Homes built on despair

By Noel Pearson
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AS Australians have confronted the depth of the social and cultural breakdown in remote indigenous communities, there has been a growing discussion around their very viability, and whether these communities should continue to exist.

The previous government, especially under former senator Amanda Vanstone's indigenous ministry, started to articulate and implement a policy that sought to grapple with the question of the viability of remote communities.

Measures were introduced that discouraged decentralised settlements, otherwise known as outstations or homelands.

The viability of remote communities is an important discussion, but it is not one that can properly be led by senior bureaucrats and politicians. We must never forget that the congregation of Aboriginal people into settlements such as those on Cape York Peninsula was not by the choice of the people themselves.

These missions and settlements were created in the wake of the dispossession and dispersal of Aboriginal people from their traditional lands. They were often repositories for the tens of thousands of children removed (yes, stolen and rescued and every imaginable permutation in between) from their families, and many thousands of adults who were forcibly removed to places like Palm Island.

Then there was the mass relocation of Aboriginal families from cattle stations following the equal wages case in 1965, when the actual result was not a better industrial outcome for Aboriginal station workers but their near entire removal from the industry. Removed from the only work they had (and loved) and their traditional lands to live life on unemployment benefits in the settlements and on the fringes of country towns.

There is an ahistorical tendency in contemporary policy discussions about indigenous communities. As if the problems of these communities are not themselves the product of earlier "in the best interests" policies devised by bureaucrats and politicians. It is far too late in the day for arbitrary decisions to be taken to (once again) forcibly relocate Aboriginal people to where the latest policy now says is best.

While Aboriginal people are right to insist that they make the decisions about the future of their communities, the policy questions involved are of legitimate concern to the rest of the country and therefore governments. The plight of children and families in these communities - ravaged by the perfect storm of grog, drugs and gambling addictions meeting passive welfare and cultural demand sharing - is the business of all Australians.

No longer can human suffering continue behind the veil of closed communities, and no longer can real action be deterred by appeals to self-determination, if self-determination actually means not facing up honestly with the problems and taking urgent action where it is needed.

No matter what legitimate criticisms can be made of the media in relation to Aboriginal issues, its exposure of the trauma in remote (and not so remote) indigenous communities cannot be gainsaid.

When we finally get indigenous policies right, and the wellbeing of Aboriginal children and families is restored and assured, then it will in no small part be due to the role of journalists such as Tony Koch of this newspaper in relentlessly bringing to light inconvenient truths.

There is an increasing suggestion in the contemporary debates that remote communities are not viable, and indigenous people should relocate to the centres of economic growth.

I have two responses to this view.

First, pushing remote people into urban areas wouldn't work.

Indigenous people in Cape York are in large part behaviourally disengaged from the real economy, and live in families and communities that are dysfunctional to varying degrees, and passivity is a major reason for the behavioural disengagement. If our people were pressured into relocating to urban centres, then they would just end up joining our counterparts in the dysfunctional (white, black and migrant) underclasses in the cities and regional centres.

Second, the answer to the viability question is conditional.

To the question "Is this community viable?" I suggest it depends on whether, after maximising education and mobility, people choose to maintain their community by maximising local development opportunities and removing passive welfare from external supports to the community.

There is uncertainty as to the choice that community members will ultimately make about their own futures and that of their community. There is no guarantee that young people from my home town, after receiving an education and gaining the capabilities to be mobile, will choose to return home. They may do so later in life. They may never return at all.

There is no absolute answer to the viability question. It is entirely possible that highly educated consultants could live in remote communities and provide their services to the outside world, linked through information and communications technology. No matter how economically marginal the location might be, a high degree of education and skill could still make living in such areas viable. While this example is the extreme possibility, it just underlines how viability is conditional.

The fewer local development opportunities there are, the more important education and mobility becomes to the viability of the remote communities concerned. This is completely counter-intuitive to the prevailing policy thinking about the future of the most remote communities.

In any case it is hard to see how any remote communities will be able to realise their local development opportunities without education and mobility. After all, there are many other communities on the planet that are located in very hard places: as hard as any remote community in Australia.

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