



ABORIGINAL 'INDUSTRY' MUDDIES THE WATERS

*People's lives
must matter more
than culture*

ANTHONY DILLON

IN the past week, two high-achieving Aboriginal men have written for this newspaper on Aboriginal issues. Both Warren Mundine and Ben Wyatt talk about the need for diversionary programs that can be used to prevent juvenile offenders from going to jail, and hopefully into jobs and education or training.

Mundine argued: "Legal aid is vital, but it deals with the problem at the tail end." I believe Mundine is correct and that too much of the energy invested in Aboriginal affairs focuses at the tail end.

This is fine, but I think we should be focusing on preventing Aboriginal people of all ages from engaging in antisocial behaviour and crime in the first place, something on which I think both Mundine and Wyatt would agree.

I want to focus on an approach that deals with the underlying causes and contributors to the high incarceration rates. Such an approach will be useful to dealing with many other problems that plague Aboriginal people, such as unemployment and homelessness. As an analogy to the problems facing Aborigines, imagine a river that is dirty and polluted.

You can try all sorts of clean-up strategies downstream, but you will be forever performing the same strategies unless you identify the source of the problem upstream and clean that up.

There are many problems upstream, but clearly the major one is a factory upstream that is dumping waste into the river. Common sense dictates that efforts should be directed upstream if it is clean

water downstream that is desired. I would argue that the "Aboriginal industry" is the factory. By Aboriginal industry, I mean the collective mindset produced by those promoting the view that Aboriginal people are totally distinct from the general population, requiring separate services and separate solutions to the problems they face.

Some of these people work in positions specific to addressing Aboriginal issues while others are contributors, in one form or another, whether they be commentators, journalists or activists.

Obviously, to clean up the water downstream — which in this analogy means addressing poverty, crime, unemployment and sickness — means closing down the Aboriginal industry or at least giving it a major overhaul, which will mean removing the incomes and pedestals of many.

This is not likely to happen any time soon. The words of American writer and activist Upton Sinclair resonate here: "It's difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends upon his not understanding it."

I am not suggesting that all players in the Aboriginal industry are less than helpful, as I have met some amazing people (both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal) who work tirelessly to close the gap.

Speaking of the gap, while there may be some evidence of it closing slowly, such as the health and wellbeing of Aboriginal people as a whole catching up with the health and wellbeing of non-Aboriginal people, I suspect there is a broadening of the internal gap.

That is, among those who identify as Aboriginal, much of the improvement has been with those who were already relatively advantaged. For many of those Aboriginal people living in extreme poverty, the gains have not been as substantial as for their more advantaged cousins.

This problem of an internalised gap is recognised by Tony Abbott. Nicolas Rothwell reported in this newspaper that there was a need to highlight the distinction between remote and urban Aboriginal societies, their circumstances and their needs. It is in remote communities that there is the most need, and it is in these communities that the actions and ideologies of the Aboriginal industry impact the most.

While some consideration of Aboriginality should be given, the focus should be on need, and those in most need are more likely to live in remote areas, where they lack access to opportunities and services that most of us take for granted.

A hallmark ideology of the Aboriginal industry is its insistence on blaming colonisation and "white" governments for the problems facing Aboriginal people today. We are sure to be reminded about this by the Aboriginal industry as January 26 approaches.

Demonising government with words such as "genocide", "assimilation" and the like simply makes it less likely that those Aboriginal people most in need will embrace any opportunity or service provided by the government.

Another pillar of the industry is

its strident insistence that culture, often a romanticised version bearing little resemblance to authentic Aboriginal culture, be given absolute priority. Matters of culture are fine, but not at the expense of child safety and family wellbeing. The hearts of thousands of Australians break whenever we read how a child's safety has been compromised, sometimes with fatal outcomes — all because placing a child with Aboriginal carers was considered more important than safety. We read daily of fears of another "Stolen Generation".

When considering how best to close the gap on unemployment, ill-health and dysfunction, it is surely education and jobs that must be priorities, not culture. Individuals can decide for themselves what role culture plays in their lives, and I am all for people embracing and expressing their culture in a way that suits them, but this must not be focused on at the expense of jobs and education.

Let's focus upstream so that we get better results downstream. If this means overhauling the Aboriginal industry, or at the very least giving it a major shake-up and wake-up, so be it. Surely what really matters is the lives and the potential of Aboriginal people.

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