

Failing to address issues of interest for Aboriginal Australians in the 2016 Federal election campaign

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Abstract: This essay explores the ways in which Indigenous issues were framed, amplified and subverted in the national discourse in the lead up to the 2016 federal election. An examination of key theories on minority group representation and participation in democratic process provides the framework through which channels for Indigenous self-determination on key political issues in the Australian context are examined.

Keywords: 2016 federal election; Indigenous issues; Australian politics; self determination

As Australia's First Nations peoples and a group grappling with the ongoing impacts of colonisation, dispossession and acts of genocide at the hands of the state, addressing Indigenous issues seems a pertinent function of Australia's social policy obligations. Indeed, as the descendants and proponents of the world's oldest cultures, the preservation of Aboriginal language and heritage in healthy communities is of international significance (Grant 2015). Yet the 2016 Australian federal election campaign marks the continuing 'insuperable challenge' of prioritising entrenched poverty and disadvantage, institutionalised injustice, racialized discrimination, and the ongoing loss of Indigenous culture in the Australian public and political sphere (Davis 2016). While a change in leadership has facilitated a revision of policies, redrafting of the budget and re-prioritisation of key issues, history suggests this opportunity to redress drastic cuts to Indigenous services in favour of community-managed care programs will likely fall by the wayside in favour of the rhetoric that wins elections (Porter 2015).

This essay will explore the ways in which Indigenous issues were framed, amplified and subverted in the national discourse in the lead up to the 2016 federal election. An examination of key theories on minority group representation and participation in democratic process will provide formative theory through which to examine the channels for self-determination of key political issues in the domestic context. From there, an exploration of lived experiences and prominent issues of rights



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and inequity will establish the broad scope of issues to be dealt with by the state. An analysis of both political party communications and mass media reporting, framing and impact will elucidate the perceived public interest and possibilities for agenda-setting, before a final evaluation of the representation of Indigenous issues in the public sphere.

While Aboriginal communities are under-served, underrepresented and dramatically disparate with the general population in many points of interaction between citizens and state systems and services - health, education, welfare, taxation, civil and criminal justice - the Liberal National Coalition federal government has made sweeping cuts to Indigenous services (Coggan 2014). In lieu of processes that aim to heal these gaps in earnest, Aboriginal Australians are also systematically excluded from policy debates through the rhetorical creation of intrinsic 'Aboriginal cultural issues' which act to obscure specific Indigenous needs in conversations like taxation, housing affordability and environmental issues. Politicians and media are complicit in obfuscating root causes of disadvantage like systemic racism and colonial grievances by conflating 'Aboriginal needs' with issues like alcohol-based violence, geographically remote communities and welfare dependency (Langton 2016).

From politicians, this ostensible focus on 'practical policy' has been accompanied by a discordant show of symbolism - displaying merely a 'semblance of public conversation, democracy and debate', denigrated by Noel Pearson as emblematic of the 'era of the reification of process' (Altman 2016; Davis 2016). This Baudrillardian simulacrum of power occurs not in a vacuum - but continues a bipartisan predilection towards 'cookie-cutter, top-down, one-size-fits-all policies' that are repeatedly developed without community consultation, disregard the recommendations of government-commissioned reports and inquiries, and ignore successful case studies with an effect that Davis (2016) deems is 'removing autonomy and choice from the individual and collective lives of a profoundly unhappy polity' (Cox 2014; Grieves 2015). In waves predictably mirroring election cycles, policies are conceived and implemented 'out of consultation or a research base', reports and inquiries are commissioned and the recommendations ignored, investigative journalism avoids the poor performance of government policies in order to focus on sensationalised 'Aboriginal issues', and policies that are ostensibly needs-based - income management, mandatory sentencing - manifest as racially discriminatory in practise with little scrutiny (Grieves 2015; Cox 2014; Moran & Go-Sam 2015).

