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I have to confess I was both honoured and nervous when Paul O'Callaghan asked me to deliver the dinner speech tonight. Honoured because I was so aware of the important work that is done by the member organisations of the group and nervous because I knew that some people in the room would know as much about my subject matter as I did.

So, after a discussion with Paul, I have tried to tailor my remarks to a concise overview of some of the issues in the Indigenous portfolio and the role that the non-government sector can play in addressing the underlying issues of Indigenous disadvantage in Australia in the hope that it will resonate with those of you familiar with working in that area and perhaps inspire those of you who don't to think about the contribution you may be able to make.

We often hear Australia referred to as "the Lucky Country" but Indigenous people do not share in this bounty. History and fact give testament to the lack of opportunity afforded to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people through poorer health standards, lower levels of educations, lower levels of employment and poorer housing. We have an average life expectancy 17 years less than their fellow Australians. It is well documented that in some areas Aboriginal communities experience health levels that are equivalent to those in the third world. Yet, concern is often expressed by those working on Indigenous disadvantage in this country that it is harder to get Australians interested in donating to improve the conditions of Aboriginal people than it is to get them to donate to people in the third world.

The question that many Australians ask honestly and genuinely is: with so much good will and so many resources spent on Indigenous affairs, why is there still such a disparity between the life chances of black and white Australians? This is a reasonable question to ask given that the federal government alone can point to over \$3.5 billion that it spends annually on the Indigenous affairs portfolio.

There are three quick answers to that question that highlight the underlying problems to approaches to dealing with Indigenous disadvantage in Australia.

1. Cost shifting between state/territory and federal governments

When media attention focused on the issue of the high incidence of sexual assault in some Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory in early 2006, the response of the Federal Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Mal Brough, and the Chief Minister for the Northern Territory, Clare Martin, was a textbook example of this process whereby the two levels of government try to shift the blame and shift the cost.

The first response from Federal Minister was to blame the Northern Territory Government for not putting police into communities where violence was endemic. And, while he was absolutely correct in asserting that any community of 2500 people with no police force would have law and order issues, there are many other factors that contribute to the cyclical poverty and despondency within some Aboriginal communities that create, over decades, the environment in which the social fabric unravels and violence, sexual abuse, substance abuse and other anti-social behaviour is rife. To this, the Chief Minister replied that the problem was a result of the failure to provide adequate housing – and health and education services – and she pointed the finger firmly and squarely at the Federal government.

Governments of all levels continue to under-fund Aboriginal community on basic needs. Health services, educational facilities and adequate housing services have never been supported in these communities and instead of co-ordinating their efforts, governments engage in the slanging matches that occurred between the Federal Minister and the Chief Minister about who was at fault. The federal government continues to assert that it is a law and order issue; Martin says it was a housing issue and points to other areas of government neglect such as health.

And both are right; both levels of government have been negligent. This attempt to shift the blame is referred to as “cost-shifting” and it is a feature of many issues within the Aboriginal Affairs portfolio where financial responsibility is shared between state/territory governments and the federal government. The attempt to avoid responsibility (or share responsibility) means that Aboriginal people are the losers.

2. Inefficient use of government money

The first is that the money spent on the Indigenous affairs portfolio is not spent in a way that focuses on development, building human capital or addressing underlying issues.

Access Economics estimated at the time of the last election that the basic health needs on Indigenous Australians are under-funded by \$450 million and in a year of record budget surpluses, this pressing need was not addressed. Data from the COAG trial in Wadeye highlighted that less is spent on the education of an Aboriginal student than a non-Aboriginal student (47c for every \$1). When a shared responsibility agreement was signed in that area and the children all turned up to school, there was not enough classrooms or teachers highlighting the under-investment in infrastructure. Housing needs in the Northern Territory alone are estimated to be under-funded by \$2billion.

One of the first responses of the Federal government in light of the spotlight being turned on issues of Aboriginal violence was to say “we are not going to throw any more money at the problem.”

Underspensing on essential matters – and it is hard to think of anything more essential than basic health services – lack of investment in infrastructure and human capital are far from conducive to breaking cycles of desperate poverty. In fact, it is a breeding ground for it. And against this backdrop, ad hoc measures like shared responsibility agreements and home ownership schemes are not going to solve institutionalised and systemic failings.

There is another factor that emerges in response to the situation of violence in Aboriginal communities that explains a key barrier in achieving social justice for Aboriginal people and that is the prevalence of racism in Australian society. Studies increasingly show that Australians are resistant to the notion that they are a racist society and resent the use of the term “racism” to describe their attitudes and actions to any sector of the community, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders.

