

Soft bigotry of low expectations holds back indigenous reform



Noel Pearson attends a community School Improvement Partnership meeting at the Coen campus. Picture: Mark McCormack

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What is the soft bigotry of low expectations?

It is the most important idea in race relations since the advent of civil rights and the rejection of racial discrimination. Australia and the world need to wake up to it. This form of prejudice wreaks a massive toll on the marginalised and perpetuates great social injustice. It is as bad — and I would say even worse in its effects — than its better known counterpart.

It is the most important insight if we are concerned with the downtrodden and marginalised in our society, and how we might seriously try to make poverty history and truly diminish the misery that mires communities of the underclass, and the lower classes generally. Not the least, black Australians.

It is the most powerful cultural and ideological barrier to social progress. If the hard bigotry of prejudice and discrimination is a wall that keeps the marginalised out of the opportunities of the social and economic mainstream, then the soft bigotry of low expectations is a prison. A prison maintained by people who think they are socially progressive. It is the compassionistas' prison, having nothing to do with true social progress.

While proponents of hard bigotry are said to come from the cultural and political Right, soft bigotry is from the Left. The wall of hard bigotry is well recognised, no black Australian can

fail to see it — we rail against it every time we see it — and we have laws and institutions that declare aspects of this hard bigotry unlawful and unacceptable in our society. Because hard bigotry hurts people and is unjust.

But what about soft bigotry? We do not even recognise it as a phenomenon. It is virtually unknown and unrecognisable. Not even black Australians or other lower-class Australians affected by this bigotry understand we are in a prison of low expectations.

And yet I contend we now live in a country where the scourge of hard bigotry has been long overtaken by its softer counterpart. It is an ideology harboured by greater numbers of people than the old variety. Its perniciousness lies in the fact the purveyors of this bigotry believe themselves compassionate, sensitive, respectful, empathetic and morally correct. And the objects of this bigotry take it as benign and sympathetic, not knowing it is a poisoned pill.

The strangest thing is that this profound insight came from George W. Bush when he was on the presidential campaign trail in 2000. From the beginning of his presidency Bush was on his way to becoming what might have been the greatest education president in the history of the US when he conceived the No Child Left Behind policy as the central platform of his administration. He had conceptualised a platform for social justice through school reform that not even Bill Clinton had the gumption to tackle.

Alas, as with Lyndon Johnson's Great Society, war intervened and the focus and treasure needed to prosecute such large ambitions was lost. One of the great ironies of the attacks of September 11, 2001, was that at the very time Dubya was told of the terrorist strikes, he was in a classroom reading a small Direct Instruction booklet to young students called *The Pet Goat*. No kidding.

From that moment No Child Left Behind was doomed. The implementation, the adaptations and necessary adjustments based on what works, and the necessary relentless push from the president, and peace through education equality were overtaken by the war on terror.

In July 2000, Bush spoke to his country's leading civil rights organisation, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, at its 91st annual convention — a Republican president in a den of civil rights lions. Bush's speech is impeccable in how he sought to bridge the gulf of historic conflict and antipathy.

He said: "For our nation, there is no denying the truth that slavery is a blight on our history and that racism, despite all the progress, still exists today.

"For my party, there is no escaping the reality that the party of Lincoln has not always carried the mantle of Lincoln.

"Recognising and confronting our history is important. Transcending our history is essential."

He went to say: "America must close the gap of hope between communities of prosperity and communities of poverty. We have seen what happens ... when African-American citizens have the opportunity they've earned and the respect that they deserve. Men and women once victimised by Jim Crow have risen to leadership in the halls of congress."

How was this to be done? "This begins by enforcing the civil rights laws," Bush said. He was open about the ongoing prejudice faced by black Americans: "Discrimination is still a reality, even when it takes different forms. Instead of Jim Crow, there's racial redlining and profiling. Instead of separate but equal, there is separate and forgotten. Strong civil rights enforcement

will be a cornerstone of my administration. And I will confront another form of bias: the soft bigotry of low expectations.”

He turned to America’s schools: “While all can enter our schools, many, too many, are not learning there. There’s a tremendous gap of achievement between rich and poor, white and minority. This, too, leaves a divided society.

“And whatever the causes, the effect is discrimination.”

The reform principles he championed started with the need to “expect every child can learn” and “to blow the whistle on failure” and “remember the role of education is to leave no child behind”.

He referred to at-risk schools that had been turned around, explaining that “at-risk means you’re not supposed to learn”, and where this assumption was challenged he claimed: “I’ve seen these schools and principles bring new hope, inspiring new confidence and ambitions.” He went on: “See, every child can learn ... And every child in this country deserves to grow in knowledge and character and ideals. Nothing in my view is more important to our prosperity and goodness than cultivated minds and courageous hearts.”

He obviously had a great speechwriter, but the words went out under his authority. Before leaving Bush I want to quote this stupendously correct principle. “My friend Phyllis Hunter, of Houston, Texas, calls reading the new civil right,” Bush said. “Equality in our country will remain a distant dream until every child, of every background, learns so that he or she may strive and rise in this world. No child in America should be segregated by low expectations, imprisoned by illiteracy, abandoned to frustration and the darkness of self-doubt.”

Reading is the new civil right. Reading is indeed a basic human right.

During the tumult of the Aurukun school closure earlier this year, a political leader expressed the wish that Aurukun should look like “a normal state school”. What thoughtful person would think that “normal state schools” have been serving children like those in Aurukun in decades past?

Normal state schools are routinely failing Aboriginal children. They are preparatory schools for too many indigenous youth moving on to lives of welfare dependency and economic exclusion, juvenile detention and adult imprisonment. We want schools that cater to disadvantaged students, and that do not leave them behind with low expectations. This is the low socioeconomic status excuse for low expectations.

