

## CHANGING MIND AND HEART

The protection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander<sup>1</sup> children from abuse has been a highly debated topic in recent months. Earlier this year the Federal government took unprecedented action by intervening in a forceful and militaristic fashion in remote Aboriginal communities. The stated objective of this action was to enhance the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and their families. The West Australian government has also of recent times taken much firmer action in relation to the abuse of children in Aboriginal communities.

These actions, although welcome in their intent, leave us somewhat perplexed. The plight of Aboriginal children has been known for decades. Their physical, emotional and psychological needs have been well documented. Their need for education, decent housing, effective health services and protection from harm has been reported through countless investigations both government and non-government. These reports have spoken of the need for committed and coordinated responses to be undertaken in cooperation with the leaders and members of Aboriginal communities.

Recent government actions seem to be born out of frustration rather than a thoughtful and thorough approach to the issue of Aboriginal wellbeing. The frustration is understandable given that after many years of effort, however badly executed, and much money spent, a large number of Aboriginal children and communities are still locked in a cycle of poverty and desperation.

The responses also appear to emanate from a genuine desire to help. They seem to express a sense of shame in the destitution and pain that is such a part of many Aboriginal communities. Our broader community finds it increasingly hard to explain away the incongruence between what most of us have and what Aboriginal families don't have. Such rationalisation is even harder when it involves vulnerable children.

It is unlikely that there will be much progress with resolving the plight of so many Aboriginal people until we stop approaching their situation purely in terms of "a problem to be solved." Unless our efforts in this area are based on the belief that, as fellow citizens, Aboriginal people have the right to live purposeful and satisfying lives we will continue to make little progress with a situation that can only be described as a national shame.

It is our belief, that efforts to deal with the dire circumstances that exist within many Aboriginal communities need to have the following attributes:

- The meaningful involvement of the Aboriginal communities in the decisions surrounding any proposed intervention or development;
- A long-term (10 to 20 years) and significant financial commitment to the development of the necessary services, infrastructure and governance systems that will achieve progress;
- The creation of a sustainable economic base for communities;
- The establishment of a coordinating and decision making body that will ensure the effective delivery of services and the establishment of the infrastructure necessary to ongoing development.

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<sup>1</sup> For this paper Aboriginal will be used and to be inclusive of Torres Strait Islander people

The current approach that relies on individualistic departmental systems for the delivery of services is both ineffective and inefficient. Interventions that are implemented with great enthusiasm for relatively short periods of time cannot resolve difficulties that are long-standing and entrenched.

The extent of Aboriginal need and the requirement to establish viable economic developments in remote communities requires a financial investment that is far more substantial than anything done to date and that is sustained over long periods of time. Until now, the money spent has been inefficiently used due to a lack of coordination, effective planning and inadequate levels of funding.

Economic activities that provide Aboriginal people with meaningful work are fundamental to resolving many of the dysfunctional behaviours found in some Aboriginal communities. Employment is fundamental to resolving the meaninglessness, hopelessness and associated depression that is the experience of so many Indigenous Australians. Attempts to resolve issues of domestic violence and maltreatment of children are likely to fail unless many Aboriginal people, especially males, are able to regain a sense of purpose in their lives.

Interventions that run roughshod over Aboriginal communities are destined not to succeed. The long-term wellbeing of communities can only be achieved by those who live in them. It is therefore essential that Aboriginal leaders and their people are involved in a fundamental way in the formulation and implementation of any new development.

It is doubtful that the answer to these issues is to be found in bureaucratic government systems, whether these be federal or state. The answer is more likely to be found in the spirit that underlies any intervention. We are likely to be successful in our endeavours if the spirit that underpins our actions is founded in the genuine belief that the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are as valuable as those of any other Australian. If we are to avoid the loss of another generation, there is a desperate need for a change of mind and heart in regards to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs.