

“The Substance of Australia’s First Men”

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*A Presentation to the
National Mental Health and Homelessness Advisory Committee of St. Vincent de Paul Society
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Introduction

In July 2005 the ABC TV program “*Message Stick*” aired a story titled “*Longgrassers*”.¹ It led with the following introduction:-

“Darwin has one of the largest populations of homeless Aboriginal people in the country. They're called the “*Longgrassers*”, people who sleep under the stars either by choice or circumstance. To the authorities in Darwin they're a nuisance and a growing problem ...”.

Later, it copied materials from a news broadcast featuring Lord Mayor Peter Adamson:-

“NEWSREADER: Darwin City Council claims the itinerant problem in Darwin is the worst it's ever been. Darwin's Lord Mayor Peter Adamson is calling for a big stick approach. More tougher policing, even for minor offences. ...Violence against itinerants is not a new problem.

LORD MAYOR PETER ADAMSON: People who are out there, causing the havoc on our streets. Who are defecating in our car parks and our shopping centres deserve to be monstered and stomped on”.

Then, on ABC “*Lateline*” in May 2006, the impact of violence at Wadeye was not only creating headlines, but also further potential headaches for the Darwin City Council:-

“JANE COWEN: There are fresh fears the crisis at Wadeye will spill over into Darwin as people flee, creating a refugee scenario last seen in 1999 when 1,500 East Timorese sheltered in a tent city after they fled militia violence.

* The contents of this paper relate to the writer’s personal experience at the township of Wadeye (Port Keats), with acknowledgement to various discussions held with Mr Tobias Nganbe, Co-principal, OLSH Thamarrurr Catholic School. Any conclusions reached should not be taken as applying to the Indigenous community as a whole, but instead used as a guide to question a particular experience and/or history.

¹ ABC TV, “*Message Stick*”, 1 July 2005, presented by Rachel Maza. See <http://www.abc.net.au/message/tv/ms/s1412406.htm>;

PETER ADAMSON, DARWIN LORD MAYOR: It's potentially feasible but it's only a bandaid solution. We do need to look at the overall issues.

TONI VINE BROMLEY, NORTHERN TERRITORY SHELTER: We can't condone people sleeping under tarps and on swags".²

At that point in time, some 300 people were mooted to be part of an evacuation from Wadeye to Darwin. The Lord Mayor, while correct in indicating that the overall issues needed to be looked at, was later heard to comment that there would be nowhere for the people to stay³ and he would be very concerned about itinerants should such a thing eventuate⁴. This was confirmed by the statement from Northern Territory Shelter that, while there was no public or private shelter available, it would also not be good enough to have people sleeping under tarps and on swags – the same people who were currently sleeping with either very little or nothing out in the bush. Days later, Darwin confidently announced it was ready to handle an evacuation from East Timor of up to 2,500 people.

In all of this, the focus has been on the behaviour and impact of Indigenous men. They have been variously described as paedophiles, substance abusers, the perpetrators of violence and sexual abuse, and villains who hide behind the veil of customary law. At the present time in Australia, there could be no title more difficult to bear than that of: "Indigenous man". The response to date has been to concentrate on matters which are visually graphic – violence, abuse, itinerancy and self-destructive behaviour. These are matters which I see as "effects". Rather than concentrate on the impact of Indigenous men with respect to such matters, I turn instead to the more complex yet silent arena of "cause" by raising the following question:-

"Since the dominant culture imposed itself on Australia's Indigenous society, what has been the impact ON Indigenous man?"

Family Formation

Allow me to share a story with you. When I was a child, I remember time and again watching an old man by the name of Wundjar walking past our high-set house, east of the main street in Port Keats, now known more commonly as Wadeye.⁵ In his hands he held his hunting spears and woomera; by his side were a couple of eager dogs. A small distance behind him were his wife and other female relatives. Tailing them were, naturally, the children of the family. In all, it amounted to what could be described as an "arrow" formation.

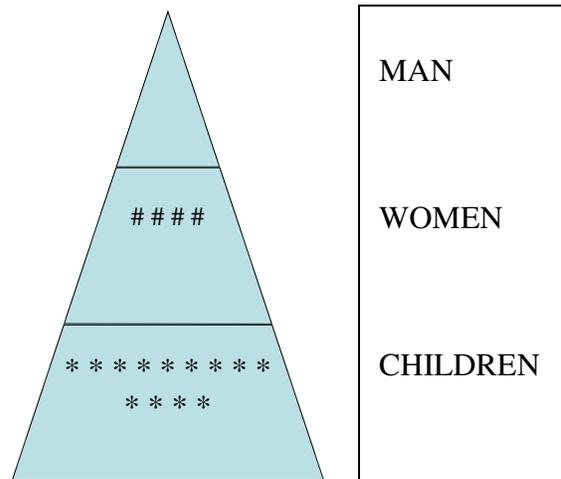
² ABC TV, "Lateline", 24 May 2006, presented by Tony Jones. See <http://www.abc.net.au/lateline/content/2006/s1645753.htm>;

³ ABC Radio News, 23 May 2006;

⁴ ABC Radio News, 30 May 2006;

⁵ All further references shall be to the current term of Wadeye;

Visually, it appeared like this:-



Why was such a formation adopted? Firstly, as an Aboriginal man Wundjar was ensuring that he as head of the family took the lead. Secondly, as this was a hunting and gathering expedition, being at the head enabled Wundjar to react quickly, either to potential danger e.g. a snake, or the opportunity for game e.g. a wallaby. This could be done without the concern of spearing a wife or child who was in front of, instead of behind, his line of sight. Travelling behind in their position of safety, the women were free to gather smaller game, vegetable foodstuffs and other useful plant materials. Children assisted, learning by imitation. This formation was typical of an earlier time, a time before contact had been fully experienced between the dominant and Aboriginal cultures. Once contact was made, however, impact was felt in a variety of ways.

