

From Aboriginal/Indigenous Peoples to First Nations: The Transformation of Australian Politics

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Senator Dodson enthusiastically addressing the Labor party faithful about the new First Nations caucus, chaired by Malandirri Mc Carthy, within the Federal Labor Parliamentary Party.

The new enthusiasm of the Federal Labor Party and Bill Shorten to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as first nations in the Commonwealth Constitution of Australia is a turning point in national awareness and sophistication. It catches the Australian Commonwealth parliament up with a growing feeling of the Australian people. No matter the difficulty of changing the Commonwealth Constitution by referendum, Australians want to recognise First Nations because it is in line with the contemporary concept of the Australian nation itself. The longer it takes for the Constitution to recognise Australia's First Nations peoples the more embarrassing it is for Australians as they think of themselves and the great diversity of the Australian land. The subtle language shift from Aboriginal/Indigenous to First Nations signals a new awareness, a new determination and an impatience with Australia's chronically outmoded, colonial framework and system of political representation. Suddenly Australia's relationship with First Nations communities is a symbol of the capacity of the nation to become a sophisticated, self-assured nation in the world.

Alexander Downer wrote in the **AFR** (17/12/2018) that Labor represents the metro elites. Ironically, Downer and his family represent an old Australian elite and an old Australia in which First Nations Australia have no representation and voice, in which our horse and buggy constitution is sacrosanct and the divisions between country and city are very simple. The truth is that Australia's highly concentrated urban population is becoming more deeply interested in regions and remote areas. Downer's article, maybe because he has spent so much time in London lately, is anachronistic. The Liberal party in the city and the Country/National party in the bush and the Labor Party itself now must change or be left behind. It is a measure of how the national consensus is changing that Aboriginal/Indigenous politics is being conventionally recognised as first nations politics. In understanding the 350 plus first nations, mainstream Australians are starting to understand the great cultural and geographical diversity of this country with an interest that is unprecedented. Our awareness is moving beyond the consciousness of mainstay of remote and regional economies, farming and mining, to something far deeper and more meaningful. As this occurs Australians are learning something about themselves and even metropolitan areas are recognising first nations culture and pre-historical artefacts about them and are, so too being transformed.

The transformation of Indigenous politics is not something on the margins. It is about Australia changing its heart and soul. It may be that the conventional political parties have admitted Aboriginal First Nations people to their ranks as simply a matter of representation but the dynamic that is occurring goes far beyond normal politics, Ken Wyatt has played an important role in transforming the understanding of the Liberal National party. Linda Burney, Patrick Dodson and Malandirri Mc Carthy have fundamentally transformed the Federal Labor Party. Their presence at the centre of the national polity offers hope for something more and is a bridge for something better.

Suddenly the Australian people are far ahead of the political process. This is made even more acute by the disastrous period of federal Aboriginal affairs since 2014. The Abbott/Turnbull/Morrison era has arguably been the worst period of Federal Indigenous affairs since the pre 1967 era in which an un-coordinated rabble of State administrations

presided over church-funded missions. The characteristic of Indigenous Affairs under Abbott/Turnbull/Morrison is that Aboriginal governance has been run from a centralised Canberra bureaucracy with an ad hoc, tokenistic group of Aboriginal advisors that are inadequately consulted and appointed. The contemporary period has been destructive for Aboriginal communities particularly in remote and regional areas. It has been an embarrassment and a shame. Now the momentum to set things right is overwhelming.

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The Federal Labor Party is setting a new standard for involving first nations peoples. The Reconciliation Action Plan adopted by the Federal ALP¹, as well as the Aboriginal Labor Network², will discourage the tokenism in which political parties involve Aboriginal people. Politicians and political parties frequently hold up individual Aboriginal/Indigenous representatives and gloss over the great diversity of Aboriginal Australian cultures. Labor's RAP and the Aboriginal Labor Network are part of a larger campaign to involve Aboriginal people in the political process on their own country. The involvement of Aboriginal people at all levels of the political process including encouraging Aboriginal people to register on electoral rolls so that they can participate in referendums and general elections is a basic and over looked step in recognising Aboriginal first nations. As Senator Dodson noted at the ALP National Congress tens of thousands of Aboriginal people are not registered and not included in the mainstream political process and this has to change and is something that all political parties should encourage.³

Understanding first nations dynamics is at the heart of the engagement process that the Federal ALP now guarantees. It will no longer be the case that Federal politicians pick and choose who they consult with from the Aboriginal community depending on the policy outcome they are seeking. Nor will it be the case that Aboriginal delegations are understood to simplistically represent a homogenous national population that mirrors the nation state.