But it explains why it is that the government can loosely and misleadingly assert that “they are not going to throw any more money at the situation” many Australians agree. The notion that “too much money” has been spent on Aboriginal people and communities feeds into the prevalent negative stereotype that Aboriginal people are dole-bludgers, shiftless, indolent and lazy.

The prevalence of this stereotype means that governments are not scrutinised and questioned to the extent that they should be. When the government says it has increased funding on Indigenous issues and points to almost \$3 billion, it does not elaborate that the figure includes the large amount of money that is spent on running the National Native Title Tribunal and the parts of the Attorney-General’s Department that is spent defending and defeating native title claims. It includes spending such as \$100 million on the new Shared Responsibility Agreements of which \$75 million went on administration and only \$25 million made its way into Aboriginal communities. It includes amounts set aside for home ownership schemes that no-one has taken up.

The easy acceptance of Aboriginal people as welfare dependant and as getting too many handouts has crippled the capacity of Australians – including the media – to question blind and misleading assertions made by government that mask their neglect of Indigenous communities and hidden their ill-conceived and ineffective policies.

Decisions are made that value the pursuit of other programs over initiatives that look at a developmental approach or seek to address underlying causes of disadvantage and dysfunction. And the reason those priorities are so poorly funded is that decision-making about the allocation of resources in the Aboriginal affairs portfolio is driven by an ideological agenda.

Ideological approaches to Indigenous issues

The ideologies that have driven Indigenous policy in the Howard era – and which Rudd has given no indication of moving away from – and the ideologies of assimilation, mainstreaming and mutual obligation. There are also strong ideological beliefs that the real Aborigines live in the north and that remote Aboriginal communities are not economically viable and should not be supported.

The ideologies of assimilation and mainstreaming have re-entered the approach to Aboriginal issues at the national level. The pursuit of these ideologies has seen the agenda to dismantle the national representative structure that was part of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) and it has seen the major programs for Aboriginal people shifted from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Services into mainstream departments. No doubt these moves will appease the constituency who has always resented the attention to Aboriginal issues and has interpreted the need for targeted programs as “welfare bludging” or “getting something for nothing”.

But the real danger with the move is that the ideologies of “mainstreaming” and “assimilation” have failed in the past to shift the poorer health, lower levels of education, higher levels of unemployment and poorer standard of housing that Aboriginal communities have experienced. These ideologies have not offered ways to protect Aboriginal cultural heritage, interest in land, language. And they have not offered a way in which Aboriginal people can play the central role in making decisions that will impact on their families and communities.

In the past, the failure of mainstreaming has stemmed from its inability to target specific issues that arise in Aboriginal communities in relation to health, education, housing and employment. This is because mainstream services need to develop specific mechanisms and strategies for Aboriginal clients and they have to do this with stretched resources. In addition to these challenges, Aboriginal people claim that they are often subjected to racism within those mainstream services.

Fundamentally, there is no evidence to show that the ideologies of mainstreaming and assimilation that failed so dismally in the past will work now. This shift in the delivery of Aboriginal policy and programs does not offer any new insights or any promise of more effective policy-making and program delivery.

The approach to Indigenous policy should not be ideologically led. It must be directed by research-based policy so we are not the perpetual guinea pigs for government. The focus on the ideological has blinded us to what we can learn from the many successes that go unnoticed. In the face of government neglect and failed policy, many Indigenous communities continue to flourish, creating successful and viable institutions and continuing to keep their cultural values strong and their children safe. We could learn much from what it is that successful organisations do to ensure their effectiveness and viability in this climate and use that information as a basis for developing similar conditions in the communities that fail.

And we can look at research in Australia and North America that has detailed that better socio-economic outcomes are achieved when Indigenous people are involved in the setting of priorities

within their community, the development of policy, the delivery of services and the implementation of programs.

Overcoming Indigenous disadvantage means governments at all levels have to take responsibility for the provision of three things as a matter of right:

- adequate standards of essential services
- adequate provision of infrastructure, and
- investment in human capital.

This is a simple formula and it has been shown in numerous reports into issues such as the high levels of sexual assault within Indigenous communities that dysfunction in Indigenous communities is the result of decades of neglect where underfunding on essential services and infrastructure, and no investment in human capital, compound to create dysfunction in some communities as the social fabric unravels.