Upon their arrival at Wadeye, the Catholic missionaries had “not systematically tried to persuade the Aborigines to abandon their cultural traditions, customs and mores, unless these, from the missionaries’ point of view, [were] in direct opposition to Christianity”.⁶ However, due to the circumstances of Aboriginal people right across Australia, it was thought their culture was soon to be extinct due to the massive confrontation with the dominant culture. Missionaries considered this to be unavoidable.

As a result, and working on the theory that children could be influenced most easily, the mission, in 1947, “established a dormitory where boys from the age of 7-8 years live permanently, under supervision from the missionaries. In the same way the young girls some years earlier were collected at a convent where they also reside permanently. At the same time these children go to school until they are 14 years old. ... Among the consequences of the separation of the children from the other members of the tribe is the almost complete discontinuation of the boys’ initiation ceremonies. The gradual admission into the secret life is now replaced by a systematic education in Christianity”.⁷

⁶ Falkenberg, J., “*Kin and Totem – Group Relations of Australian Aborigines in the Port Keats District*”, July 1959, Oslo University Press, p. 19;

⁷ Ibid;

In doing such things, often in collaboration with the people, the missionaries were carrying out two important elements of their work: firstly, helping the Aboriginal people to gain understanding of a new way of life because the loss of theirs was ‘unavoidable’; secondly, assimilating the Aboriginal people through evangelization.⁸

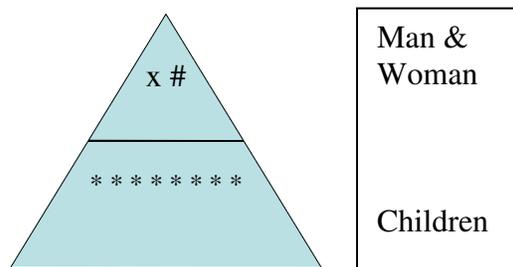
It was seen by observers that, on the whole, “the missionaries remained neutral in regard to the process of cultural change among the Aborigines”.⁹ This is an interesting statement when coupled with the observation that they were also “purposefully fighting the initiation ceremonies, ... circumcision is performed ... at the mission hospital [and they] disapprove of polygamy ...”.¹⁰

Polygamy to Monogamy

Why polygamy in Indigenous society? Simply, as a hunter-gatherer society, women were most valuable due to their expertise and great knowledge in the collection of smaller game, vegetable foodstuffs and plant materials. This was particularly important should man be unable to kill larger game, thereby relying totally on the gathering skills of women for sustenance. With more women, a more plentiful supply of food should (in theory at least) be possible. However, polygamy was contrary to Catholic beliefs and to be prevented in the lives of Aboriginal people.

At Wadeye this worked to a certain extent. Some men gave up their wives while others did not. Missionaries also re-allocated women to men who did not have wives in order to build up numbers of tribes they considered to be dying out. The effect this had on family groups was that their base-level food supply mechanism had been removed – as they could no longer gather enough food for the entire family, they were now reliant on rations being provided by the newcomers in order to survive.

The following diagram demonstrates:-



The classic “arrow” family formation, excepting those such as Wundjar’s, was now gone as a full-time reality.

⁸ See Hearn, P. (MSC), “A Theology of Mission: An Analysis of the Theology of Mission of the Catholic Diocese of Darwin in its Ministry to Aboriginal People during the Episcopacy of JOHN O’LOUGHLIN MSC (1949-85)”, Nelen Yubu Missiological Unit, 2003;

⁹ Falkenberg, J., op cit, p. 20;

¹⁰ Ibid;

As life under the mission system became more entrenched, work for rations, then money, became the reality. Fr. Leary, stationed at Wadeye for some 11 years between 1958 and 1980, had this to say regarding the manner in which people worked:-

“Groups worked a very large and productive vegetable garden to supply their own food. They used a rotating system whereby some were out bush living and hunting, others in the garden and on other work locations. Stock men brought in killers to supply fresh meat for the community. One man ... ran the saw mill. A group did the logging from the “Timber Camp”.

Later, when money became available, [a local man, leading] a group, ran the brick making factory. Another group of men with the help of one qualified white carpenter built houses. Even today, men will proudly point out houses they built.

I have vivid memories of working alongside sixty men as we built the new airstrip. It was all done by hand, with pick and shovel and axe – clearing, digging out roots and stones, filling and levelling. It was done with zest and a lot of joking and laughing.