Repeating this pattern in the 2016 election and beyond would be to continue disastrous policy cycles, deepening inequalities in the face of poor progress. Despite significant financial investment since the National Indigenous Reform Agreement of 2009, poor and mismanaged health and disability support services leave many of the most vulnerable Aboriginal children and adults at risk of preventable incarceration, illness and death (CRC 2016). State intervention consistently takes the form of punitive justice, forming conditions in which Indigenous Australians are more likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system; be arrested younger, often for smaller offences; be denied bail and sentenced to prison time; and to die in custody (Anthony 2016). While state governments are undoubtedly responsible, the impact of national child protection services are clear in the extreme over-representation of Indigenous children in out-of-home care and juvenile detention (Rudd 2015; CRC 2016).

The isolation of Aboriginal communities in practise and rhetoric is exacerbated by issues of intergenerational poverty, with 19.3% of the Indigenous population living in poverty and making up 25% of Australia's homeless population (CRC 2016). These issues are deepened rather than alleviated through persistent prioritisation of income management projects that have been proven economically inefficient, racially discriminatory and unsuccessful at tackling alcohol dependency, school attendance, unhealthy lifestyles or poor saving habits (Cox 2014; Moran & Go-Sam 2015; Campbell 2014).

These issues are complex, intersecting and chronic - yet there are a wealth of evidence-based recommendations for ways forward, including: community-led planning, consultation, participation and management; flexibility in design and delivery to meet highly-localised stipulations; longevity in funding - including staff; relationship-building and maintenance between key stakeholders (Cox 2014). These approaches can be seen as 'decolonising' in their assertion of Indigenous autonomy and diversion from 'sclerotic bureaucratic and political cultures' and the constant turbulence of national politics (Blagg & Tulich 2016; Cox 2014).

Much of these policy decisions can be understood through the dual influences of mainstream media agenda-setting and political party perceptions of public opinion. While it is common to argue, as March (2001, p. 159) does, that recent years have seen major Australian political parties 'largely jettisoning their roles in interest integration and opinion framing', the power of the formal representation of minority groups in disrupting the architecture of participation and presenting a necessarily oppositional, discerning and regulatory presence should not be understated. At a broad level, the representation of Indigenous peoples in governments is at least a litmus test for the integrity of state democracy in demonstrating its ability to 'represent the community in a microcosmic sense'; while even proportionally-appropriate levels of representation of Indigenous groups is not a panacea for fairness, prominent minority candidates can ameliorate perceptions of invisibility and help politicise and mobilise community members (Anthony 2006, p. 50; Bird 2005). Further, a lack of formal representation aligns with Walker and Walker's (1997, p. 8) definition of social exclusion as encompassing the 'dynamic process of being shut out' from the systems which 'determine the social integration of a person', in effect representing the non-realisation of the rights of citizenship.

Therefore it can be understood that with few elected representatives at the federal level, Indigenous Australian communities have limited avenues for the prioritisation, discussion and dissemination of political issues and campaign materials. Following the resignation of prominent Northern Territory member of parliament Nova Peris, there are just three incumbent Indigenous federal representatives. Often a correlation between spatial location and electoral boundaries can help mobilise ethnic groups and garner elected representation; yet in most parts of Australia, Indigenous communities represent tiny contingencies in National Party seats where they aren't able to form such voting blocs, and due to the nature of geographical community groupings, political priorities can be incredibly diverse within these groups (Bird 2005; Zappala 1999; Dudgeon 2002).

Further, though they have the same rights to participation and representation as the broader public, due to the history of 'alienation from systems of government', coupled with higher illiteracy rates, lower accessibility and apathy towards or lack of trust in the state, only 58% of Indigenous

Australians are on the electoral roll, and deliberate and accidental informal voting is more pronounced (Anthony 2016, p. 51). Within a landscape where ‘citizen participation is primarily funnelled through the ballot box’, these factors leave Aboriginal communities neglected in formal political discourses - on this Davis (2016) strikingly asserts that contemporary public policy does not necessitate the ‘imprimatur of the Aboriginal people’ - that their ‘participation in decisions taken about their lives is negligible’.

