

THE LIGHT ON THE HILL

Noel Pearson

*Ben Chifley Memorial Lecture
Bathurst Panthers Leagues Club*

Saturday 12 August 2000

In recent times I have been thinking about the social problems of my people in Cape York Peninsula. The nature and extent of our problems are horrendous. I will not reiterate the statistics here tonight, suffice to say that our society is in a terrible state of dysfunction.

In my consideration of the breakdown of values and relationships in our society – I have come to the view that there has been a significant change in the *scale* and *nature* of our problems over the past thirty years. Our social life has declined even as our material circumstances have improved greatly since we gained citizenship. I have also come to the view that we suffered a *particular* social deterioration once we became dependent on passive welfare.

So my thinking has led me to the view that our descent into passive welfare dependency has taken a decisive toll on our people, and the social problems which it has precipitated in our families and communities have had a cancerous effect on our relationships and values. Combined with our outrageous grog addiction and the large and growing drug problem amongst our youth, the effects of passive welfare have not yet steadied. Our social problems have grown worse over the course of the past thirty years. The violence in our society is of phenomenal proportion and of course there is inter-generational transmission of the debilitating effects of the social passivity which our passive economy has induced.

In considering the sad predicament of our people and the role which passive welfare has played in the erosion of our indigenous values and relationships, I have had cause to think about passive welfare provisioning and welfare policy generally in Australia. Thus I have also been considering the history of the Australian welfare state, its origins and its future.

The historical experience of my people in Cape York is different from that of mainstream Australians. I will therefore talk about two histories: the history of your mob and my own.

Before I do so, let me first say that my historical and social discussion has been assisted by some of the analyses of the early international labour movement. I am therefore thinking about class. I refer to “class” in Australia because its existence cannot be denied – it is a historical and contemporary fact, even if the term has lost currency, indeed *respectability*, in public discussion today. Indeed the Australian Labor Party talks no more about class, let alone class struggle. The C word has departed from the rhetoric of the official left. This is understandable, but regrettable.

It is understandable because the political philosophy of the Left in Australia has changed and the notion of the *struggle* between classes is seen as antiquated, divisive

and ultimately fruitless given the apparent inevitability of stratification in a free market society. This notion is after all associated with a political and economic system that is now discredited with the collapse of communism.

However it is harder to understand the abandonment of class in our intellectual analysis of our society and history. How can we pretend that class does not exist?

If the policy prescription – large scale expropriation of private enterprises – that followed the class analysis of the early international labour movement was wrong, it does not mean that all aspects of the analysis are therefore invalid. Indeed, whenever there is public discussion of the widening social and economic divide in our country – as *The Australian* did in its recent series – we are faced with the fact that there are class cleavages in our society. And yet our policy debate is largely conducted as if class does not exist.

Classes are treated as political constituencies and labelled with evocative and provocative terms such as “the battlers” and “the mainstream” and “the forgotten people” and “the elites”. The theory of the dynamics and operation of class society, as explained in the analysis of the early international labour movement, has been largely discarded. It does not inform policy.

But I find that I cannot so easily avoid such analysis in seeking to understand the predicament of that lowest underclass of Australians: my mob. For it explains our predicament in a way that the prevailing confusions do not.

Recently, I read the comments of a prominent young indigenous sportsman who has been speaking out, in his own way, about his views on the oppression of indigenous people in this country. In a blunt statement this young man said:

“Today’s government and society are trying to keep us down, keep us in our little place, and take away our self-esteem, take away our pride ... They want to kill us all and they’re still trying to kill us all.”

Most indigenous Australians would understand this feeling, even if they would not articulate their sense of oppression in the same way. Most indigenous Australians know the sense that every time we try to climb we face daggers of impediment, prejudice, difficulty and strife.

My own thinking is that this viewpoint is to be explained by understanding the structures of class which operate to keep our people down. There are *structural* reasons why we occupy the lowest and most dismal place in the underclass of Australian society. There are structural reasons why all of our efforts to rise up and to improve our situation – are constantly impeded. The concept of race has been coopted by the mechanisms of class to devastating effect against the interests of black Australians. It means that even among the lower classes the blacks have few friends because the whites focus their Hansonesque blame and resentment upon the blacks, who are either to be condemned for their hopelessness or envied for what little hope they might have.

From my acknowledgment of the reality of class society you should not infer that I am a proponent of socialist or indeed *any* economic policies. I do not propose, indeed I do not have, any economic policy for the country. My preoccupation is to understand the situation of my people, which necessitates an understanding of class.

