The anthropologist Peter Sutton has noted that ‘Indigenous issues have a habit of storming into public consciousness periodically and then storming out again’. The last several years have seen Australia experience a sustained period of turbulence in that regard: the emergence of Noel Pearson as a trenchant critic of the Australian welfare state and its effects on Indigenous people; the publication of the Little Children are Sacred Report leading to widespread concern about child sexual abuse in Indigenous communities; and the Federal Government’s 2007 ‘Intervention’ in the Northern Territory. Paul Toohey’s recent essay ‘Last Drinks’ is an account of the intervention and its aftermath.

The national conversation on ‘Indigenous issues’ – such as social welfare and community dysfunction – is often framed as a simple and circular argument between two divergent viewpoints: self-determination and external intervention. Toohey contributes to this conversation in his exploration of daily life for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory. He eschews an explicitly ideological approach, largely focusing on families: the central argument is that neglect and familial violence are the issues that require a response. Toohey is, accordingly, critical of the intervention’s initial rationale – that of ending child sex abuse – noting that on 21 June 2007, Aboriginal people were effectively accused of ‘forming a parental Fifth Column that molested and raped children while ignoring their…rights to be fed, washed and educated’.

For Toohey, anyone ‘with any knowledge of the Territory knew that the problem was not child sex abuse but the brutality visited on Aboriginal wives and mothers’. Toohey, the chief northern correspondent for The Australian and a long-term resident of the Northern Territory, clearly has detailed knowledge of a region unknown to many of his compatriots. It is somewhat mysterious, however, that his essay is described on its back cover as ‘the definitive account of how the Territory intervention came about and what it has achieved’. It seems unusual that a publication such as the Quarterly Essay, dedicated to presenting ‘contributions to the general debate’ and facilitating dialogue between intellectuals from different fields, should endorse one approach as ‘definitive’. Statements such as these are symptomatic of a trend in the national conversation: the conclusion that the time for arguments about Indigenous welfare and legal rights is over; that the Whitlamite Left has lost and ‘practical reconciliation’ – whatever that may mean – has triumphed. The Australian newspaper has been an active participant in the attack on ‘feel-good symbolism’, concluding in a recent editorial: ‘Disadvantaged children can’t eat rights’. Indigenous affairs is a field much bedeviled by experts, whether they be bureaucrats, policy advisors, lawyers or anthropologists. To this list must be added those journalists and other commentators who define themselves in opposition to ‘the South’.

Toohey reminds his readers that ‘most Australians’ have never been to an Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory; nor have they encountered, for instance, ‘the red-eyed kava drinkers’ or the ‘petrol-sniffer boys’. The author is, of course, correct in these observations. In addition to explaining local circumstances to his readers, however, Toohey subtly cements his position as an authority, someone well placed to sneer at the members of an undefined Southern ‘white elite’. This class of persons, the ‘caring parts of the white population’ are variously damned for ‘forever sighing that “something” had to be done’; owning ‘valuable Aboriginal artwork’ and having both the luxury of complaining about the Intervention ‘from a chair in the Opera House’ and the refinement and good taste to start ‘wondering about that gin and tonic around 5 p.m.’
Toohey’s essay is thought-provoking, touching on many issues currently being explored at a political and at an academic level. The overall stance of ‘Last Drinks’, however, is frustratingly ambivalent. On the one hand Toohey notes, with a degree of incredulity, that ‘we were asked to accept that Aborigines, after 60,000 years of survival in some of the most hellishly harsh country known to humans, had, in the last forty years, forgotten how to raise children: that the part of the Aboriginal DNA allotted to parenthood had been cast adrift from the genome or, perhaps, was never really there’. He also states baldly that to ‘destroy the culture of the north would not be a crime. It would be a sin’. Naturally, the author also rejects the old conventional wisdom of inbuilt indigenous character flaws. However, ‘Last Drinks’ concludes that many Aboriginal adults do not provide adequate care for their children and kin – ‘the emergency was that children were not being put to bed by 10pm; they were not being properly fed; they weren’t being watched and they weren’t going to school’. Toohey’s explanation for such parental neglect centres on a combination of laziness, alcoholism and a failure to take responsibility. Controversially, Toohey also implies that some undefined ‘Aboriginal culture’ is to blame, stating that he was concerned that ‘the valid parts of their culture might be killed off as the necessary lifestyle clean-up began’ [emphasis added]. It seems that some aspects of the cultures of Territory Aboriginal people are to be classed as ‘invalid’ and then purged.

How such a classification is to be effected and implemented, and by whom, is not discussed. The problematic notion that individual elements making up an overall world view could be removed without affecting the remainder, or the adherents to that world view, is not addressed. Notable also is Toohey’s seemingly static approach to ‘culture’. In a brief discussion of the Aboriginal art owned by ‘white elites’, Toohey suggests that in light of media revelations on the violence in the communities, images of a ‘serpent creation trail’ or ‘women’s bush-potato site…no longer seemed to have much to do with Aboriginal culture’. Given Toohey’s experiences in remote Aboriginal communities, his implication that a culture cannot simultaneously include elements both old and new, uplifting and distressing, is odd. To raise such concerns is not to shelter beneath the phrase ‘cultural relativism’, retreat to the comfort of one’s gin and tonic, and reactively defend any and all aspects of Australian Indigenous cultures from critique. It is reasonable to ask of commentators and intellectuals that they explore the arguments that they present to their readers, rather than pre-emptively dismissing potential critics as members of an undefined elite. The fact that Toohey’s essay concerns a highly sensitive and politically charged area does not lessen the burden of intellectual rigour; it increases it.

