

Indigenous policy ripe to disrupt; Indigenous relations

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Australian Financial Review
23 June 2016

We need to disrupt the status quo because for decades it hasn't been working.

The concept of "disruptive innovation" was conceived by Harvard Business School professor Clayton Christensen. He showed how new technologies and inventions take hold in established industries - by targeting the bottom of a market in which the market leaders have lost interest in or are not paying attention to, and eventually displace the established players who've become complacent about the status quo.

It was also a theme of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull's major announcement on Indigenous affairs with initiatives to develop Indigenous business opportunities through increased focus on innovation, including a \$90 million Indigenous Entrepreneurs Fund.

Some people might think innovation is an optional extra when it comes to Indigenous affairs. Some might think we should focus on the basics such as reading and writing, and getting Indigenous people into unskilled jobs before getting ahead of ourselves and expecting Indigenous people to pursue science and technology.

I, too, am a great believer in the basics. In fact, some people criticise me for being too focused on simple things - such as school attendance and jobs. But I also believe that innovation and disruption will be critical to solving the intractable problems that plague Indigenous communities.

First, innovation is all about disruption. We need to disrupt the status quo in Indigenous policy because for decades it hasn't been working.

A few years ago, I started using the term "disruptive thinking" to describe my approach. It seemed to me that Indigenous policy had become stuck. For 40 years billions had been spent and very little had changed. And anyone who challenged the status quo would get howled down.

It's very damaging if people are too scared to challenge what they know isn't working or say what they know is true.

I'm well known for challenging the status quo in Indigenous policy, both challenging the mainstream views of Indigenous people and communities and also the embedded thinking of Indigenous leaders. This makes people uncomfortable, even angry. In 2005, for example, I gave a speech calling for private home ownership on traditional lands and was abused by the audience. In my speech at the Garma Festival in 2013, I said there was a herd of elephants in the room when it comes to Indigenous affairs and I was about to shoot them one by one. And I did (metaphorically speaking).

Both speeches were examples of disruptive thinking. The things I said are much less controversial now and more widely discussed. That process of open discussion - even to disagree - is important.

Second, disruptive innovation is about acceleration and making large leaps. This is exactly what's needed to end the disparity between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. Developing nations, for example, look to innovation, science and technology as a way of leapfrogging to the quality of life Western nations took hundreds of years to get achieve. Developing nations don't have the luxury of a few hundred years to catch up and nor do Indigenous Australians.

Third, disruptive innovation is about not being afraid to fail. We need to give Indigenous people the freedom to have a go. In the next few years, a lot of new Indigenous-owned small businesses will be created. Some will fail or will need to restructure or refocus, particularly if they are starting in areas with no real economy. That's a normal part of the process. But I sense a strong a temptation to shield Indigenous businesses from failure. Coddling Indigenous businesses is no better than welfare. Guidance and capacity building is one thing. Choking them with micro-management is another, particularly if the person doing the micro-managing hasn't ever run a business themselves.

Fourth, disruptive innovation about creating something from nothing. Humans invent and discover new technologies when a problem needs a solution. Some challenges for Indigenous people, and remote and regional Indigenous communities in particular, can only be solved by disruptive innovation. The people facing those challenges every day will be best placed to invent the solutions.

We'll need innovation to build economies in remote areas and to develop Australia's north, something that will benefit the entire Australian economy. We'll also need innovation to deliver good-quality teaching and education to kids in remote and regional areas.

Finally, disruptive innovation forces regulators to rethink how - and even why - they regulate human activity. (Think Uber and bitcoin, for example). I'd like to see some disruptive innovation that completely upends the over-regulation choking Indigenous Australians, our communities and our land and asset base.

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