As more goods came into the place any boats and barges were unloaded by men without mechanical help. In those days there was just a handful of [non-local] staff. The bulk of the work was done by the aboriginal people. Money was also at a minimum ... We depended mainly on the generosity of good people in the south”.¹¹

Fr. Leary also made critically important observations regarding the coming of money:-

“The advent of money, of course, had made a difference. I do believe I have witnessed a life-style perverted almost overnight with the introduction of a cash economy. When you have a supermarket and money to hand there is no need to hunt, no need to teach the children to hunt. The skills that made these people the most independent of peoples are not needed in the new situation. It was such a quick passage from independence to dependency.

I remember well our bush carpenter ... and his reaction on receiving his first ‘Training Allowance’ package. [He] was very perceptive and a thinker. He called a public meeting. Waving his wage packet he announced ...in [Murrinh-patha]:-

“This is a new way to live. It is not my old way. My old way is living in the bush, teaching my children how to live there. That is me. This new way is not me. What if I leave my old way and join their new way? I will end up [‘makardu’]”.¹²

‘Makardu’ in Murrinh-patha means, quite literally, a non-person; a nobody.

¹¹ Leary, J (Fr)., “*Port Keats – An Historical Perspective*”, undated notes provided to *NT News* regarding historical background to a special publication on 29 October 1997;

¹² Ibid;

As Fr Leary saw, the introduction of money hastened the passage from independence to dependency. Now families were dependent on another culture for sustenance for the first time in their history, firstly through rations, then by way of the local store. Two positive points remained:- money was not plentiful, and it had to be earned through work.

Then 1967 arrived. By way of referendum that year, the exclusion contained in s. 51(26) of the Constitution that the Federal Government could not legislate for people of the Aboriginal race was removed. This had two impacts:-

- i) Aboriginals were able to receive Social Services from the Commonwealth; and
- ii) the Commonwealth had power to make laws for Aboriginal people as they were considered to be 'citizens of Australia' for the first time.

The coming of citizenship and equality brought with it another change besides that of social services that would, on face value, be thought of as positive – equal pay. The on-ground reality, however, was devastating. Cattle stations and other industry usually paid their Aboriginal workforce by way of rations and little to no pay. Equal pay meant that their value diminished in comparison to the engagement of non-Aboriginal employees. The great majority were let go, returning to communities that were not created to cater for great numbers of people living in the immediate vicinity.

By way of example, Catholic policies of the time determined that Wadeye was “intended to serve as a centre for the spiritual, educational and medical services for the aborigines in the area. ... most families were to continue in employment, or to find employment, if the populations began to build again, on farms or cattle stations in the region ...”.¹³

People returned to find a lack of employment opportunity and, slowly but surely, a deficiency in the appropriate provision of adequate services and infrastructure by governments. They had been educated to work in the new world, but now there were not enough jobs. Through the work schemes of the time, “young men and women, educated to some degree, rode an endless, aimless treadmill, their main occupation gathering up their own garbage. Training Allowance had become no more than a dole out. Removed still further from an active life of hunting, dependence was never so abject”.¹⁴

An alternative emerged in the 1970s – unemployment benefits. The introduction of social services after 1967 meant that a new economy then began to emerge – welfare.¹⁵

¹³ Hearn, P. (MSC), op cit, p. 103, 105;

¹⁴ Fr. Leary to Bishop O’Loughlin, 16 April, 1972, DCA B141 (referred to in Hearn, P. (MSC), op cit, at p. 145);

¹⁵ See also McCormack, D., “*Remote Economic Rationalism: A Contradiction in Terms*”, at <http://www.marluk.com.au/articles/remote-economic-rationalism.pdf>;

Receiving Welfare

Time has shown that the impact of the welfare economy has been extremely severe. Aboriginal people moved from a position of complete self-sufficiency and independence to one of learned helplessness or planned dependency.¹⁶ That is:–

- i) from hunting and gathering to receiving rations for work – this meant that man, in particular, was not required to hunt for his family’s food, but instead to work and be provided with food;
- ii) then from receiving rations to buying food at the store with money earned from work. As hunting was no longer required and food simply purchased, man disengaged further as collection was woman’s work.

With welfare, they moved from buying food at the store with money earned from work to buying food at the store with money received from welfare – money for nothing.

This money came, and still comes, in a variety of forms including pensions, family allowances and unemployment benefits. As this ‘cash economy’ developed and people had greater access to income in the forms noted, “the nexus between meaningful work and sustenance became more and more difficult to uphold. With these developments, especially unemployment benefits, the phenomenon of dependency became an enduring issue in the absence of meaningful work”.¹⁷

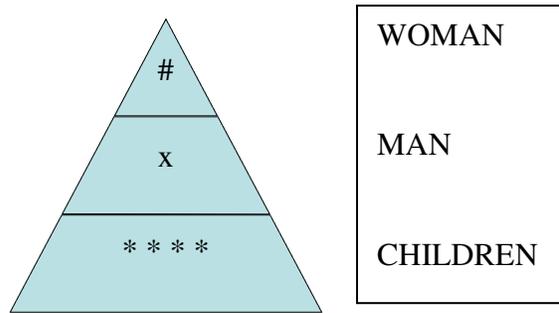
As a result of such immense change, women in some respects have been the winners. From the outset, missionaries saw it as their role to liberate women from the clutches of Aboriginal society and its menfolk. Their status was raised, giving them a position which was previously unknown. They were protected, nurtured, employed and, later, paid. Then they began to receive social services and, as time has gone on, the social services have increased – for example, I refer to the so-called ‘baby-bonus’ introduced in 2005.

