

Coming Ready or Not!
Aborigines are heading for town

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The Bennelong Society

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Coming Ready or Not!: *Aborigines are heading for town*

Rev. Steve Etherington PhD

IF YOU READ NO FURTHER THAN THIS...

It's about jobs: not overcrowding.
It's about jobs; not about culture or ethnicity or missions, or history.
It's about jobs: not about grog and drug abuse.
It's about jobs: it's not even about child abuse.
All these are merely symptoms of long-term unemployment.
It's about jobs.

MY MOTIVE

I want Aboriginal children now living in the remote communities to grow up with equal access to the full range of jobs done by other Australians.

Remote community kids can't do this: they're not safe enough, they have almost no models of successful adulthood to copy and the schooling available is limited by the lack of demands made on it by the parents, by underspending on the part of State and Territory governments and by sheer isolation and the small populations in the communities.

The Federal Government's intervention responded to the issue of child abuse. My argument is that child abuse is simply the most distressing of the symptoms produced in any human group by very long-term unemployment of a whole group. This is not about race, or ethnicity, and it is especially not about culture. It is about what happens to people—any

people—without any hope of work. What we see now in remote Aboriginal Australia is what we see in third-generation unemployed and unemployable families anywhere. The only reason the link between child abuse and long-term unemployment has not been obvious to us in Aboriginal contexts, is the way we have chosen to view Aboriginal people as somehow different from the bulk of the human race.

ARGUMENT IN A NUTSHELL

The best way to end child abuse is to provide real jobs to adults, to create a working lifestyle. This would also begin to rectify the other self-destructive impacts of underemployment and unemployment such as substance abuse, uncontrolled gambling and domestic violence.

The twin obstacles to providing employment access for remote Aboriginal people are:

- the costs of creating workplaces and their prerequisite infrastructure in remote communities; and
- the need to prepare people to enter the workforce.

The alternative to spending on infrastructure and set-up costs in the bush is to create jobs for these people in urban centres.

The equally expensive and perhaps more difficult task of preparing people for workplace entry is almost impossible to achieve in remote centres for the three reasons:

- the absence of an existing visible and exemplar workforce motivating and supporting school learning;
- the dysfunction of home lives and collapse of traditional disciplines; and
- the small scale of social groups which makes provision of mainstream educational access impossible.

The inevitable conclusion is that people will need to move to where education and employment can be created and provided.

Aboriginal people will suffer even more if movement to these centres is compelled. Instead, the growing desire on the part of many motivated remote area people to move into urban centres should be supported and informed. Many of those anxious to move from remote communities at present are motivated by inaccurate views on how mainstream lifestyle works. Some are refugees from horrors we are beginning to acknowledge; some are drawn to the attractions of the shops, gambling and access to the range of Western material goods they have seen from a distance. And there are certainly some who want their children to be schooled in functional 'real' schools and to move into jobs.

Resistance to the idea that Aboriginal people may wish to live like mainstream Australians, especially that they may want or need jobs, is deep seated, and reflects the perhaps unconscious spiritual needs of the mainstream.

If we accept the need to do anything at all about the abused children, we must accept the need to bring remote area people into the workforce.

Governments must summon the courage and the very serious financial commitment to take

some practical steps. If taken, they will begin the process of setting free subsequent generations of Aboriginal children from lives of fear and self-destructive behaviours. Any other form of intervention is simply going to fail by applying a cheap solution to what has now become our most expensive national problem.

I am going to try now to look at why, as a nation, we have let this go on (because we will need to continue to address these ideas in our own national thinking), and then suggest some ways to provide workplace access and engagement for people in remote Aboriginal places.

MY PERSPECTIVE

I need to talk a little about my perspective, and the interesting place Oenpelli is for this discussion [Steve Etherington spent almost 30 years at Oenpelli]. The Kunwinjku people did not have children taken away as stolen generations; they still speak their own language, and by and large live on their own land. Yet the medical, educational and social dysfunction usually attributed where these factors have operated, still goes on and steadily worsens. This suggests a cause other than substance abuse or severing contact with the land or culture. Could it really be something as simple as unemployment? My research kept bumping into evidence that jobs and working were more important to Kunwinjku people than I had thought they should be.