The formation of a First Nations caucus within the Federal Labor parliamentary caucus is a very important development. It has occurred at the initiative of Malandirri Mc Carthy, Linda Burney and Patrick Dodson and is chaired by Senator Mc Carthy. The caucus consists of around 16 Labor Federal representatives who have significant Aboriginal constituencies within their electorates or who have special interest in Aboriginal affairs. All Federal legislation that requires Aboriginal input is referred to the First Nations caucus. It is also a point within the Federal ALP that first nations communities can consult and inform. The caucus also forms a point of reference for the Minister for Indigenous Affairs so that the sort of catastrophe that occurred under Prime Minister and Minister for Aboriginal Affairs Tony Abbott and his assistant Minister Alan Tudge cannot occur again. Under Abbott and Tudge local and regional Aboriginal organisations were over-looked in a reform of Aboriginal funding that saw capital city based non-governmental organisations replace, undo and

¹ <https://www.reconciliation.org.au/alp-becomes-first-political-party-to-launch-reconciliation-action-plan/>

² See this paper by Dr. Chris Bourke, MLA

https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/ginninderra/pages/30/attachments/original/1452811527/Darwin_CP_A_seminar_2015.pdf?1452811527

³³ Senator Dodson, December 17, 2018, Riverbank Room 8A, "In Conversation Mc Carthy, Dodson, Burney", noon discussion.

damage the social capital that had been built up in remote and regional areas for generations. The First Nations caucus, amongst other things, functions as a corpus of local first nations knowledge that will protect local communities from top down, “Canberra bubble” bureaucrats and is the first step towards building a regional and remote knowledge system and it encourages and anticipates the formation of a first nations voice being established to address the parliament as a whole.

The 2018 ALP National Conference underlined Labor’s commitment to the creation of a First Nations voice⁴, recognised by the Constitution in line with the Uluru Statement and the report of the Expert Panel on recognising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.⁵

There are differing views about what the First Nations voice to the Australian parliament will look like. But there is a consensus about the fact that it must include First Nations groups in all their diversity and from grass roots levels. Increasingly Australians are understanding that there is not one Aboriginal Australia but hundreds of First Nations communities with their own languages, cosmologies and belief systems. If the political process simplifies the great diversity of Aboriginal First Nations peoples or seeks to define one or two representatives of all the voices it will fall into the mistakes that have dogged Australian governments since 1788.

At the very minimum is the National Congress of Australia’s First Peoples proposal⁶ for nine Makarrata⁷ Truth and Justice Commissions in the capital cities and in Broome and Cairns. Under the proposal in the lead up to a referendum, the National Congress would be an interim voice for Australia’s First Nations communities. It should be noted that Congress itself is an imperfect representative body mainly because it has been decimated by the funding cuts of the Abbott government and subsequently, and because many First Nations communities are understandably distrustful of any entity that claims to represent them. As has been noted above tens of thousands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are not on electoral rolls and purposefully maintain an arms-length relationship from the conventional political process. The position is “It is not you who should recognise us, but we who need to recognise you in our own way and on our own country”. The coming period is an important period for mainstream Australia to ask for the recognition of Aboriginal first nations communities as much as it is for the mainstream community to recognise first

⁴ See

http://www.billshorten.com.au/labor_will_establish_a_voice_for_first_nations_people_tuesday_27_november_2018

⁵ https://www.pmc.gov.au/sites/default/files/publications/Recognising-Aboriginal-and-Torres-Strait-Islander-Peoples-in-the-constitution-report-of-the-expert-panel_0.pdf

⁶ National Congress of First Peoples, “Submission to the Joint Select Committee on Constitutional Recognition relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples”, June 2018

⁷ Makarrata is a Yolngu word that has been long put forward as a framework for reconciling the conflict between Australia’s First Nations and colonial societies. Originally Makarrata was a ceremonial process for resolving inter-clan conflicts and wars in North East Arnhem land and may have also been used as a means to resolve conflicts with colonial traders such as the Macassans. For its use in an Australian constitutional setting see Botsman, 1999 <http://www5.austlii.edu.au/au/journals/QLdJSchol/1999/36.pdf>

nations. But in doing so Australia will come alive in a way it has never done so before. That is the exciting prospect in front of us.

Getting things right with First Nations communities is not just an empty constitutional symbolic gesture. It is the fundamental pre-requisite for improving the lives of First Nations peoples, closing the human, social and cultural gaps between mainstream Australians and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and in remaking who we are as a nation.

Getting things right is the core for improving the substance of policies, reforming the framework in which Australians engage with each other and building the long overdue equal partnerships that are needed in Aboriginal and Indigenous communities. Too often we over the course of Australia's history things have been done upside down and from the top down without the true involvement of

Just as the First Nations caucus within the Federal Labor Parliamentary sphere has already improved the decision making within the Labor Party, a first nations voice to the parliament would heal a deep discontent, ignorance and disenchantment within the nation. It would also change how we think of ourselves, who we are and enable us to walk more proudly together in the world.

There are so many innovations that are available and are needed in First Nations communities across the country that are retarded by the way Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and mainstream peoples work and communicate with each other at Commonwealth, State and local political levels. There will be a renaissance of First Nations communities that will drive a whole sea change in the nation as a whole when First Nations communities are properly involved in our national polity. The great thing about the Adelaide 2018 ALP National Conference is that there is, for the first time, substance, people and drive for this momentous change. Thanks to Burney, Dodson and Mc Carthy and also Ken Wyatt Australia's Federal politicians have finally caught up with the aspirations of the Australian people.