What this has meant is that instead of man being the primary provider, this role has been overtaken by woman. This is also evidenced in today’s world by the movement of people upon marriage. In the past, when marriage took place, the young girl / woman moved to the clan land of the man. In contrast, I have seen on numerous occasions, particularly where marriages have taken place between couples from distant parts of the Territory, the male partner moving to the country of the female. Why? Generally speaking, she is the one capable of receiving – not providing, mind you – the greatest resource base required for provision of sustenance. Man is not required to provide; his wife receives the bulk of all payments and the provision of food requires but a short walk to the local store.

¹⁶ See W.E.H. Stanner, ‘*Durmugam: A Nangiomeri (1959)*’, in “*White Man Got No Dreaming*”, Essays 1938-1973, Australian National University Press, 1979, p.74 - 75;

¹⁷ Hearn, P. (MSC), op cit, p. 148;

This is depicted as:-



Clearly, roles within society have changed. For one there is gain; for the other, loss. Naturally, the impact of loss does not occur without consequences and the surfacing, possibly over extended periods of time, of extreme emotions – grief immediately associated with that loss; anger; low self-esteem and self-confidence; lack of motivation; a sense of helplessness; and, most importantly, ever-diminishing hope in the future.

In my experience, these are thoughts and emotions that now span generations.

Fr. Wilson MSC, in his 1983 paper, “*Observed Values in Aboriginal Society*”, saw the impact of changes in this fashion:-

“I believe I can safely propose that the social role most damaged in the contact situation is that of the adult men. Traditionally the society’s legislative function was mainly their preserve through the performance of the ceremonies that constitute the ‘sacred law’. Their economic role consisted in the hunting of larger game, and in the prosecution of exchange. By revenge parties, formal duels and pitched battles they dealt with major disputes.

Their religio-legislative function has been made difficult, though not impossible, through the requirements of the wage-earning system [and] all its ramifications. The Christian faith has directly confronted their basic world view ...

The traditional economic role of hunting for larger game has been reduced to a weekend leisure pursuit. The exchange system could still be operating ...

The role of enforcing justice has long been taken over by institutions like courts, police, corrective services, whose principal officials are in fact exclusively white. ...

In brief, the male social role has been so damaged by the contact situation that there is little wonder that Aboriginal men are so caught up in social ‘anomie’ (alcohol, unemployment, gaol) or that they are seeking salvation in the self-chosen ‘apartheid’ of homeland movements and restricted-entry communities. To state their expectations more positively it may be said that Aboriginal men are expecting, by pursuance of the goals of autonomy and peace, to find a way of

living with dignity within a monied economy and a wider society whose intervention is required as due aid while resented simultaneously as intrusion”.¹⁸

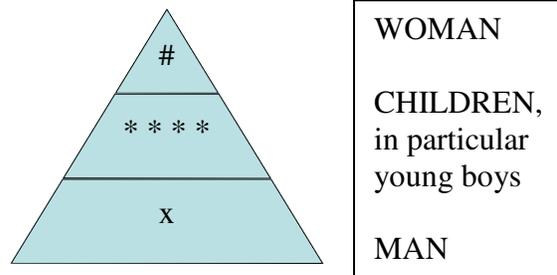
The social ‘anomie’ referred to – that state of alienation experienced as a result of the absence of social norms or values – has expressed itself most visibly to the public eye through the abuse of substances in their varying forms. It is my view that men have been the most impacted by this attempt to forget current circumstances, to erase from the mind one’s position as “kardu makardu” – a non-person, a nobody.

The Abuse of Substances

Through their misuse and outright abuse of substances ranging from alcohol and marijuana to methylated spirits and petrol, in general Aboriginal men have ensured that in today’s world, and particularly in the Northern Territory, they are Public Enemy No.1.

Hand in hand with the loss of their own self-respect is the loss of respect from others. Why would a young boy, about to enter adulthood himself, give respect to those whom he sees dashing off to the bright lights at the slightest opportunity in pursuit of the almighty green or red can; why would that young boy have respect for those whom he sees lying drunk on the side of the road, day after day; why would he respect someone who does not have pride in himself any more?

This has become even more damaging because, as he sees his father, his grandfather, his elder, lying on the roadside, in the gutter, abrogating his responsibilities day after day, the young boy in time walks by – and takes his place. This can be seen as follows:-



Now we see what many communities and towns are experiencing – the rise of the child.

¹⁸ Wilson MSC, MJ, “*Observed Values in Aboriginal Society*”, *Nelen Yubu*, No. 15, 1983, pp.32-33;

The Rise of the Child

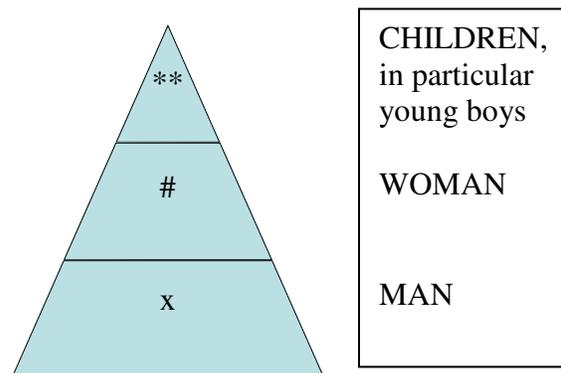
Xavier Desmarchelier, a knowledgeable community development worker, conducted interviews with the people at Wadeye over some years as they worked together to find a way forward following the administrative and financial collapse in 1994 of the former local government council. From these interviews, one statement from a male clan leader has particularly held in my mind:-

“We know we do not control our community. Our young boys who have lost all sense of meaning in their lives rule our community through fear. We sometimes live in fear of our own children”.¹⁹

What this statement reveals is that the tables have turned 180 degrees – it is the young boys who now rule, not the old men. It is those with the least experience, the least knowledge and the least fear who rule; those with the most experience and the greatest knowledge are the most fearful – and are therefore ruled. Critically, it must be realised that this is the position in which many men find themselves, not just women.

