

## Ignorance rules as debate rages on black homelands

*The story of remote communities is too complex for slogans*

THE fracas over Tony Abbott's use of "lifestyle choice" in describing the condition of indigenous people in remote communities is taking on a life of its own. The outrage of the green-Left and their digital media urgers — labelling the Prime Minister racist — finds its counterpoint in the blind defence of Mr Abbott's sloppy choice of words. Voluble commentators on the Right can allow their ignorance of indigenous issues to curdle into a dyspeptic view of indigenous disadvantage itself. These issues are complex and require historical knowledge, first-hand experience and good faith to achieve progress.

It may be too much to wish for in a political-media culture of non-stop pontification, payback and ideological advocacy, but we call on participants to improve their understanding of how indigenous people live. It is a cruel twist for Mr Abbott; he has stumbled in a policy and cultural realm he knows intimately. Many will forever mark him down despite his sincerity in seeking to improve the lives of indigenous people, not through words but direct actions. These good works have fundamentally shaped his views and created deep personal bonds. Yet the irony is Labor's Kevin Rudd stands taller in some minds on the strength of a lone gesture: his February 2008 apology to the Stolen Generations. This view, of course, excuses Mr Rudd's one-time bureaucratic role in Queensland to stymie native title claims.

As a newspaper, we support the right of people to determine how they will live; we believe in individual responsibility, not state paternalism. Still, there is room for nuance and complexity in these principles. There are about 20,000 people living in remote indigenous communities, a very small number in comparison with the 600,000-plus Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders. A sense of proportion is utterly lost on those who view people living in remote settlements — most adults likely on the dole — as a blight on the welfare system. There is a slur cast, with no evidence at all, that remote communities expect rolled-gold health, education and housing facilities. They do not. In fact, most of the rhetoric about these issues comes from white politicians and bureaucrats.

A sense of scale and reality likewise eludes state administrations feeling the pinch, who see such communities as a cost burden and dysfunctional. West Australian Premier Colin Barnett's cash grab in seeking to close up to 150 tiny communities is a diabolical ploy for the Abbott government — it gets all the

odium for WA's policy and none of the benefits from a much-needed decentralisation. Strong words, in ignorance, are spoken about life in these communities. The substance abuse, crime, aimlessness and family violence prevalent in town camps and on the outskirts of cities are less chronic or absent in remote areas. Health standards are often superior; there are innumerable personal benefits from staying connected to the homeland.

Our front-page story yesterday featured Emma Gundurrui, who lives on an island off the north coast of Arnhem Land, a haven from the social ills of bustling Darwin. It's no accident Mr Abbott took his cabinet to self-governing Arnhem Land last September, where health outcomes are good for indigenous people. As we argued here yesterday, indigenous people were displaced, with disastrous consequences, after the equal pay cases in the 1960s. Black stockmen and their families were cast off from pastoral lands; moving to cities and towns, they lost contact with family, kids didn't fit in at schools and breadwinners were unemployable. A similar fate awaits those now living in remote WA communities. Plainly, many elders have never known another life and are not equipped socially or economically to cope in larger places. That is not their fault; relocation is not an option. They are also compelled to stay because of cultural obligations and to maintain continuity for native title claims.

Across time, we want to see young indigenous people taking advantage of all the possibilities available in modern Australia and, if it is their wish, to maintain their traditional roles and duties. This was an important point the Prime Minister was trying to make. *The Australian* has supported the Australian Indigenous Education Foundation to raise funds to get indigenous kids into schools; the results are encouraging, offering life chances to students their parents could only dream of.

And that's the point. We want to see kids from remote areas succeed in a way their kin never could. Cape York-based health expert Ernest Hunter does see a long-term case for some remote communities to be abandoned. "But if that is to happen," Dr Hunter writes in *The Australian* today, "it should be because we have the policies right and have created the circumstances for remote Aboriginal residents to redefine their needs."

It is clear those conditions have yet to be met and this truth, not moral posturing or name-calling, should be at the heart of an informed debate.