

Cape York bauxite curse could be a blessing for Aboriginal tribe

- The Australian
- May 28, 2016
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Noel Pearson with Peter Beattie, who as premier tried to restore the Aurukun mining rights to the local people.

Bauxite has been a curse to the Aboriginal tribes of western Cape York Peninsula.

Since the enormous fields extending hundreds of square kilometres were discovered in 1955, bauxite has wreaked destruction on these indigenous societies and cultures. From the burning beds of Old Mapoon, to the poverty of the mission at Weipa South (now called Napranum) in the middle, and to poor Aurukun to the south, the story is one of social and cultural trauma in the shadow of vast wealth production.

No great ingenuity was needed to discover these reserves. Western Cape York holds some of the largest deposits in the world. The round red pebbles litter the surface everywhere, and the red cliffs of the coastline visible from out at sea are testament to its abundance.

From 1957 when the Queensland government passed special laws to create Comalco, granting the predecessor of today's Rio Tinto massive leases at Weipa and to its north, the curse of bauxite started. The government carried out its duty as trustee for the tribes by revoking their reserved lands.

For its first 50 years this curse played out to the detriment of these missions. Though traditional owners of these lands, the tribes sank into that familiar life story of indigenous people living in the shadow of mining towns. Weipa, the refinery town of Gladstone and the state of Queensland took the upside of economic development, and the tribes took the downside.

In the past two decades measures were taken to address some of this parlous history. The Uniting Church and the Queensland government acknowledged their culpability in the closure of Old Mapoon, and apologised to the tribes. In 2001 a landmark agreement was signed between the tribes and Rio Tinto that finally allowed some measure of economic participation in the vast wealth generated in this region.

But the scorecard still tells us that bauxite has been a curse to these tribes and their communities.

This week the Queensland government closed Aurukun school because of concerns for the safety of teachers caused by a campaign of delinquency waged by a group of youth. These teachers are among the most heroic workers in Queensland. The events of the past two weeks are but the latest manifestation of longstanding problems of lawlessness, recurring family disputation and wayward youth coming in and out of juvenile detention in Townsville and prison at Lotus Glen near Mareeba. These cycles of chaos and violence are punctuated by short periods of peace before the next load of bootleg alcohol enters the nominally alcohol-free community, or the provocateurs return from detention. The binge drinking and screaming, the loud stereos and fighting start again.

What teachers witness and what they see in the faces and eyes of their students is harrowing. They carry an emotional load no public servants are called on to carry on behalf of the children whom they have come to Aurukun to serve.

If there is leadership, it has been unable yet to quell this storm. Not for many years now. Like many such places, the old cultural and moral structures have fractured and nothing new has replaced them. There is a moral and leadership vacuum, with the mothers and grandmothers holding on to hope for the children.

Two events define Aurukun today.

First, in 1978 the Presbyterian (now Uniting) Church was removed from its role as the administrators of the mission with the Bjelke-Petersen government's takeover of the Aurukun and Mornington Island missions. The church was replaced by the department of local government. Overnight the Christian mission became a secular community.

Second, by 1985 the new local government was pressured by the Queensland government to open a wet canteen. What was an alcohol-free mission was flooded with rivers of grog. This is when the horrific cycles of trauma really began to turn.

To understand Aurukun today, these two events are seminal. They were the product of deliberate Queensland government policies.

But it was bauxite that was the genesis. Bauxite was the source of these malevolent policies. It was bauxite that wreaked destruction on the hapless Wik people.

The strife in Aurukun we are reaping today is the harvest from the seeds sown by the Queensland government over these past 35 years.

This is why I say bauxite has been a curse.

The second chapter in the tragic history of bauxite on western Cape York started in 1975 when the Queensland government legislated to grant vast swaths of the Aurukun Aboriginal Reserve to a French aluminium company, Pechiney. They give similar sweeping rights to those granted to Comalco two decades before. The director in charge of Aborigines ignored the people of Aurukun when he gave away their land.

The mission organised lawyers to represent the Wik elders in a challenge to the Queensland government that went all the way through to the Privy Council in London. The church's actions raised the ire of Joh Bjelke-Petersen, who then moved to take over the mission from the Uniting Church and ran the community itself as a government settlement.

You want to understand why the social and cultural structure of Aurukun is so fractured today? The destruction of the mission that had sustained the people in the transition from traditional life to settlement living was seminal. The mission was by no means idyllic and the old missionary superintendent, Bill MacKenzie, was a hard taskmaster, but in retrospect this was nothing compared with these past 35 years.

After the church left, the grog came. It is always young men of the tribe who first habituate themselves to the firewater. Binge-drinking was by no means absent from the mission but it was infrequent, dependent on money and supply.

Then the combination of a wet canteen run by the new Aurukun Shire Council and the supply of free money from welfare caused the grog epidemic. The Queensland government forced the canteen to raise money to run the local government.