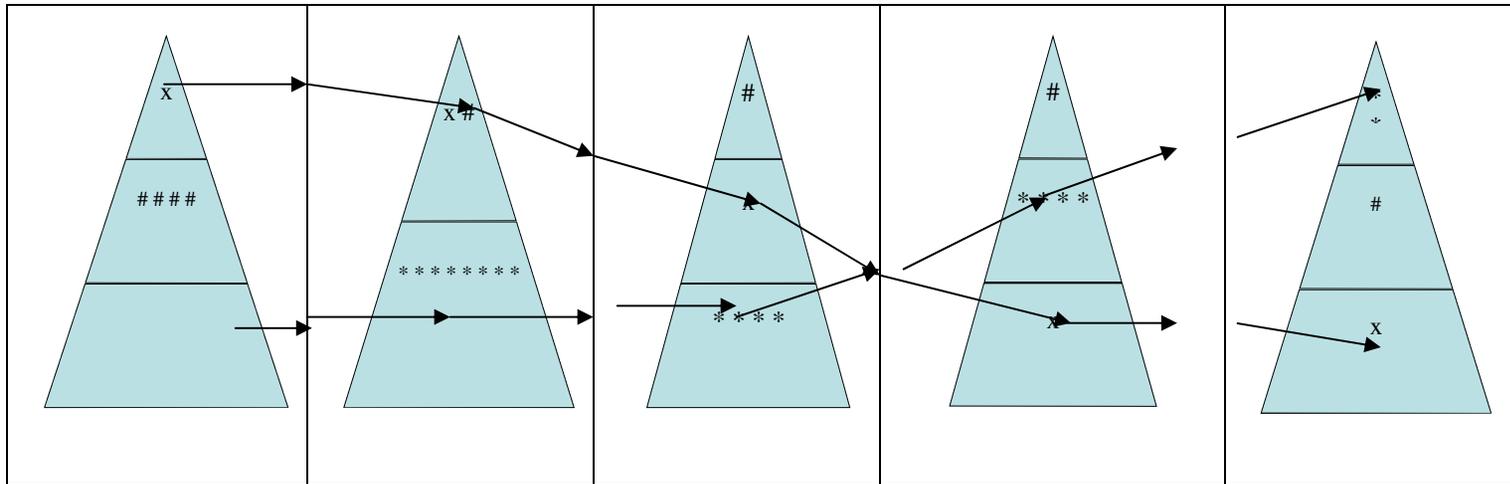
The substance of choice among the young cohort at Wadeye is that of marijuana. The only thing which stands in the way of achieving its relaxing high is cash. Only cash stands in the way because the fathers, the grandfathers, the elders cannot and do not stand in the way, for they are afraid. Groups of young boys and men who do not have respect anymore are not to be crossed. The target then is women – those who can provide the resource base required for provision of sustenance – in this case, satisfying the marijuana urge. The women can be a mother, aunt or grandmother. Cash will be collected – one way or the other. Marijuana is bought, consumed and then, once the effect wears off and hunger sets in, the youth concerned heads home to consume what little food may have been purchased by his mother from the money he left behind.

Our classic “arrow” family formation has been rotated, and with it, an entire society:-



¹⁹ Desmarchelier, X., “A Historical and Cultural Overview to the Re-Emergence of Thamarrurr, A Traditional Form of Governance for the People of the Wadeye Region”, Background Presentation prepared by the people of Wadeye on behalf of Thamarrurr Incorporated, 8th December 2000;

Collectively, the diagrams reveal the following:-



- 1) The path for men since the coming of the missionaries to Wadeye is denoted by the descending black arrow;
- 2) The path for young boys since the coming of the missionaries to Wadeye is denoted by the ascending black arrow.

With great simplicity, the diagrams tell a sad and destructive tale. On the whole, men have been displaced, losing their self-respect, pride and sense of hope in the future. It began over time with loss of role as the provider, relinquishing the hunter-gatherer lifestyle for an easier, more regular way and subsequently becoming, even seeking to become, dependent. Then they lost work while society gained cash in ever increasing amounts, entrenching the behaviour of dependence upon the dominant culture but also upon the resource provision of their women. With self-respect shattered, they finally lost themselves through attempts to forget. Substance abuse has been and is a living hell for Australia's first man, for it is when he is under the varying influences that he sees himself as being strong, having capacity and taking charge – he is again a man. Once the influence has passed however, reality returns – he is not a man; he is nobody. And he yearns to forget that he is nobody. So the process of abuse is repeated.

