

Response to the First Report 2008 – Senate Select Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities

The issues purported and raised in the Senate Committee's first report gives an important insight into the disparity between Aboriginal and contemporary Western Australia. Although the submissions received are useful, firsthand accounts must be sought from those who live in Aboriginal Communities in order to accurately reveal how Departments, agencies and support organisations should best be delivering their services.

English is at least a second language for many people living on remote Aboriginal communities. Communicative literacy skills are uncommon. If the Committee wants to be truly effective in obtaining accurate information for their reports Aboriginal people living in remote communities must be allowed to prepare for the questions they are to be asked in advance.

Questions need time to be properly interpreted and imbued by the community. Even then answers may still not be planned. To participate effectively in the decisions which affect their livelihood time and trust must be given to Aboriginal people as a basic right. Poor fit Government and service organisation decisions must stop.

For any action to be effective as a result of the Committee's reports the Committee needs to ensure that there is broad and concomitant Australian community understanding as to the origins of Aboriginal Australia's enforced oppression. Aboriginal people's lack of empowerment exists because decisions are continually handed down from the top by those empowered to believe they know better. Only an understanding into the reasons behind why things are the way they are, and an empathetic approach to the treatment of this cause, will achieve the desired results.

Being subjected to revolving oppression and experiencing social rejection as a result of Government policies at the hands of broader Australian society has engendered an intergenerational cry of unheard Aboriginal voices who know what needs to be done. Organisations should be the providers of this service, not conferrers of advice. It is inherently wrong to assume those who battle it out on the front line each day are unaware of what is best for them.

Given the intergenerational sufferance handed down by Governments one must ask when the truth is going to be told. Why send troops into Northern Territory communities to try to fix something without exposing the reasons behind why things are the way they are in the first place?

The cause of the sore, and not just the sore itself, needs to be treated. For example, in Fitzroy Crossing, although the negative effects of alcohol abuse are obvious, for many the removal of equal drinking rights is another social right taken away without the replacement of a viable or opportunistic alternative to allow participation in broader society. Better and timelier support is

required. Without it parents must continue to expose social indifference and disparity to their young children as they grow into such a world?

The underlying theme for the Committee's investigation should be that consultation with, and the vocal empowerment of, those who live on Aboriginal Communities is the only way to effect real change. All the decision makers, the Departments and support agencies, the itinerants who come to the Fitzroy Valley and believe they know better, are the bane of Aboriginal Australia because they do not try to consult with the complexity of the lives, culture and families that they attempt to affect. The decision makers at the top get to pull the strings but are not taking the time to be exposed to the harsh reality of the goings on of life on an Aboriginal Community.

Those who have experienced the apathy of policy decisions in the past need reassurance that their voiced participation will be heard. Existing assumptions made in regards to Indigenous Australia by contemporary society historically challenge Aboriginal voices because they have the education to be the makers of the rules of the game; they get to set the goal posts for success and also to continually move them. The only consistency is inconsistency.

Of the terms of reference for the Committee, it must be understood that the current situation occurs as a result of enforced institutionalization. How can one get ahead if the game is not there to be played fairly? Anti-Aboriginal sentiment is rife in contemporary society. Decades of shattered hopes for equity in equality now makes quick simple fixes impossible. Of prime concern for real change is the need to understand the reasons behind why things are the way they are.

The Stolen Generation is public, but what of the euphemistically termed dispersal and dispossession? Aboriginal people know that no amount of sorry will ever make up for the past, but at least if the truth is brought out into the open today's situation can be understood, it can be treated, and everyone can move on. Longer-term empathy and support will ensure such success. Service organisations in this regard need to learn how to talk to and to listen to those whom they say they are there to serve.

Some of the topics of discussion which need to be held with Aboriginal Community members are covered by the Committee's terms of reference.

Housing is a priority. The Fitzroy Valley cannot grow or offer employment without being able to provide accommodation. In the past the one off expenditures given to communities for housing failed to recognize that there is a lack of disposable income to maintain and or repair the dwelling that time itself ravages, nor that there is an eventual need for siblings to grow out of the family home and into a sustainable home environment of their own.

