

Separatism

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For those who believe that all the problems faced by Indigenous people are the result of the arrival of the White Man, then the logical solution is to separate Indigenous people from non-Indigenous people and let each group live independently of one another. Or if physical separation is not possible, then Indigenous-specific programmes should be established so that Indigenous Australians do not have to come in contact with, or under the 'control' of non-Indigenous Australians. An Indigenous-specific programme is one that is intended mostly for Indigenous people and is usually run by Indigenous people. The separatist approach was believed to be a solution to many of the problems faced by Indigenous people. Sadly, this has not been the case, or if there has been any improvement in the general well-being of the Indigenous population, then it has not progressed at the same pace as the improvements achieved in the wider community.

THE UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS OF SEPARATISM

To understand why separatism is promoted, despite its apparent lack of success, it is useful to examine the underlying assumptions that are driving Indigenous-specific services. These assumptions have evolved to become what are considered by many as unquestionable facts. In our quest to improve race relations and living conditions for Indigenous Australians, it is now appropriate that these assumptions be questioned and critically examined. This examination should be open to anyone who is committed to reconciliation and not just restricted to one race of people.

First assumption

The first assumption underlying separatism is that Indigenous people are different in

nature compared with the non-Indigenous population. It follows from this assumption then, that the key to helping Indigenous people is to focus on these differences. However, one of the problems with such thinking, as noted by Helen McLaughlin,¹ is that while the supporters of Indigenous-specific programmes focus on the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, they fail to acknowledge the commonalities. The commonalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are, however, far more important than the differences between the two races.

Differences of a cultural nature for example, should be considered, but they should not become the pivotal point about which all decisions are made regarding how best to assist Indigenous people. Differences (cultural or otherwise) should be considered, but only in the context of a better understanding of the human commonalities. If programmes and services for Indigenous people are to be effective, then Indigenous people need to be viewed as a race with a range of needs that are common to all people, and not just as a separate race of people who share little in common with the rest of the population. It is probably more true to say that any observed differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are the *effects* of separatism rather than the *causes* for separatism. Proponents of the separatist approach have largely ignored the commonality between the races and have chosen to magnify any observed differences.

Second assumption

The second assumption used to justify the extensive use of Indigenous-specific programmes is that Indigenous people are a homogeneous race of people who all think alike, are in gen-

eral agreement with one another, strongly identify as members of a close-knit community and feel alienated from mainstream society. This is perhaps the saddest myth of all. For some small communities where traditional customs and practices are adhered to, this may be true. However, to extrapolate this belief to the Indigenous race as a whole is not justifiable. Anyone who has spent time with any significantly sized group of Indigenous people will immediately recognise the diversity among its members.

Once Indigenous people are seen as a homogeneous race of people, then deciding what is best for them is just a simple matter of identifying what is best for a few. For some issues, sampling the opinions of a few in order to provide services for the majority will suffice. Indeed, this often happens in mainstream society. But, like mainstream society, there are many issues affecting Indigenous people where the best solution lies in consulting with as many people as is practical. Sometimes the best solution is to let individuals make their own decisions. Sadly, because of the belief that all Indigenous people think alike, it is assumed that they will accept any decision made on their behalf, so long as the decision-maker is Indigenous. It is time that a clear message was sent to the self-appointed Indigenous messiahs who claim to best represent the Indigenous race that Indigenous people are individuals. It is time they were reminded of who they really are.

In the past, Indigenous people may have accepted letting other Indigenous people (such as elders and appointed Indigenous leaders) make decisions on their behalf, but a new generation of Indigenous people has emerged. Indigenous people today are more independent and feel more comfortable participating in mainstream society. While still maintaining

pride in their cultural heritage, they have shaken loose the obligations to be followers, as was once believed necessary to be accepted as an Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander person. For many Indigenous people, their sense of identity includes their Indigenous status, but it is not dominated by it. Indigenous people desire and deserve the same rights as other Australians—to be seen as individuals.

Third assumption

The third assumption driving separatism is the belief that the presence and use of Indigenous-specific services is an expression of self-determination or empowerment—that is, Indigenous people taking control of their own lives. The need for self-determination arose from the injustices of the past, where Indigenous people were indeed controlled and treated badly by the governing authorities.

Consequently, any service today that is run mostly by non-Indigenous people is cited by some as evidence that Indigenous people are still coming under the control of non-Indigenous people. Therefore, to prevent history from repeating itself, Indigenous people are being urged by some Indigenous leaders to avoid using services that are managed by non-Indigenous Australians.

Indigenous people in positions of power and influence are taking control of the lives of other Indigenous people

Indigenous people, like all people, have a right to self-determination. In fact, it is a necessary prerequisite for reconciliation. To have a situation where Indigenous people were forced by non-Indigenous people to live a lifestyle which was not their choice is an act of which we should be ashamed. However, having services that are mostly managed by non-Indigenous people is not an attempt to control Indigenous people; rather, it is more a reflection of Australia's population make-up. Given that approximately 97 per cent of Australia's population is non-Indigenous, it should come as no surprise that it is usually non-Indigenous

people who are responsible for managing and delivering services intended to benefit the whole community. While self-determination and empowerment should be an integral part of the solution for improving the lives of Indigenous people, these terms need to be carefully defined.

