

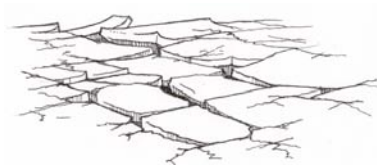
Bob Day

An outback region had been hit by a severe drought. The paddocks were parched and dusty. Livestock were dying, the people were desperate. Days turned into weeks, weeks into months. No rain.

The local church ministers from every denomination, decided to call for a 'Special Day of Prayer'. They asked everyone to meet on the town oval the following Saturday and bring with them their own personal 'object of faith' for inspiration. Everyone turned out, filling the oval with anxious faces and hopeful hearts. The clergymen were touched to see the variety of objects that the people clutched in prayerful hands – bibles, candles, rosaries, crosses, you name it, they brought it.

About an hour into the service, out of nowhere, clouds appeared and it began to rain. People cheered and held aloft their objects of faith in praise and gratitude. From the stage, the ministers were aghast to see an object of faith being held high that they were not expecting.

A young boy had brought an umbrella.



It is a sad reality that Aboriginal Australians do not share equally in the benefits of Australian life. On any comparative measure, be it in the area of health, housing, employment, education, wealth, infant mortality or life expectancy, we find that Aboriginal Australians are doing poorly when compared with non-Aboriginal Australians.

On the health front, Australians as a whole, enjoy a level of health rated as 'very good' to 'very good plus' by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare in its annual report titled, Australia's Health. However, the health of Aboriginal Australians is significantly poorer and there is a large disparity in life expectancy between male Indigenous Australians (56.3 years) compared with other Australian males (77 years). Aboriginal women (62.8 years) also have much shorter life expectancy than other Australian women (82.4 years)¹.

The report says, the major causes of premature death for Aboriginal men aged 35-54 years are heart disease, diabetes, liver disease, intentional self harm, mental and behavioural disorders due to psychoactive substance use, malignant neoplasm of digestive disorders, respiratory disorders and assault. Among Aboriginal women the major causes of death in the same age grouping are heart disease, diabetes, liver disease and respiratory failure. Infant mortality is also high, with Aboriginal Australian children three times as likely to die in their first twelve months compared with other Australian children².

Participation in the workforce is significantly lower, with Aboriginal people in the labour force three to four times as likely as other Australians to be unemployed. In almost every age group the proportion of Aboriginal people who were not in the workforce is about 20 points higher than for other Australians.

This difference is particularly significant considering that more than 33,000 of those participating in the Aboriginal workforce are working in subsidised employment through the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) and counted as employed. CDEP, when introduced in 1977 was intended as a transition to work program, a 'work for the dole' style program, but instead it has become a long term engagement for the majority of its participants.

When it comes to education, both at secondary and tertiary levels, the rate of transition of Aboriginal people into higher levels of education is much lower than for other Australians. Retention to Year 12 for Aboriginal students (38%) is half that of non-Aboriginal students (76.3%).

Home ownership, the main means through which most Australians acquire personal wealth, is yet another area where the participation rate of Aboriginal people is well below other Australians. Only 32% of households with Aboriginal people own or are purchasing their home compared with 67.5% of other Australian households.

Given the low participation rate in the workforce, and the link between employer contributions and superannuation savings, it is not surprising that the vast majority of Aboriginal people have little by way of superannuation savings.

In many areas of national life the participation rate for Aboriginal people is low. This is particularly so in those areas which hold the best prospects for advancing their interests, namely, employment, education, capital formation and housing. However, an understanding of how best to increase participation and improve living standards is not possible without an appreciation of the significant geographic and social barriers.

Remoteness is, without doubt, one factor that has significant bearing on the capacity of Aboriginal people to access work, education, housing and health services. Widespread community dysfunction, welfare dependence, addiction and violence are other significant factors that greatly diminish the quality of life.

The geographic distribution of Aboriginal people is also markedly different from that of other Australians. While 67% of non-Aboriginal Australians live in our major cities only 30% of Aboriginal people live in major cities. The Aboriginal population of Australia, which constitutes a little over 2% of the total population, was recorded as being 458,000 in 2001 and this number has been growing at a rate of about 2% per annum. The highest concentration of Aboriginal people, 29% of the total population, is in the Northern Territory compared to something less than 4% of total population in all other States and Territories.

