

# Indigenous welfare ideology: time for a change

## OPINION

By Anthony Dillon

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**Aboriginal leader Mr Yunupingu has claimed welfare is killing Indigenous Australians. This claim has been made by many others before him.**

Despite the recognition that welfare is problematic, policies, programs, and incentives are rolled out that encourage people to remain on welfare. As human beings, optimal mental health is dependent upon making valuable contributions to the community in which we live - and paid employment is one of the most common ways to achieve this. Long-term welfare dependency robs a person of their ability to contribute to their community, consequently eroding mental health. Poor mental health is then almost inevitably followed by poor physical health. Incidentally, living off mining royalties typically does not allow a person to make valuable contributions to their community.



**PHOTO:** Leaders need to refocus and start considering long-term sustainable approaches to closing the gap. (Ian Waldie: Getty Images)

But the claim that welfare is killing, is akin to the old adage that "guns don't kill people, people kill people". Applied here to the devastating effects that welfare has on Indigenous people, we need to ask who is "pulling the welfare trigger?"

Welfare should only ever be considered as a short-term solution. Perhaps the many political leaders and Indigenous leaders need to refocus and start considering long-term sustainable approaches to closing the gap instead of promoting the "welfare mentality". There can be no denying that long-term approaches are difficult, but to quote another old (and very applicable) adage here - "no pain, no gain". In short, solving the chronic problems facing Indigenous Australians which welfare has failed to solve, and in fact contributed to it, will be painful for many. More specifically, a long-term solution will mean ensuring Indigenous people have access to real jobs, quality education and training, and other resources many of us take for granted. This may mean relocation which is often considered a painful option, but the pain of not relocating seems even greater. A recent report into Indigenous spending has questioned the approach of pumping money into small remote areas where there is very little chance of sustainable commercial ventures. Such an investment will only encourage Indigenous people to remain in these areas, with no incentive to move to where there are new opportunities.

What is preventing Indigenous people accessing these opportunities is the ideology that Indigenous people are a separate, special, different race of people requiring a set of rules to live by. Such ideology seeks to present Indigenous people as living a traditional lifestyle. However, with few exceptions, the traditional life is dead - but the Indigenous leaders won't bury it, they insist on propping it up to support their self-defeating claim that "we are different". The application of different rules (such as cultural practices being emphasised over mainstream schooling and education) has resulted in outcomes very different to that of the non-Indigenous population, hence the gap. Instead of addressing tough issues, key opinion holders have invested their time and huge sums of government money in pursuing nonsense issues such as an Indigenous congress, constitutional change, etc.

Now as someone who has Indigenous heritage, before I am criticised for "selling out", being "paternalistic", being a "coconut" (someone who is brown on the outside but...), let me respond to the anticipated response of the activists and other opinion holders who maintain that Indigenous people have a right to live on their "traditional land" for cultural reasons. Consider this scenario: Imagine going back 150 years to meet with the local Aboriginal ancestors of today's people living in squaller in remote areas. Those ancestors were living a traditional life where they understood that work meant food, shelter, and safety. Give that ancestor a crystal ball and say "This is what your grandchildren will be living like in 2011; living in poverty and despair. What do you think? Should they stay there in the name of tradition and culture, or should they move on and search for opportunities?" I think the answer is obvious. Let's stop playing the game of "culturally appropriate," come out from behind the "cultural curtain" and start being "culturally effective". It seems that those people who exercise their right to stay in traditional locations don't accept the associated responsibility for sustaining their lives using traditional ways which were once somewhat successful.

To facilitate a move from welfare to alignment with the economy, will mean silencing those political leaders and Indigenous bureaucrats who have pushed for rights and placed the romanticised view of Indigenous cultural and tradition ahead of education and employment - essential ingredients for prosperity in the 21st Century. We need to follow the lead of other key opinion holders such as Marcia Langton who summed it up well when she said, "We must not become dependent on governments, we must teach our children to work". Currently, a generation of children in some remote communities see their parents collect pensions. Let's change our ideas before we lose another generation.

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