High expectations are not enough, there must also be effective teaching. Otherwise we fail to furnish students with the means to meet these expectations. The operating principle of Direct Instruction is: “If the student has not learned, the teacher has not taught.”

This is precisely the approach to schooling that removes all excuses. You can’t use the student, their low SES background, ethnic identity, lack of books in the home or their disadvantage as excuses for their failure to learn. They fail to learn because they have not been taught by their teacher.

It is this principle that is so challenging to public education in particular and to the middle-class school model generally. High-expectations schooling is ultimately about high-quality teaching. The esteem and pride will follow learning success.

Let me now finally turn to what I called the ABC's culture of soft bigotry. To be fair to them, this soft bigotry characterises the progressive media generally, and indeed is an expression of the false socially progressive culture in the wider polity. I think this bigotry is a problem with the national broadcaster because it is matched only by *The Australian* newspaper in its coverage of indigenous affairs, putting aside the SBS.

Before I put aside the SBS, let me opine that there is more insight in the reality television of its recent *First Contact* series than there has been in the ABC's investigative reporting on me and my schools over the past two weeks. When reality TV is more truthful than current affairs journalism, then something is going on.

People have misapprehended my critique of soft bigotry. ABC managing director Michelle Guthrie's response — pointing to indigenous staffing and the new role planned for Stan Grant as head of some indigenous unit and host of the Friday night slot of the 7.30 report — was just embarrassing. For someone who has made his own way through journalism, nationally and internationally, to be rolled out as evidence of indigenous employment and inclusive programming means Guthrie just does not get it.

Many people have interpreted my criticism as opposition to the ABC or any other media exposing the misery and horrors of social and economic marginalisation of indigenous peoples. No, that is not my objection.

Indeed *The Australian* and the ABC have a long and commendable history of this exposure and bringing the blight to national attention, when for the rest of the media "blackfellas just don't rate, mate". So let me not be taken to be opposed to investigative journalism, tough questions, scrutiny and expose.

Indeed, the ABC has a proud record of excellent journalism through *Four Corners*, *Australian Story* and the 7.30 report, which have been catalysts for public attention to abuse, neglect and suffering. I happen to regard the young David Marr's *Four Corners* piece on the emerging grog crisis in Aurukun in 1990, *Six Pack Politics*, as a catalyst that shook me up about the social dimension to my emerging advocacy for native title.

Only four weeks ago the *Four Corners* program on the industry that has been built around child protection was journalism at its finest — completely relevant to indigenous affairs and so important.

My problem is not with the journalism exposing the problems. My problem lies with the journalism that deals with attempts to tackle the problems. It is in relation to the policy response that the culture of soft bigotry at the ABC (and other progressive media) comes to the fore. This is where the ideological and cultural bias of the institution colours everything. This is where the false progressivism of the journalists as individuals and as a culture comes in.

I have been in this reform business for 25 years. I am a keen observer of and player within the Australian political culture generally and the media culture particularly. I have witnessed when this culture exposes problems and then kills any response. Time and time again. Indigenous reform is a zero-sum game, as a result. Three steps forward, two back. Two steps forward, three back. We just end up going nowhere.

This is why we have policies and initiatives that seek to reduce imprisonment, keep children with their parents, give hope to juveniles, get indigenous children to succeed in schools,

reduce “over-representation in the prison system”, yet a couple of decades later the numbers are worse, there are more people in prison and we are heading towards half of the children in protection coming from 3 per cent of the population.

I could point to the ABC’s news reporting that discloses the bias against reform. I have not done an analysis, but the reporting on Direct Instruction will readily show a pattern of controversialising what should be — according to Australia’s foremost education expert, John Hattie — uncontroversial.

But this is a culture. This is when you don’t need an editorial line. You just need the culture to be allergic to ideas like welfare reform, economic development and not just conservation. Our defence of our land rights in Cape York against attempts by governments and the green lobby to impose environmental regimes like vegetation management and Wild Rivers without the consent of traditional landowners of course brings into sharp conflict our rights with the culture of journalists such as the ABC in respect of environmentalism. Of course they are disposed to one side of this issue — and guess which side?

If I asked which side of the line the ABC culture sits on a range of issues such as asylum-seekers, immigration, coalmining, climate change, same-sex marriage — and so on — no one would fail to answer the question correctly. There is no evidence favouring neutrality in this, except for iconoclasts such as Chris Uhlmann taking a stand on freedom of religion.

There is no way indigenous reform will succeed in breaking out of the zero-sum game we are trapped in. We will die in the arms of the false progressives who we mistakenly think are on our side, but they harbour a basic bigotry towards our humanity and oppose our dignity at too many turns.

This soft bigotry exists because its purveyors on the Left fail to get over their relativism when it comes to indigenous people and the poor generally. This is a class aspersion, but one that is particularly easy to associate with race.

The relativism appears to reflect an acceptance or sensitivity to ethnicity and culture, but in fact it cloaks double standards where the progressive purveyors fail to ask themselves: what would I want for myself and my children if I were in the same circumstance? The answer that you would like to participate in economic development, have jobs, not be on welfare and so on, is not a question the purveyors of this culture ask themselves.

The greens who prioritise conservation over indigenous development needs fail to confront their double standards. And at the end of the day these double standards expose a basic hypocrisy.

This is the most fundamental challenge to indigenous reform in our country: will we confront and reject the soft bigotry of low expectations as surely as we confront and reject hard bigotry?

This is the edited text of a speech given at Customs House, Brisbane, on Thursday by Noel Pearson, who co-chairs Good to Great Schools Australia.