Most Aboriginal people live outside cities in regional and outer regional areas. Nearly a quarter - about 108,000 in total, in fact live in 1200 discrete communities³ that extend across Australia. Over half of these communities, most of which are in remote areas, are in the Northern Territory (632) while Western Australia (283), Queensland (142) and South Australia (96) are home to most of the remainder. Around three quarters of the communities have a population of less than 50 people and only 145 are recorded as having populations of more than 200 people.

These communities, with some notable exceptions, have little economic activity, high unemployment, poor housing, limited services and facilities, an income stream almost entirely comprised of benefit payments or royalties and little prospect of becoming socially or economically viable due to either the remoteness of their location or the resources necessary to establish a real economy.

Many communities are in complete disarray. The breakdown of traditional authority structures and an increased unwillingness over the past thirty years for government agencies, (eg police, welfare, health, education) to be actively interventionist has resulted in many communities becoming lawless and unsafe. In many of these places domestic violence, assault, petrol sniffing, alcoholism and drug use are rife.

Regrettably, it is the women and children of these dysfunctional communities who suffer the most. For example, Aboriginal women in the NT are 28 times more likely to die from homicide than any other Australian person⁴ and Aboriginal children, particularly those in communities, are at great risk of neglect and abuse.

A report by Dr Nanette Rogers, the Chief Crown prosecutor in Alice Springs was yet another attempt to highlight the epidemic proportion of child sexual abuse and violence prevalence in remote communities. In speaking of violence permeating many Aboriginal communities, Dr Rogers pointed to an entrenched cycle of violence in which children experienced violence, witnessed violence and as adults become violent themselves.

Child abuse and neglect is in epidemic proportions. A much higher rate of alcohol consumption by Aboriginal women, compared with Australian women in general, also results in a higher incidence of foetal alcohol syndrome among Aboriginal babies.

These damaging and irreversible effects destroy young lives. While child abuse and neglect is not confined to just Aboriginal communities, it is so disproportionate among them that action to protect the young and vulnerable must be taken if there is to be any hope of a full life for future generations. Where harm is caused through violence or lawlessness, whether it be in the heart of our cities or the most remote corners of our continent, the full force of the law should be applied to protect those at risk.

Rosemary Neill, a Walkley Award recipient for her coverage of indigenous family violence, wrote⁵:

“If indigenous children and women are to enjoy the same protections the rest of us take for granted, forced marriage and sex with underage girls must be condemned and challenged, not just under whitefella law but also within those indigenous communities where these misogynous customs persist.”

In considering how to create a better life for Aboriginal people five key areas stand out:

- Community Order
- Workforce Participation
- Education
- Home Ownership
- Connecting with the Modern World

Community Order

While on the societal front a 'zero tolerance' approach to violence and abuse will be necessary to restore safety and order, it is unrealistic to think that traditional authority structures will be able to achieve this. Traditional structures of authority are beyond repair in many communities. As unpalatable as it is to many, the "whitefella" law must be applied to protect the interests of vulnerable people, who are, when all is said and done, citizens of Australia and entitled to the full protections that citizenship affords. Restoring order in communities in chaos is critical. In the absence of a sustainable level of community order we don't have the faintest hope of improving the health and well being of Aboriginal people. People cannot thrive when they do not feel safe and they cannot establish their lives when they do not have confidence that those in authority will act in the best interest of all. They cannot learn when they are frightened and they cannot recover their health if they are surrounded by violence.

Workforce Participation

Breaking the reliance on welfare and boosting workforce participation is also critical to the future prospects of Aboriginal people. Warren Mundine, a prominent Aboriginal leader and National President of the Australian Labor Party, said⁶:

"I think welfare has been poison You go back 30 years ago, we had lot of people working, a lot of people involved in the economy now 30 years later we find communities with 100 per cent unemployment living off welfare. We have to put in place welfare programs where you've got to contribute to the community. If you don't contribute to that community, I don't think you deserve welfare."

When people have no work, whether through the remoteness of their location, the dysfunction of their lifestyle, the availability of passive welfare or because the regulated price of labour is too high, we lead people to believe that their contribution is not needed. In the absence of meaningful work people drink, sniff, fight and laze their lives away – it happens in cities and it happens in remote communities.

The leap from welfare to work is not easy. There are many barriers created by wage and workplace regulation and these hit hardest where economic conditions are weak. Where the regulated price of labour exceeds its value the opportunity for paid work disappears and this is exactly what has happened in remote areas. Those for whom work would have been available in the past have been priced out of the labour market.

