

When welfare is a curse

By Noel Pearson
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Centrelink is a major contributor to the drug problems of Aborigines.

Bob Collins, the co-ordinator appointed by the Rann Labor Government in South Australia to tackle the problems in the Anangu Pitjantjatjara Lands, has cut to the chase: automatic and unconditional welfare payments must end to encourage young indigenous people to seek work.

Rather than just alluding to problems of "welfare dependency", "boredom", "hopelessness" and so on, Collins says unconditional welfare payments are a problem "that's got to be addressed at the Commonwealth level".

That is, we can't just all agree that passive welfare is a problem, we have to do something about it.

John Howard and Mark Latham: you know Collins is right. Your challenge is to decide how this piece of public policy is to be structured.

We can keep talking about welfare reform, but the time for reform that will turn around the social disaster in remote Aboriginal communities is now.

We will not get on top of the serious problem of substance abuse without confronting the issue of unconditional payments to able-bodied people.

The measures taken by Peter Beattie in Queensland to limit the supply of alcohol are a necessary part of the solution. Beattie has had the courage to tackle the hard question that is within the state's policy domain.

But if we don't tackle unconditional money supply, our progress will stall.

Money to purchase grog and drugs, and idle time to use them, are the key factors that must be confronted, in addition to supply. This is the Commonwealth's policy domain.

A host of counter-arguments will be immediately raised against Collins's bottom line, such as the lack of jobs in remote areas.

Yet in most remote communities there are scores of jobs manned by non-indigenous people, many of them not requiring particular expertise or expertise that could not be readily attained by local people.

How is it that we are unable to convert the more than \$2 billion allocated by the Commonwealth to indigenous programmes into jobs performed by indigenous people?

The answer is that there is no firm bottom line in the welfare system that young indigenous people enter as they approach adulthood. As long as that system does not say "there is no alternative to work, education and training", all the youth programs and interventions will come to very little.

There needs to be both help and hassle.

At present the welfare system provides unconditional income support to young people once they leave school. It immediately provides an easy option to young people: you don't have to undertake further education or gain skills or work, because you will receive an income regardless.

This path of least resistance becomes the road well-travelled. Young people have free money to purchase grog, cannabis and other substances. They soon become addicted. Thereafter the welfare system pays for their addiction.

A major contributor to the weekly drug habits of young Australians is Centrelink.

This may be an outrageous thing to say, but it is the truth.

If we want to ameliorate the tragic situation that Bob Collins is talking about in remote indigenous communities, then we have to end unconditional welfare payments.

The Federal Government has talked the talk on welfare reform, and a program was devised around "Community Participation Agreements", but nothing has emerged after four years. I do not know of one CPA being implemented in any community across the country.

The Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services has given us strong support on the help side of income-support reform. It has worked with us, in partnership with the Westpac Bank, to implement Family Income Management facilities for families to budget their income.

But another reform on the hassle side of income support, which we in Cape York Peninsula have attempted to pursue, has gone nowhere. Too many of the "mutual obligation" and "shared responsibility" policies skirt around the real needs, and the mainstream bureaucracies end up putting off reform for another day.

Bob Collins's suggestions appear self-evident against the background of social collapse in central Australia. Unfortunately, indigenous welfare reform is hostage to the lack of progress in mainstream welfare reform.

But if Australia is truly empathetic to the waste and suffering of young indigenous people, and of those who love them, then we must take Bob Collins's plain advice as the starting point.

Noel Pearson is director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, a joint initiative of Griffith University and regional organisations in Cape York Peninsula.