It is also at this cross-over point that youth rise above for the first time. They rebel, taking control by force – yet this is really a cry for help. They do not fully understand; they have little worldly experience. While they create havoc deep within their society, they wish for their elders to show them the right path.

In the midst of chaos are the women, trying – desperately – to keep families together.

The Current Situation

The current impact on man is evidenced through three main areas:-

- 1) Employment; 2) Crime; and 3) Health.

I deal with each in turn:-

1) Employment

The loss of employment, combined with the ease by which dependence could be achieved through welfare receipt, was the trigger that dramatically encouraged the downward decline of man. The *Workforce NT Report 2005*, and in particular “Chapter 5: *Indigenous Employment Profile*”, highlights key data relating to Indigenous employment within the Northern Territory as follows:-²⁰

- Over 60% of the Indigenous population lives in very remote areas where the opportunities for economic development and engagement in the mainstream labour market are the lowest (p. 3);
- The [growth] in the Indigenous working age population ... will be particularly significant in the 15-24 and 35-44 year old age groups. As the proportion of 15-

²⁰ “*Workforce NT Report 2005*”, Department of Employment, Education and Training, Northern Territory Government. See http://www.deet.nt.gov.au/employment/workforce_nt/2005_report.shtml;

24 year old Indigenous people not in the labour force is [57%], the challenge for the NT is to engage this cohort in employment (p. 4);

- Over 83% (approximately 30,100) of the Indigenous population aged 15 years and over reside in remote areas. This existing and potential labour force is characterised by:
 - high rates of disengagement from the labour market;
 - high rates of employment through Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP);
 - declining mainstream employment;
 - high welfare dependency;
 - low school attendance, low rates of literacy and numeracy and high rates of morbidity and mortality (p. 5);
- Indigenous people who are not in the labour force often suffer multiple disadvantages. They are more likely to have a disability or long-term health condition ... (p. 8);
- A study of Yolngu employment in East Arnhemland in 1999 found that reasons for not engaging in the labour force included: a lack of motivation to work brought about by long-term welfare dependency; the ready availability of other sources of funds such as welfare benefits; poor education and associated lack of confidence and shame; ... (p. 8);
- Specifically in Wadeye, 82% of total Aboriginal income [is] attributable to welfare sources compared to only 3% of non-Aboriginal income. If CDEP income is also counted as welfare income ... then the level of welfare dependency rises to 90%²¹; and
- Data for the NT and Australia suggests that once an Indigenous person moves onto unemployment benefits, they are more likely than their non-Indigenous counterparts to remain on those benefits and become long-term recipients (p. 11).

The link between low employment, lack of motivation and planned dependency is real. The challenge is to break the cycle of not only being dependent, but seeing dependency as a prime goal due to the ease with which it can be secured.

²¹ Taylor, J., "A Report to Thamarrurr Regional Council and the Northern Territory Office of Indigenous Policy", November, 2003, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, The Australian National University, Canberra – Baseline Profiles for Social and Economic Development Planning in the Thamarrurr Region: http://epress.anu.edu.au/caepr_series/no_24/pdf_instructions.htm, p. 35;

2) Crime

With respect to crime, the Northern Territory Department of Justice's Correctional Services Statistical Summary as at 30 June 2005 is illuminating²². The most pertinent statistics are as follows:-

- The daily average number of Indigenous prisoners during 2004-05 was 600, which represented 78% of the total (p. 3);
- An Indigenous adult is at least 10 times more likely to be imprisoned than a non-Indigenous adult (p. 4);
- The most common offence for all prisoners was assault (39%), followed by sexual assault (11%) (p. 3);
- Average sentence length for Indigenous prisoners in custody was 408 days (p. 3);
- The average age of prisoners was 31 years (p. 4);

Specifically on 30 June 2005:-

- there were 662 Indigenous prisoners in custody in an adult correctional institution in the Northern Territory, which represented 81% of total prisoners (p. 3);
- There were 14% more prisoners than for the same day last year (p. 13);
- Males represented 97% of the prisoners (p. 13);
- 76% of prisoners indicated they were unemployed at time of reception (p. 13);
- 73% of prisoners were between 20 and 39 years of age (p. 13).

Clearly, Indigenous men are far more likely than their female and non-Indigenous counterparts to find themselves in prison. When they do, it is primarily for assault. Importantly, the great majority are young and unemployed.

²²See http://www.nt.gov.au/justice/ocp/docs/statistics/20051201_NTCS_StatsSummary.pdf;

3) Health –

It is undeniable that the health of Indigenous Australians is recognised as being amongst the worst in the world. In their 2004 study, “*Remoteness and Issues in Mental Health Care: Experience from Rural Australia*”, Rajkumar and Hoolahan noted that while there is a dearth of data on the mental health of Indigenous people in remote Australia, “a study of Indigenous hospitalisations [in] 1998-99 found that the rate of hospitalisation for mental disorders due to psychoactive substance use and organic disorders was comparatively three times higher, and the rate for psychotic disorders was twice as high. There were over twice as many deaths associated with mental disorders among Indigenous people and death from suicide was three times more for Indigenous males and twice the number for Indigenous females”.²³

Specifically, in the Daly Serviced Land Area of which Wadeye is a part, there are “24 deaths per thousand which is 18% higher than the equivalent rate of 20.2 deaths per thousand calculated for Aboriginal people in the Northern Territory as a whole, *with higher male mortality accounting for all of this difference*” (Emphasis mine).²⁴

