

ARE BLACK KIDS ALLOWED TO ASPIRE TO WHITE JOBS?

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Let me introduce you via some false names to some real kids. I know their real names. I have spoken their language, lived with their families, learnt my second language from their elders, taught them at all age levels in the school in their language as well as English. I know what they talk about, at least when I'm around, and I know what happens to them at home. I want to introduce you to some of these children who are on the receiving end of any policies we make as a nation about indigenous people. And I want to start and finish with the aspirations those kids express, and which then elude them.

Cathy is eleven this year. She spends her schooldays watching DVDs, walking around with her friends, mainly listening to music on headphones, cadging money from adult card games to buy something to eat. Cathy says she would like to be a teacher and work at school. Now what do I say to her? Your family have never sent you to school, so you will never be able work there. Even the cleaning and yard staff are non indigenous nowadays, because they can work on contracts. I could ask her whether she is really free to make plans for any sort of future beyond having babies. Cathy says she doesn't want to have a boyfriend or get married, but she has friends her age who already know who their promised husband will be. A young man nowadays usually only five or ten years older than the girl, though neither was consulted. Future planned already? So why aspire to anything.

Bobby is ten and usually he does attend school, mainly because his mother is a teaching assistant. Both Bobby and his mum are well above average intelligence and it is easy for an experienced non-Aboriginal teacher to see in Bobby a potential university graduate. Despite her potential, his mother is not a teacher. Bobby is not going to make it either. He doesn't want to be a teacher, he says he wants to be a policeman. And this isn't surprising given the level of violence he displays constantly at school. His second grade teacher had him working on the same material any mainstream child could have tackled, but found Bobby's rages scary. The fact his father is a drunk who has only nominal employment on CDEP has set Bobby up for similar unemployability. Of course he will never be a policeman. He might make it as a "police aid" if he decides not to opt for the community solidarity of the grog.

Or, what do I say to Mario when he says he wants to be a mechanic because he has seen the men in his family coax a wrecked four-wheel drive back into life? Mario has almost never attended school. Most little boys in any culture don't attend unless someone sends them or takes them. He might be allowed to aspire to CDEP employment, where he will attend course after course on vehicle maintenance run by a real mechanic – a white mechanic, and at the end of which there is no qualification and no job.

Or what do I say to Billy: “Sorry Bill, you’re a black kid. You must limit your aspirations to painting on bark or performing bit parts in white men’s documentaries or movies. Your career will be in the provision of spiritual décor to our lifestyle. You don’t get to enter that lifestyle alongside us – the key to that door is independent income and competency in the English-speaking world. You need neither to keep performing for us. We need you to stay as cultural as you are. Through our neglect of schooling, remote indigenous parents also receive our indirect encouragement: “We’re not going to insist on school attendance. Don’t send your kids to school. Teach them your culture!”

The Culture of Low Expectations

I have taught ten year olds who could write long creative stories in their own language, and handle maths at mainstream level. None of them is now employed. I’ve taught year nine and ten boys using correspondence course materials (since the small size of Oenpelli precludes any high school) and seen them perform competently at mainstream levels. I’ve seen the same boys turn into unemployed drunks. I’m still on best mates terms with most of them, but I now avoid meeting them. I can’t take it.

What do I say to any of these other kids when they talk about maybe being lawyers, hairdressers, nurses, chemists or teachers? Do I tell the girls (what they very rapidly find out by observation) that they should aspire to early motherhood, cultural employment for pocket money and a life dominated by violence? Even the prospect of professional sport comes too late to these kids. The clubs certainly try to recruit, especially A F L with its justifiably proud history of black players. But it is only the tiny minority who have gotten out of the remote communities and attended mainstream school regularly and learnt how not to drink, and who will cope with the discipline and training of professional sport.

