

Underlying Principles of a New Policy for the Restoration of Indigenous Social Order

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Summary

This discussion paper contains suggested principles for a national policy aimed at reducing violence in Indigenous communities. It has been prepared for a meeting of the Indigenous leaders invited to Prime Minister John Howard's Roundtable on 23 July 2003.

The suggested underlying principles are:

1. Make the connection between substance abuse and violence
2. Avoid “symptom” thinking and “harm reduction” thinking
3. Avoid overemphasis on “inherited and personal trauma” as causal factor
4. Avoid attributing violence mainly to traditional culture
5. Avoid reliance on experts from the “Aboriginal industry”
6. Reject illegal handling of addictive substances

Introduction

Dear colleagues,

Prime Minister John Howard has called this summit because one of the two peoples of this continent, the Indigenous Australians, are in crisis. Of course the living circumstances of Indigenous Australians vary greatly, but the Indigenous communities that are not affected by disproportionate levels of social dysfunction and violence are today the exception rather than the rule.

The safety of our families is primarily the responsibility of Indigenous Australians ourselves, and the governments have an overriding responsibility for social order through the Police and other agencies. But neither Indigenous leaders, nor the government agencies are currently able to protect Indigenous women, children and men. This is a national crisis.

During national crises, the federal Government needs to take the lead and formulate an action plan that goes beyond the normal workings of governance. Our responsibility as Indigenous representatives is to give sound advice. It is preferable if we can unite around a common position.

In order to have a policy we need an underlying philosophy. In Indigenous affairs there is currently no national policy direction. This is a stark and damning contrast to, say, foreign affairs, economic policy, or the safety and welfare of the electorally powerful non-indigenous people of Australia, policy areas where neither side of politics would

allow a vacuum of the kind we have now in relation to the protection of vulnerable Indigenous citizens.

The Prime Minister has made two observations: First, he stated that this is a “huge human problem” that has reached “astronomic” proportions.

Second, he stated that he was impressed by statements and reports by Indigenous leaders.

Boni Robertson was something of a pioneer in terms of the scope of the Women’s Taskforce into Violence chaired by her. This effort also involved a large number of grassroots people from the communities.

Mick Dodson is right that we need "extreme action". It is now clear from Mick’s speech that we don't have "problems" that can be solved with the usual kind of slow policy adjustments; we have an extreme situation which requires a complete and instant change in society’s response.

The response by National and Regional ATSIC leaders also showed that the Prime Minister was right about the ability of Indigenous people to confront the problem and take responsibility.

Lionel Quatermaine significantly mentioned alcohol and substance abuse first among the issues we have to consider in this context, and pointed out that “[i]n remote Indigenous Cape York communities alone, person to person conflict is the single biggest cause of injury, with these injuries representing 43% of all injuries recorded and of these injuries, 89% involved alcohol.”

Commissioner Alison Anderson put the left/right political divide aside and expressed her confidence in the determination and ability of the Prime Minister. She also brought attention to the fact that the large numbers of women invited by the Prime Minister is a recognition of the “[w]omen [who] are the backbone of nearly all good programs” and that “it’s about empowering them to take a leadership role.”

Then there are of course the speeches and statements by John Ah Kit and others about Indigenous responsibility, too numerous to list here.

Evelyn Scott said that she was “not going to go and sit on a committee and waste money and not see any results in the communities” and that “the effort should focus on giving the authority, resources and power to women in communities who were ‘dealing with this stuff day in and day out, year in and year out’.”

To avoid wasting more time and money we need to agree on some principles that not only allow but more or less compel resolute action. My suggestions for a common platform are as follows:

1. Make the connection between substance abuse and violence

The Prime Minister supports this view: “The occurrence of violence, and related issues of alcohol and drug abuse, is having a tragic impact on indigenous people.” I have discussed this point in the substance abuse and violence strategy documents that I have distributed (available at www.capeyorkpartnerships.com).

Whilst we may all be aware about the role of substance abuse in our violence problem, one of the main reasons why we have the problem that we have is that – when it comes to concrete action – we have avoided making the connection between substance abuse and violence. One of Mick Dodson’s reasons for despairing about attacking the problem from this angle is that “dry communities haven’t worked” because the problem moves elsewhere and people break the rules.

Obviously Australia is not going to be free of alcohol, which means that Indigenous Australia won’t be free of alcohol either. However, what we are attempting in Cape York Peninsula is *regulation* of alcohol and rebuilding of capacity in the communities to restore and keep social order. This is difficult and requires the wholehearted engagement by the state Government, but the results so far are promising.

The report of the Queensland Women’s Task Force contained numerous references to this connection:

“All we want is for the violence to stop. We don’t want our men to go to jail. But by the same token we as a community have to try to address the issues of alcohol, drugs and violence [quoted from a submission].”

“The consultative process advanced alcohol as the most pressing concern of Indigenous people ... 91% of the overall submissions, and 100% of those from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, including Community Councils and organisations, cited alcohol and other drugs as major factors for attention if the issue of violence is to be successfully addressed ... It is vital to recognise the role of alcohol in deaths and injuries through violence, in general ill-health, and also in family and Community breakdown.”

*“While alcohol was identified as the major trigger of violence, there were also concerns about people mixing it with *yarndi* (marijuana).”*

John Ah Kit and Kim Hill have also pointed to the role of substances other than alcohol in suicide, violence and social and economic marginalisation. They were of course ridiculed by “progressive” and “liberal” people who see drugs as a matter of personal freedom. I have myself witnessed that there is nothing soft about the impact of “soft” drugs on Indigenous communities.

