

When self-determination becomes self-detriment

OPINION

By Anthony Dillon

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We have all become accustomed to stories about dysfunction (eg. alcohol-related problems) in some remote Aboriginal communities.

Such stories have been published for as long as I can remember, and sadly, are likely to be published for quite some time. Why is this? Why do these same problems continue? Einstein said that insanity is the practice of doing the same thing over and over, and expecting a different result. In this context, the practice of repeatedly encouraging Aboriginal people to take charge of their own lives (a practice promoted as 'self-determination') with little or no assistance from non-Aboriginal people has resulted in no change in the plight of these Aboriginal people. This encouragement often comes from Indigenous leaders who typically have comfortable jobs, and have the responsibility of addressing problems facing Aboriginal communities.

Self-determination usually means that individuals decide to take control of their own lives, by making decisions for themselves as individuals that lead to improved quality of life. The emphasis is on the individual to make decisions. For example, if I am overweight and have high blood pressure, I might decide to change my diet and start exercising. I may seek assistance from others, but I need to initiate action. Unfortunately, the term 'self-determination' has been hijacked in Aboriginal affairs to mean 'having only Aboriginal people provide services for other Aboriginal people'. This has resulted in Aboriginal people being encouraged to identify as a separate group of people within Australian, having separate and different needs to other Australians. Further, they are being discouraged from focusing on what they as individuals can do to address their problems.

Under the banner of 'self-determination,' the Aboriginal leaders and cultural brokers are quick to shout; "Let Aboriginal people take control of their own lives. Let them have ownership of the problem." Such thinking only promotes the 'us-them' mentality, much to the detriment of Aboriginal people. The idea that Aboriginal people have very different needs to other Australians is propped up by the romanticised notion that Aboriginal people are leading a traditional Aboriginal lifestyle. Those who have spent any significant amount of time in remote communities will tell you that such fairytale living is rare. When problems arise, do the people offering a solution really need to be of the same race as those experiencing the problem? The rhetoric of this brand of self-determination often prevents access to quality education and meaningful jobs, which is what is needed in these communities.

In remote communities where alcohol is a problem, the people are not living traditional lifestyles, they are living off welfare. They are claiming, or more correctly, the Aboriginal leaders are claiming; "We want to control of our own lives and manage our own affairs." What they don't publicly claim is that they want self-determination while still having them live off welfare money. Can a race of people experience self-determination while also being welfare dependent? Any attempts to utilise the skills, experience, and most importantly, the goodwill, of non-Aboriginal Australians to address problems is labelled with emotive words like 'paternalism' and 'assimilation'.

What is needed is personal accountability. Being accountable is not about blame. It is about finding solutions. Being accountable does not mean you are responsible for the plight you are in, instead it means you take responsibility for finding a solution. Suggesting that people begin to take responsibility for their lives, often invokes the argument of 'victim blaming'. However, victims are not being blamed. When the doctor suggests to patients that they need to exercise more, lose weight, give up the cigarettes, etc. if they wish to be healthy, that is not 'blaming the victim'. That is simply telling the patient the truth. That is telling them the rules of life. And in life, you either play by the rules or you lose. I wish to be perfectly clear here, Aboriginal people are quite capable of achieving and succeeding (with the best of the best in many areas of life) as many have convincingly proven. Often they need assistance, as all people do, and the assistance should come from people who are competent to help. Aboriginal people come from a race of people who were very intelligent, fit, and highly adaptive, able to survive in the harshest living conditions in the world. Therefore, there is no doubt that they can address the problems they face.



PHOTO: Let's begin to see Aboriginal Australians, as 'Australian' first, and 'Aboriginal' second.
(AFP: Anoek De Groot)

MAP: Australia



The solution to the problems facing Aboriginal people in these remote communities will mean making radical changes in current thinking. It is only from a change in thinking that there comes a change in doing, and finally, a change in outcome. Let's do away with the approach that casts Aboriginal people as cultural icons with separate needs to other Australians. Let's tear down the cultural curtain which many hide behind. Let's begin to see Aboriginal Australians, as 'Australian' first, and 'Aboriginal' second. Let's begin to understand that true self-determination and welfare dependency cannot coexist.

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