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Research that matters.

TITLE: Minority groups target of vilification

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The Howard Government's vilification of indigenous communities and their culture is another in a long line of morally repugnant diversionary tactics employed by a Government devoid of ideas and scrambling to retain the interest of the electorate.

When the history of this Government is written, the events in recent times should be placed side-by-side with the shameful exploitation of refugees, the wicked fear-mongering that followed the Wik decision, the gay bashing in 2004 and the demonisation of drug-users in terms of the most unethical political strategies employed in its decade of power.

To give the Government its dues though, it has turned the demonisation of minorities into a political art form. The beauty lies in its simplicity. When faced with a political challenge - like the unpopularity of the industrial relations laws, the shambles in Iraq or the AWB shemozzle - it picks a vulnerable minority group and stirs up loathing towards it.

If the circumstances allow, the Government will belittle the minority group for its social problems and beat the law and order drum as the solution; as has occurred with remote indigenous communities over the past week.

The formula is repeated over and over, yet neither the electorate nor the media seem to tire of it. The Murdoch press, particularly The Australian, rush to the aid of the Government, publishing inflammatory articles and opining on the moral fortitude of the Prime Minister and blaming the bleeding hearts and lefties for society's ills.

The television stations run the pictures that fan the flames and the shock jocks on radio almost drool over the endless opportunities for racism, sexism and all other discriminatory "isms" that arise in these circumstances. It is a media circus that verges on high farce.

And while everybody is distracted by their moral outrage - either for or against the minority group - whatever it was that troubled the Government before has been forgotten.

Gone are the concerns about interest rates, rising debt, corruption, loss of workplace

rights and the like, replaced by either a loathing of the minority group or outrage at the Government.

Of course, the dismay of those alarmed by the denigration of a minority group is of no concern to the Government; it knows its target group of conservative "Howard battlers" that dominates key marginal electorates will direct its angst at the dole bludgers, Aborigines, refugees, druggies or other unfortunate groups who have been made the flavour of the month.

The icing on the cake comes from knowing that the Government's knowledge of the mindset of the marginals comes from thousands of hours of focus groups and polling that is subsidised by the taxpayer.

Attacking minority groups for political purposes is morally reprehensible at the best of times, but the latest onslaught directed at indigenous Australians and their culture is beyond the pale.

As indigenous leaders have been keen to emphasise, the issues that the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough - whose nickname is Marlboro (after the Marlboro man of the cigarette ad fame) - has seized upon have plagued indigenous communities for decades. Yet, Marlboro and his media cheer squad are treating the events as new.

The Howard Government has been in power for a decade and has been told on countless occasions about the need for greater attention to be paid to the plight of indigenous communities.

Their predicament and the extent of the disadvantage faced by indigenous people are laid out in hundreds of reports, including the annual Report on Government Services that is published by the Productivity Commission.

No politician can claim ignorance when it comes to this issue. And before Brough's "intervention", the Government seemed to be fully aware of indigenous disadvantage. In dismissing calls for land rights and an apology for the stolen generations, the Prime Minister claimed his Government was more concerned about "practical reconciliation" - by which he meant addressing disadvantage - than these so-called empty gestures.

Yet now Brough is claiming to have discovered the social decay in Indigenous communities and is blaming everybody but his own Government for these problems.

Guilt for the failings of Indigenous policy does not lie solely with the Howard Government, but they are at least partly responsible.

All this has been lost in the squawking about law and order solutions and the use of cultural factors as a mitigating factor in sentencing. And this is precisely how the Government wanted it to be.

Absent from the debate has also been the success stories; instances where Indigenous communities have overcome adversity through innovation and hard work.

Such cases don't make the minister's in-tray because they don't fit the political agenda. Why point out the positives when you can use failure to whip up resentment?

We should not turn a blind eye to indigenous disadvantage or suffering in any community. By empowering indigenous communities and providing them with the necessary support, their problems can be overcome.

But progress will not be made while politicians exploit the issue for short-term political advantage.

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