I went through several stages of my relationship with Kunwinjku people. For the first five years, living as part of their family life in Oenpelli and at the outstations, learning the language until it seemed as natural to me as English, taking part in the ceremonial life, the hunting, the stories, I enjoyed feeling a bit like I'd discovered a real life Narnia. But then I watched while modernity arrived with the mining and the

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alcohol, which created a suddenly jobless and instantly 'poor' economy. My research depended on interviews with what we usually call 'elders', in their own language, and free to address their own viewpoints. All of them looked back with great nostalgia to the era of full employment under the mission. All articulated despair about their loss of moral direction, of political control, of their own domestic education, of any sense of self-worth.

As both teacher and minister I have talked with hundreds of children over the years. I know why they don't go to school. I know what happens to them in school hours where outsiders don't see. I know why the men are so dangerous to the kids, and so self-destructive. I'll put it simply: if adults cannot work, if every real job is held by white people, if their lifelong role is to play occasional comic or decorative cultural parts in someone else's culture, if every penny comes as a favour from the latest white to control a project, if they know deep in their bones they will never have their own independent income, will never be able to be part of the economy whose crumbs they pick up—then men stop distinguishing themselves from children. They may even be in competition with them. The abusers' psychological needs may drive them to use children simply to relieve some of the pain of a totally 'failed self' image.

I take it as universally agreed that long-term unemployment leads to self-destructive personal behaviours. When a whole social group are long-term unemployed, and come to regard themselves as unemployable, the psychological impact on the whole group is magnified among individuals, who are even less likely to see past the evidence of failure all around them. And when the world tells them that their distinctive group self is somehow racially inherited, and

therefore unchangeable and unchallengeable—there is nowhere to go outside the small band, all suffering together. In fact, a perverse pride may develop that insists on personal failure as a sort of badge of membership. When those small, inwardly focused communities of despair are identified as 'different' by an apparently all powerful master race, who manage and provide for every key need—food, schooling, medical—and who control the laws and the money, then adults simply sit down and play cards with the children: children, who are suddenly on the same level - dependents all, beggars all. The self-replication of unemployment is unavoidable; school is not the means to any useful end.

It is suddenly easy to justify absenteeism in racial terms. And sometimes, even worse, this entails the deep belief that 'we can't do schooling'. 'Only white people have jobs; only white people need school. Only white people take sick kids to the clinic. Only white people report child abuse or domestic violence. They're them and we're us'. And so on and so forth, on into early graves. 'Blackfellas die young.'

CRYING FOR WORK

Even more distressing for me, are the times when Kunwinjku men and women have articulated all of this horror movie script, revealing that they see it all for the terminal downhill trip it is. Kunwinjku men are no more likely to weep than any other men. But I've seen them cry over jobs. Two terrible examples:

MM, a man I have hunted with, taught with in a bilingual programme, and from whom I learnt a good deal of Kunwinjku lore and law, went on to become the first Kunwinjku Local Government council president. This meant for

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him better pay, but no office, no phone, no car, no authority. He wept as he told me one day that he was going to drink himself to death, because he realized his role was completely decorative.

AN, another man I knew well, also sobbed telling me how he had tried for weeks to get a job in the council office, finding more white people moving in to more and more complicated jobs. He had become unemployable.

From another angle: RG, one of the young women on my parish council, worked at the school and held on to her assistant job for grim death. She told me her motivation was to allow her to take her children out of the horrors of her home life at least from time to time, into Darwin, or to visit distant relatives where her daughter was less under threat. She needed the job to maintain her second-hand vehicle—it was her escape pod.

This atmosphere has developed in a short lifetime. When we arrived in Oenpelli in 1977, the mission era was just running down, but nearly every adult was in paid work. When we moved to Darwin, in 2006, less than five per cent of Kunwinjku adults had real jobs, and only one of these people was actually in charge of any process—he identified people who could then sign for registered letters, and collected peoples' signatures whenever required.