Further, and compared with the whole non-Aboriginal population of the Northern Territory, “overall Aboriginal death rates in [this area] are 4 times higher. The comparable figure for all Aboriginal people in the Territory is 3.4 times higher. Age at death is between 45 and 54 years compared to the 78 years recorded generally for non-Aboriginal people in Australia”.²⁵

From evidence in the Northern Territory as a whole it was seen that 75% of these deaths were caused by the following factors, indicating a clear trend towards ‘lifestyle’ diseases as the primary cause of Aboriginal death:-

- diseases of the circulatory system [high/low blood pressure];
- respiratory diseases [lung/breathing problems];
- endocrine diseases [especially diabetes];
- neoplasms [tumours]; and
- external causes.²⁶

²³ Rajkumar, S., and Hoolahan, B., “*Remoteness and issues in mental health care: experience from rural Australia*”, 13 February 2004, Centre for Rural and Remote Mental Health, University of Newcastle, Orange, Australia.

See also http://www.crrmh.com.au/pages/documents/2004_2_RajkumarpublishedEPS.pdf;

²⁴ Taylor, J., op cit, p. 52;

²⁵ Taylor, J., op cit, p. 53;

²⁶ Ibid;

Finally, a report from the Australian Medical Association with respect to both crime and health was released with little media fanfare in May 2006.²⁷ This report highlighted the facts that:-

- Indigenous Australians make up 2.4% of the population of Australia, but 22 per cent of the prison population. An Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander young person is 19 times more likely than a non-Aboriginal young person to be detained in a juvenile facility;
- The health statistics of Indigenous prisoners are appalling– the rates of smoking, alcohol abuse, illicit drug use, and violence and abuse are well over national rates and way over rates for the Indigenous community in general;
- It's the same for infectious diseases, chronic diseases, oral health and mental health, and the harm to the health of juvenile Indigenous offenders is with them for life. It is increasingly obvious that the health system should regard juvenile offending as a significant population health issue that deserves a much stronger preventative focus;
- Between 2000 and 2004 Indigenous women's imprisonment rates rose by 25%, while there was an 11% increase for Indigenous men;
- More than 80% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners smoked;
- More than one third of women, and about half of all men in the general prison population, drank hazardous or harmful amounts of alcohol;
- Illicit drug use was rife before prison, with 74% of women and 64% of men using drugs. More than half of these prisoners continued injecting drugs while incarcerated;
- Many inmates reported sexual abuse at a young age and many had experienced violent relationships;
- In 2003, a New South Wales Justice Health mental health study found substantial prevalence of mental illness amongst prisoners in the NSW correctional system. 46% of those arriving in prison and 38% of sentenced inmates had suffered from a mental disorder (psychosis, affective disorder or anxiety disorder) in the previous 12 months;

²⁷ Australian Medical Association, "Undue Punishment? Aboriginal People and Torres Strait Islanders in Prison: An Unacceptable Reality", Australian Medical Association Report Card Series 2006, 18 May 2006. See [http://www.ama.com.au/web.nsf/doc/WEEN-6PU9BH/\\$file/Indigenous_Report_Card_2006.pdf](http://www.ama.com.au/web.nsf/doc/WEEN-6PU9BH/$file/Indigenous_Report_Card_2006.pdf);

- The NSW Department of Juvenile Justice, together with NSW Justice Health and the University of Sydney, surveyed 242 juvenile offenders in custody in 2003, 42% of whom were Indigenous. The social profiling reflected their vulnerability:-
 - 84% had reported symptoms consistent with a clinical disorder;
 - 8% had symptoms of two or more personality disorders; and
 - 19% of male and 24% of female detainees had considered attempting suicide in the past;
- There is no systematic collection of prisoners' health data. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander prisoners' health data is almost non-existent ...; and
- Not unlike the health system, the costs of interventions at the 'downstream' end of the criminal justice system are significant. It costs \$159 per day to house prisoners according to a 2004 Productivity Commission report. ... A mental health bed costs approximately \$550/day; therefore, it is more economical to admit mentally ill prisoners to jail rather than hospital.

The AMA called on the Federal Government to act in two primary ways:-

- 1) Keep those out of prison who should not be there, principally those with mental health and substance abuse problems; and
- 2) Ensure that health service provision in prisons is the best it can be – in particular, supporting inmates to take control of their health and the determinants of their health.²⁸

Australia, the Lucky Country

We have been and are confronted with the reality of violence, abuse, itinerancy and self-destructive behaviour, particularly as attributed to Indigenous men. Their consequences are seen as 'effects', the cause of which is the behaviour of these men. Recent comment states emphatically that it is "impossible to ignore the way a generation of Australians is being consigned to a Hobbesian horror of addiction and abuse, perpetrated by powerful black men on women and children", and that "the rapists and bashers must be shamed and shunned".²⁹ With respect to itinerant behaviour, the attitude of Darwin's Lord Mayor was that people "deserve to be monstered and stomped on".³⁰ Incredibly, local Darwin magistrate David Loadman has even wondered aloud in court why, with respect to the situation at Wadeye, "they don't just arm them with machine guns and let them finish what they started 2000 years ago, and let it end".³¹

²⁸ Australian Medical Association, op cit, p. 4;