Toohey reveals his initial scepticism of the intervention, stating that ‘it had never been that Howard wanted to rescue Aborigines. He wanted to rescue himself’ from defeat in the 2007 federal election. Toohey also notes that ‘there was the sense that [Mal] Brough [the Howard government minister for Indigenous Affairs from January 2006] was shopping around Aboriginal Australia for a tragedy that would help him sell his politics’. Overall, however, the essay concludes that the situation in the Territory still requires radical action and that Brough’s ‘coldly realistic view’ of Aboriginal daily life was needed. In particular, Toohey criticizes the Rudd Labor Government for its ‘pointless idealism’ in reinstating the permit system. He also argues that income management ‘was perhaps the most fundamental and successful plank of the intervention’ and its successes would be fatally undermined by the reintroduction of the CDEP (the Community Development Employment Projects) program. These two decisions meant that the intervention itself was ‘more or less over’, with Labor revealing that they were the ‘real conservatives’.
‘Last Drinks’ is a challenge to the very concept of Indigenous self-determination, with Toohey concluding that over the past thirty years, Aboriginal people in the Territory had simply been dependent on white bureaucrats and ‘become accustomed to doing nothing for themselves’. More broadly, the essay, like the intervention itself, poses serious questions concerning the social democratic project and the role of government. In Sutton’s words, ‘the awful thing about repression is that there are times when it works’, and Toohey argues that income management for welfare recipients ‘worked’ in that it led to more money being spent on the necessities of life, removing ‘the drinker’s wage’.

Toohey’s assertions are not supported by extensive references. Having described Brough’s strategy of providing ‘a personalized tale of tragedy’ – gleaned from anonymous Indigenous women – to back up each policy, Toohey takes a similar approach, quoting anonymous Aboriginal informants concerning the impact of welfare quarantining and alcohol restriction. The language used is shocking, emotive and persuasive, but the essay is reliant on tone, rather than on analysis of evidence. Nonetheless, Toohey’s essay, like Sutton’s point concerning repression, poses an as-yet-unanswered question. The intervention is predicated on a series of ideas: that welfare recipients cannot be trusted with their money; that individual freedoms are less important than social cohesion; and that government has a role to play in regulating the daily lives of the nation’s poor. The response of the Australian Left to the articulation of these ideas remains to be seen.

‘Last Drinks’ is confused and confusing. Overall, it leaves an impression of anger – at successive Federal and Territory governments; at the violence and neglect meted out by Aboriginal people to each other; at the response of the ‘white justice’ system; and at the white southern chardonnay sippers. The essay allows the reader to feel the full force of Toohey’s – no doubt justified – rage and despair and be, perhaps, prodded into some kind of action. In this respect, ‘Last Drinks’ resembles much of the recent commentary on Indigenous welfare – it is driven by a need to shock the reader. Paul Keating’s conclusion in his 1992 Redfern speech that guilt was not a constructive emotion is equally applicable to anger. What the nation now badly needs is nuanced analysis and proposals for change.

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1 This review is an edited version of comments made by the author at a Labor Readers event on 19 August 2008 at which ‘Last Drinks’ was discussed.
4 Ibid., p. 45.
5 Stuart Bradfield of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies argues that the ‘fact of entrenched Indigenous disadvantage is increasingly being mobilised in order to set – or justify – a particular ideological trajectory for Indigenous policy in Australia’. The process he describes sits within the ‘growing orthodoxy in Australia which assumes that what can be broadly described as a “rights based agenda” has failed Indigenous Australians’; see S. Bradfield, ‘Separatism or Status-Quo?: Indigenous Affairs from the Birth of Land Rights to the Death of ATSIC’ 52(1) (2006) Australian Journal of Politics and History, p. 80.
7 Another such individual is Nicolas Rothwell, also a journalist at the Australian who describes himself as one who has ‘become caught up in the landscapes and the writing of north Australia’. Rothwell is similarly scornful of ‘elites’, notably

8 Toohey, ‘Last Drinks’, *Quarterly Essay*, pp. 41 and 42.

9 Ibid., p. 18.

10 Ibid., pp. 16, 19, 86 and 92.

11 Several commentators have sought to explore and explain the sources and reasons for Indigenous male violence. Germaine Greer’s essay *On Rage* represents a recent and controversial attempt; see G. Greer, *On Rage*, Melbourne University Press, 2008, pp. 1-96. Toohey’s suggestion of an intensity created by the oppressive near-certainties of life for Indigenous men could usefully be explored further. He notes that if ‘the statistics told you that you, as an Aboriginal man, were going to be dead by forty or fifty, you too might live your short life in a series of extremes, sucking it all in, spewing it all out, knowing no such thing as abstinence or restraint, but with a determination to know every possible sexual, alcohol or drug-induced excess’; see Toohey, ‘Last Drinks’, *Quarterly Essay*, p. 16.

12 Ibid., p. 2.

13 Ibid., p. 56.

14 Ibid., p. 46.

15 Ibid., p. 54.

16 Ibid., pp. 18-19.

17 Ibid., p. 16.

18 Ibid., p39. See also p. 58.

19 Ibid., p. 57.

20 Ibid., p. 79

21 Ibid., p.90.

22 Ibid., p. 93.

23 Ibid., p. 8.


25 Ibid., p.91.


27 Ibid., p. 91.