Please force yourself to believe that I am speaking about real flesh and blood children. They are not “Aboriginal kids” or “Piccaninnies” or photogenic tourist icons. They are not hypothetical, they are not stereotypical, they are individual human beings with the same range of personalities, potentials, intelligence and capacity for aspirations and disappointments as our own children and grandchildren. And, in theory, the same human rights and status under Australian law.

Of course we get upset about this sort of anecdotal reporting, especially when the objective research by say, Menzies School of Health Research, confirms the horror in the language of numerical or medical data. We ask ourselves, How is that Australia boasts as one of our “values” a strong protective attitude to children, yet allows one group of children to live out lives denied any hope of adult independence? It doesn’t look like it’s due to any malicious racism?

I have hoped, and a lot of people still cling to this hope, that intelligent Aboriginal kids deeply schooled in their own arts and skills will take on the maintenance of this cultural productivity as a career. A very tiny minority aspire to this. The others have grown up with their noses pressed firmly against the windowpane of the mainstream world. They know as much as other Australian kids their age about sporting heroes, music groups and favourite TV shows and DVDs. I assume no one wants to remove the right to aspire to cultural reproduction from any group of kids (assuming the

culture is no threat to the rest of us) but this is a long way from effectively denying those children access to schooling and life models of the whole vast range of other aspirations they might develop.

It should go without saying that childrens' welfare should be an inflexible parameter in forming government policy. Of course, it is this in most parts of Australia. But not in remote Aboriginal Australia where school attendance is not generally expected or enforced, nor even budgeted for by increasingly desperate state systems, where premature sexualization of girls is brushed under the culture carpet, where children with STDs are not accepted as evidence of any systemic problems. If its not malicious racism, it seems to have the same impact.

Is our naïve national flair for infantilising and commoditising Aborigines well motivated, a kind of benevolent and defensible racism? Are we culpable as a nation? Somebody must be, because something quite evil is going on.

Why, especially, have we failed to apply to remote Aboriginal communities the human economic principles we've know for decades: that transgenerational unemployment in any human group diminishes self esteem, leads to drug abuse and other self destructive behaviour in adults and invariably predicts poor educational outcomes for their children. When we add to these already well-researched expectations the absence of routine public scrutiny and personal accountability that have been allowed to screen us from Aboriginal realities, the prospects for child neglect and abuse are magnified. We know too that re-engaging long term unemployed subgroups in the economy may be more expensive and distressing in the short term than letting them rot. We also know that children, including Aboriginal children, are incapable of making an informed choice about where and how they will live.

I've introduced some real children, and it may be possible to think their lack of choice is somehow automatically the fault of the parents. Yet over twenty eight years I have never heard a Kunwinjku parent take any other position than a strong desire for their children to master English and the social and technical skills needed to cope with that invading reality. Some parents of course are culpable. But there are others, and this is a matter for the most urgent research, who have used the limited range of options in remote places to send their children to boarding schools. There is a steadily growing minority too who keep trying to get their roots down in urban areas and have their children schooled either with reliable white people interstate, or in local schools. This is hit and miss, but we are seeing the beginnings of a refugee movement away from domestic violence and unemployability into urban Australia. And we're not ready. Every government until recently has hoped this was not a trend, that somehow these horrifically dysfunctional places would improve. And meanwhile highly aspirational parents are hanging in there and need support. But what about the majority of parents? Let me summarize one of my key doctoral research findings in one horrible sentence: those others surrendered their children to us decades ago.

And we took them on. We appeared to adopt them. Those who do drift to the urban areas of course don't bring schooling with them as a habit or a resource. As a result, engagement in urban based schools will be a fraught process. The only real motivation for those displaced children will be the same one our school systems are built on everywhere: school is how you achieve employment, and that is the key to

choosing a lifestyle for yourself. Perhaps this is too basic a mantra for us to hear any more?

