

To the Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities

The current situation concerning Aboriginal Australia is astounding in that Australia has been built upon its original inhabitants who, in literally being left for dead as a result of the land grab and social Darwinism, continue to be denied equitable access to equality and thus generations of families the right to equal advancement alongside contemporary Australians. The lack of empathy and overarching paternalism practiced by past Governments reinforces the practice of throwing good money after bad and is heralded by short-termism in such recent approaches as Self-determination, the Reconciliation Council and ATSIC.

Although the Labour Government has made incremental moves towards repairing recognition of Aboriginal people if it does not source reliable information then each opportunity to make a difference will deny change and continue to reflect poor Aboriginal socialisation and living conditions.

I wish to submit suggestions as to what needs to be done in reducing the gap between contemporary and Aboriginal Australia. I am neither a spokesperson nor representative of any particular group. I am a concerned member of my community with a desire to right a wrong and do this by sharing my particular knowledge in the areas of employment and enterprise, education of children and skills development of adults in the Fitzroy Valley.

It must be noted from the onset that most adults and families in the Fitzroy Valley wish to remain close to their traditional country.

Background: Since settlement the Kimberley region has been mostly subjected to the pastoral lease. Reclassification of these leases is rare although sporadic mining and agricultural leases are granted with consent of the pastoral lease holder. The lands predisposed to the cattle industry provide seasonal below average waged earnings to a small number of semi-skilled labourers. A smaller percentage again engages in employment opportunities available in mining. The repealed Camballin Farms (AIL Holdings Pty. Ltd.) Agreement Act 1985 gave rise to a large scale agricultural project but in twenty years is still yet to produce any tangible output or employment.

Issue 1: Education

For sustainable growth equitable access to education is required. Schools must allow children the opportunity to read and write their first language and restore the confidence in the ability to learn and communicate. Currently the first language is not being used as a learning tool or as a precursor to code switching to English around the ages of eight to ten. The majority of Aboriginal parents I have spoken to wish for their children to learn Standard Australian English (SAE) yet the language is not spoken at home nor is it reinforced in school during recess and lunchtime.

Children in their formative years are subjected to learning a foreign language at the same time as learning and becoming aware of the environment around them. What happens is that coupled with itinerant teaching staff children filter through the school system without literacy and communication skills to confidently participate in the wider community.

Issue 2: Employment and Skills Training

Localised employment and skills training is restricted because of the effects of Issue 1. While some members of the community do obtain employment it is the lack of confidence in ones own ability to communicate that social skills and thus employability is limited to participation in and amongst networks of family and friends where acceptance is more forthcoming. Empathetic training which focuses on working in and with a person's first language is needed to identify areas of interest and then build on this to prepare youth and adults for what to expect in a variety of employment

environments. This works to increase the levels of understanding about contemporary society and to reduce the incidence of avoiding the unknown.

DVD resources which depict recognisable local Aboriginal businesses and people and which demonstrates how systems of skills and work facilitate the operation of businesses are needed rather than resources offering reading and writing. Traditional song, dance and story telling is the preferred learning strategy of Aboriginal people.

An online learning and training environment with real-time visual communication can help remote community's access training. Some of my current students are especially keen to see online distance training commence for their communities because to build their community they need skills, to get the skills they must leave the community, and when they leave the community it loses its vitality.

Issue 3: Enterprise

Enterprise development is restricted because of the effects of Issue 1 and Issue 2 and because of the lack of alternative industry. Because Aboriginal people are not as likely to leave their home country industry development needs to be both localised and subsidised by the Government both out of its infancy and until businesses become self-sustainable. The following areas need developmental support in both Fitzroy Crossing and the surrounding remote communities in the Fitzroy Valley:

- Retail diversity, including the encouragement of opportunity for a variety of small business ideas and ventures
- Pilot and small scale agricultural projects, including seasonal fruit and vegetables, irrigation and soil rehabilitation
- Trades, including mechanical, plumbing, electrical, boiler making, electronic and building (carpentry etc)
- Community services, including those which can capitalise on information technology such as online training for remote communities, recreational activities, transport (especially access to a bus transport around and to town), counselling across broad emotional and developmental areas, specific need workshops for skill development and local community infrastructural support
- Aboriginal Tourism, helps promote knowledge of the traditional culture, the sustainability of the environment and generates income
- Sports, including facilities and mechanisms for fostering athletic abilities in a wider variety of sports for health and wellbeing

Subsidised and ongoing industry development and support is overwhelmingly vital. Given that the township of Fitzroy Crossing is governed by Native Title industry opportunity in this region can only succeed if it comes from direct consultation with Aboriginal people.

Conclusion

Gaining an understanding into the reasons why things are the way they are in the Fitzroy Valley would help to explain the above issues in perspective. I have tried to keep this as brief as possible but there is an intricate and interwoven set of circumstances that has created a void in the Aboriginal people's belief system. Without rebuilding the belief system, which understands how and why things are, nothing will make sense and the motivation to continue or participate will be absent.

Summary

The underpinning objective should be to realise that the current system is ineffective and that creativity and innovation is required to implement change in a unique environment such that the Fitzroy Valley without being given the opportunity and potential to grow into a strong localised industry will have limited future prospects. Localised employment is undermined by a lack of alternative industry development but particularly by those who move into town for two to three

years armed with the ability to make decisions and who in believing they know what is best make choices without recognition of the existent traditional culture or by consulting those whose needs they are attempting to address.

Of utmost importance is the redemption of the poor fit between Aboriginal people and mainstream education. The pathway to tertiary education is best fostered by developing the student's confidence in their own ability to learn and communicate. Aboriginal apprehension of the current situation is not unfounded, development and change needs to commence from within and through consultation with Aboriginal people. It is wrong to assume Aboriginal people do not know or talk about what needs to be done. The mistrust of white people as a result of all the past Government policies as well as the attainment of land through murder and massacre have served to remove fundamental building blocks in the Aboriginal belief system and these need to be replaced with genuine concern and dedication.

Mainstream Australia also continues to hold false assumptions about Aboriginal people. This contemporary Australian mindset continues to impose sanctions against those who struggle to be recognised. Moreover the Government really needs to publically expose the reasons behind why the things are the way they are. The ethos of helping your mate when he is down is lost on Aboriginal people who are historically more likely to suffer a put down for the trouble of even trying to make an effort.

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