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Urban living beats benefits for Aborigines

ANTHONY DILLON THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM DECEMBER 23, 2014

AS the year draws to a close I am reflecting on what I believe are the ways forward for Aboriginal people. Recently I visited the Utopia homelands, a remote Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory.

Many of the people there display a beautiful radiance, despite living in conditions that many of us would have difficulty tolerating. I marvel at their beauty, but am also saddened by some of what I see and what I imagine their future to be, especially for the children.

During the past 12 months much as been written about, discussed and debated in Aboriginal education, employment, and mental health. Some of the best thinkers on Aboriginal affairs have expressed their views in this newspaper.

One issue I feel is missing from the public discussion — and can no longer be ignored if we are ever to close the gap — is that there is no use talking about Aboriginal people as if they were one group of people with the same problems. Just like non-Aboriginal people, there is great diversity among the Aboriginal population. While many are enjoying a good life in terms of emotional and physical wellbeing, many — though statistically a minority — are not. The most important gap that needs closing is not the one between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people but between well-off Aboriginal people and disadvantaged Aboriginal people.

What distinguishes those who are doing well from those who are not? Back in March last year, Nicolas Rothwell reported in this paper that “Place, not race, is key to closing the gap”. Put simply, we know that, on average, those Aboriginal people living in remote areas are less likely to do as well as their city cousins. I am not suggesting big cities are the panacea for all problems, but there are many advantages to living in those urban centres that have the opportunities most of us take for granted. The relation between wellbeing and usual place of residence is consistent and strong.

For 2015, I hope we are guided by the question: “What will be the futures for the children in these impoverished communities when they become young adults?” Many of the adults (the children’s role models) do not work. If the children do not see working as normal, will they have any aspirations to work?

children do not see working as normal, will they have any aspirations to work? In these remote communities there are some job opportunities, but they are few. Their best chance at a job lies in urban settings.

Northern Territory Community Services Minister Bess Price and her husband Dave said: “Life-threatening crises are occurring. Life-threatening crises are frighteningly common in our lives. We are interested in pragmatic solutions, not in the advancement of ideologies or the quest for soul-soothing esoterica for the comfortable urban middle class.” The solutions they propose are opportunities for real education and real employment.

Where unemployment rates are high, self-esteem will typically be low. Add drugs and alcohol, and you have a recipe for toxic dysfunction. In addition to having economic benefits, being employed promotes self-worth and buffers people against stress, boredom, and despair. Its importance should not be underestimated. Job opportunities and job-readiness for adults, and education for children, must be the priorities. And if the jobs, training and education cannot be brought to the people, then serious consideration needs to be given to bringing the people to where the opportunities are. The alternative is yet another lost generation. This is not just the Aboriginal people’s loss but Australia’s loss.

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