Masters of Social Chaos
John Hirst

White Out: How Politics Is Killing Black Australia
Rosemary Neill

POLITICS

FOR A LONG TIME in her column in The Australian, Rosemary Neill has been breaking the taboo that Aboriginal affairs must not be discussed honestly. She has now brought her researches and thoughts together in a book. The book appears just after the taboo has finally been overthrown and has thus been robbed of some of its impact. Neill, in her columns, deserves some credit for unsettling the taboo, though what was needed for its overthrow was for Aborigines themselves to start speaking the truth. This, fortunately, has now occurred. The statements by Noel Pearson and John Ah Kitt have given a licence for a new, frank discussion on Aboriginal affairs. It can now be said openly that alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence and neglect of children are much worse in Aboriginal communities than in the population generally, and, moreover, that the situation is getting worse, not better, despite three decades of ‘enlightened’ policy and massive government expenditure.

This book still has its uses. It is a good compendium of politically incorrect information. It will tell you at what age sexually transmitted diseases are diagnosed in Aboriginal children, the misrepresentations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, and the fudging in the Bringing Them Home report.

Neill proceeds as a journalist, quoting different testimony and viewpoints, and so seems to endorse positions on policy that are contradictory. Sometimes more money appears to be needed; sometimes money is not the answer. Neill well knows that many of the so-called Aboriginal communities are highly artificial and dysfunctional, and yet she records without question the approach of those who think they can be made healthy by a series of programmes, one to keep the kids in school, another to stop petrol sniffing, another to prevent suicide, another to stop domestic violence, and so on. She gives her support to the view that if a white community was in the same plight as many Aboriginal communities, a state of emergency would be declared and the troops sent in. However, she also quotes with approval the statement of Elliott Johnston (the deaths in custody Commissioner) that the first criterion for success is ‘the desire and capacity of Aboriginal people to put an end to their disadvantaged situation and take control of their own lives’. Sending in troops is not going to achieve that.

Neill does not pretend to have the answers, and some of the confusion in the book is what we must all feel facing this intractable problem. Her strongest argument about policy is that no progress will be made until the wider society stops using the Aborigines to defend highly predictable partisan positions. The left has refused to acknowledge the social disaster for fear of perpetuating stereotypes; the right has been willing to talk honestly but in order to defend past practices and resuscitate the policy of assimilation.

I am not so hopeful that the politics can be taken out of Aboriginal affairs, and, in any case, the problem is much deeper than this. The complexities we face can be demonstrated by making explicit the positions that Neill herself appears to occupy. She wants Aborigines to live as long as the rest of the population; to be part of the real economy; to be employed in genuine jobs; their children to be educated in Western ways; their women to be treated with respect. This must happen whether Aborigines want it to happen or not. Neill produces considerable evidence of Aboriginal resistance to this programme: for instance, the men who control communities are often not interested in reducing domestic violence, some Aborigines are careless about their health because they ascribe sickness to sorcery, and many Aborigines do not wish to give up welfare, considering that they are entitled to receive it in return for the taking of their country. The implication, then, is that Aborigines are to be coerced or cajoled into living according to the general community standard. Neill quite definitely believes that an exaggerated respect has been shown to their traditional culture.

Is this not assimilation or something very close to it? One taboo Neill will not break is to consider the merits of that policy. In Australia, assimilation became associated with physical absorption and the dreadful practice of removing half-caste children. It does not necessarily mean that, but, so that there is no confusion, let us say that the outcome Neill appears to desire is integration. Is there any chance that integration will be adopted as official policy and, if adopted, would any government have the nerve to carry it through? Neill herself has not begun seriously to think through the means necessary to reach her ends.

The Zeitgeist is not favourable to the imposition of social discipline. Witness the misgivings at Noel Pearson’s proposal for banning drugs and alcohol. We are much better at creating social chaos. It is not merely coinidence that the degradation of Aboriginal communities over the last thirty years occurred at the same time as the development of a white underclass. Welfare without strings, no-fault divorce, the single mother’s pension and the social indulgence of drug-taking and sexual promiscity have brought disaster to marginal groups, white and black. The Aborigines have suffered a double handicap: they were controlled more fully and for longer than other indigenous people, and they were liberated into a libertarian age. Aborigines will not be able to help themselves or be helped to a better life until the libertarian impulse has exhausted itself.