THE PROBLEM WITH SEPARATISM

Many of the problems faced by Indigenous people today are the same as those faced by many non-Indigenous people. It is true that these problems may be more common among Indigenous people, but they are not an inherent trait of Indigenous people. These same problems (or variations of them) are also typically encountered by members of low socio-economic groups, people living in rural and remote localities, and members of other minority groups. They are not 'cultural problems', they are 'people problems', and therefore require 'people' solutions.

Solving these problems requires the assistance of people who, first and foremost, have the appropriate skills, knowledge and necessary experience to deal with them. Significant problems cannot be solved by someone simply because they share the same ancestry as the one requiring assistance.

A knowledge of *Indigenous culture* is fine, but only in the presence of a knowledge of *human culture*. To assert that only Indigenous people should be helping Indigenous people, and indeed are believed to be the only ones capable of providing effective assistance, can often mean that Indigenous people do not receive the standard of assistance they need. This is not because Indigenous people are not capable of helping other Indigenous people, but because there are often insufficient numbers of Indigenous people who possess the necessary skills for

dealing with many of the problems faced by Indigenous people.

Despite the insistence by many Indigenous gatekeepers and leaders that Indigenous people will become more liberated and be better-off as they use services that are managed by 'their own people', many are less liberated and more reliant on service providers. Moreover, many Indigenous people seem to be enjoying the benefits of services that are provided without discrimination as to the ethnic identity of their clients. And so they should—that is their right. Many Indigenous people have demonstrated their satisfaction with a wide range of mainstream services (for example, local councils and retail outlets), lei-

sure activities (for example, television and cinemas) and technologies (for example, faxes, cars and aircraft) that make life more enjoyable and manageable, despite the absence of any form of 'cultural appropriateness'.

It should come as no surprise that what Indigenous people look for in a service is similar to what non-Indigenous people look for: an appropriate solution to their problem. An appropriate solution is one that understands and recognises the underlying cause of the problem and fixes it. The belief that people who are appropri-

ately skilled can provide valuable assistance to others (regardless of their cultural identity) is well demonstrated in the way Australian people have for many years provided humanitarian assistance to people of other cultures who are in need. The people providing assistance are experts in their fields and are able to work with others to implement solutions regardless of the 'cultural sensitivities' or other barriers. Their focus is on helping their fellow human beings.

An individual is empowered or attains self-determination to the degree that he or she begins to make decisions about matters that affect him or her personally

WHAT ARE SELF-DETERMINATION AND EMPOWERMENT?

Concepts such as self-determination and empowerment feature significantly in discussions about reconciliation and any policy developed with the aim of helping Indigenous people. Take a moment to reflect on your own life. You probably desire to have a certain degree of control over your own life, see it is a human right, and believe that all Australians are entitled to the same right. This personal control you have is the result of your abilities, talents, skills, available opportunities and determination. This is what empowerment and self-determination are all about for the individual. An individual is empowered or attains self-determination to the degree that he or she begins to make decisions about matters that affect him or her personally.

But what about Indigenous people? What does it mean for an Indigenous person to attain self-determination or be empowered? The answer is very simple: Indigenous people are empowered in the same way that non-Indigenous people are empowered! That is, Indigenous people achieve self-determination and empowerment when they, as individuals, begin to take greater control over matters that affect them personally. The important word here is 'individuals'. For any group (such as a race of people), attaining self-determination for the group requires that each member of that group attains self-determination. However, this is not how current programmes intended to assist Indigenous people and promote reconciliation apply the processes of self-determination and empowerment. These important concepts (self-determination and empowerment) have been promoted as processes that can be applied collectively to a group of people. The group is no longer seen as comprising unique individuals; rather, it is seen

For many Indigenous people, having a service that is 'culturally appropriate' (meaning that it is managed by Indigenous people) is not a high priority

as a single unit. Consequently, self-determination for Indigenous people is incorrectly defined as the process where select members of the Indigenous race (such as Indigenous leaders) make decisions or provide services for the other members of the race. When this happens, it is then said that Indigenous people are taking control of their lives. What is actually happening, is that Indigenous people in positions of power and influence are taking control of the lives of other Indigenous people who are not in positions of power and influence.

Indigenous people need, for example, to be able to tie their own shoelaces (just like all people). However, the term 'their' can either refer to an individual, or it can be applied collectively to members of a group. When applied collectively, the use of the term 'their' can mean a few Indigenous people tying the shoelaces of all the other Indigenous people. Alternatively, it can mean each individual Indigenous person tying his or her own shoelaces. Currently, concepts of self-determination and empowerment are applied in the collective sense.