But first I want to analyse the present situation of the lower classes of Australia generally, and the historical origins of the present situation.

The two major influences on the lives of your mob have been industrialisation and the emergence of the Welfare State. During the stage of the industrialised market economy when the Welfare State was developing, the lower classes consisted mainly of a huge, homogeneous industrial army and their dependents. Since they lived and worked under similar conditions and were in close contact with each other, they had both the incentive and the opportunity to organise themselves into trade unions and struggle for common goals. They possessed a bargaining position through collective industrial action.

Many of your great grandparents and their parents were members of this industrial army, and they got organised to insist on a fair deal for working people and their families.

At the same time it was in the objective interest of the industrialists to ensure that the working class didn't turn to radical ideologies, and that the workers weren't worn down by the increasing speed and efficiency of industrial production. Health care, primary education, pensions, minimum wages, collective bargaining, and unemployment benefits created a socially stable and secure working class, competent to perform increasingly complex industrial work, and able to raise a new generation of workers.

These two factors, the organisation of the workers and the objective interest of the industrialists, produced an era of class cooperation: the Welfare State. The support and security systems of the Welfare State included the overwhelming majority of the citizens. The welfare ideology predominated in Australia during the long period of bipartisan consensus founded on what Paul Kelly called in his book *The End of Certainty* "the Australian Settlement", established by Prime Minister Alfred Deakin just after Federation and lasting up to the time of the Hawke and Keating governments in the 1980s.

At this point let me stress two points about the Welfare State that developed in Australia from 1900.

Firstly, the key institutional foundations of this Welfare State were laid down by the *Liberal* leader, Alfred Deakin. As well as the commitment to a strong role for government (what Kelly calls State Paternalism) it included the fundamental commitment to wage conciliation and arbitration which became law in 1904. Throughout most of the twentieth century the commitment to a regulated labour market enjoyed bipartisan support in this country. Whatever complaints the non-Labor parties harboured about organised labour, there prevailed a consensus about the necessity and desirability of a system of labour regulation in this country, right up to the government of Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser. It is important to remember the

bipartisan consensus around the general shape of the Welfare State established in the early 1900s.

Secondly, it is also important to remember that the Welfare State was the product of class compromise. In other words it arose out of the struggle by organised labour – it was built on the backs of working people who united through sustained industrial organisation and action in the 1890s. It was not the product of the efforts of people in the universities, or in the bureaucracies or even parliament. Whilst academics, bureaucrats and parliamentarians soon came to greatly benefit from the development of the Welfare State – and they became its official theorists and trustees – it is important to keep in mind that the civilising achievement of the Welfare State was the product of the compromise between organised labour and industrial capital.

When the Arbitration bill was introduced into Parliament, Deakin spoke of this compromise as “the People’s Peace”. He said:

“This bill marks, in my opinion, the beginning of a new phase of civilisation. It begins the establishment of the People’s Peace...which will comprehend necessarily as great a transformation in the features of industrial society as the creation of the King’s Peace brought about in civil society...imperfect as our legal system may be, it is a distinct gain to transfer to the realm of reason and argument those industrial convulsions which have hitherto involved, not only loss of life, liberty, comfort and opportunities of well-being.”

The Social Democrats have given three reasons for defending the Welfare State:

Firstly to counteract social stratification, and especially to set a lower limit to how deep people are allowed to sink. People with average resources and knowledge will not spend enough on education and their long term security (health care and retirement), and they and their children will be caught in a downward spiral, unless they are taxed and the services provided. This is the main mechanism of enforced egalitarianism, not confiscating the resources of the rich and distributing them among the poor, because the rich are simply not rich enough to finance the Welfare State, even if all their wealth were expropriated.

Secondly to redistribute income over each individual’s lifetime. This is often performed not on an individual basis (those who work now pay some of older peoples’ entitlements and will be assisted by the next generation), and there is some redistribution from rich to poor, but the principle is that you receive approximately what you contribute (in the case of education you get an advance).

Thirdly because health care and education (the two main areas of the public sector of the economy) can’t be reduced to commodities on the market, because health care and education are about *making* everybody an able player on the market. In other areas of the economy you can then *allow* competition.

Classical welfare is therefore *reciprocal*, with a larger or smaller element of redistribution.

But now, alas, the circumstances that gave rise to the Welfare State have changed.