I hope I don't need to argue for the attractiveness of employability. What I find I do need to argue about sometimes in Australia, is that the damage of long-term unemployment happens to Aboriginal people as well as any other people.

POLICY OPTIONS

In a moment, I'll talk about the reasons for this general failure to think of Aboriginal people as

being enough like us to believe unemployment is hurting them. But first, assuming we want them to move from their present almost complete unemployability, into personal income-producing jobs, what are the broad policy options?

Obviously and preferably, we could create jobs in the communities. There are already some approaches that work, but will employ only a very few people—environmental work including land and sea management and more recently carbon management, cultural

employment and so forth. There has been a general failure by Aborigines to enter the mining, medical, educational and administrative jobs usually held open in remote communities, reflecting, I believe, the sheer difficulty of being a lone wage earner is an unemployed extended family.

So what are realistic options?

What about applying some start-up funds to enterprises that could be located in remote places, and fund training staff within them? As an example (seriously considered once for Oenpelli), why not build a

printery to handle low urgency, high volume jobs? It would provide training in all aspects of the trade including computer use and management skills. But this is where we begin to run into the raw numbers: the cost of providing staff housing; the cost of upgrading the already overloaded power station; the cost of building a bridge to allow road access during the wet season. Add to these the difficulty of getting the local community to agree while the white man who owns the local airline and has a seat on the local government council is watching this decision-making process.

With the printery you have still only employed a tiny fraction of the burgeoning population. And

Another man I knew well, also sobbed telling me how he had tried for weeks to get a job in the council office, finding more white people moving in to more and more complicated jobs. He had become unemployable.

I know some Kunwinjku aspire to other kinds of jobs, as they surely have the right.

Another alternative is to hope that the larger of the remote communities will draw in people from the very obviously marginal outstations, and assist them to create some kinds of cottage industries. Let's take this medievalism seriously for a minute and let's assume no one aspires to anything beyond 'cottage' employment. We still face questions like: how do cottage industries sell their products? To whom? Do we expect to see stalls littering the side of the main road near Oenpelli where colourful natives barter with tourists for odds and ends? We still need the road/bridge/access of some kind during the wet season. We need to ride out the time between tourists. We need to provide full education to children who will aspire, along with their parents, to move beyond this disguised underemployment in what is the richest, highest qualified economy in the world—unless you're black.

The alternative is to count the costs, financial and human, for encouraging people to migrate towards work in the towns—something lots of human groups have done and keep doing. First, the human costs. I predict a generation at least of terrible pain and turmoil. I will make some suggestions in a moment about how people, who already seem to want to, can be helped to make this move. In fact, a lot of young women, in particular those from remote communities, try to 'reconstruct' themselves in government housing, often trying very hard but without success to engage their children in 'real' schools, only to fail and lose the house through relatives moving in whose motives are quite different. I'll talk about how to address that one. The point is, over the years, especially after widespread access to TV, people hunger for the mainstream experience. Sometimes they

are unaware of the costs and complexities, but they seem willing to learn if they can only get a toehold. When they do manage to score some payment for some cultural performance back in the remote community, they want to go and spend that money on mainstream items. An increasing number of remote area people keep coming to the towns, to Darwin and Palmerston for example, to shop, for entertainment, for medical visits—and increasingly they want to stay where there is some hope of protection and comfort. Almost always their trips home after this are of necessity not of choice.

An increasing number of remote area people keep coming to the towns, to Darwin and Palmerston for example, to shop, for entertainment, for medical visits—and increasingly they want to stay where there is some hope of protection and comfort.

I assert that they are right now at the point where, if governments fund the right kinds of accommodation, and if governments have the courage to get the kids into schools and keep them there, and if there they bite the bullet and give sufficient funding to create bridging employment or mentored employment on the scale we will need, we will see this massive shift towards mainstream economic access happening. Even if it takes twenty years by the time the first mainstream schooled ex-remote kids come through into the workforce, and into the position where they can exercise real choice as to their cultural observances and their

personal lifestyles—just like us.

