

The NT intervention: what next?

Gary Johns

My fear is that when life on the communities becomes too restrictive [grog and pornography restrictions] or too uncomfortable in its level of change [abolition of work for the dole], bush people will head for Alice Springs rather than stay. That will exacerbate our issues of accommodation and ... jobs.

— Fran Kilgariff, mayor of Alice Springs, speaking to the Bennelong Society conference, 1 September 2007

The race is on to save Aboriginal children. Those who argue that it can be done in situ in remote communities have to overcome a major hurdle. A good education is probably impossible in remote communities. It is marginally more hopeful in regional centres.

Until the Howard Government, and in particular the minister Mal Brough, intervened in remote Aboriginal communities, governments feared offending the Aboriginal industry.

The pretext for the intervention, the *Little Children are Sacred* report, found that sexual abuse is rampant in virtually every Aboriginal community in the Territory. Its recommendations struggled to avoid offending the prevailing consensus—the dream of a separate Aboriginal society. The dream has condemned Aborigines in remote communities to a short and meaningless existence. As a colleague of mine observed, ‘in Aboriginal policy, the Left have blood on their hands’.

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The report blames the destruction of social mores on alcohol and pornography. It is less forceful on the real cause of the misery, the mistaken view that Aborigines do not have to pay the price of admission to the modern world. The price involves taking personal responsibility, attending school for at least ten years, and working. Each of these has been missing. The challenge for the future is to ensure that these factors are reintroduced.

The report made plain the common finding of the 40-or-so reports before it: sexual promiscuity (and drug abuse) among sub-teenage Aboriginal children is rife. The reason that there have not been commensurate adult arrests for child sexual abuse is that much of the abuse is performed by young boys and girls upon their peers or the very young.

The story reveals the collapse of morality. The number of teenage pregnancies ensures that the cycle of immaturity and inappropriate behaviour repeats itself rapidly. Banning pornography and grog is sensible, but only as a breather and as a signal that grog and under-age sex are diversions from a decent life.

The essential message that informed the Australian Government’s Northern Territory Emergency Response Task Force is that if Aboriginal children are not socialised in the same way as every other Australian child, they are doomed. Is it possible, though, to teach children when they live in an appalling social environment? Is it possible to have good teachers in remote areas? Of the almost 1,200 discrete Aboriginal communities in Australia, nearly 500 have no primary school or are at least 25 kilometres from one. Only 40 communities have a secondary school up to Year 12.

Is it possible in these circumstances

to have every child in a remote Aboriginal community attend school? The absence of law enforcement over 30 years has condemned Aboriginal children to hell on earth. I asked a senior education public servant in the Northern Territory recently why the law was not enforced. ‘You would get a real debate about that up here’, was the response. What’s to debate? Are Aborigines so different that they do not have to attend school?

Saving children is bound to be tough in regional centres, it is nearly impossible in remote communities. Many good teachers have attempted to do the right thing and been shunned by communities. Not so long ago, a teacher at a remote school established a tuck-shop for students. It proved so successful that the parents began to eat there. The local shop, owned by the elders, got wind of the tuck-shop and demanded royalties from the sales. The teacher refused to be blackmailed and was thrown out of the community.

It is very difficult indeed to teach children who come from places where everyday behaviour is appalling, where the only expectation is to have sex and consume drugs. A school in every community would not solve the problem. The teachers who have the skills to handle such children are few.

Alice Springs and the larger centres will have to get ready for the changes ahead.

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