

We need black heroes, not black armbands

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Professor Marcia Langton warns against being dependent on government / Picture: Colin Murty

THE problems affecting Aboriginal people, or variations of them, are reported regularly.

The problems are the same: child abuse, foetal alcohol syndrome, domestic violence, high incarceration rates, welfare dependence and suicide. This web of disadvantage has rightly been called a national crisis.

These appalling problems — now magnified by ice — are also rightly excoriated as a stain on the nation.

However, there is some good news. Professor Marcia Langton, in her 2012 Boyer Lectures, stated: “A new generation of Aboriginal people is turning dreams into reality: education; economic participation, self-esteem and success are part of this new Aboriginal world, and there is no going back.”

Despite this good news, we know problems persist and put people in early graves. While some have dreams, others live a nightmare.

Why is this?

Most suggested solutions to the crisis are more of the same — more funding, more talks, more special committees. All these responses should form part of the overall solution. But there is one solution that does not receive the attention it deserves.

If we could realise the major problems mentioned above all have the same underlying cause, then instead of running around responding to crises, we could focus on that underlying cause. And unless the underlying cause is identified and addressed we will be forever attending to crises.

The main source of these problems is that many Aboriginal people lack the opportunity for education and employment that is so normal for most other Australians.

It's not rocket science that when adults are working and kids are in school, families and communities become safe places in which to thrive.

There will be less welfare, less dysfunction, less bad behaviour. Instead there will be more enterprise, more engagement, and more purpose.

Marcia Langton has once again eloquently expressed it: “We must not become dependent on governments. We must teach our children to work and we must reform the education system to ensure future generations will be able to participate in the economy.”

It's no secret what the major barriers to education and employment are.

For small remote communities, it can be extremely difficult to provide services and establish business and economy. If the jobs and schools won't go to the communities then we are faced with the tough decision of moving people to where the opportunities are.

For those who cling to the romanticised image of the Aborigine “living on country”, the option of relocation is not appealing. Which political leader wants to make that decision to move people to where the opportunities are better?

A further impediment to Aborigines partaking in education and employment is the myth that Aboriginal people are vastly different to non-Aboriginal people. The reality is that the commonalities between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people far outweigh the differences.

While the Aboriginal industry has thrived by promoting the myth of difference, this has come at a ruinous cost. Fair enough, some Aboriginal people may require some specialised services that are not readily available in the mainstream, but let's not paint a picture of Aborigines being so different and "special" that we continue down the road of separatism until the end of time.

We have been on this road for a few generations now. The results are dubious at best, and it is about time to do a U-turn.

While pursuing solutions to the serious problems mentioned at the beginning of this opinion piece as our highest mission, let's not pursue distractions such as treaties and sovereignty.

Let's stop blaming racism and colonisation. Let's focus on aligning the people with job and education opportunities.

The recipe for success in Australia for all races is pretty much the same as it has always been: don't segregate yourself from society; treat others with respect and see them as equals; pursue an education (whether it be formal or informal); make contributions to the community in which you live; be a role model for others to emulate; make healthy choices; and adhere to a civic moral code.

Let's learn from those Aboriginal people who are turning dreams into reality.

It can be done. They are living proof.