

Old policies, loudly restated

Elections inevitably become auctions. The only question is what kind of bids will prove most electorally appealing. If the past week or two is anything to go by, the parties at the 2007 election will try to sell themselves as having the answers to the problems of indigenous communities; problems that have defied the efforts of governments of all political persuasions for decades.

The Howard government's opening bid sounded bold and impressive. Banning alcohol, sending in the army, making welfare payments conditional, and compulsory health checks for young people seemed like daring moves, putting practical outcomes ahead of civil libertarian sacred cows.

But as with the \$10 billion water plan announced earlier this year, the initial response to the crisis proved to be both less and more than meets the eye. In large measure, it consisted of a loud restatement of existing policies.

Banning alcohol might sound draconian, but the majority of remote indigenous communities have been legally dry for decades. Sadly, enforcement of the bans has proved almost impossible. To have any chance of making an alcohol ban effective, it would be necessary to restrict the sale and possession of alcohol for all residents of the Northern Territory. There are some cows too sacred to be slain.

Conditional welfare payments are also not new. The Community Development Employment Program (CDEP), introduced in the Fraser years and greatly expanded under Labor, requires recipients of unemployment benefits to participate in community projects.

Similarly, sending in the army sounds dramatic, but the military role will be confined to logistical support. The Army Aboriginal Community Assistance Program has been providing similar kinds

of assistance to indigenous communities, including health services, since the Howard government was elected. Most of the PM's indigenous action plan has been tried before, writes **John Quiggin**.

The program has made some valuable contributions on a modest budget, but clearly not sufficient to prevent the tragic outcomes that have led to the current intervention. The idea that sending in the army will work where government as a whole has failed smacks of magical thinking.

Then, there was the proposal for compulsory health checks, now being revised on the run. It turned out that the civil libertarians had a point. Doctors who made enforced physical checks could violate both criminal law and medical ethics.

The "more than meets the eye" components of the package include the abolition of the permit system restricting access to indigenous communities and the end of communal land tenure. These policies have been high on the wish list of the government's ideologists, but are irrelevant as an emergency response to sexual abuse of children. The end of the permit system might well be counterproductive. These policies should be debated separately on their merits, not rammed through in a crisis atmosphere.

Despite its flaws, the government's opening bid has forced Labor to respond. Initially wrongfooted, Kevin Rudd has pointed out an obvious problem in the government's strategy. Although increased school attendance is necessarily a central element of any response to the crisis, there was no commitment to fund the teachers, school buildings and so on that would obviously be required.

And once this point has been made, the examples keep on coming. The money required for housing alone has been estimated to run into billions of dollars. Health and alcohol abuse services will be similarly expensive. The government's plan includes more police, but this is just the start of an effective response to the breakdown of social order in many communities.

And, as Cape York Aboriginal Noel Pearson has pointed out, there is little point in providing improved services if people are sitting in idleness. Creating and sustaining employment in disadvantaged communities is bound to be expensive. Yet far from spending more, the government withdrew funding for urban and regional communities under the CDEP plan on June 30. Its replacement, the Structured Training and Employment Projects (STEP) program, is expected to save the government nearly \$40 million over five years.

So far, apart from Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough's initial promise of "whatever it takes" to fix the problems, there is no sign of a properly thought out funding program. Recent statements from the Prime Minister have fudged the earlier commitments and sought to push funding responsibility back on to the states.

However, with the favourable headlines fading and the polls indicating public cynicism about the government's motives, standing pat is not an option. There is still time for both parties to commit real resources to overcoming the national disgrace of our treatment of indigenous communities. If this happens, Howard's bold plan might lead to some genuinely positive outcomes.

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