

The Future of the Family

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There are some who think the family is finished, that barely half of partnerships will survive in any form and that many children increasingly must grow up adrift from the love and the strengths of kinship.

This is such a bleak view of the human family that we should challenge the failure to celebrate what is good.

Family and community have been the eternal source of well being for all human beings and if we look at the longer timelines of history, family and community are also the key to the extraordinary resilience of the world's oldest cultures, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Coming to see and understand Indigenous families in this light is to experience joy, laughter and learning, as well as all of the conflicted emotions that come from so many generations of the Struggle for human rights and dignity.

This is not to underestimate the depths of the crisis that now engulfs so many Indigenous families but to question the policies of those who think that assimilation is the answer to all of the woes.

Look at the future through the eyes of an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander child in any family, urban, rural or remote community.

Can anyone say that Australia has succeeded in offering all of these children an equal chance of health, a good home, a first-rate education, life fulfilling work and happiness?

After you have answered truthfully, NO, you must surely wonder are Australian Governments indifferent or insensitive, or just plain incompetent and unaccountable?

The wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander families is the single most important test of whether Australia ever becomes a great society. It challenges those cherished national ideals, the way we view our selves as egalitarian, fair minded and fundamentally equal.

We seem so far from passing this wellbeing test as a nation. Yet in the 21st Century we have failed to abandon the mistaken government approaches of the 18th, 19th and 20th Centuries.

Dispossession, disempowerment and disrespect remain the major themes of a Government approach that has taken control of so much Indigenous family life. The results, we all know, are wretched.

Australian Government policy and society as a whole have failed to alter the most disturbing realities for so many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families.

To give you some measure of the pain and loss experienced by too many Indigenous people put yourself in the shoes of a family that has lost a young person to suicide this week. This is happening at a very frightening rate.

Even just twenty years ago Indigenous suicide rates were at the same rate as for all Australians. Today Indigenous youth suicide and self-harm have reached crisis proportions in many but not all communities and we need to look closely at this pattern of why in some places there is hope and in other places despair.

In the Northern Territory for example, the percentage of all age Indigenous suicide has increased from 5% of total suicides in 1991 to 50% of the total in 2010. The most alarming increase, however, is among young Indigenous people aged 10 to 24. Indigenous youth suicide increased from 10% of the total in 1991 to 80% of the total in 2010.

None of us living anywhere in this country should stand by while so many families lose their children.

All Australians, including all Governments, should be asking themselves, why do we go on doing the same things when clearly the despair and loss of hope is growing worse in so many communities?

Mainstream approaches are not succeeding in addressing the dangerous spiral and numerous government inquiries have confirmed this. Yet we so rarely draw on the Cultural strengths, the experience and knowledge in those communities that maintain an extraordinary resilience and ability to foster wellbeing.

The truth is that still today there are many Aboriginal communities, remote, rural and urban, where there is a strong sense of Cultural identity, where school attendance and learning is so much higher, where neglect and malnutrition have improved and where there is not that endless procession of funerals.

Traditionally, of course, Culture, community and family ties maintained the balance of life and were the source of genuine wellbeing for most Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

Today these same values are the targets of a neo-liberal onslaught on Culture that undermines traditional Indigenous support structures. Controlled by new Great White Protectors, Aboriginal people are expected to sign away any real control over their destiny.

Bullying interventionist policies such as the Northern Territory Emergency Response including welfare management, punitive school attendance strategies and many other instruments of social engineering are now thinly disguised under misleading titles like STRONGER FUTURES and CLOSING THE GAPS. In truth, Australia is merely continuing that old pattern of dispossession, disempowerment and disrespect.

All of today's social engineering is occurring while the Australian Government and both major political parties declare with studied sincerity that they seek bi-partisan agreement to improve family services.

This is an outrageous claim if we look at the hard Government evidence from the first five years of the Northern Territory Intervention.

