

Trust

For the advancement of Australia's First Peoples the main question in this Federal election is *who can you trust?*

All of our political leaders know this is true, with the Prime Minister Kevin Rudd and Opposition Leader Tony Abbott declaring that trust is the overarching issue around Australia. Yet the major parties will have a very hard time convincing Aboriginal people and Torres Strait Islanders that there is any evidence, any historical pattern of trust that would allow voters to pin hopes on promises of change.

Tony Abbott, the clear front-runner, has declared that he wants to be “the Prime Minister for Indigenous affairs” and that Indigenous disadvantage is Australia’s “greatest national failure”. He adds, “You still have the dreadful fact that life expectancy is almost 20 years less for Indigenous Australians, that education attainments is significantly lower and unemployment rates are between 50 per cent and 300 per cent higher.”

Publicly Abbott has been critical of the top-down approach of the Northern Territory Intervention and in personal correspondence responding to criticisms I have made about the Intervention’s crushing disempowerment he has acknowledged “that as a general principle it would have been better to consult rather than simply to act.”

You the voter will be left to judge whether as Prime Minister Abbott would be committed enough and capable of uniting a neo-liberal Coalition to embark on a major change of policy that would empower Indigenous people to improve education, employment and health.

There is no disputing the fact that empowerment, education, employment and wellbeing are essential for progress and genuine equality.

To succeed, a Conservative leader would have to break with past history and shift trust to Aboriginal leaders, organisations and whole communities.

Abbott would have to invest in Aboriginal wellbeing, education and economic development in innovative ways and with levels of spending the Coalition has never embraced.

We must think deeply about the facts before we buy the promises.

Abbott now claims he wants to make the fight against Indigenous disadvantage one of his top priorities and that he will attempt to “close the gap”. This is commendable but history offers us a caution.

As Federal Health Minister in the Howard Government, one of the most disastrous for First Peoples, Abbott resisted calls to close the gaps in spending on primary health care. The ALP has unfairly attacked Abbott over general hospital spending because there were steady increases of federal funding. But in the area of glaring

disadvantage, primary health care for Indigenous Australians, Abbott's sheer obstinacy in the past is troubling.

Again, I draw on personal correspondence in which Abbott defended the Howard Government's spending levels and rejected the arguments by an overwhelming majority of health professionals that the then annual shortfall of more than \$420 million dollars in primary health care was the most critical factor in tackling the genuine emergency, the epidemic of chronic illness cutting the heart out of another generation of Aboriginal people.

Abbott also rode along with the federalist horde, overthrowing Aboriginal rights, removing the protection of the Racial Discrimination Act and crushing communities under the Intervention. In fact, it was the Coalition Government that ushered in a new era of Great White Protectors, undermining self-determination and community control.

As a result of many years of ardent mutual courtship between Tony Abbott, Noel Pearson, Warren Mundine and Marcia Langton we are presented with the would be Prime Minister's much publicised 'conversion' to the creed of these neo-liberal Aboriginal voices.

How would this work? If Abbott anoints himself as the "Prime Minister for Indigenous affairs" with Senator Nigel Scullion as Minister for Indigenous Affairs, would we simply see yet another version of Great White protectors?

It is important to bear in mind that John Howard's highly influential head of the Prime Minister's Department, Professor Peter Shergold, recently wrote that "after two decades the scale of relative disadvantage suffered by Indigenous Australians remained as intractable as ever. I can think of no failure in public policy that has had such profound consequences."

Centralising Indigenous policymaking in Canberra does not guarantee it is effective and may instead maintain the status quo. The telling change will be shaped by the quality of advice coming from Indigenous people and of how well grounded this advice is in the reality of life in Aboriginal communities, urban, regional and remote.

Tony Abbott tells us that if he becomes Prime Minister his advice would come from his good friend, Noel Pearson and a council of advisors put together by Warren Mundine. This set of relationships would not be new either.

Remember in the Howard years there was such an advisory council and Mundine, a former ALP national secretary, was there pushing for commerce, employment and private home ownership in a market-place approach to Aboriginal development.

Noel Pearson's stamp would be on the idea of the Conservatives dragging Labor to a 'radical centre' and agreeing on a new approach to Indigenous development. But Pearson's old mantra about "the right to take responsibility" thinly disguises the age-old political problem.

Would a Conservative Government allow Indigenous people to take responsibility for their destiny?

The proposal by the Conservative group to give Indigenous people an interface with Government such as a Productivity Commission to hold politicians to their promises and closely evaluate where the money is going and whether strategies are succeeding is certainly not a new idea. But it is an approach that is long overdue.

Since the start of the Close the Gaps political campaigning led by Dr Tom Calma, Aboriginal professionals on every front - health, education and employment - have called for a new instrument or institution to make Government more accountable.

Axing a Government, ultimately, is the only instrument afforded us in the Australian brand of democracy.

We have no human rights law of substance, no bill of rights, no means to legally halt the relentless assimilation eroding the rightful place of First Peoples in this land.

The ALP's self-inflicted damage to its relationship with many Indigenous voters is a consequence of its drift from staunch support of rights to an agenda of Intervention, social-engineering and punitive policy.

When Kevin Rudd in Opposition allowed his party to support the Northern Territory Intervention he undermined any good prospect of a new relationship.

Yes, Prime Minister Rudd's historic Apology to the Stolen Generations was a high point of the ALP Government's historic recognition of past injustices. But by refusing to abandon five years of Intervention and by introducing ten more years of political controls over remote communities under the Stronger Futures Legislation, Labor has enjoined the conservatives.

In essence, the major parties are assimilationist and refuse to allow Indigenous people the effective measure of control and self-management that global evidence says is necessary to end poverty and move towards equality.

The ALP has a better record on investing in education, health and housing. Yet all of these initiatives have been severely weakened by the refusal to shift trust to genuine Indigenous consultation, involvement and management.

The Greens, particularly through the work of Senator Rachel Siewart, have consistently opposed the Intervention, assimilation and ruthless exploitation of the resources on Aboriginal lands. Their minor party status gave them a role in a Minority Government to approve some constructive legislation but they have been powerless to end the discrimination against Indigenous people.

In the end, First Peoples should be heartened to see an ever increasing number of Indigenous candidates sharing a vision and values and offering voters greater choice.

For your vote to have real vale, it must be for someone you can truly trust.