The modern economy of the developed countries, including our own is no longer based to the same extent on industrial production by a homogeneous army of workers. The bulk of the gross domestic product is now generated by a symbol and information-handling middle class and some highly qualified workers. These qualified people have a bargaining position in the labour market because of their individual competence, whereas traditional workers are interchangeable and depend on organisation and solidarity in their negotiations with the employers. A large part of the former industrial army is descending into service jobs, menial work, unemployment. Many of their children become irrelevant for economic growth instead of becoming productive workers like their parents and grandparents.

New growth sectors of the economy of course absorb many people who can't make a living in the older sectors. Also, income stratification is now in many countries being permitted to increase. Employment is created at the cost of an increase in the number of people on very low wages. But even if mass unemployment is avoided, the current economic revolution will have a profound effect on our society: it will bring about the end of collectivism.

The lower classes in developed countries have lost much of their political influence because of the shrinking and disorganisation of the only powerful group among them, the working class proper. The shift in the economy away from manufacturing, and economic globalisation which makes it possible to allocate production to the enormous unregulated labour markets outside the classical welfare states, have deprived the industrial workers in the developed countries of their powerful position as sole suppliers of labour force to the most important part of the world economy. The lower classes are therefore now unable to defend the Welfare State. Nor is there any longer any political or economic reason for the influential strata of society to support the preservation of the Welfare State.

Those who have important functions in the new economy will be employed on individual contracts, and will be able to find individual solutions for their education, health care, retirement and so on, while the majority of the lower classes will face uncertainty. And the Welfare State will increasingly be presented as an impediment to economic growth.

In Australia the effects of this revolution and the dismantling of the 80 year old Australian Settlement, have been alleviated by the compromises between the traditional Australian social system and the economic internationalisation that was carried out during the Hawke-Keating years. These successive Labor prime ministers presided over this transition in the Australian economy, and they sought to introduce reform without destroying the commitment to the welfare state. Labor eventually lost the 1996 election but the earlier endorsement of the electorate of this compromise to a large extent forced the coalition parties to be more cautious about dismantling the welfare state, notwithstanding their preferences.

But the story does not end here. The welfare state will continue to face pressure to retreat. As I have said, it will increasingly be presented as an impediment to economic growth. You do not need me to tell you this.

When I consider the history of your people, I am struck by the ironies. Few Australians today appreciate their history. They do not realise that the certainties they yearn for were guaranteed throughout the twentieth century by the Welfare State to which the great majority of Australians were reconciled and committed. They do not realise that this civilising achievement was founded on the efforts of organised labour. Instead of appreciating the critical role that the organised labour movement played in spreading opportunity and underwriting the relatively egalitarian society which so many Australians yearn for today – organised labour has been diminished in popular esteem. It has come to be demonised, and whilst working people have a proud story to tell – of *nation building* no less – this is not understood by Australians today.

The second irony concerns the sacrifices that working people and the organised labour movement made during the painful transition period in our country that occurred from 1983 – and the complete lack of acknowledgment in the historical understanding of the Australian community of this. Wage restraint underpinned the reform processes pursued under Prime Ministers Hawke and Keating. If these reforms were essential and have underpinned the current economic performance of our country – what credit did the working people get from the responsibilities that they shouldered for the sake of the national economic interest? The irony is that rather than taking the credit for the outcomes of the economic reform process during this period (when incomes declined and profit shares surged) the organised labour movement ended up being perceived as retarding economic performance, and the call for labour market ‘flexibility’ never abated. Indeed the pressure mounted and continues today. At the end of the day, organised labour was left between a rock and hard place: responsible for economic reform, but unable to claim credit because many workers wondered whether the sacrifices had been worth making.

That is the origin and the present predicament of the Australian Welfare State, upon which your people have relied for generations and whose future is of critical significance to the prospects of your children.

The predicament of my mob is that not only do we face the same uncertainty as all lower class Australians, but we haven't even benefited from the existence of the Welfare State. The Welfare State has meant security and an opportunity for development for many of your mob. It has been *enabling*. The problem of my people in Cape York Peninsula is that we have only experienced the income support that is payable to the permanently unemployed and marginalised. I call this "passive welfare" to distinguish it from the welfare proper, that is, when the working taxpayers collectively finance systems aimed at the their own and their families' security and development. The immersion of a whole region like Aboriginal Cape York Peninsula into dependence on passive welfare is different from the mainstream experience of welfare. What is the exception among white fellas – almost complete dependence on cash handouts from the government – is the rule for us. Rather than the income support safety net being a temporary solution for our people (as it was for the whitefellas who were moving between jobs when unemployment support was first devised) this safety net became *a permanent destination* for our people once we joined the passive welfare rolls.