Government measurements of family wellbeing show that suicide, self-harm, children at risk and numbers of young people going into detention have increased alarmingly during this period of sweeping disempowerment of Aboriginal communities.

It is time for governments to wake up and take stock of this crushing humiliation of Aboriginal families. I challenge every government minister and departmental head to look closely at the social damage caused by this policy and then to ask yourselves, would you subject your family to this treatment?

No matter how many Big Lies were told in the Federal Parliament about this state of emergency in 73 remote communities, no matter how often the Government dismisses the United Nations criticism that these measures are deeply discriminatory and in breach of International Covenants, this offensive social engineering was never even likely to succeed because it did not respectfully consult let alone engage Aboriginal people.

Both the Prime Minister, Julia Gillard and Opposition Leader, Tony Abbott have admitted that the top down approach was a mistake and yet this approach continues in most dealings with Indigenous families and communities.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people will work with others who offer support if Government and other organisations show enough respect and common sense to listen carefully to what is actually happening in these communities.

This has rarely happened and it has created a gulf between us historically.

Apart from youth suicide, the increasing removal of Indigenous children from their families is generating Indigenous mistrust of Australia's entire social system.

Many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families are truly frightened of the government family services.

Within any family and the surrounding community there is collective trauma surrounding the loss of a child removed to some other social setting. This is so profoundly disturbing not only because of the heartache every family would experience at such a time, but also because of the waves of cross-generational trauma that are still flowing from the original removal during the Stolen Generations of up to 100,000 Indigenous children.

Are most Australians aware that right now over thirteen thousand Indigenous children have been taken away by the Government and placed in out of home care? We are not talking about the madness of the past but the cruelty of today. This means Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children make up about one third of the total number of over 39,000 Australian children in out of home care.

With the same misguided logic of the Stolen Generations era these children are supposedly being removed for their wellbeing but almost half of them are also being removed from kith and kin and any of the traditional strengths of Culture.

Yes I know that all governments are supposed to have signed onto important priority principles to put such kids with Aboriginal extended families. But this isn't happening for too many Indigenous children. In the Northern Territory some 66% of children are removed to non-Indigenous homes.

Across the country at least one third of Aboriginal kids in non-Indigenous out-of-home care have revealed to government that they have very little contact with the Culture of their community, the life force that orients them towards a sense of place, a sense of identity and a sense of purpose.

We already know the pattern of misery that will flow from futile attempts to tear out the Aboriginal essence from the mind of a child. Mental illness and depression become a river of sickness flowing on to other generations.

Clearly the white fella way is incapable of managing the crisis that historically White Australia is most responsible for, despite our persistent denial or convenient amnesia.

To be blunt, it is racism in its most dangerous form to try to blame the victims, by stereotyping Indigenous families and particularly their Culture as the cause of this crisis in family life. This neo-liberal war on Culture displays a striking ignorance of the Aboriginal way of seeing and understanding how this overwhelming sadness descended over so many people.

So where is there hope?

Many elders have told me that the family counselling efforts trialled in Central Australia tap into traditional approaches for alleviating social crisis by involving members of the extended family and community services to discuss how to improve the safety and wellbeing of the child. This approach can reduce the removal of children from family and we should be supporting the local efforts vigorously.

Similarly, Aboriginal suicide prevention programs and other youth services can make a huge difference to the state of mind of these young people at risk. Yarrabah, the large and proud community near Cairns, pioneered a very successful suicide prevention program.

There are effective programs supporting Aboriginal children and families in New South Wales, Victoria and Western Australia as well and they all draw on the core strength of the local community.

Alarming, these exceptionally effective Aboriginal programs are the exception. And Governments show little interest in adequately funding more of them.

In the Northern Territory an official inquiry led by the Children's Commissioner, Dr Howard Bath, Muriel Bamblett and Rob Roseby recommended major changes because the mainstream child protection system could not cope.

So what do we see?. The Northern Territory Government has slashed the budget for the community sector including for the peak Aboriginal organisation set up less than a year and a half ago, known as *Strong Aboriginal Families, Together*.

