

Bipartisanship on Indigenous affairs gave us the Intervention. Shorten is right to break it



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The bipartisan status quo on Indigenous affairs began when Labor offered their support to the Howard government's Intervention in 2007. Breaking it would be a positive move



'If Bill Shorten has indeed broken the current bipartisan compact on Indigenous affairs, that could be very good news.' Photograph: AAP

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When Bill Shorten delivered Closing the Gap [speech](#) on 11 February, several Coalition MPs walked out. What seemed to have upset them was his simple point that you can't cut \$500m from frontline services and still expect outcomes to improve.

It wasn't initially clear why the Coalition MPs who walked out found this so offensive – or at least more offensive than the cuts themselves – but explanations soon followed: Shorten had, [according](#) to one MP, Andrew Nikolic, chosen “blame over bipartisanship”.

If [Bill Shorten](#) has indeed broken the current bipartisan compact on Indigenous affairs, that could be very good news.

There have been moments when bipartisanship on Indigenous issues would have been helpful. Perhaps around the time of the Mabo decision and the implementation of native title legislation, or as action on the recommendations of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, or a positive response to the recommendations in the Bringing them Home report. Those are moments when bipartisanship would have helped progress issues of national significance and Indigenous wellbeing.

But the current bipartisanship began in more dubious circumstances: in 2007, when the Howard government announced it was implementing the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) – the Intervention.

It was a “national emergency response” designed over a 48-hour period in Canberra; barely any attempt was made to consult people working at the coal face in the Northern Territory; it was rolled out by flown-in bureaucrats in the most vulnerable communities in Australia. It was a high risk, highly experimental approach to Indigenous issues, that went contrary to research and experts on the ground.

It was always going to be fraught. If ever a policy needed diligent scrutiny, it was this one. But bipartisanship, in that case, stopped even the usual level of accountability.

The intervention was rolled out in the lead-up to the 2007 election that swept Kevin Rudd to power. The cynical view was that the intervention was Howard and his government playing to the electorate; that overlooked the approach taken by Labor.

In the meetings around Canberra – as Indigenous groups gathered to express their concerns, and offer alternatives to deal with family and domestic violence and substance abuse – there was a subtle message conveyed: Rudd was simply agreeing to the Intervention so it wouldn't become an election issue. It was implied that after he was elected, the policy could be revisited.

It is easy to see why Noel Pearson so often reminds us that we can't always assume the left are our strongest and best allies.

Labor also lent their support to provisions in the legislation that suspended rights of review and appeal under the Racial Discrimination Act and the Northern Territory anti-discrimination legislation, and rights to appeal to the social security appeals tribunal. Bipartisanship meant the most vulnerable had no recourse if they felt the intervention was discriminatory or unfair.

Because both major parties are invested in the intervention's success, scrutiny of the intervention during ordinary parliamentary processes, like senate estimates, has resulted in more defending than questioning. It has fallen to the Greens, particularly Senator Rachel Siewert, to ask the key questions.

The sad facts of Indigenous disadvantage, as chronicled by the productivity commission's latest [report](#), do not belong to the Abbott government alone. Nor is the Howard government solely to blame for having started us down the current policy pathway. The Rudd and Gillard governments implemented the same policies and extended them – especially [income management](#).

Breaking that kind of bipartisanship would be the first step to making significant improvements in Indigenous affairs.

There was another aspect of Shorten's speech that might also indicate a positive shift. In providing an example of a community-owned approach that worked to reduce crime, he noted it was “championed by local people, local knowledge and local expertise”.

Shorten went on to say:

We are blessed, in Australia, with inspirational Indigenous leaders: educators, advocates and role models in every field ... and we need to be better, as a parliament and as a nation, at channelling their knowledge and their ideas.

A re-engagement with experts in the key areas of Indigenous advantage seems like a commonsense approach but it will be a change from the current model, that listens only to those people who say what the government already wants to hear.

Perhaps a new bipartisanship, if we must have it, would harness the expertise and knowledge of organisations such as the [Australian Indigenous Doctors Association](#), the [Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care](#), [National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation](#) and [National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Legal Services](#). That would be a practical step forward.