Soon older men join the drinking. Then younger women, the mothers of the future children, join in. The first cases of foetal alcohol spectrum disorder start showing up in kids whose first nine months are spent swimming in a pool of alcohol. The aunts and grandmothers bear the load of child rearing. And down the track even some of them succumb to the vortex of binge drinking.

Physical violence was part of traditional life, before the mission and during. But with grog the violence is more severe, more frequent, arbitrary and sadistic. Mechanisms for regulating and intervening in fights fell apart. The cultural and mission-era institutions for mediating and settling disputes between families collapsed under the sheer onslaught of grog-induced chaos.

The legacy of this terrible history is now evident in two tragic dimensions.

First, there is the burden borne by the children. The trauma is written on their brains and bodies. The rates of intellectual and physical disability are horrendous. These children historically have missed out on the support that children with such disabilities are entitled to receive in Queensland schools.

After a history of neglect, Education Queensland regional director Deb Dunstone has mobilised her department to ensure these children receive the support they need. The students of the Cape York Academy now receive diligent support from Dunstone, whereas in the past they were neglected by her predecessors.

What is not understood by commentators who compare National Assessment Program — Literacy and Numeracy and other educational achievement data is they are comparing

schools with a normal range of disability of 2 per cent to 6 per cent to remote schools such as Aurukun with up to 25 per cent of the children severely impaired. When you consider that many more of these children are on the borderline of impairment, your tears should flow from the enormity of the tragedy that is involved here.

Scores of Aurukun children now are succeeding in their education and going on to secondary schooling. This year 54 Wik kids are attending boarding schools outside of the community. These numbers are unprecedented for Aurukun.

The second dimension to the tragic legacy of this history is the sheer scale of mental health problems suffered by community members. These adults were children when the rivers of grog started flowing in 1985. Traumatized children grow up to be parents of traumatized children. And the cycle turns.

In a community of less than 1500 the numbers receiving various forms of inconsistent, medicated and unmedicated treatment for mental illnesses is unbelievable. Psychiatrist Ernest Hunter, who has intimate knowledge of the mental health profile of Cape York communities, including Aurukun, upset me with his observation in this newspaper that such remote communities are becoming concentrations of disability. Coming from a remote mission, I felt offended by Hunter's observation and defensive for my people. But I know what he means.

This is how the curse of bauxite led to the events in Aurukun these past two weeks.

Can bauxite become a blessing instead of a curse for the Wik People? This is the most important question to ask in the wake of the Aurukun crisis. Economic development is what this community needs to get out of misery and poverty. They have the opportunity to use their enormous bauxite fields on their own lands to build a future that can turn around and defy the legacy of the past 35 years.

Welfare reform will never work without jobs. The Wik people need jobs, they need enterprise and they need opportunities for their young people to share in the prosperity other Australians enjoy from development.

Young Wik people are now habituated into dependency. Too often they have not seen their parents or grandparents engaged in work. These generations were a departure from their history. The great-grandparents of the youth causing havoc today were hard workers. They worked in the cattle industry in northern Queensland, they worked in the fishing industry in the Torres Strait. They were more mobile in search of work than present generations.

But 50 years of welfare dependency have separated these young people from their proud legacy.

In 2004 Peter Beattie, then Queensland premier, offered hope the bauxite curse could be turned into a blessing. After 30 years of the mining leaseholder failing to develop the mine and build a refinery as they were required to do, Beattie compulsorily took the lease back. His intention was the Wik people would benefit as much as the people of Queensland when the lease was offered to new developers under a tender process.

It is 12 years since Beattie tried to turn history around. Instead of realising Beattie's promise, Queensland bureaucrats bogged the lease down in an intractable quagmire, because they advised Liberal National Party and Labor governments to repeat the curse of Bjelke-Petersen: ignoring the right of the Wik people to decide the terms of development of their land.

It is ironic the son of Bjelke-Petersen's treasurer, Llew Edwards, presided over this repetition of history. Former state development tsar David Edwards steered the ill-fated decision of Campbell Newman's government to grant the development rights to mining giant Glencore — just before it fell into a debt crisis. Edwards then reviewed for the Palaszczuk government the actions over which he presided under the former regime.

Unsurprisingly, his advice to the new government was that all was in order.

The Aurukun bauxite mine, if owned with appropriate equity by the Wik people, could underwrite their future and turn around their parlous history. Wik students attending boarding schools today could take jobs in their own mine. They could then bring up the next generation without trauma and every chance of ensuring the Wik people will live long on the earth. Bauxite could become a blessing instead of a curse.

In Glencore's global empire these Aurukun bauxite fields are just a speck. For the Wik this mine represents their future, and their social crisis is of utmost urgency. This much is obvious from the events of these past two weeks.

The best hope is that Glencore chief executive Ivan Glasenberg will negotiate a way through the impasse and help solve the Aurukun crisis. Tragedy can be turned into triumph in the long run because we know development can work good as well as bad.

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