In Queensland, Campbell Newman's Government has slashed hundreds of positions for people experienced in working with Indigenous young people most at risk.

The excuse always offered by Governments is that budgets must be trimmed. But even those ministers know that the guaranteed outcome of cutting the support for families is that it will eventually cost far more for children removed from homes, sent into juvenile justice or through the revolving doors of prison.

Everyone knows that prevention is a better approach to create wellbeing for children, families and communities. But Australia can never get serious when it comes to a consistent, coordinated preventative approach.

For example, Aboriginal elders plead with Government to show some genuine responsibility and improve the terrible living conditions that have such a drastic impact on any child's wellbeing and future prospects. In my lifetime I have watched people move from smaller humpies to larger sheds, from 44 gallon drums of water to leaky toilets and sewage running across children's play areas. I see rusted cars pulled up around tumbled down walls and old men, near blind, forced to hobble around with any real care or compassion.

For all of us, physical and mental health is largely a consequence of social determinants. At least 70% of our health is determined by the kind of home we live in, degree of education we access, nutrition and medical care we receive from birth and all of those other interconnected facets that make up home and community, especially a feeling that we belong.

All of this has been denied to so many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people across so many generations that escaping the poverty trap, the welfare trap and that great malaise is constantly defied by a system that stubbornly refuses to listen.

While the Australian public may wince at the large amounts of money invested unsuccessfully in the controlling welfare management of Indigenous families, so many Indigenous people are even more deeply disturbed that Australian can throw billions at child removal and another billion by 2014 to develop family and community support services when these Indigenous families know they are still missing out.

The parents who call me when they have to bury a child who has taken their life know that we have all been silent for way too long.

I cried with a much loved Aboriginal friend, a woman schoolteacher whose oldest son, aged 20, killed himself.

I sat with an Aboriginal elder a week ago who said to me, “When my son killed himself I could only deep into my Culture... and I said to my family, ‘I forgive you son, for the pain you are causing everyone now.’”

I want you to put yourselves in the shoes of that man and woman.

As a nation we have not listened to the cries for help, we have not taken the right kind of action to prevent this totally preventable contagion of loss of life.

Here are some of the ways Aboriginal people say Australia can help to make a difference.

1. Why can't we empty our heads of that old poison called assimilation and listen to the Aboriginal elders and organisations who can tell us what is going wrong and why the mainstream services don't reach so many people.
2. If we were objective we would admit that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities are not truly 'community controlled' because they struggle with myriad agencies that still want to dispossess, disempower and disrespect them. It is time for empowerment!
3. Often government funded family support programs are positioned in direct competition, undermining the natural strengths and authority of Aboriginal groups. Let's start respecting the rights of communities.
4. The workforce of many Government funded family services still requires a vast education and reskilling effort to help even experienced counsellors appreciate who it is they are working with and the nature of the complex causes for dysfunction.
5. It is also a major flaw in Australia's approach to ailing communities and families that we go on unsuccessfully treating what is always characterised as 'the Aboriginal problem' but we show great reluctance to address and alleviate the causes of this 21st century poverty and national neglect.
6. No one can claim that we don't have the wealth to build a decent home in a reasonably serviced community for half a million Indigenous Australians. Let's be fair Australia.
7. If we held ourselves to that same standard most Australians expect and demand for their families we would address the overcrowding, the lack of sewage, the second rate health care and education, the lack of opportunity and the refusal to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people on their terms.
8. If Governments can ever admit that they don't have the answers to the wellbeing of Indigenous families then Australia may be ready for real change.
9. It is time to empower Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families and community organisations to swell the ranks of the hopeful.

10. Provide adequate funding for the size of the task, invest in the children and we will see a truly greater society.

Together we can get this work done.

Yes, families are hard work but for all of us they are the source of our greatest strengths and joys.

Address to Family Relations Australia Conference. Canberra. March 13th 2013.