Having someone else make significant decisions for you, even if the decision-maker is of the same race as you, is definitely not self-determination or empowerment. Sadly, this view of self-determination and empowerment is promoted as 'Indigenous people taking control of their lives'. Although it is often sensible to have someone appropriate who has been endorsed by the majority to make decisions on behalf of others, as often happens in discrete Indigenous communities, this should never be passed off as self-determination or empowerment for the entire race of Indigenous people. To do so opens the way for control, dependency and corruption.

IMPLICATIONS

Another problem with potential negative implications arises when there is an insistence that only Indigenous people be allowed to assist other Indigenous people. Suppose, for example, that an Indigenous community lacks a fresh water supply. If an Indigenous organisation provides a community with a much-needed water supply, then this is cited as an example of empowerment or self-determination. This is because Indigenous people have provided services for other Indigenous people.

There is nothing wrong with Indigenous people providing much-needed services to other Indigenous people. For example, my plumber is Indigenous and has helped me out many times over the years. I use him, however, because he is good at what he does, and not because I feel empowered when he fixes my plumbing. But there are not always sufficient numbers of Indigenous people to provide such services. What happens if the same water-supply system is installed (and the same benefits consequently generated) by an organisation that is not an Indigenous organisation, or does not employ Indigenous staff? It is then no longer perceived as empowerment or self-determination. Instead, it is often portrayed as an act that has hampered the process of empowerment. A given intervention and its outcome (such as an improved water supply), can be interpreted by some as an act of empowerment, or as a manifestation of control and welfare. It all depends on the source of the assistance.

This narrow and restrictive definition of empowerment for Indigenous people stems from the 'us/them' mentality where Indigenous people are seen as a race having very little in common with non-Indigenous Australians. A consequence of this thinking is that Indigenous people can sometimes miss out on services that could be of great benefit to them. In the example just given, can the situation only be viewed in terms of one race providing services for another race? In the spirit of reconciliation and in recognition that Indig-

enous and non-Indigenous people share much in common, is the situation not better described as Australians helping Australians? Of course it is. Unfortunately, though, some people do not agree that the single term 'Australian' can be applied simultaneously to describe people of different ethnic backgrounds. People in this country, from whatever ethnic background, are entitled to call themselves Australian, and still maintain a sense of allegiance to their ancestry. Such freedom is what makes Australia such a great nation.

WHAT IS THE COST OF ABANDONING THE SEPARATIST APPROACH?

It was mentioned earlier that Indigenous people desire services that provide an appropriate solution to their problems. (Is this true, or am I the only black fella who believes this?) Whether the service should be Indigenous-specific or mainstream is really up to individuals to decide. For many Indigenous people, having a service that is 'culturally appropriate' (meaning that it is managed by Indigenous people) is not a high priority. However, if you were to ask an Indigenous person who is employed in an Indigenous organisation, then they would probably insist that Indigenous-specific services are vital for the well-being of Indigenous Australians. It's not too difficult to see why this is the case. For many Indigenous people working in the 'Indigenous industry', the absence of Indigenous-specific services means no job, no status and no power. In other words, to abandon the separatist approach comes at a huge cost to those with a vested interest in separatism.

A SOLUTION

While there is nothing wrong with Indigenous people having the option of accessing Indigenous-specific services, they should never be told by others that they should only ever use Indigenous-specific services or that their needs are best understood and addressed only by fellow Indigenous people. To be reliant on Indigenous-specific services greatly limits the options Indigenous people have available to them. This can only hinder the reconciliation process. Furthermore, it is not necessary to

abolish Indigenous organisations. Keep them, but let Indigenous people decide for themselves, as individuals, what services they will use. If, after feeling comfortable about making their own choices, Indigenous people still prefer to access Indigenous-specific services, then fine, there is obviously a need for such services. However, we will never really know until the pressure for Indigenous people to seek out services that have been promoted as 'culturally appropriate' has been removed.

A FINAL WORD

There are many very good people employed by Indigenous organisations or who work in Indigenous positions. They know who they are. I am not suggesting that they should be

made redundant. We need them. There are, however, many Indigenous people employed in such jobs whose motives are highly questionable. What I am suggesting is that greater consideration be given to a person's character and competency, rather than their Indigenous status. I share the same dream as one of my heroes—Martin Luther King, Junior. King said that he longed for the day when his children would be judged by the content of their character and not by the colour of their skin. It is my dream that the same happens in this country—that people would be employed and allocated positions of responsibility and power based on their character and capability to do the job, rather than because they are black.

Reference

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About the Author



Anthony Dillon, originally from Brisbane Queensland, currently lives in Sydney. With an Indigenous father whose family come from the Gold Coast, and his mother, whose family originate from England, he is very proud of his cultural mix. For more than ten years he worked for Queensland Health, where he gained an insight into the major issues facing Indigenous people. Holding a Master's degree in adult education, his passion is teaching people, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, about those issues that are common to both races. He is currently completing an honours degree in psychology.