Overcrowding is rife and contributes to increased wear and tear on the abode. It is like having the family over for Christmas lunch every day. How is one meant to maintain the home under such conditions without income? Governments support fledgling industries but what of small

Indigenous business initiatives in the Fitzroy Valley? Where is alternative industry development, skills training and decent income from real jobs to sustain the practice of raising a family? Aboriginal people are also more likely to remain within their traditional country.

On policing, there must be more community based policing. A forged association between police and local people will foster better insight into the region's needs. Police officers still tend to come into the predominantly Aboriginal populated Kimberley region and believe their iron fist is the answer. This develops poor community relations and is abhorrently wrong given the atrocities attributable to the police since settlement.

The police should be made to repair the fear of white people their actions have caused yet they continue to bring elitist attitudes to bear on the down trodden. Policing in this region is not always necessarily a matter of understaffing as is claimed, but is that of an inability to communicate effectively. This stems from a failure of the police to understand the environment in which they are expected to operate. Cultural awareness programs are vital.

Mental health services need to be given a high priority as does primary health care. The cultural building blocks and belief system a traditional lifestyle had provided was removed as a result of Social Darwinism based Government policies but were never replaced by a guiding and empathetic hand which could explain and demonstrate how to participate in Australia's liberalist economic society.

Fitzroy Crossing is the hottest inhabited place on the planet. Subsidized public transport that charged concessional fares for travel past all public and private amenities would do well to reduce the impact of the harsh climate, and community member wellbeing, from the knowledge of being able to get out and about and back home within a predictable timeframe.

On schooling, the education system largely fails many students by not recognizing the existence of an alternative culture, a traditional learning method based on storytelling, song and dance, and of Kriol in the region being the predominantly spoken language. Teachers are also ill prepared for Aboriginal students. The Education Department needs to provide a credible cultural awareness program to better facilitate the delivery of education.

Whilst many parents I have spoken to wish for their children to learn English it is not reinforced at home or in the playground. The pathway to English must use Kriol as a base early enough to develop the child's confidence in their ability to learn. Recognizing and working in with the existing language in order to use it as a bridge towards English will provide an easier pathway to higher education.

On the topic of business and economic development I recommend readers note the comments made in my first submission (Submission 35). In support of this, the Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre's comment at 6.20, of the Senate Committee's first report, recognizes the importance of the ties to country before any planning infrastructure and economic

development strategies are commenced. A firm base upon which the future can be built needs to be reassured of first.

The importance of creating a solid foundation stems from constant assault from mainstream Australia's spoon fed myths as to why Aboriginal Australia continues to struggle. If ten people were selected from cities across Australia and told their belief system was going to be removed, and then told what was best for them and finally how they were to now conduct all aspects of their life, how would they feel?

Departments and organizations need to be more attuned to the resultant impact of having literally thrown Aboriginal people into the deep end of society's river without swimming lessons. There has been no practical approach towards explaining or educating Aboriginal people holistically about health or of dealings which concern the full range of feelings and emotions which impact upon a person as a result of interpersonal interactions. Contemporary society takes this for granted because of intergenerational conditioning. Tribal life eschewed broad emotions to favor a balanced interaction with the land.

Contemporary society is so far distanced from the reality of community life and the remnants of a traditional lifestyle that the consequences of new policies will continue to be ineffective if the decision makers do not physically learn to ensure their decisions are being understood and seen through at ground level. Work in with what exists. To learn of what people would really support means to ask Aboriginal community people themselves what is the answer. Decisions which are participated in are those most likely to succeed.

Opportunity must be balanced and thus is best prescribed through equity in equality. In Australia every person has the right to learn for themselves. Governments must not continue to support apathy and can do this by ensuring that there is equity in the provision of equality. Moreover, providing context to the conditions that created social inequality to all Australians will better facilitate service providers' ability to make an informed and constructive difference to Indigenous Australia.

The economic race and the expectation that Aboriginal Australia was expected to die out needs to be placed firmly in contemporary Australian society's mind. It is easy too for many of us to be ignorant of contemporary Aboriginal history, unless that is you are Aboriginal. The Northern Territory Emergency Response is reflective of the Colonist's race to uptake land in the name of development and reeks of a callous and acquiesced desire to dominate the Aboriginal population without giving Indigenous Australia's voices strength.

Fair go. This is Australia.

Daron Steven Keogh
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