
End the Aboriginal Cult of Victimhood and Focus on What Matters

By Anthony Dillon
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Cries of racism detract from many of the other issues affecting Aboriginal lives

Too many Aboriginal people in this country suffer and languish - not due to a lack of energy, effort or resources, but misplaced priorities.

Take the recent stories generated by the 25th anniversary of the report of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. We've seen stories and heard speeches all centring on the theme of "25 years later, Aboriginal people still die in custody". The usual suspect, racism, is fingered as the underlying cause of these deaths.

At this point, I want to make a disclosure: I write this piece as someone whose research interests include how best to promote the holistic wellbeing of Aboriginal people. Further, I write as a part-Aboriginal Australian. I do not believe that this ancestry makes my opinion more valid than anyone else, but in a world dominated by political correctness, it does provide me with the freedom to discuss matters that many are afraid to discuss for fear of "blaming the victim" or being labelled racist. Ultimately, I believe Aboriginal affairs is all our business, and we as a nation must work together.

Drawing attention to an issue like Aboriginal deaths in custody is misplaced, for the simple reason that while Aboriginal people are over-represented in custody, they are not over-represented in deaths in custody. In fact, an Aboriginal person in custody is less likely to die than a non-Aboriginal person in custody.

Stating this another way, there is an over-representation of non-Aboriginal deaths in custody. However, the narrative of elevated black deaths in custody is emotive, and that gets attention.

Consider The health of Australia's prisoners 2015, a publication by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. It states: "With just over one-quarter (27 per cent) of prisoners in custody being indigenous, and 17 per cent of deaths in custody being indigenous, indigenous prisoners were under-represented." This is something that activists should never lose sight of. Yet Greens indigenous affairs spokeswoman Rachel Siewert is quoted on an ABC website as saying: "It has been 25 years since the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and Aboriginal people are still disproportionately dying while in incarceration." At least she got the 25 years right.

At the same time as the deaths in custody furore, Melbourne Aboriginal actor Uncle Jack Charles was again refused a taxi ride. This was immediately ascribed to racism.

It is possible, maybe even likely, that racism was the motivating factor for the refusal. However, such racism may not be as common as some people would like to think. I am guessing that each week thousands of Aboriginal people across the country must catch taxis without incident.

As such, Victorian Premier Daniel Andrews's response that racist taxi drivers are not welcome in Victoria seems like an over-reaction, or playing to the gallery. If it is the case, the other premiers and chief ministers should perhaps prepare for a huge invasion of racist taxi drivers from Victoria.

No doubt Premier Andrews will be hailed by some as the man who took a courageous stand against racism. But how does this help Aboriginal people?

Certainly addressing racism against Aboriginal people where it exists is worthwhile. But this should not take the place of addressing those issues that have the most negative impact on Aboriginal people - like unemployment, poverty, alcohol abuse, child sexual abuse, violence and unsafe living environments.

These problems require government input - but also personal responsibility. But when people are continually told that they are victims of racism, personal responsibility is quickly forfeited.

My friend Dave Price, husband of Northern Territory Minister Bess Price, says: "It is enormously difficult to convince your Aboriginal loved ones bent on self-destruction that they have the power in themselves to take responsibility for their lives and solve their own problems when the rest of the world tells them that they are victims with a capital 'V'. The whole debate needs to change. Let's start by getting rid of the pernicious victim stereotype and the stultifying viciousness of political correctness gone mad." Shouts of racism may help politicians and academics with popularity contests, but they come at a high price for too many Aboriginal people.

I agree with Dave: unless the debate changes, the outcomes will not change. Let's keep applying the same effort but direct it towards addressing the real causes of Aboriginal suffering.

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