That's my first main point. I'm going to tell the government what practical things to do to harness this movement, and to allow remote kids equality of opportunity with other Australian children.

THE BARS OF THEIR CAGE

But first, whenever I think this through, I come up against opposition. I don't know whether others have thought about this, but I have wondered

what mysterious force makes otherwise liberal and intelligent people reject with some hostility the idea that Aboriginal children might want to aspire to live like mainstream children.

Since this insistence that remote Aboriginal people should continue to live in their remote Aboriginal way is such a powerful force in making policy, I want to tease it out. We need to understand what motivates this recalcitrance. Is it a sort of benevolent racism that won't allow Aboriginal people to be like us because it's not good for them? Or is it ourselves we seek to protect when we protect them?

I have often wondered about the astonishing level of passion when people defend what they imagine is the remote Aboriginal lifestyle. I'm encouraged recently by the fact that these proponents can be genuinely shocked when they are forced to look at the reality of contemporary Aboriginal life.

I'm going to suggest this shock is not due to a challenge to simple ignorance. It confronts a kind of culpable naivety, and this usually unexamined thinking is very deeply part of our national mind.

Please bear with me while I relate this act of national self-analysis. I don't actually like what I'm going to state now, but I think we need to be aware of our usually unexamined motivations.

Why We want Aboriginal Australians to Live the Way We Imagine!

- We're materialists, bowed down with the weight of possessions and the scramble for cash. We like to imagine we can live vicariously, free of all this, without a worry in the world, in our Aboriginal domain, where poverty can be felt from a distance and

celebrated as a kind of relief from economic drudgery and social complexity.

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- We're scientific, educated, savvy, hard-headed and mature. We no longer need our ancestors' beliefs—as a society, we've outgrown our own religious childhood. But we still have this spiritual hunger. The apparently unproblematic spirituality of the Aborigines, in whatever form we imagine it to be, is a comfort and makes no demands. The Muslims have come to us and reminded us that spirituality is not simply a vague preference for the numinous: it is hard-edged and motivating and expected to shape all life—in contrast, we are attracted to the Aborigi-

nal beliefs which, from our urban perspective, seem so much less threatening. So we continue to insist that Aboriginal people maintain some sort of obligation-free, spiritual rootedness for us. We can easily dismiss Aboriginal Christianity as some sort of accommodation they've all made to the missionaries.

- Then there's this lingering sense of guilt. Can we sort of repay the Aborigines? Make it up to them by failing to hold them accountable for anything at all? Treating them like the spoilt children of a hard father? Letting them live without the disciplines we teach ourselves?
- Or, perhaps we see ourselves as trapped in the suburbs, spending hours every week commuting, so it's a comfort to live vicariously the unrushed, unscheduled life of the Aborigines. Oh for their lifestyle without the pressures of the workplace! (And they don't need the money like us, do they?)
- Fighting to mark out and buy our own little patches of ground, we need to live vicariously with the Aborigines—whose ownership is

unbounded, free and automatic. Ain't it?

- And we are uneasy, too, about owning this little patch of land—wouldn't it be fun to imagine the land somehow owned us, like the Aborigines are owned by their land? (Without asking whether actual flesh and blood people might be de-humanized by this sort of assumption, we insist on 'locating' them as part of the landscape, whereas we *own* our landscape.)
- The rapidity of change in our own culture makes us willing to assume a profound continuity in the remote communities. Our most recent mental picture has to be preserved as though the remote communities and outstations have a longer history than the white government budgets that created them all; as though these remote communities were not themselves a massive imposed re-construction of their culture to meet the demands of our previous generations.
- Our feeling of individual disempowerment in the face of large government structures is soothed when we contemplate our attractively simple model of consensus politics in the Aboriginal tribes: people represented by all-wise elders who percolate up somehow from the extended families. There is ample evidence that we unconsciously insist on this model: for example, among all the voices calling for more consultation with Aboriginal people, it is always suggested that the 'elders' are their voice. Yet every indigenous person in Australia lives in a local government area with an elected council. Why are there no demands that the Federal Government consult with those local government

bodies? Perhaps this sounds too much like ourselves and reminds us too sharply of our own feelings of political smallness. We prefer celebrity Aboriginal people rather than genuinely elected ones.

