilities to me. Who in world history has ever been saved by anyone in the way we hope whitefellas will save our people?

This absurdity drove my campaign for responsibility and my thesis: we have a right to take responsibility.

It is a thesis in which I firmly believe. When it all boils down, the most important right we have is the right to take responsibility for ourselves. The misery we endure and have endured as virtual wards of a state which has taken over our responsibilities points clearly to the urgent need for our right to take responsibility to be restored to us.

Our responsibility agenda of the past seven years has led us to tackle the largest immediate problems facing our people: substance abuse and the reform of welfare. We aim to tackle these problems at the level of individual responsibility, because addicts and their addictions, welfare recipients and their passivity are behaviours that must be tackled. We also aim to tackle these problems at the structural level: the policy, legislative and administrative structure of the income support system, and the passive welfare services delivered by governments and non-government organisations. We aim to be radical in our reforms, in that we seek to tackle the root of the problems that we say are the cause of the responsibility crisis among our people.

We have cut through with our advocacy and our policy analysis. We have contributed to a wider discussion on welfare reform and social disadvantage – a discussion which is not unique to Indigenous affairs, and certainly not unique to Australia. The responsibility agenda is now ascendant. However, while my own experience of talking with Indigenous people in communities confirms that there is widespread resonance with the responsibility agenda, the effective weight of Indigenous leadership is, at best, silent on it. There is still, I suspect, a yearning for the ascension of the old paradigm.

The problem is that, with the rise of the responsibility agenda, there has been a corresponding collapse of the rights discourse. While there has been a lot of talk about 'the rights agenda' in Australia over the past decade, there has been no effective leadership with impactful advocacy, policy and strategy. It is not enough to stubbornly keep up the talk. There has to be *impact.* And in order to have impact, there must be new thinking, new strategies, new tactics – to cut through. For discourse to penetrate the social and political currents of society, we have to get beyond preaching to the

converted, and complaining in our in-house forums about the failure of wider forums to take up our hammers. Influence is not conferred on all discourse as if it is an equal opportunity exercise. We have to fashion hammers with impact.

We therefore have the problem of skewing in Indigenous policy in Australia. The tensions of the responsibilities agenda are ascending, but the tensions of the rights agenda have receded. There is at present no effective rights leadership and advocacy. This is not to say there is no competent intellectual analysis of the rights agenda (though I have doubts about the quality of the intellectual ballast supporting the rights agenda), but there needs to be more than compelling analysis; there must be a capacity to increase the necessary dialectical tension.

My experiences have led me to three conclusions about the prerequisites for syntheses which allow societies to transcend conflicting tensions and take a historical leap forward: the political analysis must be right; it is not possible for the same actor to play several roles in the dialectical process; and apparently contradictory principles must be carried by strong societal forces.

Shelby Steele has described how faulty analysis can derail promising development. The twin phenomena of 'white guilt' and a problematically conceived 'black consciousness' prevented the United States from achieving a historical breakthrough that would have benefited all Americans. (I do not subscribe to the quasi-radical analysis that white Americans benefit from the current plight of black Americans.) You have to get the analysis right.

The second conclusion is that it is difficult for the same actor to play several roles in the dialectical process. It is possible for the same person to have an overall intellectual analysis, but practical politics and the production of theory are not the same thing. For example, in a socially and economically successful country, there is competition between interests and forces which represent capitalist principles on the one hand, organisations which represent communal and socialist ideas on the other, and inspired political leaders who perform the synthesis between these contradictions. It is possible for an individual to have an intellectual appreciation of this, but that individual can hardly play all three roles.

Only the primary leaders of a whole society can 'triangulate', to use the crude practical terminology of Clinton's adviser Dick Morris in *Behind the Oval Office* (Renaissance, 1999), during his most effective 'third way' period – from mid-term disaster at the hands of the Newt Gingrich's Republican revolution in 1994 to re-election against the odds in 1996 – to move players to a radical centre on vital issues such as welfare reform. People with lesser vantage can only advance one side of a dialectical tension.

I AND MY associates in Cape York Peninsula decided to champion the Indigenous responsibility agenda, because this was the most under-developed area in the then Australian discourse. The side-effect of our decision is that we are perceived to represent only the principle of responsibility; in a political and societal sense, we are largely limited to this role, despite our continued work and ongoing practical achievements in securing rights for our people.

This leads to the closely related problem: a successful synthesis will not occur unless the rights agenda is equally developed and cutting through. Perhaps this was WEB Du Bois's great shortcoming – that he had the analysis, but not the capacity to increase the

necessary dialectical tension.

Australian Indigenous rights consist of both socio-economic rights (which may be referred to as 'race relations' and which we share with African-Americans) and rights derived from our 'peoplehood'. A successful Australian synthesis must reconcile these rights with Indigenous responsibility, and the interests of non-Indigenous Australians. But the Indigenous rights agenda is so weak that non-Indigenous Australians seem unaware of the nature of our people's aspirations. This might seem a strange contention almost two decades after the *Mabo* decision on native title, but it is becoming clear that our opponents do not understand our point.

Six words struck me like a bolt of lightning when I read Shelby Steele's book. Reflecting of the decision of boxing authorities to strip Muhammad Ali of his world heavyweight title when he refused to fight in Vietnam, Steel wrote: 'When he said, "I ain't got no quarrel with the Viet Cong", *even his enemies understood his point* [my emphasis]. Where was the moral authority to ask this black man, raised in segregation, to fulfil his responsibility to the draft by fighting in a war against a poor Asian country?'

Recently we hosted a senior federal minister so that we could explain our reform plans and seek support for them. The minister was supportive, amiable and intellectually astute. He observed the relevance of our work for his portfolio, and I have no doubt he will support our plans. Indeed, I have no doubt he desires our people to rise up in the world. However, as he left he commended our work but said: 'I just don't understand the Indigenous rights stuff.'

The minister was not expressing conscious enmity or opposition to my people's aspirations. His remark was a symptom of the fact that the Indigenous rights agenda is politically irrelevant. Tension between rights and responsibilities is impossible, and therefore no synthesis can be achieved. Warren Mundine and I (and many others) are carrying the Indigenous responsibility leadership. There is no sign of effective carriage of the Indigenous rights leadership. There is no sign of a primary societal leadership that is interested in finding the radical centre – where rights and responsibilities are synthesised.

There is a growing insight in the United States about the nature of their problems – importantly by black intellectuals and leaders – and a successful synthesis of the traditions of Booker T Washington and WEB Du Bois is likely to emerge. I eagerly await Shelby Steele's forthcoming book on Barack Obama and Steele's views on whether Obama has 'the right stuff'.

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