

Neglect, not injustice is the enemy

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Acting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission chairman Lionel Quartermaine has called for a smart card that links welfare funds to the purchase of clothing, food and education as a way of addressing child deprivation. He has been attacked by indigenous leaders for advocating a return to the era of "protection" and discrimination.

These critics, however, seem to think it's fine to dismiss Quartermaine's as yet undeveloped ideas with civil rights arguments.

They are wrong. While there are problems with his proposal, the importance of Quartermaine's suggestion is not in its details. The importance is that he puts the rights of the children first - at the expense of the rights of adults, if necessary.

Children comprise a very large proportion of Australia's indigenous population. Without adequate nutrition, peace, sleep and education, they will be marginalised for the rest of their lives. Indigenous culture won't survive, and Australia will have an intractable social problem for the rest of this century.

Quartermaine observes correctly that the problem is that though assistance is given for certain purposes, often adults treat their entire income as discretionary instead of taking responsibility for their families and communities.

Mutual obligation, respect, defence of close kin and individual autonomy are strong features in traditional and semi-traditional culture. Abusive and irresponsible people have turned these aspects of indigenous culture to their advantage, but escape their obligations. It is common that grandparents, not parents, take all responsibility for the children.

The highest priority is the development of new policies that represent a clear break with present policies, but which still can be implemented quickly.

In Cape York Peninsula, we have already achieved encouraging results with family income management trials. They are based on voluntary participation and our government partner, the commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services, and our private sector partner, Westpac, have entered into tremendous partnerships with us. With the assistance of competent people, communities have achieved savings quotients as high as 20 per cent of their income.

Contrary to the belief that "poor people can't save", indigenous people can use the meagre benefits they receive to build for the future. But a financial and social infrastructure needs to be in place in the communities, and income management needs to take place simultaneously with other initiatives such as alcohol management.

The involvement of local indigenous welfare groups - such as the Community Justice Groups in Queensland - is necessary. The social situation in many communities has deteriorated, but there is still a large group of responsible elders and women who want things to change. Indigenous community groups that represent the interests of the majority should receive the necessary support to prepare their communities for organised attacks on misspending and irresponsibility, and should be empowered to make decisions. This is a matter of self-determination.

Child neglect, as Quartermaine recognises, is widespread in non-indigenous communities. And indeed it may turn out to be necessary to pass legislation that makes welfare benefits alienable, for the sake of non-indigenous as well as indigenous children. Such reforms might take the form of compulsory income management orders or smart cards as proposed by Quartermaine. If such reforms are enforced, there must be strong indigenous community welfare groups that are able to deal with the individual cases. It cannot be done by government agencies acting on their own judgment.

There is a common principle uniting many of the indigenous policy suggestions that have won widespread public approval recently. Indigenous people will fight for acknowledgement of past injustices, and we will fight for recognition of our long denied rights. But even if our history ultimately explains the social disintegration, it's pointless to claim that the present crisis is only a symptom of dispossession and marginalisation.

Indigenous people need to restore social order, even if that means we have to confront abusive and irresponsible people in our communities. We have to do this now, regardless of the level of support we receive from governments and the wider community, and regardless of concerns about stereotyping and blaming the victim.

Removal of children is one of indigenous people's main accusations against non-indigenous Australia. Today, disproportionate numbers of indigenous children are still being removed. The main reason is neglect. Quartermaine's idea has the great merit of practically confronting the problem of neglect that is occasioned by the misspending of income support payments. It is the details of any mechanism that need to be worked out. The objective is correct.