- And of course, there is global warming! Our mutual blaming and the collective guilt we teach even our primary children about the environment needs the spiritual ointment of our constructed vicarious Aboriginal lifestyle, where their relationship with the environment is wise, unproblematic and exemplary. It never occurs to us that a small group without organized industry or any of its benefits makes a relatively small footprint in the desert. Better they live simply and without jobs, because we're not about to slow down or shut down our own industries.

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In summary, if the remote Aboriginal people didn't exist, or didn't live the way we need them to, it would have been necessary to invent them, and to invent the way in which they live.

In protecting them and projecting them, we are trying to live by proxy through them. No wonder they are our mandatory and protected national icons.

I will admit here that there are some lovely people, many of them my colleagues, some of them urban Aboriginal people, who genuinely believe

that things are not as bad as reported, and there is a slow, consultative way of helping. Those people may not be guilty of any of this culpable sentimentality. However, I will note with respect that none of them has lived in the remote communities in the last couple of decades.

I don't think we can combat this. I think I still have those sorts of motives: after all, feeling

sorry for people feels good. But the simple way to correct it is to return to the core question that should direct all our policy right now:

Does the policy make it more likely that this remote Aboriginal child will grow up with the same access to schooling and the same range of lifestyles and employment as every other Australian child?

Conclusion to the mea culpas

Our generally unconscious picture of Aboriginal life is of course tragically false. But two things are brutally real:

- all these profound spiritual needs are quite real; and
- our desire to live our spiritual lives through Aboriginal people has acted as a cage for them, our own needs as bars keeping them 'out there'.

The sentimentalists are always dangerous for Aboriginal people. If the Aborigines break their hearts, they may just need to be disposed of like an old toy, or ignored, like an ungrateful beggar. Move on to refugees, or distant causes generally, or wars, or the environment yet again.

But I don't think sentiment is what is driving the change in policy we are seeing now. It's money. It seems to me that the bean counters have become the real driving force for intervention. The support across governments for the Federal moves in the NT may be mostly about financial realities.

Australia will not be able to afford the luxury of insisting that one ethnic group live out our spiritual fantasies for us. Certainly it's killing

them. But the issue for many people will be that it's costing us more than it's worth. So be it. If I need to surf that fiscal motivation to liberate some kids, then I will.

THIS IS WHAT TO DO

I make the following recommendations with some trepidation. I admit firstly to defensiveness about my motives. I am not advocating an Australian version of some long forced march to another reservation. Based on not wanting to hurt people I love, but not wanting to see them going on being hurt either. Based also on their many so far failed but persistent attempts to move and live in the mainstream.

About Education and Schooling

Enforce school attendance no matter what, and in an organized well-funded way, regardless of objections emerging from successful white people who attended school because they were made to. Train and employ specialist police as truancy officers.

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One of the Kunwinjku women working at Oenpelli school lamented to me that she had been placed as a token local on the school's attendance committee. They had been forbidden to suggest any strategy involving coercion or penalties. Instead, as she describes it, they were to revisit all the failed soft options: school buses, parents' days, attendance prizes. She asked: 'Why can't we prosecute parents?' This woman is an indigenous parent and teacher. Replace the ineffective indigenous liaison officers

with indigenous attendance officers. Make it hurt to miss school.

Introduce a school age children's ID card that provides photo ID and a school enrolment

number only. Empower uniformed police or truancy officers to see that card and remove any child they find out of school to the appropriate school. Fund staff to follow up liaison as needed. If this sounds draconian, the alternative we have now sounds like a society that doesn't give a damn about kids.