²⁹ *The Weekend Australian*, 24 June 2006: Editorial: "Everything in the bush must change";

³⁰ ABC TV, "Message Stick", ibid;

³¹ Magistrate David Loadman, *NT News*, p.1-2, 28 June 2006;

So there, in a nutshell, we have the views and solutions of the dominant culture:- Powerful black men; Monsterring and stomping; shaming and shunning; arming with guns. Further, the policy of the Federal Government enunciated by the Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough, reinforces that law and order is the starting position.³²

I do not seek to ignore, nor justify, the violent acts to which women in particular, children and other men, are subjected to by Indigenous men. I know of it and have lived then worked through it for the majority of my life. Nevertheless, I do seek to provide background and reason, then clues to identify actual causes. Questions remain, however:- Why is the situation so tragic, so hopeless, so internationally disgraceful and embarrassing? And how is it that a country as fortunate, as wealthy – as lucky – as Australia, has been unable to prevent it? In my view, while the dominant culture ignores the voices of the people actually living the issues and continues to provide ‘*The Answer*’, dealing only with *the effects*, then *the causes* will remain – yielding ever greater and more damaging effects. In fact, the opinion has been voiced by Noel Pearson that the new policy of the Federal Government “lacks confidence in Indigenous Australians and is utter madness”.³³

I do not disagree with a priority of law and order – at Wadeye it was initially described as “Safety” because it was seen that all else comes to nought unless such issues come first e.g. you can't concentrate on education if parents are too scared to have their kids go to school; you can't concentrate on health if people won't go to the clinic. The Federal Government calls it law and order because it sounds tougher. However, the “tough Brough” approach, of itself, is not the answer – the issues are far more complex than simply placing more Indigenous men in jail. This must be recognised and an appropriate holistic process championed. As the Australian Institute of Criminology notes, “[t]here is no simple or single solution to violence. It is a multifaceted problem with biological, psychological, social and environmental roots. Therefore violence must be addressed on multiple levels and in multiple sectors of society simultaneously”.³⁴ Crucially, this includes the “rebuild[ing] of functional social and cultural norms, which are much more important than simple compliance with law enforcement”.³⁵

This notion of rebuilding returns us to that state of alienation experienced primarily by men as a result of the absence of these social norms or values. In order to retrieve the current situation, the critical requirement in my view is attention to the needs of MEN, for it is they who must, with assistance, cease the self-destructive behaviour which now engulfs them; it is they who must take charge of youth and show them the right path; it is they who must ultimately lead. If this does not occur, the number of programs directed at Strong Women, Women in Leadership, Women and Families or Women and Children

³² See Minister Brough’s interview with John Laws on 16 May 2006 at http://www.facs.gov.au/internet/minister3.nsf/content/2ue_transcript_16may06.htm;

³³ Pearson, N., “*Big government hurts Aboriginal population*”, *The Australian*, 26 June 2006;

³⁴ Australian Institute of Criminology, “*Preventing violence: The public health approach*”, 26 August 2003, no.8, ISSN 1448-1383. See <http://www.aic.gov.au/publications/crm>;

³⁵ Pearson, N., *ibid*;

will be irrelevant. Men, through natural strength alone, will continue to wreak havoc, sadly, upon themselves and those nearest and dearest to them.

While possessing natural strength, the men with whom I most often associate are not what I would describe as ‘powerful black men’. The great majority are caught in the vortex so simply demonstrated by the diagrams seen earlier. They are lost – why become educated, for there are not enough jobs; should opportunity present, why work, for dependence is easier; why attempt to parent, for they are in fear of youth. Substance abuse, itinerancy, incarceration and health disorders are the norm. These are Aboriginal men – the first men of Australia – who have experienced a breakdown of their social norms and values, who lack adequate intellectual understanding of the dominant world, and who struggle to communicate with it. They have lost their role, their place, their hope. And the response of the dominant culture? Law and order; monsterring and stomping; shaming and shunning; the promotion of self-extermination.

The response must instead focus specifically on returning control of their lives to Indigenous Australians. One of the most important areas is that of land, as “the prerequisite condition for the exercise of autonomy and the enjoyment of peace is ownership of their land or at least unimpeded control of their living space”.³⁶

Crucial aspects where government, the private sector and/or the philanthropic sector have a role to play include infrastructure, housing, health, job creation and human capital formation. While the resources are available within our wealthy Australian nation to address root causes, it has to be questioned whether the political will to deal with reality is present. To date, the answer is mostly in the negative, even though government has played a role in this tragedy at almost every step. Noel Pearson has observed that the “present over-reach by government in response to the crisis in indigenous affairs will eventually be exposed as a failure. In the meantime, much good work and progress made by indigenous communities and organisations will be destroyed”.³⁷

I leave you with the words of Claude Narjic, a senior elder of the Marri-ngarr language group from north of Wadeye, who one evening as an 18-year old spent long hours telling Fr Leary his worries about the troubles his people were going through because of so much happening too quickly:-

*“Our word ‘thawath’”, he said, “explains how things should be happening. ‘Thawath’ has a double meaning – slowly, carefully”.*³⁸

³⁶ Wilson MSC, MJ, op cit, p. 31;

³⁷ Pearson, N., ibid;

³⁸ Leary, J (Fr), ibid.