The irony of our newly won citizenship in 1967 was that after we became citizens with equal rights and the theoretical right to equal pay, we lost the meagre foothold

that we had in the real economy and we became almost comprehensively dependent upon passive welfare for our livelihood. So in one sense we gained citizenship and in another sense we lost it at the same time. Because we find thirty years later that life in the safety net for three decades and two generations has produced a social disaster.

And we should not be surprised that this catastrophe was the consequence of our enrolment at the dependent bottom end of the Australian welfare state. You put any group of people in a condition of overwhelming reliance upon passive welfare support – that is support without reciprocation – and within three decades you will get the same social results that my people in Cape York Peninsula currently endure. Our social problems do not emanate from an innate incapacity on the part of our people. Our social problems are not *endemic*, they have not always been with us. We are not a hopeless or imbecile people.

Resilience and the strength of our values and relationships were not just features of our pre-colonial classical society (which we understandably harken back to) – our ancestors actually managed to *retain* these values and relationships despite all of the hardships and assaults of our colonial history. Indeed it is a testament to the achievements of our grandparents that these values and relationships secured our survival as a people and indeed our grandparents had struggled heroically to keep us alive as a people, and to rebuild and defend our families in the teeth of a sustained and vicious maltreatment by white Australian society.

So when I say that the indigenous experience of the Australian welfare state has been disastrous I do not thereby mean that the Australian welfare state is a bad thing. It is just that my people have experienced a marginal aspect of that welfare state: income provisioning for people dispossessed from the real economy.

Of course the welfare state means much more than the passive welfare which my people have predominantly experienced. As I have said the welfare state was in fact a great and civilising achievement for Australian society, which produced many great benefits for the great majority of Australians. It is just that our people have largely not experienced the positive features of mainstream life in the Australian welfare state – public health, education, infrastructure and other aspects which have underpinned the quality of life and the opportunities of generations of Australians. Of course some government money has been spent on Aboriginal health and education. But the people of my dysfunctional society have struggled to use these resources for our development. Our life expectancy is decreasing and the young generation is illiterate. Our relegation to the dependence on perpetual passive income transfers meant that our people's experience of the welfare state has been negative. Indeed, in the final analysis, completely destructive and tragic.

The two questions I ask myself about the Australian Welfare State in general and the future of Aboriginal Australia in particular are:

First, why were the lower classes not prepared for the changes in the economy and the accompanying political changes in spite of the fact that the labour movement has been a powerful influence for most of the century? The stratification of society is increasing, but the lower classes are becoming less organised and less able to use their numbers to influence the development of society via our representative democracy.

Second, why are we unable to do anything at all about the disintegration of our Aboriginal communities?

Let us admit the fact that we have no analysis, no understanding at all. All we have is confusion dressed up as progressive thinking.

When I have been struggling with these questions, I have gone back the early thinking about history and society of the nineteenth century international labour movement. A main idea was that social being determines consciousness, that is, economic relations in society determine our thinking and our culture, and that our thinking is much less conscious and free than we think it is.

If we allow ourselves to analyse our society in the way I think early social democrats would, I think we would come to the following conclusions:

Society is stratified. There is a small group at the top that is influential. There is a middle stratum that possesses intellectual tools and performs qualified work. The third and lowest stratum lacks intellectual tools, and does manual, often repetitive work.

The middle stratum consist of two groups with no sharp boundary between them. One performs the qualified work in the production of goods and services (the 'professionals'), the other (the 'intellectuals') has as their function to uphold the cultural, political and legal superstructure that is erected over and mirrors the base of our society, the market economy

I believe that a main function of our culture, from fine arts to footy today is to make people unable to use their intellectual faculties to formulate effective criticism and analysis while still allowing them to do their work in the economy. In this talk I use the word "culture" in a wide sense, including not only art and literature but also our social and political thinking. To intellectually format people, but still let them acquire the knowledge and develop the faculties needed for them to be productive is a complicated process. Therefore our culture is complex and difficult to analyse.

Our society and our culture is not a conspiracy. There are no cynics at the top of the pyramid who use their power to maintain an unnecessarily unequal society. Stratified society is perpetuated because of the self-interest that everybody has in not sinking down. People believe what it is in their interest to believe. Influential people believe that a stratified society will always be necessary for economic growth and development. Their subordinates, the intellectuals of the middle stratum who maintain our culture, sense the cues from above, then produce ideology for the conservation of the current state of things, but are not conscious of the reasons for their actions.

