

Intervention arguments

OPINION

By Anthony Dillon

Posted Wed 16 Nov 2011, 3:34pm

The claim that "Evidence backs intervention" (The Australian, November 11) is sure to attract criticism from the anti-intervention campaigners.

There is certainly evidence against the intervention, something I believe should be addressed. However, there is also evidence that some kind of intervention was warranted, and that also should be addressed. I have written this opinion piece (and it is just my opinion) not so much from the perspective of supporting the intervention, but more so from the perspective of questioning the arguments and motives of the anti-intervention camp.

In this piece, I will touch on some of the arguments used by anti-intervention campaigners, which will no doubt invoke critical responses. I am open to what they say, but the arguments they offer will have to be better than the ones offered so far, in order for me to consider the possibility that the intervention is a 'government conspiracy'. I tend to agree with the opinions of people like Bess Price, who is quoted in The Australian this week (Nov 14) as talking about the need for "radical and life-changing policies to transform the lives of her people". It is also important to recognise that policies can only do so much; the people must actively play a part.

Differing opinions about Aboriginal issues are fine; but are personal, slanderous attacks between opponents needed? Why are supporters of the intervention cast as racists or "pet Aborigines"? Perhaps critics of the intervention lack substance for their arguments and take advantage of emotive words (such as "racism", "paternalism", etc.) that will appeal to people, and are likely to gain them more support. After all, every decent person opposes racism and wants to be seen as opposing it. Right?

But on hearing that something is racist, how many bother to investigate if it really is racist, and how many just accept the racist label without question? Why is it that when a bad situation affecting many Aboriginal people is openly spoken about, it is often cast as racist? Use of emotive language is clear evidence that the individual is unsure of their position but will not let it go for self-serving reasons that they may be largely unaware of.

But is the intervention a racist act as critics have suggested, or was it an emergency response to racist actions, namely, the action of keeping Aboriginal people living in squalor and locked out of accessing services most Australians take for granted? An intervention was needed not because the people are Aboriginal, but because many of them have been living in third-world conditions for far too long. To end the severe disadvantage suffered by these Aboriginal people will mean putting an end to some people's careers, and diminishing the social status held by some in their roles as spokespeople for Aboriginal people.

In hindsight, any large-scale emergency response could always have been implemented better, and the intervention is no exception. But given the strong criticism from those opposing the intervention, I think a response is warranted. For many years we have been exposed to the shocking imagery of Aboriginal people living in dysfunctional communities in the NT (and some other parts of Australia), long before the intervention was initiated. My first question to the critics is: Although you are loud now in your protests claiming the intervention is racist, why could we not hear your voices before the intervention was implemented?

Could the loud protesting voices we currently hear perhaps be in response to the guilt they now feel, knowing that they had for many years sat back in silence while watching the atrocities that were happening (and are still happening) in some remote Aboriginal communities? Is a person who allows the dysfunction in many Aboriginal communities to continue themselves racist?

Further criticism has been given on the grounds that the people have not been sufficiently consulted. Some consultation is fine, but in emergency situations, there is not always time to consult people. Further, if people were consulted with (and there has been some consultation in recent times), it is questionable whether people living in a state of dysfunction are really the ones to know what is best for them.

With that last sentence I am sure to be criticised by some as being paternalistic, or be told that I am promoting another "Stolen Generation" - more emotive rhetoric. Or worse yet, I could be accused of having low expectations of Aboriginal people because I am suggesting that someone needs to intervene on their behalf.

Some critics have suggested that quarantining of welfare income is disempowering. I have been asked before if I would like my income controlled. Of course I would not. But there are vast differences between my situation and that of some in remote communities.

First of all, I am not going hungry and I am fortunate enough to live in a city where there is opportunity for paid employment. Secondly, certain issues affecting some remote Aboriginal communities, such as alcohol abuse and gambling, cause people to make irrational choices when it comes to spending.

Consider this: if I was not capable of managing my income (whether it be welfare money or money earned from employment) it would be unlikely that I would be capable of making a rational decision regarding having my income managed for me. Imagine asking someone - who wastes their money through poor and irrational choices - to make a rational decision about having their money managed for them. We know what the likely response would be.

My question to activists against welfare-management is: Do you really believe people are 'empowered' when left to (mis)manage their own welfare money?

How is it 'empowering' to allow someone with an alcohol addiction to spend their money on alcohol instead of food? This belief that having Aboriginal people should manage their own welfare money as an expression of 'self-determination' seems to simply reinforce low expectations of Aboriginal people. Shouldn't we raise the bar? Shouldn't Aboriginal people living in remote communities have the same opportunities as you and I for attaining self-determination? Such low expectations are killing the people. Is a person who holds such low expectations for Aboriginal themselves racist?

It is interesting that given the Government's intervention has not worked as well as many would have liked it to, myself included, the critics have found it convenient to blame the Government. However, if a plan of action offered by one body (the Government) to another body (Aboriginal people in dysfunctional communities) fails, then the reason for failure could lie with either the Government, or the people of these communities, or both. Much like when a person fails to lose weight after consulting a dietician, the individual has a part to play, though it is often more pleasing to blame the party providing the service for any failure. If an intervention of any kind is to work, then it needs to be clearly articulated what the responsibility of the Government is, and what the responsibility of the people are. For the latter, I have not heard anything. Instead, the Government have been made responsible for everything. Such a state is highly disempowering for Aboriginal people. When people are told "It's all the Government's fault that you are living in squalor," individuals, families and communities, are less likely to ask themselves "Okay, what can I do to make a difference?" Again, to suggest or imply that Aboriginal people themselves do not have to do anything to address their plight, is, I believe, a very low expectation.

Accountability is needed. 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 criticism of 'victim blaming'. However, victims are not being blamed here. 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.

In his book for Black Americans, "Man up! Nobody is coming to save us," Black American Author Steve Perry states:

"When we blame them [White people], we are expunged of responsibility for the condition of Black people. This allows us to occupy the peculiar position of victim... It is good for Black folks to know that there are flaws in the assumptions that the root of all Black problems is White people. It is downright freeing to know that we have a hand in perpetuating our current condition. That also means that we can fix it."

For some, that last sentence of Perry's may invoke hope, while for others, it may invoke anger (likely directed at me). A key word here from Perry's advice is "perpetuating". So okay, let's acknowledge the problems that colonisation caused to this nation's first people. Now having done that, let's forgive and focus on the present. And forgiveness is not about forgetting, it is about moving forward. We need to examine what perpetuates the problems in some sectors of the Aboriginal community today. I say "some sectors" because it is obvious that there are many Aboriginal people in this country, who despite the history of dispossession are doing very well for themselves. Perhaps they have replaced the mindset of "The White man is to blame" with "No more excuses. No more blame. What can I personally do to make a difference in my life?"

In conclusion, I am happy to hear criticisms about the intervention, as open debate and discussion can open the way to finding better solutions to difficult problems. However, in considering criticism, perhaps the critics need to examine their expectations of what they believe Aboriginal people are capable of achieving. Unless critics are able to provide well

balanced and substantive alternatives to the intervention (as opposed to the typical rhetoric and claims of conspiracy theories we have become accustomed to), then their criticisms should be viewed as having little or no foundation whatsoever.

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Topics: nt-intervention, indigenous-policy, government-and-politics, welfare, indigenous-protocols, aboriginal, indigenous-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander, community-and-society