The urban drift is starting to frighten at least the Territory government: as it should. But in other places, those who may not imagine themselves moving to a larger centre, the people in NSW country towns for example, the drift in lifestyles is accelerating too, and becoming more desperate. The only avenue for self esteem or even employment may mean taking up an indigenous role, a reconstructed self to suit the market demand for elders or professional givers of approval for developments - another gilded cage with increasing numbers of inhabitants becoming more expensive to keep. The only way out is obviously the provision of jobs that are productive in net terms to the whole economy. So what policy preferences do we need?

If we start with a ruthless preference for the long term welfare of children, I think we need to refocus immediately on two policy areas: we must firstly keep an eye on them as they are right now through structured scrutiny and the enforcement of the law without regard to race as applied to local schooling and community governance. Secondly, more importantly and more difficult: ensure kids in remote areas can aspire to real employment.

By definition, children have a right to the public scrutiny of the factors that protect and empower them. The long overdue movements in the Northern Territory judiciary towards recognizing the rights of women and children has largely come about because police and other public servants have simply (if bravely) done their jobs reporting and enforcing existing codes. Public servants may be expected to do their jobs of course, but how much more likely are they to make tough interventions when governments have made a public commitment to say, intervene on behalf of abused children? We need to keep telling police, child welfare agents, teachers and nurses in remote communities to do their jobs exactly as they would in non Aboriginal Australia. Given the absence of local scrutiny, and the local pressures to fit in with the prevailing corrupt power structures and lies, they should do their job. Rather than acquiesce, letting the professionals off the hook of immediate conflict, but above all letting each of us off the hook of tackling the big costs of economic engagement, they should do their job.

This elementary level of public scrutiny is still missing in the more remote areas of Aboriginal Australia. School principals, police and clinic staff are not the only ones who choose to maintain good relationships with local adults rather than follow up on poor school attendance or allegations of child abuse in the way they would in a mainstream context. Fear of embarrassing a community or ethnic group may be cited, implying children's rights are secondary to such considerations. Self-appointed defenders of Aboriginal outstation life, as another example, usually speak from a position of sentimental regard for "a way of life". They also speak from profound ignorance. I've lived at some of these outstations, and I will assert they are virtually detention centres for many children where there is no public scrutiny of their schooling, their health or their sexual welfare. They do not control when and if they are able to leave. And, of course, there is no hope at all of any significant employment for the growing generation.

Even in relatively large remote communities we will find, if we have the guts to look for it, exactly the sort of corruption we would expect in any other domain of local

government in Australia where it left to its own devices. In the remote places, it is magnified by educational failure and sheer geographical isolation. We are beginning to admit that governance in these communities is problematic, if not sometimes farcical. What must also become clear is the way schools fail without constant organized scrutiny. Out of sight out of mind means off the budget? Or maybe it's a more general rule of human affairs that the further from the source of the funds the more the dollars, like shotgun pellets, spread out unpredictably from the targets. I guess I don't have to argue this.

Culture or Kids?

Low self esteem, lack of workplace expertise among Aboriginal people means white functionaries tend to become little despots, even if benevolent ones. Nor do we need to tolerate government via elders unless they are elected. We must not tolerate for our own citizens a regime of a kind we would criticize in another country, without elections or equality. Culture or Kids? Which do we save? The guiding principle is their long-term welfare.

So whose responsibility is that scrutiny? Let me start by talking about why the Northern Territory government cannot and will not do it. Our NT government is dealing with problems that should frighten anyone, let alone a small government with a shallow gene pool. But, I'm going to start by defending the Chief Minister of the Northern Territory. Here is a case study on why federal scrutiny of remote communities must be locked in to any future federal policy mix. When Clare Martin was caught in the headlights on the issue of child sexual abuse in Aboriginal communities, it was tempting to rejoice in the public humiliation of a Labor leader. It was less tempting to realize the issue that wrong-footed her is the direct outcome of Federal, not Northern Territory policies that have allowed remote groups to fester without the oxygen of public interaction.