Thus in a space where there exists few Indigenous voices in positions of formal power, mainstream media and political parties are able to ‘influence, shape or determine [the] very wants’ of the broader public by conducting agenda-setting functions, acting as ‘megaphones of the prevailing elites’ to decide what issues are worthy of reporting (Lukes 2005, p. 27). In a homogenous media landscape typified by news management and ‘pundictocracy’, ‘Aboriginal misery dominates the national media frenzy’ as metanarratives of chronic, irreparable and intrinsic distress pervades media content (Langton 2008).

This is reflected in a macro-level analysis of election coverage by major outlets. ABC news websites, The Australian and syndicates, and newswires by far mention Indigenous issues in relation to the election most, with 662, 592, and 550 articles on the subject respectively. Significant contributions are made by *The Guardian* (240), News Corp’s *Northern Territory News* (177) and state-based Fairfax papers (126). Small yet influential offerings came from *The Daily Telegraph* and *Herald Sun* (79) and academic publication *The Conversation* (68).

This coverage falls into four categories across the spectrum of progressive to conservative: objective reporting of issues as they arise and as politicians engage with them; fixation on what Langton (2016) deems the ‘few old shibboleths’ of mainstream media reporting - seen in News Limited’s focus on community corruption, the closing of the Aurukun school, the drink-driving charge of an MP and the AFL’s Indigenous Round as well as the two-dozen opinion pieces penned by Andrew Bolt; a significant prioritisation of the campaign for constitutional recognition housed across ABC, Fairfax, and News Limited reporting; and the opportunity for Aboriginal voices that disrupt these narratives - realised by columnists like Celeste Liddle for *The Guardian*.

While on some levels substantial, this media coverage pales in comparison to the severity of contemporary issues facing Aboriginal communities - higher rates of poverty and incarceration, limited access to quality healthcare and education services, child protection, drug, alcohol and mental health issues - that must be targeted through collaborative policy (CRC 2016; Cox 2014). Instead, players in the 2016 federal election have ignored root-causes of regenerating issues - for example, that there has been no state action since the UN found in 2009 that Australia was failing Indigenous rights obligations due to ‘entrenched racism’ (Maguire 2009).

This is further compounded by the dissonance between mainstream issues that impact Aboriginal Australians in specific ways - housing, environment, tax reform, connectivity - and what falls in the public discourse under the spectrum of ‘Indigenous issues’ (Langton 2016). Rather than discuss the growing gap in internet equity between young Indigenous Australians and their non-Indigenous counterparts or the pressing issues of desertification and sea level rise on remote communities, issues like digital infrastructure and climate change are framed to cater to white and urban political

audiences (Langton 2016). In Marcia Langton's acclaimed 2008 essay, *Trapped in the Aboriginal Reality Show*, she explicates how sensationalised framing of Aboriginal issues 'shifts attention away from everyday lived crisis that many Aboriginal people endure' - elucidating the role media and political parties play in disparaging public discourse and the aforementioned cycle of policy failures.

Of course, the flagship policy for discussion among media, pundits and politicians alike is constitutional recognition. While it has broadly been accepted in both conservative and progressive communities as a step further towards reconciliation, opinion within Indigenous spheres is far more heterogenous. Advocates and dissenters alike wish to see substantive change - yet disagree about the ability of constitutional change to act formatively and garner tangible outcomes for Indigenous communities grappling with proportionally disastrous incarceration, suicide, unemployment and literacy rates. While Langton (2013, p. 2) argues there is power in language and symbolism, and Pearson (2014, p. 50) believes the 'right constitutional hook' could realise the self-determination of Indigenous communities, others see the Recognise campaign as giving legitimacy to a colonial tool with potential future neocolonial applications in a system where 'Aboriginal participation in the decisions taken about their lives is negligible' (Gorrie 2016; Liddle 2016; Davis 2016).