The moves in the late 1960s to increase wages and conditions for Aboriginal people working in the pastoral industry, as well intended as they might have been, have tragically backfired. They have led to unemployment, passivity and a host of other terrible consequences. In 1985, Gerard Henderson wrote in 'Wages Wasteland',

"The plight of Aborigines in northern Australia provides a traumatic example of the devastating social consequences that result from determining wage levels irrespective of the capacity and willingness of individual industries and enterprises to pay. Successive Australian governments have bemoaned the truly appalling level of Aboriginal unemployment – now running at about 60 per cent. The Minister of Employment and Industrial Relations, Mr Ralph Willis, has described the Aboriginal unemployment rate as 'disastrous.' And the Secretary of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Mr Charles Perkins, has said that 'black unemployment is tragic; to be black, unskilled and unemployed is the lot of most of our people.' According to Mr Perkins 'in some specific locations Aboriginal unemployment is as high as 100 per cent.' The response of ministers and bureaucrats is invariably to call for more and more reports and studies, to propose further government-funded employment schemes and to urge the private sector to employ Aborigines. The level of Aboriginal wages as a factor in Aboriginal unemployment is seldom even mentioned. It is simply assumed that the award rates handed down by the Holy Industrial Grail are appropriate. But there is clear evidence that the decisions of the Conciliation and Arbitration Commission have been directly responsible for significantly increasing Aboriginal unemployment – especially in the Northern Territory and the north-west of Western Australia."

Henderson went on to say,

“The Commission’s decision in the Cattle Station Industry Award was staggeringly irresponsible. Sir Richard Kirby has since stated that the employers produced ‘a magnificently well presented case’.... the NAWU’s submission, on the other hand, was so bad that the Commission ‘had to do a lot of thinking for the union.’ In the event, the Full Bench virtually accepted the thrust of the employers’ case – but then ruled in favour of the union.”

“If any problems of native welfare, whether of employees or their dependants, arise as a result of this decision, the Commonwealth government has made clear its intention to deal with them. This is not why we have come to our conclusion but it means we know that any welfare problems which arise will be dealt with by those most competent to deal with them.”

Regarding these changes prominent Aboriginal leader Noel Pearson contends:

“After we became citizens with equal rights and equal pay, we lost our place in the real economy. What is the exception among white fellas – almost complete dependence on cash handouts from the government is the rule for us. There is no responsibility and reciprocity built in to our present artificial economy, which is based on passive welfare (money for nothing).”

For too long we have, as a community, held to the view that to pay a person something less than the regulated wage is considered exploitive whereas to pay them even less not to work is considered just. This is muddled thinking because money and conditions are not the only things of value that you get from work. There are many other benefits including the acquisition of marketable skills, development of confidence, engagement in a social network and a sense of place and purpose in life that passivity can never offer. Any policy, program or system not based on economic reality is doomed to failure.

Increasing the level of employment among Aboriginal people, whether in rural or urban areas, is vitally important to their future prospects. However, there is a dilemma in that most Aboriginal people live outside major cities and most jobs are to be found in major

cities. This does not mean that there are no jobs for Aboriginal people in rural areas, however, there are clearly not enough for which Aboriginal people have the required qualifications.

As much as we have a genuine desire for Aboriginal people to fill key paid and funded service delivery positions in rural and remote areas, we are forced to acknowledge that shortcomings in the education of Aboriginal children over the past decades and the growing technical demands of these jobs are making them less appealing and less accessible to local people.

Education

In the 1970s I worked for a time as a volunteer on an Aboriginal Children's Mission⁷ in Western Australia. During my time there I was struck by the sense of fun and optimism that these youngsters possessed. They played lots of sport and loved the latest pop tunes on the radio. Fast forward to today and in reporting on results of the most comprehensive study ever undertaken on Aboriginal child health, involving more than 5,000 Aboriginal children and their families, the Institute for Child Health Research pointed to the importance of early childhood development in breaking the cycle of Aboriginal poor health and disadvantage⁸. The report showed that Aboriginal children performed far worse at school than non-Aboriginal children and that there had been no obvious progress made over the past 30 years to close the disparity in academic performance. The report noted that many of the answers to improved child health were to be found outside the health system and that education was a vitally important factor.

Noel Pearson has been at the forefront of the debate in highlighting the way that current education practices are failing Indigenous children. He advocates scholarships for Aboriginal children at boarding schools in major cities as an important way of ensuring they have a genuine chance of achieving their potential.