Our culpability is national and bipartisan. We've known this since the much-misapplied referendum of 1967 unambiguously made the nation as a whole, through the federal government, responsible for governmental intervention in indigenous affairs.

Scrutiny of course, could become merely a death watch unless the root problem of long-term unemployment is tackled. And this is absolutely a federal issue. I've hinted already that the argument in favour of cultural employment has probably reached saturation point. The limits on it may be economic, but there is also the fundamental human rights issue of whether children's aspiration should be artificially and certainly unnecessarily constrained and limited to the situation into which they are born. Local child abuse is the result of psychological and economic exclusion with its proven inevitable dysfunction. But there is something else at work too: systemic child neglect where schools are under-funded and there is no focus on saving children at risk. Premature sexualization of children is put in the too hard basket, and that basket is re-labelled culture.

A moment ago I ventured to defend the NT governments' recent response to the increasingly visible nature of Aboriginal dysfunction. I'll go one step further now and quote Mark Latham: 'the best social security is a job'. He didn't add, and we should,

that this applies to Aboriginal people too. And I would add: the best thing that could happen to Billy, Cathy, or the other remote indigenous kids I've introduced, is to have their parents in meaningful employment, and given some economic control over their own affairs. We already know this! So why haven't state and federal governments pursued this fundamental agenda for remote communities?

Benevolent Racism

Benevolent racism is why. Blythe cultural assumptions are cheaper than the brutal economics of employment. That's why CDEP has flourished: it's cheaper than real economic engagement, and much less embarrassing than bald unemployment. Unless you regard Aboriginal people as radically superior or inferior to other humans, you need to face the fact they are the only stakeholders in their language and culture, and in their location. The relative value they assign to these rather vague concepts will only be proven when they are forced to choose between loyalty to those things, or the need to protect and empower their children. A young mother at Oenpelli will always hanker after somewhere safer, something allowing affordable access to the economic and cultural attractions of the outside world. The only reason the majority of young families in Oenpelli have not left is the lack of economic mechanism to enable them to move. When they can, they do. It is a horrifying possibility that governments may completely abandon effective policing and limitations on alcohol in remote communities. If they do, the refugees to urban areas will become a flood. On the other hand, if community access to drugs and alcohol were enforced, the refugees may be those joining the already large number of "long grass" drinkers creating policing problems already in Darwin and Alice Springs, and leaving behind communities of supporting mothers. A racially based drinking ban is unimaginable. So there is no alternative but to commit to bringing remote Aborigines into the workforce regardless of immediate costs and discomforts.

Okay, it is problematic. But it won't become less problematic either economically or politically the longer we wait. In fact, I think we have the opportunity right now to realign policies so that aspirational equality for kids becomes a touchstone for indigenous funding.

I suggest there are two factors telling us to move hard and fast immediately:

[1] The focus of Australia's default secular religion – a public discourse of sentimentalism – has moved away from indigenous issues to embrace refugees, the environment (again!), a diffuse anti-war concern and even world poverty. The need to save the world relegates the relatively small-scale task of maintaining Aboriginality. This shift leaves governments free to enact programmes that may have been rejected on sentimentalist grounds a decade ago. Part of this is the recurrence of appalling stories that are emerging about remote Australia that make indigenous realities less palatable to those who are drawn to an area of public interest only through motives of feel-good personal involvement.

[2] At the same time public whim has moved off Aboriginal issues, there seems to have been a simultaneous awareness across all governments that the cost of maintaining health, education and housing in remote communities is growing exponentially. Never mind the cost to Aboriginal kids mental health; the dollar cost of

their numbers and dependency is a factor coming home to roost. I want to talk a bit about money here, just taking my own home community as an example. At present we have six of our people on dialysis. They live in Darwin at public cost to be near the facilities. Their number looks like multiplying several times in the next decade, so the NT government will need to choose whether building facilities in Oenpelli will be cheaper than moving people into Darwin. It may turn out to be, but dialysis is only one of the costs taking off in remote communities. Predicated on birth rates, the schools system, the power supplies, the housing needs will balloon in the next few decades. In Oenpelli, the school infrastructure and staffing are quite literally only set up at present for less than half the potential enrollees on today's figures. No wonder the NT government never pursues school attendance with any determination! Imagine if all the kids turned up! It's a consolation to pretend they are all off learning culture!