A key aspect of this agenda is the development of social capital within Aboriginal communities, creating leadership, skills and the quality of human relationships and exchanges.¹ We know that social capital can be built up when people solve shared problems and satisfy economic, spiritual, recreational and other needs to levels that change over time. It is undermined when people are dehumanised, deprived of the basic and necessary levels of housing, education and health and when politics is used as a divisive instrument.²

Sustainability in Aboriginal communities requires leadership. And quality leadership is defined by their integrity, commitment and vision. They need to be able to handle the privilege of being selected, to realise that a leadership position is not about being elevated, it is about assuming the burden of responsibility. And this is not a technical skill; it also includes an element of intuition – of reading the environment and the people you are leading and, of being able to take the people with you because they trust you and you understand what they need and how they think. You don't crush opposition, you meet it head on. You do not silence and ridicule those who disagree with you, you seek to engage them.

The fact is that all the research tells us that to effectively deal with issues in the Aboriginal community it is essential that Aboriginal people are involved with the development of policies and programs that are going to be implemented. The top-down, paternalistic imposition of half-baked policy ideas is a recipe for failure.

But while the Howard government had offered no effective way forward – and Rudd has offered no alternative – there is an important role for the non-government sector in working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities that suffer from disadvantage.

There are a few reasons as to why the non-government sector may hesitate to invest in alleviating poverty in Indigenous communities and why they have not played a more prevalent role in achieving social justice for Aboriginal people as they might have.

- There is a disproportionate fixation with problems in the remote and northern parts of Australia, perhaps because of the common perception that this is where the “real” Aborigines live. The largest Aboriginal population lives in Mt Druitt in the outer-west of Sydney. Aboriginal people there face the same socio-economic barriers as Aboriginal people in other parts of the country but these days, with so much of the federal dollar being shifted from urban to remote areas, they have fewer programs to deal with those issues. There is much work that can be

¹ Alan Fowler. *The Virtuous Spiral: A Guide to Sustainability for NGOs in International Development*. London: Earthscan, 2000.

² Alan Fowler. *Striking a Balance: A Guide to Enhancing the Effectiveness of Non-Governmental Organisations in International Development*. London: Earthscan, 1997. At p.107.

done in a community like Mt Druitt. And it is easier to find solutions to these problems in urban areas than always trying to solve the hardest problems first.

- Non-government bodies often express concern that, although they would like to do something, they are not quite sure what that might be. They have no mechanism by which to consult with Aboriginal people and no network to build a relationship with Aboriginal communities. It is often a good idea to partner with an Aboriginal organisation or use an Indigenous consultant with a good reputation who can give this advice, this support, this expertise and an entrée into the Indigenous community – and give a heads up what the community politics are.
- There is too little evaluation of what works and what doesn't in relation to effective Aboriginal programs and policies so it is important to have a process to facilitate a research-based approach to an issue. Having said that, we have learnt as much from our failures as we have from our successes in dealing with the complex issues that face Indigenous people, their families and their communities. What is also needed is a long-term commitment to this area as there are very few instances where quick wins have occurred.

The problems facing Indigenous communities are so vast and complicated that there is certainly room for a strong and varied presence from the non-government sector. Their sustained interest and work can avoid the problem of policy and program changing with every change of government. That is, a sustained commitment for the long-term to ensure the fostering and success of community projects is easier to achieve through non-government sources.

The key role the non-government sector can play in this regards is to add value and fill the gaps. It is a sector in the unique position of being able to respond to the initiative of others because they are not burdened with the expectation and responsibility of that governments are so do not need to respond to and be governed by public opinion polls.

Investment and expertise will not work if the money injected in to communities is guided by what outsiders think are the priorities and solutions. In order to avoid this benevolent paternalism, it is important that a relationship be developed either with Indigenous communities and leaders and/or Indigenous organizations. These relationships need to be guided by Indigenous aspirations and the essential oil in this relationship is trust. Trust cannot be imposed, it cannot be demanded it can only be earned.

NGO's are better placed to develop the relationship of trust needed to work in Aboriginal communities than bureaucrats are. And they are perhaps in a better position to develop trust that Indigenous people can decide the priorities and solutions.

The relationship an NGO develops with Indigenous organisations is a relationship that needs to be both practical and realistic. There needs to be an understanding that, because many of these initiatives will be new and innovative, there may be failures. And as disappointing as that may be for those who have invested time and money, this has to be acknowledged as a natural part of finding the best and most workable solutions to issues where government policy has failed for decades and sometimes centuries.

In light of this, it becomes all the more important to keep pushing the successes and applying the same principles that guide commercial decisions. It means not expecting rewards for short term investments and understanding that to achieve results there needs to be a continual and trusting and committed relationship that understands that listening, flexibility and innovation as a basis for programs and support will only bring solutions in the long term. And these will be long term solutions that government is ill equipped to deliver.

But in the long run, they offer the best hope for achieving social justice for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.