

## Politics beats suffering for city Aboriginal leaders in denial about child sex abuse

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- Chris Mitchell

No area of public policy has been as heavily scrutinised by the media in the past 25 years as Aboriginal affairs, and particularly the abuse of women and children in remote communities. Yet the rape of a two-year-old girl at Tennant Creek in the Northern Territory late last month and the subsequent publication of Territory abuse statistics show all of that scrutiny has achieved little.

The Northern Territory board of inquiry report *Little Children are Sacred* in 2007, John Howard's NT intervention in June that year and last year's royal commission into youth detention have been for nought. That royal commission included, but buried, a finding that Territory Families took only five child sex abuse victims into care between 2012-13 and 2015-16 despite substantiating 232 cases.

Given many cases will not have been notified, childhood sexually transmitted infections among children may be an even more accurate barometer of the problem.

Amos Aikman in *The Australian* revealed last Monday that in the decade to 2016 they rose 180 per cent, and NT Aboriginal girls are now 60 times likelier to contract syphilis than the wider community and 30 times likelier to contract gonorrhoea.

Hayley Sorensen in the *NT News* on March 2 wrote: "Analysis of Territory Families figures reveals at least 8559 individual Aboriginal children had notifications relating to neglect, physical, emotional harm or sexual exploitation in 2016-17. Each had ... an average two notifications."

This is from an NT Aboriginal child population of 14,050. Most Australians would view these as far more serious issues than those at the Don Dale Youth Detention Centre exposed by the ABC's *Four Corners* in 2016 and investigated by the royal commission.

And the problem is much wider than the NT. This paper's Rosemary Neill won a Walkley award for exposing violence by Aboriginal men against family members in 1994. Tony Koch in this paper and at *The Courier-Mail* won a swag of awards for 15 years of scarring stories about the rape and abuse of women and children in Cape York. Russell Skelton and the late Michael Gordon at *The Age*, Suzanne Smith at the ABC, and this paper's Nic Rothwell and Paul Toohey on the scourge of petrol sniffing all focused on remote Aboriginal issues.

Yet it seems many in the progressive left and in the metropolitan Aboriginal leadership remain more concerned with politics than suffering. Where was the Twitter outrage on the rape of a child that so consumed many on social media when Bill Leak drew a fair and truthful cartoon about parental responsibility after the Don Dale revelations?

The first senior Labor figure I heard raise the issue of child removals being blocked for fear of repeating Stolen Generations policies was former Beattie government minister Paul Braddy in the late 1990s. Braddy said Aboriginal children were regularly being left in family circumstances that would not be tolerated if a child were white.

Last month Aboriginal leaders Warren Mundine and Jacinta Price made the same point, as did Sky News hosts Andrew Bolt and Paul Murray. They are dead right, but Braddy was speaking 20 years earlier. These problems should have been sorted given government spending on Aboriginal affairs tops \$30 billion a year.

The *NT News* has been brilliant since it broke the story of the rape on February 21. It splashed on or published the story on its front page eight times between February 21 and March 1. Much credit must go to the paper's former editor and now Sky News NT correspondent Matt Cunningham, who broke many of the paper's best stories. He has been incisive on *The Bolt Report* and with Peta Credlin on Sky News. ABC Darwin, *The Australian* and Guardian Australia have run hard on the story, but for my money last Tuesday's episode of *The Drum* on the ABC really highlighted the divide between metropolitan and outback Aborigines on the issue.

Melbourne-based Aboriginal opera star Deborah Cheetham seemed nonplussed when confronted by the passion of Price, an Alice Springs councillor, who that morning in *The Australian* had demanded to know where the Aboriginal leadership of the nation was on the issue of child abuse.

Just as with the intervention a decade ago or *The Courier-Mail's* experience with Koch's work 20 years ago, many in the Aboriginal political establishment do not want to talk about child abuse, foetal alcohol syndrome, violence against women and systemic drug and alcohol addiction.

Yet the APY Lands in South Australia, much of the northwest of Western Australia and large swathes of northern and western Queensland remain riven by these scourges.

After Koch in 1999 revealed the plight of a 17-month-old raped and left to use a colostomy bag because of internal damage, I received a delegation from the then peak Aboriginal body, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, urging the paper to drop its focus on abuse and start reporting stories of positive achievement by Aboriginal people. In 1994 at the Walkley Awards ceremony in Melbourne I was attacked by Fairfax and ABC editorial executives as a racist for publishing Neill's winning feature.

Many in the Aboriginal community leadership were quick to brand the intervention racist, completely ignoring the findings of Little Children are Sacred.

Why has the urban Aboriginal political leadership so often been silent on issues about which Australians really do care but so vocal on things such as Australia Day dates, treaties, apologies for the Stolen Generations and constitutional reform? Why so defensive of the rights of parents to drink alcohol but so quiet on the right of children to grow up safely?

Ronald Wilson in the *Bringing Them Home* report in 1997 said no more than 5000 Australians at that time were directly affected by removal policies. That does not even ask whether many of those removed actually benefited. Many say they did. But since

the Aboriginal population today sits at 650,000, how did the psychological problems of the 5000 come to be synonymous with the problems of the entire community?

The answer is the politics of victimhood and a political desire to blame white Australia and its alleged racism for all of the problems of Aboriginal Australia. Yet as Noel Pearson has so often said since he wrote his magnificent pamphlet *Our Right to Take Responsibility* in 2000, Aboriginal people have “agency”. They can and must take responsibility for their situations.

The community of Tennant Creek and the family of the two-year-old rape victim are responsible for that child’s fate. Sure, Territory Families should have done a better job given concerns had been raised about the family and the individual child, but the lazy resort to cultural explanations and blame-shifting to the white majority is surely infantilising the role of Aboriginal adults.