In the next few years it will be essential to provide some urgent support to schools in remote areas, all of which have acquiesced to lower attendance demand models. Enforce attendance, and enforce State and Territory government spending on attendance strategies and school infrastructure to cater for full attendance.

Enforce! Enforce! Enforce! Yes, we are doing someone's parenting for them, but so what? We do it if the real parents won't. Governments and nations are always *in loco parentis*.

Insist on courses as early in primary school as possible that orient children to working lives, to self-esteem and to maximizing educational opportunities as pathways to income. People need to see themselves as potentially employable against all the evidence around them and even in their own families. Self-management and self-esteem, planning a pathway of study and life engagement are so prevalent in employed groups that we forget they are all learned attitudes and behaviours.

Put money into boarding schools and urban school needs. Fund Boarding Schools, including creating new ones as needed, and tighten the conditions to keep kids in school—for example, disallowing so-called cultural absences. Penalize schools that allow excess legalized absences and reward schools with high attendance. There is already clear evidence that in many remote

communities parents are willing to send children away to boarding school. Reward the parents who do this, and provide for younger entry to boarding school. The children who fail in the first years of high school are almost always kids without experience of regular attendance in primary years. It is too late to learn school habits at puberty.

Provide massive new VET funding to school-based pre-employment courses, including support funds for firms employing indigenous apprentices, but especially programmes that support their employment by personal mentoring. This is becoming a growth industry but will become less urgent in another generation. In the meantime, fund contracted support services where groups undertake to get indigenous young men and women into

work on time and keep them there until they self-start. There are already good programmes used by urban indigenous people to help move teens into workplace training.

About Accommodation—the crunch issue in NT

Provide massive funds for three tiers of housing in urban centres (I'm modelling from Darwin):

- Long-term training hostels for those in work, especially young men and women apprentices or trainees. These would be well supervised hostels with round-the-clock management and discipline. Make living there a contracted relationship between employer, trainee and the government.
- Government-supplied rental housing, which needs massive funding to allow for:
 - † some gated communities, with their own security fence and guards, requiring

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non-residents to be there with consent, including funding for community-specific child minding centres;

† staffing to allow management of those in separate housing, as is the current model, and including a system of identity cards for residents and patrols to remove and, if needs be, charge any resident caught in a house without a resident's permit. If the leaseholder's complaint is needed, the usual intimidatory tactics will lead to them losing the house—the common pattern now.

- A support programme for home buyers. As long as Australian law allows race as a category, we should use it to provide government underwriting of loans to employed indigenous people.

About Ghettos

One response I've had when talking about housing is the comment 'We don't want to see ghettos'. No we don't. And the trouble with our present system is, the ghettos are there but we can't see them. No more than we can see the kids out of school or the other problems. Even urban ghettos will still be better than the out-of-sight, out-of-mind ghettos we have in the remote communities.

Don't Remove the Paternalistic Protections Overnight

Set up a Body to Supervise the Lease of Land

It is obviously dangerous to allow remote community Aboriginal people to negotiate leases with the sharks who are already circling. The Federal Government should be obliged to set up a land office with the power to review (and overturn where necessary) leases negotiated without informed consent or with other forms of duress. It would also protect the rights of those who don't want to lease their land. The time limits imposed on leases can be negotiated.

The lease system is in fact deeply problematic at the level of individual choice. Without a formal

federal authority, even the individual claim on his or her clan land is likely to be lost. Establish a system for deciding who owns what, or we simply concede some members of the Aboriginal gerontocracy will lease other people's land to the white real estate sharks.

The best solution is probably to have the Federal Government lease the lot and then let it to other people in a transparent way.

The permit system has simply not worked to achieve any of its objectives. The right to safeguard access to one's home and land now needs to be the legal basis for those protections. Just like us!

There is no hope at all of restricting pornography or alcohol in any human group. Do we need to learn this lesson again? At Oenpelli the carefully controlled liquor outlet, coupled with dry community legislation has simply put the power to control the majority of men, the drinkers, into the hands of the white club management. And it doesn't stop illegal imports, drug use, child neglect, child abuse or despair.