In the face of bitter opposition, Pearson has been steadfast in campaigning for an approach that he believes serves the best interests of Aboriginal people.

The road to self-reliance begins with a strong foundational education. Without a good foundational education you cannot make the steps necessary to transform

circumstances. If we cannot deliver the strong foundational education required in remote communities then we have to open the doors to that opportunity through boarding schools in cities and regional centres or through other educational alternatives so that those who seek a better life can grasp it.

Home Ownership

When it comes to the accumulation of personal wealth, the acquisition of assets and participation in the mainstream economy, most Aboriginal people are just not in the race. The ownership of assets for Aboriginal people often sits outside the mainstream property ownership system. Frequently assets are owned in common or are developed on land owned by an Indigenous Land Council or a government body, or land granted under a particular piece of legislation. Native Title may confer some rights to access and use particular lands, but it is worthless in terms of the ways those rights can be applied to gain economic benefit. Again, Noel Pearson has been at the forefront of this debate.

The legal structure of land arrangements are frequently complex and deny Aboriginal people the right to buy, sell, exchange, offer as security or otherwise deal with property in the unencumbered way that others do. Limitations on the rights of use over assets of this kind, even very valuable assets of this kind, result in 'dead capital'.

To this extent, many Aboriginal people are in much the same boat as the poor of other countries. According to research by Hernando de Soto informal systems of property rights make such assets "dead capital", and this makes it difficult, if not impossible to use them as security for a loan which might be used to acquire an income generating property, start a business or utilise in some other way that adds productivity or value. De Soto contends that an efficient, inclusive legal system preceded rapid development in every rich country and that bringing property rights into the formal legal system of poor and developing countries will release dead capital and spur growth.

Aboriginal people need the freedom to use their property for capital formation and economic development purposes and to that end the development of legal structures that provide effective property entitlements are essential. The capacity for Aboriginal people to buy their own homes, to improve them, to borrow against them and to sell

them is critical if they are to have the same rights to deal with their land and the same opportunities as other Australians to improve their lot in life.

Home ownership has long been the primary means through which Australians gain a tangible stake in their nation and accumulate wealth that serves them during their lives, especially in retirement. The family home is a source of refuge, a symbol of security and a place of comfort. It provides an asset that can be sold, transferred, mortgaged, extended, bequeathed or improved to meet changing needs throughout a lifetime. Such are the benefits of home ownership in building equity and providing stability that it is important that we pursue strategies to assist Aboriginal people into home-ownership as an important capital formation initiative.

Connecting with the modern world

The appalling state of affairs in Aboriginal Australia has so often prompted the refrain “*the government should do something.*” The Federal government alone spends over \$3bn per annum on Aboriginal programs. Clearly more funding isn’t the answer. The only long term solution is for Aboriginal Australians to come into the modern world and connect with the modern economy. This means removing from the statute books any law which distinguishes between any Australian on the basis of race or colour. There is no place in Australia for laws such as these.

Life in mainstream Australia means life in cities and towns, not isolated communities. This will require a fundamental change in attitude from two distinct groups of Australians – city dwellers who are happy for Aborigines to be ‘out there’ in communities (in other words ‘not here’ in town with us) and academics and romantics who believe in preserving idealistic notions of ‘traditional Aboriginal ways.’

All over the world, surbanisation is on the march. Fuelled by the prospect of a better standard of living, people are moving to where economies are at their strongest and home ownership and employment are accessible. Without a move toward the mainstream, the isolation, addiction, violence and passivity that infects life in many remote areas will remain. Despite the unpopularity and difficulty of a more interventionist approach, in the interests of a generation of Aboriginal children we can no longer look the other way.

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- ¹ Australian Institute for Health & Welfare, Australia's Health, 2004
 - ² Census of Population & Housing: Australia 2001
 - ³ ABS, 2001
 - ⁴ Hunter E, The Inter-cultural & Socio-historical Context of Aboriginal Personal Violence in Remote Australia, Australian Psychology Journal, 1990
 - ⁵ Rosemary Neill, The Australian, Aboriginal Violence has a Lengthy History, 2006
 - ⁶ Warren Mundine, Meet the Press – Channel 10, 2006
 - ⁷ Roelands Aboriginal Mission, near Bunbury
 - ⁸ Institute for Child Health Research, Australian Aboriginal Child Health Survey, May 2006