Unsurprisingly, this disparity between the lived experiences of Indigenous communities and mainstream media flows onto major political parties. The impact of political parties in modern democracies is oft-debated: some argue parties work to 'frame and elicit the various demands to which they then respond', acting to shape discussion in a formative sense; others have faith in the diversity of opinions within civil society and a multi-party state system (Marsh 2001). Regardless, it is clear that in regard to the 2016 Australian federal election, the Liberal and Labor parties, alongside prominent minority parties like The Greens, wield significant influence through their passionate bases, advertising budgets and command of mass media attention.

Broadly, The Greens have the most progressive stance on Indigenous rights, with policies covering support for a treaty and acknowledgment of sovereignty, and specific policies for health, law, education, housing, employment and family violence that work alongside self-determination strategy. They also propose prioritising the protection of culture and heritage including the funding of remote communities and native title reform with an implicit reparation element. Five of the Labor party's flagship '100 positive policies' deal explicitly with Indigenous peoples - focusing on the empowerment of girls through education and equity, funding for Indigenous rangers, bridging the vision loss disparity, a strong educational policy including the funding of Indigenous teachers, and support for constitutional recognition. However, the Liberal party platform is symbolically and practically centralised around economic development, including support for Indigenous businesses, an Indigenous Entrepreneurs Fund, and a focus on economic parity and employment. This is largely in line with decades-old Liberal party rhetoric, typified in its emphasis on 'practical matters' while 'studiously avoiding any reference to self-determination' (Sanders 2002, p. 2).

With a change in leadership for all three parties since the last election, all are capable of reshaping platforms to take to the election and beyond. Since the last election, the very architecture of Indigenous policies was fundamentally altered: 150 programs have been rationalised to five, leaving the sector in 'complete chaos' and grappling with instability; the National Congress of Australia's

First Peoples was defunded and supplanted by an Indigenous Advisory Council; and constitutional recognition has been accepted as the flagship Indigenous policy to the ire of many (Holland 2014; Cox 2014; Altman 2016). It appears neither the Liberal or Labor party is willing to fully restore funding lost since 2013, though Labor promises funding for Indigenous education and justice reinvestment, and could reallocate support to the National Congress alongside the Greens (Altman 2016).

Yet there is hope. With Bill Shorten and Malcolm Turnbull vying for the position of Prime Minister alongside a strong Greens campaign, this is arguably the most progressive leadership battle in modern Australian history. While little reference was made to Aboriginal rights earlier in the election period - neither Shorten, Turnbull nor Scott Morrison made more than lip service to Indigenous issues in the leaders debates and budget speech respectively - closer to the election, there is growing momentum for commitments to Indigenous communities. One day after Shorten showed support for investigating a treaty, Turnbull, though undermining his opponent's comments, made some of his strongest statements to date, asserting that Australia was 'invaded' (Butler 2016).

In both practical and symbolic terms, the policy frameworks of concurrent federal governments have failed Australia's international obligations and the basic needs of citizens; rather than adopting long-term policies for chronic issues, successive governments have shifted direction haphazardly to align with what is perceived to 'move a nation' to electoral victory (Altman 2016; Davis 2016). While this election campaign held innate opportunities for change - and continues to present these opportunities - a combination of factors suggest a 'business-as-usual' election and post-election policy platform: a continuation of racial tropes in mainstream media coverage, limited opportunities for the voices of Indigenous leaders in the public sphere - especially those who dissent from the broader Indigenous discourse, and the bipartisan focus on symbolic change through constitutional reform while both parties refuse to spend on Indigenous policy reform and restoration. While Indigenous activists, advocates, policy experts and academics can look towards a future set apart at least in rhetoric from the polarising leaderships of Tony Abbott and John Howard, it seems the long-term thinking and intersectional policies Indigenous Australian communities deserve are yet a pipedream.

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