So, the objective function of our culture is to stop people from breaking away from the hierarchy, but at the same time allow them to develop specialised areas of competence and creativity so that they can participate in production and even develop the economy. Our culture treats you in two different ways depending on whether you are born into, or moving towards, the lower stratum or the middle stratum of society.

Workers need only limited intellectual tools. After a basic education, the face that Culture shows the lower stratum is one that has the objective function of deterring them from unauthorised intellectual activity, that is to use their language and their knowledge to analyse our society and their position in it.

It is therefore wrong, as the present prejudice does, to regard the lower stratum as hopeless yobbos who refuse to participate in a cultural life that would make their lives richer. On the contrary, they are right in rejecting most of our culture, but they throw out the baby, *the useful intellectual tools*, with the bath water. Most people unnecessarily have a bad conscience for their lack of interest in culture. They shouldn't. Most of our art, literature, history writing, philosophy, social thinking and so on really *is* as irrelevant as most people think. Not by accident, not because those who made it are useless and isolated from real life, but because it is one of the objective functions of our culture to *deter* most people from acquiring intellectual tools. I think that much of our official culture exists in order to scare the majority of the people away from acquiring the habits of critical reading and analytical thinking. And at the same time as our schools often fail to interest children in reading and social and political analysis or even convinces them that such activities are futile, students are given the option of taking subjects like Soccer Excellence or Rugby League Excellence or Film Studies at High School as if these are the qualifications necessary for their futures.

And if people can't be prevented from independent thinking by means of discouragement and strict formatting, there is a last net which catches almost everybody who makes it that far. I believe that most of what is seen as progressive and radical thinking today in our cultural, academic and intellectual life are simply *diversions* for keeping rebellious minds occupied and isolated from the social predicament of the lower classes.

The great mistake of the Social Democrats of all countries is that they put all their efforts into economic redistribution and failed to build a movement that could take up the battle about the laws of thought. The Social Democrat leadership thought they were going to solve the problems with some major reforms and settlements between industrialists and representatives of the majority. Now when the economy is changing, and the Welfare State is being dismantled, the majority of the population are unable to take part in the analytical debate about their future.

Of course many people will think it is outrageous when I dismiss much of our contemporary cultural and academic life as being just a big confusion-producing mechanism in the service of social stratification, that keeps dissenters occupied and makes it difficult for people to analyse our society so that they can organise themselves politically and try to rid society of the things that divide us and consume our energies (drugs, crime, ethnic conflicts, discrimination and so on).

But I have been driven to this desperate conclusion by the fact that our current thinking can't provide any solutions to our problems. And for Aboriginal people, the prevalent analyses are more than confusing, they are destructive.

Aboriginal Policy is weighed down by mixed-up confusion. Many of the conventional ideas and policies in Aboriginal Affairs – ideas and policies which are considered to be “progressive” – in fact are destructive. In thinking about the range of problems we face and talking with my people about what we might be able to do to move forward, the conviction grows in me that the so-called progressive thinking is compounding our predicament. In fact when you really analyse the nostrums of progressive policy, you find that the pursuit of these policies has never helped us to resolve our problems – indeed they have only made our situation worse.

Take for example the problem of indigenous imprisonment. Like a broken record over the past couple of decades we have been told that 2% of the population comprise more than 30% of the prison population. The situation with juvenile institutions across the country is worse. Of course these are incredible statistics. The progressive response to these ridiculous levels of interaction with the criminal justice system has been to provide legal aid to indigenous peoples charged with offences. The hope is to provide access to proper legal defence and to perhaps reduce unnecessary imprisonment. To this day however, Aboriginal victims of crime – particularly women – have no support: so whilst the needs of offenders are addressed, the situation of victims and the families remains vulnerable. Furthermore, it is apparent that this progressive response – providing legal aid support services – has not worked to reduce our rate of imprisonment. In fact Aboriginal legal aid is part of the criminal justice *industry* which processes Aboriginal people routinely through its systems. It is like a sausage machine and human lives are processed through it with no real belief that the outrageous statistics will ever be overcome.

The truth is that, at least in the communities that I know in Cape York Peninsula, the real need is for the restoration of social order and the enforcement of law. That is what is needed. You ask the grandmothers and the wives. What happens in communities when the only thing that happens when crimes are committed is the offenders are defended as victims? Is it any wonder that there will soon develop a sense that people should not take responsibility for their actions and social order must take second place to an apparent right to dissolution. Why is all of our progressive thinking ignoring these basic social requirements when it comes to black people? Is it any wonder the statistics have never improved? Would the number of people in prison *decrease* if we restored social order in our communities in Cape York Peninsula? What societies prosper in the absence of social order?