The Funding

In the longer term, plan to divert money from any programmes that presently support outstations or remote community infrastructure and use it to fund urban Aboriginal housing and school attendance.

Weigh up the cost in non-human terms of allowing the present disaster to continue. I want to save kids, but if you don't think *they* are worth it, do the maths: in ten years' time, communities like Oenpelli will double their populations. There will be two thousand people who are not only unable to produce anything of economic benefit; they will be increasingly ill and violent. Housing, schooling, medical and policing costs will increase geometrically. Mark Latham said this in another way: the best social security is a job. And it could be the cheapest social security for the nation.

CODA

This is not about a forced long march. This is not about stealing wages, land or resources. This is not even about assimilation. It is unashamedly about integration: integration into a set of rights and capacities and opportunities. Integration is the form of assimilation where the individual is given the same range of choices and the same freedom to make those choices as every other citizen.

And don't back off. It is hard to stick to your guns when people say you're some sort of monster. Okay, maybe they are simply shooting the messenger, but it still hurts. And to some extent, even talking about this makes me feel like a monster. Shouldn't I just tiptoe away? But I have to ask myself: What will this kind of workplace engagement do to their mental health? Well, what is happening to their mental health now? That's a good argument, but I don't argue much any more. Think of the kids. I think of the kids whose funerals I've had to conduct. But I mostly think of living kids.

When I see my granddaughter, nearing the end of primary school, taking part in Eisteddfod, playing organized sport, reading and writing competently, with growing self confidence in grooming and clothing herself, with a range of domestic skills and a relaxed confidence about life, I thank God that she has good parents, parents who have jobs, grandparents who have jobs, uncles, aunties, extended families who have jobs.

But then I visit one of our 'dry' communities, with its own language, on its own land, as I

did last week, and I see girls the same age as my granddaughter, ten or eleven, with dirty matted hair, sitting with drunken adults in card games hoping to cadge food money, or furtively darting out of a house where the porn videos can be heard, shamefaced, frightened. When I talk to them and find them already hardened and wary about life, when I informally assess them, sparing them any humiliation, and confirm that their literacy skills, their numeracy and their general knowledge are below mainstream infants school standard, when I watch their terribly limited capacity to attempt new relationships, I find it hard to thank God. I find it appallingly easy to run away mentally, to start hiding my own seared emotions behind the smorgasbord of glib racisms—they have their own profound knowledge; their culture is so rich and so old; they seem such happy children—aren't they beautiful! How cruel to separate them from their culture! 'It is best to leave them with their own families.' God forgive me. God forgive my cowardice. I should have picked them up and run. We should pick them and run now. Worse. Worse. When I asked the kids, as I often have, what they want to do when they grow up, they all say they want to work—teachers, doctors, in a shop, mechanics...

I COME BACK TO THIS

I want Aboriginal children to grow up with equal access to the full range of jobs done by other Australians. They will be hurt much less by the massive and disruptive processes of achieving this, than by leaving them in the economic and spiritual poverty of their present lives.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Following an early career as a primary school teacher in country NSW, Steve has worked in Oenpelli, a top end Aboriginal community most of his adult life, with his wife and three children. For 28 years his work involved living with Kunwinjku people, in a Kunwinjku lifestyle and speaking the Kunwinjku language. His paid jobs over this time included roles as teacher-linguist (setting up the Kunwinjku language bilingual programme), training teachers at Oenpelli as the full time on site lecturer from Bachelor teachers' college (now BIITE), twenty years as a CMS missionary Bible translator/Linguist and more recently as an Anglican minister in the Diocese of the Northern Territory. In 2006 he moved into Darwin to work at Nungalinga college which trains Aboriginal people towards Church ministry and ordination. In

2006 his doctoral thesis on Aboriginal pedagogy was awarded at Charles Darwin University. He is the joint recipient of the 2007 Doctoral Thesis Award from the Australian Association for Research in Education.