

The dangers of mutual obligation

Opinion piece published by Noel Pearson and Pat Dodson
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The Prime Minister must not play at social engineering with Aborigines, write Pat Dodson and Noel Pearson.

A number of Aboriginal leaders, ourselves included, have decided to combine our energies to advance the situation of Aboriginal people from an abysmal state of social and economic inertia to a circumstance more closely approaching the reality of non-Aboriginal Australians.

People who see themselves as advocates of Aboriginal rights have accused us of everything from political opportunism to purveying denial of the inherent rights of Aboriginal people in this country. On the other hand, when one or other of our group criticises the Federal Government's indigenous policies, our commentary is interpreted as a death blow to the new "indigenous accord" that gives priority to the struggle against passive welfare and abject dysfunction. It is probably also seen as a sign of division among us and of Aboriginal leaders' inability to find common cause.

All Australians should be on notice that the commitment we have given to the "war on welfare dependency" is not a cause from which we will be diverted merely out of sensitivity to those who would confine Aboriginal people to the status of victim forever.

In our search for social and economic equity for our people we have created a "coalition for the future" and, as in any alliance, there will be differences in emphasis and even in strategy, but our vision remains the same and the members of this coalition will not be afraid of robust debate among its members.

We are a "coalition of the willing" but we are also an alliance of equals, and we will have the courage to challenge one another as equals with common cause in the fight for the future of our people.

We have challenged the leaders of the community-controlled Aboriginal organisations to reinvent themselves and re-engage with their communities to find the solutions for justice and equity among and within ourselves.

However, there is a risk that public opinion will place most of blame for

the present crisis on Aboriginal people. It must therefore be noted that the Federal Government's "practical reconciliation" agenda is at present not sufficiently well developed and funded.

Aboriginal people and those community leaders who are charged with engagement between the community and governments have a responsibility to ensure that in the negotiation of the new relationship between Aboriginal people and governments, they obtain the resources needed to sustain their culture, language, physical wellbeing and other aspects of their lives for the future of our people - but not at the expense of the basic human rights of those whom they represent.

It is also very important that the notion of "mutual obligation" is not trivialised.

Government and indigenous communities who no longer wish to sit on their hands while blindness is caused by trachoma, kidney failure is caused by scabies and deafness is caused by unresolved ear infections, should be supported. But they also need to think carefully about how they institute mutual obligation through "shared responsibility agreements".

"Social engineering" is unavoidable when governments attempt to influence social and economic behaviour through their programs and policies. Great caution needs to be exercised when social engineering is proposed.

The mutual obligation agreement struck with the Aboriginal community at Mulan in Western Australia has been supported by the community's leadership, and should therefore be supported by the wider Australian community. However, the Federal Government and other community leaders who are considering mutual obligation, might bear in mind our advice.

The aim must be to normalise obligations between Aboriginal parents and their children, between family members, and between individuals and their communities.

First, we need to ask how mutual obligation or, in Aboriginal terms, "reciprocity", works normally in functional societies. We believe that mutual obligation is a natural principle of human society, where people give and take, where they enjoy rights and exercise responsibilities in a more-or-less balanced way. When people are active participants in

economic life, whether as hunter-gatherers or as employees in the modern economy, mutual obligation is a natural principle. You work, you get paid. You hunt, you eat. Each has a responsibility to contribute, and each has rights.

When people are actively engaged in whatever their economy may be, it is not necessary to socially engineer mutual obligations. People take personal responsibility for themselves and their families. They don't need their leaders or their government to tell them what to do about basic things - such as to care for the welfare of their children - because these responsibilities come naturally. They do so because of their natural love and regard for their own.

But of course the community leaders of Mulan, as elsewhere in Aboriginal Australia, are having to deal with a legacy that has ruptured the natural reciprocity and responsibility that underpinned their traditional society. This legacy includes the economic and social depredations of their history, and the social corrosion caused by passive welfare dependency.

So it is understandable that the Mulan leaders, and the Federal Government, have decided to take action for the welfare of their children.

Second, the question needs to be asked: who owes the obligation to whom? The obligation to attend to children's hygiene is primarily an obligation owed by parents and adults to their children. It is not an obligation that, in the normal course, is owed to government, so careful thought must be given to what government can do to restore this natural obligation between parents and their children.

Third, we must also ask why some parents have failed to attend to their children's personal hygiene so that they can avoid serious health problems. There are a couple of possible explanations.

One is there has been a failure of awareness on the part of the Aboriginal people, and so it may be necessary to undertake what is often called "health promotion".

A second and more likely possibility is that there has been a failure of expectation - that is, poor hygiene has become so entrenched that no one is expecting parents to fulfil their natural responsibility to attend to the hygiene of their children. Other community members have long held no expectations, schools hold no expectations - everyone has become

used to expecting parents not to fulfil their responsibilities.

Because attending to the basic welfare of children is such a natural responsibility of parents and adult relatives, it is more accurate to talk about a failure of expectation when it comes to children's hygiene rather than a failure of obligation. Our point is that it shouldn't even be a matter of obligation that parents attend to their children's hygiene.

Given the collapse in expectations, we believe government has a role in assisting Aboriginal communities to restore responsibility through mutual obligation. However, it does not make sense to reward parents for doing something for which parents normally need not be rewarded. What message is the government sending: that if you look after your children, you will be rewarded? And when the rewards end or the incentives lose their attraction, can parents then revert to their previous irresponsibility?

One of the unanswered problems with the Mulan agreement is: what is the logical connection between the obligations that the government wants the community to commit to, and the incentives that it is offering in return? It is hard to see the natural connection between children's hygiene and the more convenient provision of petrol.

The Federal Government must restrain its bureaucrats from playing at social engineering, otherwise the important principle of mutual obligation will be discredited - and that would be a tragedy.

Pat Dodson and Noel Pearson are Aboriginal leaders.