Take another example of progressive thinking compounding misery. The predominant analysis of the huge problem of indigenous alcoholism is the symptom theory. The symptom theory holds that substance abuse is only a symptom of underlying social and psychological problems. But addiction is a condition in its own right, not a symptom. It must therefore be addressed as a problem *in itself*. Of course miserable circumstances make people in a community *susceptible* to begin using addictive substances, but once an epidemic of substance abuse is established in a community it becomes independent of the original causes of the outbreak and the epidemic of substance abuse becomes in itself the main reason for why addiction and abuse becomes more and more widespread. The symptom theory absolves people from their personal responsibility to confront and deal with addiction. Worse, it leaves communities to think that nothing can be done to confront substance abuse

because its purported causes: dispossession, racism, trauma and poverty, are beyond reach of social resolution in the present.

But again, the solution to substance abuse lies in restriction and the treatment of addiction as a problem in itself. When I talk to people from Cape York Peninsula about what is to be done about our ridiculous levels of grog consumption (and the violence, stress, poor diet, heart disease, diabetes and mental disturbance that results) no one actually believes that the progressive prescriptions about “harm reduction” and “normalising drinking” will ever work.

A rule of thumb in relation to most of the programs and policies that pose as progressive thinking in indigenous affairs, is that if we did the opposite we would have a chance of making progress. This is because the subservience of our intellectual culture to the cause of class prejudice and stratification is so profound and universal. What we believe is forward progress is in fact standing still or actually moving backwards.

Much of my thinking will seem to many to indicate that I have merely become conservative. But I propose the *reform* of welfare, not its abolition. Like all of you here tonight I am also concerned for the long term preservation of our commitment to welfare as a nation. If we do not confront the need for the reform of welfare and to seize its definition, then we will lose it in the longer term.

The fact is that Australia is at a critical time in the history of the Welfare State. Its reform is imperative. It is worth remembering that Paul Keating actually commenced the new thinking on welfare with Working Nation.

This country needs to develop *a new consensus* around our commitment to welfare. This consensus needs to be built on the principles of personal and family empowerment and investment and the utilisation of resources to achieve lasting change. In other words our motivation to reform welfare must be based on the principle that dependency and passivity are a scourge and must be avoided at all costs. Dependency and passivity kills people and is the surest road to social decline. Australians do not have an inalienable right to dependency, they have an inalienable right to a fair place in the real economy.

There is an alternative definition of welfare reform that will take hold in the absence of the definition that I have just outlined. This alternative definition sees welfare reform as a matter of *moral judgment* on the part of those who have security of employment and who ‘pay taxes’ in relation to people whose dependency is seen as a moral failing. Indeed this alternative definition is laced with the idea that welfare reform should be about punishment of bludgers. In other words we are seeking to reform welfare because we are concerned about the sentiments of those who work and who pay taxes – and welfare recipients owe these people a moral obligation. Welfare reform in this alternative definition could also be merely a means of reducing government commitments and decreasing taxation of those who already have a place in the economy.

I have departed somewhat from the traditions of this annual lecture in that I have not explicated my vision about the Light on the Hill. But in order to have a vision one

needs to have an analysis of ones' present situation. I contend that people who want to be progressive today, are in objective fact, regressive in their thinking. This is especially and painfully obvious if you know the situation in the Aboriginal communities of this country. Petrol sniffing is in some places now so endemic that crying infants are silenced with petrol-drenched rags on their faces. In one of our communities in Cape York, among less than a 1000 people there were three murders within one month a few months ago. And we don't know what to do.

And to be honest, *in its cups*, the late Prime Minister Ben Chifley's party today does not know what to do now that the economy has changed and by default its traditional political base is decreasing, and the class divisions are widening. Too many Australians remain with uncertain prospects. How could we be so bereft of solutions today when these negligent thinkers and trustees in the academies and the bureaucracies who most benefited from the Welfare State that was created from the sweat and organisation of working people, have had a century to anticipate our current predicament and to prepare us for this day – at the least prepared with understanding?

Those of us who wish for social progress must realise that there are important insights in the materialist interpretation of our history and our culture, which the labour movement unfortunately left behind in favour of the confusions that have preoccupied and diverted those academics, bureaucrats and parliamentarians who became the intellectual trustees of the Welfare State and the interests of working people and their families – a responsibility which they grievously failed to fulfil.