I am not trying to impose a general explanation for all problems. My point is that if we waver in this discussion, the addicts, profiteers and irresponsible people will take the opportunity to make our people a drugged people.

2. Avoid “symptom” thinking and “harm reduction” thinking

The disorder in our communities is a symptom in the sense that it is a product of our history and our marginalisation. It is a different question to what extent our history *maintains* the social chaos. I have argued that our established and dominating social ills

(substance abuse epidemics and economic passivity) contribute greatly to perpetuating the current state, rather than being symptoms of discrimination. On an individual level, an established addiction must be dealt with as a problem in its own right, rather than as a symptom of the causes of the first consumption of the addictive substance.

Another way of thinking that is determining Australia's response to social problems is "harm minimisation" (which includes "supply reduction", "demand reduction" and "harm reduction"). Supply reduction and demand reduction are not controversial, but harm reduction (defined as reducing the harm experienced by addicts and society without necessarily reducing the consumption of the addictive substance) is a very problematic strategy for our communities. We cannot avoid confronting consumption immediately with resolute measures.

A positive spin-off of rejecting the left-liberal consensus about substance abuse is that we will lose the support of people whose involvement would delay our attempts at restoring social order and a real economy.

3. Avoid overemphasis on "inherited and personal trauma" as a causal factor

In the lead up to this summit, Boni Robertson said "the summit would have to consider how problems in communities could be traced back to 'generation upon generation' of unresolved trauma."

"If this country isn't brave enough to give an apology, at least be brave enough to stand up and recognise what is causing the problems in our communities now - and what has to be done as a country to start the healing process,' [Boni] Robertson said".

"If we don't start the healing process, reconciliation will never be an accomplishable task or goal in this country."

Inherited trauma is an issue, as we have seen in the Jewish experience. But the same experience shows us that trauma is not in itself enough to debilitate a people.

I do not suggest dropping this discussion or people's efforts to resolve past trauma. We need to think about the danger of allowing Indigenous and non-indigenous people to attribute our social breakdown to intractable factors instead of taking the urgent and obvious measures.

The difficulty connected with putting less emphasis on what I call symptom thinking and the effects of trauma is that it seemingly absolves the non-indigenous colonisers from responsibility. This is a difficult balance, but there is no easy way forward from our present situation

4. Avoid attributing violence mainly to traditional culture

Peter Sutton and others have pointed to characteristics of traditional and semi-traditional Indigenous culture that might be relevant for the understanding of contemporary violence. Critical discussion of Indigenous culture is not taboo. I have stated that there are four features of Aboriginal culture that compound the denial that is central to

substance abuse and violence epidemics in our Cape York Peninsula communities: avoidance rules and relationships, kin solidarity and refusal to confront abuse, attribution of blame for misfortune on sorcery by non-kin, and individual autonomy (see Cape York Peninsula Regional Substance Abuse Strategy).

Lines of reasoning that are perceived to be honest and undeterred by “orthodoxies” and “sensitivities” will increasingly gain respect and support. Indigenous people will of course be less inclined to find faults with Indigenous culture, but I am mentioning this because the people sucked into the cultures of abuse and dysfunction will prefer *any* explanation and use *any* excuse that might allow them to avoid changing their behaviour.

The important point to note in relation to Peter Sutton’s reference to violence being part of our traditional culture is that he himself makes reference to one community in Cape York Peninsula where he worked where there was not more than 1 homicide and suicide between 1960 and 1985 and at least a dozen of each since 1985. On Peter’s own account, a wet canteen was introduced into that community in 1985.

My point is this: whatever inherent problems there might be in traditional culture, the fact is that substance abuse involves violence the nature and magnitude of which is of a vastly different proportion.

5. Avoid reliance on experts from the “Aboriginal industry”

In Cape York Peninsula we are encouraged by the initial successes with Family Income Management, Alcohol Management Plans, economic enterprise development and other efforts within Cape York Partnerships (though many other communities across Australia are doing similar things and many are having better success). We have enjoyed the assistance of competent people in the private and public sectors, but we have not at all relied on the traditional academic “expertise” on Indigenous substance abuse, Indigenous economic development, Indigenous crime, Indigenous welfare dependence, Indigenous violence, and so on.

My experience is that not much insight is present where it officially is expected to accumulate. We have to make a break with this “industry” because their policy advice has taken us nowhere – indeed it has taken us further into problems.

6. Reject illegal handling of addictive substances

If we are serious about attacking violence, we cannot accept people breaking the law in relation to addictive substances. Indigenous people who have any contact whatsoever with any illicit drug or the illegal alcohol trade or encourage or tolerate that close kin engage in such behaviour, have disqualified themselves from taking on a leadership role. Non-indigenous people who have any contact with illicit drugs or illegal alcohol trade or encourage or tolerate that close kin engage in such behaviour, cannot work in our organisations or our communities or in Indigenous affairs.

If we do not adhere to the simple rule that people must abide by the law in relation to our biggest problem (substance abuse), then our programmes will rot from the inside.

Lionel Quartermaine said that regional leaders must be involved in the effort to stop violence. I agree completely. He said that many regional and local leaders “are people who live with family violence in their communities every day.” This is true, but we must not be blind to the fact that many Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in positions of responsibility *exacerbate* our worst problem, by being involved in illegal or inappropriate behaviour, or by failing to stand up to people who do so.