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Racism or Exclusion?

By Don Aitkin

Our contemporary lack of an explicit 'national project' — the building of an Australian society whose values we share and whose future is optimistic — had consequences right through the last Parliament and the last election campaign. They will be with us indefinitely until one of the major parties recognises the need, and does something about it.

The most obvious consequences have been the rise of the One Nation Party and the Government's reluctance to advance the interests of the Aboriginal peoples. It is easy to see all this as the politics of racism, and some of it is. But it is also the politics of exclusion.

Australia is now a fundamentally urban society located in ten cities, a society which generates a great part of its gross domestic product through services of all kinds. The geographical location of the One Nation vote makes clear that it disproportionately represents people who live outside the major urban areas, who do not earn their living in knowledge-based industries, who are much less likely to have been educated to university level, and who are less likely to earn above average incomes.

You can be pretty sure that the *angst* of One Nation is about feeling excluded from this urban, well-educated, well-paid, paper-pushing Australia. Yes, some of its anger is directed against people who seem to be benefitting from handouts, and some of them are Aboriginal people, and the animus thus seems to be racist. But I see that as one expression of feeling excluded: it is a consequence, not a cause.

Paradoxically, the National Party, the principal target of One Nation's electoral strategy, was itself originally a successful expression of just such a feeling. And it became in time part of the political establishment, through throwing its parliamentary strength behind the Liberal Party, on condition that the coalition ensured that country people were included, not excluded, from the major decision affecting Australian political economy.

One outcome of that long partnership is the network of dams, universities and developmental schemes in rural Australia. Had there been no such victories, One Nation, or something like it, would have appeared much sooner.

It follows that One Nation is likely to lose its influence if proper attention is paid to its constituency, and Deputy Prime Minister Tim Fischer made it clear on election night that he would be arguing that way in Cabinet. He will have a hard time of it.

Both our major party groups have fallen for the vulgar Marxist proposition that if the economy is attended to, particular social policies will not be necessary. That proposition was false 150 years ago, and is no more correct

today. Nations are much more than economies, and One Nation's electoral success, and in my view it was a success, is a sign that our Government has lost sight of what it is that Governments are for. Governments are there to build nations, and nations are assemblies of people all of whom feel that they have a real stake in the future of the nation. One Nation's supporters plainly do not think that they have that stake.

Nor, it must be obvious, do many Aboriginal people. Once again, the sentiment is a feeling of exclusion, but this time for different reasons. The Aboriginal people were never a single nation, in the sense that we use that word today, and since the arrival of the Europeans they have not been part of our civil society either. It is powerfully instructive that the very great majority of those who play a leading role in the public struggle of Aboriginal people for a place at the table have ancestry which has European as well as Aboriginal elements.

Were it really true that Aboriginal people were accepted easily in Australian society, then it is highly likely that many of those with mixed ancestry would be indistinguishable from the main body of Australian society, and uninterested in emphasising their difference. They do not choose that possibility, because our society in fact rejects the Aboriginal aspect of their being.

Until Aboriginal people are part of our nation, no more and no less than any other definable group, then our Government still has an important task to complete. It is not at all an easy task, but a succession of Australian Governments since 1967 have done their bits, large and small, to tackle that task. There is much more to do, and it dismays me that there is so little recognition that this is so.

It may well be that the treatment of the Aboriginal people since 1788 will always be there to haunt those of us who have inherited the Australian nation, because the words and symbols now used in the conflict have a capacity to arrest us. Many of us also feel that we are properly 'indigenous' Australian people; many of us obtain psychic and spiritual strength from familiar parts of our landscape and feel a need to nurture it; many of us will feel oppressed by the actions of others.

But few of us can rightly argue that these sentiments outweigh those of the Aboriginal people. We cannot undo what has been done, and from a world-historic perspective it would seem plain that a great and unwelcome culture-shock was the inevitable lot of the Aboriginal people of Australia, once Europeans discovered the Great South Land.

We the inheritors of that culture-shock have an obligation to try and build a modern Australian society in which Aboriginal descent is something to be proud of and something to be honoured by others, as is sometimes the case for people who can trace their origins in this country to the First Fleet. For that to happen we must lose the rejection and indifference that has been characteristic in Australia about the fact of the descendants of the first inhabitants of this land.

Because we are a successful political society any change of this kind will require imaginative public policies, and an imaginative Government. Without one, the business of some kind of new start for the people of Aboriginal descent will lag and acquire more acid and bile.

The electoral success of the One Nation Party and the lack of success of the movement of the Aboriginal people for proper recognition stem from the same cause: a failure of nerve on the part of the Australian Government, and a declining belief that nation-building is what national governments are for.

Our country is not alone in this. As I said, this whole syndrome has occurred all over the Western world. What is most vexing is that Australia has the strength and the capacity to deal with both of these problems, one easily and one more slowly and over time. We are one of the most successful democracies in the world; it is vexing that we do not seem to be able to deal with our own problems.

(Professor Don Aitkin is Vice-Chancellor and President of the University of Canberra; this is an edited version of a speech he gave to the Pacific Representations Conference in Canberra last month.)