Let me mention another money story that has yet, apparently, to dawn on government minds. This is the basic issue of the economic cost of having a body of long term unemployed. Not only do they generate costs in policing and medical care, in the dole system, in public housing, but also we need to seriously calculate the loss to our economy of generation after generation of kids who we prevent from ever arriving at adult productivity. Let me add the likely explosion of racial violence as an economically excluded minority drifts into the towns with high aspirations and mounting frustration. And this group is colour coded. It is already obvious that the cost in social unrest and economic terms through policing and other responsive costs will be considerable.

People Need to Live Where There are Jobs

We need to face the unavoidable dislocation and turbulence that will allow movement away from the present kind of pain and limitation. There is no easy change possible for people in remote areas, and no attraction to anyone in those places continuing on their present pathways. People need to live where there are jobs. The Aboriginal people Australia wide are divided. There are those with access to jobs, where programmes and incentives can overcome social and educational impediments, and there are those effectively and permanently excluded from workforce participation by their remoteness. Their children are guaranteed exclusion from the universal human right to dream and aspire, because we unconsciously accept parents' prior right to shape their children's education. Yet everyday courts remove children from parents of non-Aboriginal people when they think those children are hurt by the choices parents make. It can only be some sort of racism that allows this dissonance. I don't suggest anything like a wholesale removal of children. I do suggest we own up to the economic impossibility of providing employment in small remote communities and the logical corollary of needing to support voluntary movement to where the jobs are. We also need to plan for the engagement of the children involved with urban schools and ensure job access at the end of school. Yes, the Aboriginal people who make that choice will plunge their families into turbulence and face hard choices, but the situation now is infinitely harder and without any positive future at all.

How can I be so ruthless? Because I can see radical, assisted voluntary change as the only hope for the kids. Because I have lived most of my adult life with people who caught between the slowly sinking local community mess, and the need to take a radical plunge into what increasingly looks more attractive. Why can't we create jobs

locally? Ultimately, remote small places cannot ever have things like a wide range of employment, any more than they can have fully equipped secondary schools or attractive entertainment centres. We've tried on the cheap and found that pseudo employment systems like CDEP, or like sporadic film roles, and the commoditisation of identity and phenotype demanded by commercial arts and crafts enterprise actually lull people into accepting their economic periphery, their roles as the occasionally employed, their depressed self esteem.

Whilst the non-Aboriginal people spiritualise and cannibalise what was for you a simple life skill or cultural habit, you remain the patient in this procedure. I don't think many children can articulate this, not until it is too late. At some point though the tears do come before the calloused self-destructive lifestyle. I have been with men and women on occasions when they have simply wept out of the frustration at their lack of power, their lack of real job, out of despair at seeing every "real" job taken up by non-Aboriginal people. Kids don't articulate this, but they learn it at the deepest level. No wonder by teenage years the boys will say with real cynicism, they intend to grow up to become drinkers. Oh, yes, there will be the occasional face paint and dancing. They might sit with the other chronic drinkers turning out quick art for grog money, but there is no self-esteem in the way they talk about themselves beyond about thirteen. Beyond the day they put it all together and realize the absolute prerequisite for real jobs is to a white. That is what they really think. Kids should be free to explore and settle on the same range of aspirational options in life regardless of their location as a right. If they choose cultural employment, good luck to them. But if they have no choice but cultural employment, the nightmare will simply get worse.

So, what do I tell Bill and Cathy? What about this? We have locked you kids into Australia's biggest and longest running social experiment, and without your informed consent. It's over now. Welcome to outside the cultural detention centre.