The crisis in Australia's Aboriginal communities

How right-wing ideologues stand reality on its head

Nick Beams
25 May 2006

Since the revelations of shocking sexual abuse of Aboriginal children were broadcast on the ABC program "Lateline" last week, the airwaves and newspaper pages have been filled with comments and articles demanding strong measures.

But, like the initial program, not one of them has even attempted to provide an explanation for the underlying social causes. Such an examination is routinely dismissed as "throwing money at the problem," supporting a "failed welfare state" or covering up for the perpetrators.

While the prescriptions differ in their details—some want more police and tougher jail sentences, others suggest the army be called in—they share a common ideological platform. The fault lies not with Australian capitalist society and its more than 200-year oppression of the indigenous population, but rather with "social welfare" and "Aboriginal society" itself.

This common platform was openly set out in an editorial published in the *Australian* last weekend. Denouncing "blather about abstract rights" which "betrays Aboriginal women and children," it claimed that conditions in remote communities were "the outcome of a generation of social engineering that experimented with indigenous lives." Not only were social welfare policies to blame, the causes of the "appalling circumstances", it insisted, went deeper.

"They are also a result of the rhetoric of political opportunists who have used Aboriginal disadvantage as a stick to beat settler society. It started in the 1960s when the push for equal pay for Aboriginal stockmen in remote Australia cost too many of them their jobs—and pushed their families on to welfare. There was no case then, just as there is none now, for race-based discrimination in what people are paid for equally productive work. But the fact remains that while equal pay was a just reform, it helped start the spiral into welfare dependency in the bush."

Here is one of the clearest examples of the inversion of reality practised by right-wing ideologues whenever they pronounce on social problems. The modus operandi is always the same: blame the victim for the social ills produced by the private profit system—which they vigorously defend.

Three years ago, when Keith Windschuttle produced the first volume of *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*—his cover-up of the systematic murder of the indigenous population that accompanied colonisation and the establishment of capitalist property relations—his work was hailed by pro-market advocates across the media. Like him, they recognised that the debate over Aboriginal history went far beyond its ostensible subject to "the character of the nation and ... the calibre of the civilisation Britain brought to these shores in 1788". They were particularly attracted to Windschuttle's assertion that Aboriginal people were "active agents in their own demise" who could not "reform their ways", precisely because they recognised it had far-reaching political implications for the present day.

Just as Aboriginal people had failed to "reform their ways" when confronted with British colonisation, so all those whose rights and living conditions have been the target of present-day governments, and who are increasingly unable to cope, should likewise be blamed.

Applying this method, the *Australian* locates the beginning of the current downward spiral in the stockmen's demand for equal pay in the 1960s. Because they had the temerity to fight for proper wages, instead of the handouts of tobacco, sugar and flour that formed the basis of the prevailing racist semi-slave "wages system", they should be held responsible for the social disaster that

exists today.

In reality, the real causes are to be found elsewhere.

Faced, from 1968, with the legal requirement to pay award wages, the pastoral companies responded by introducing mechanisation to replace the labour they now considered to be too expensive. Motor bikes and aircraft replaced the stockmen, while roadtrains took the place of drovers.

This had a major impact on thousands of Aborigines in remote communities—arguably the most far-reaching change in their circumstances since colonisation. The removal of their previous livelihood accelerated the shift to the towns, or rather to the camps on the outskirts of the towns. But neither the camps nor the towns offered alternative employment to Aboriginal workers. It was only a matter of time before the lack of jobs, coupled with the absence of decent housing, health care, education and other facilities meant that the so-called "welfare" system created a social catastrophe.

In other words, the crisis confronting remote Aboriginal communities results from the refusal of successive Australian governments—both Labor and Liberal, state and federal—to provide even the minimum necessities of life. The daily tragedies currently being sensationalised throughout the media are the outcome, not of "Aboriginal culture", as the *Australian* and others would have it, but of the culture of poverty that has been imposed over decades.

Far more insightful and truthful than the *Australian* editorial was a letter published in the same edition of the newspaper from Ernabella community worker Kerry Shegog.

"I live and work for a remote Aboriginal community," Shegog wrote. "In considering the debate about social dysfunction in communities such as mine, I ask you to consider how you would cope living like the people here have to live.

"Take at least 10 people from your extended family—children, the frail elderly, relations with addictions or mental health problems—and then imagine them living with you and your family in a small three-bedroomed house. Imagine that maybe only one, or two, if you are extremely lucky, has some sort of part-time paid work. Imagine that there is no cinema, no restaurant, no shopping centre—no form of family entertainment to allow you to get out of your crowded house. It is 150 km of dangerous, car-destroying dirt road to the sealed road and another 300 km to a town with such facilities. Fuel costs $1.70 per litre.

"Imagine this for a year, two years, for your lifetime. Imagine the impact on your children: how can they do any school homework, get a good night's sleep or get your undivided attention, even for a moment? How would you personally cope with the noise, the mess, the unending chaos of such a household?"

Even the Northern Territory crown prosecutor, Nanette Rogers, whose report on "Lateline" sparked the present furore, pointed to some of the underlying causes of the "malaise" within Aboriginal communities. People, she said, were "overwhelmed time and again by a fresh new tragedy. It might be suicide, it might be the fatal car accident, it might be the premature death of the 20-year-old from renal heart disease because of diet, failure to thrive, lots of grog, petrol or whatever. All of those tragedies kind of overtake a community."

In the face of such staggering problems the *Australian* insists that "more money"—for basic social facilities, including decent housing—is not the answer and that "sexual assaults in remote settlements will not be stopped by bigger public service budgets." Of course, such strictures do not apply when it comes to finding funds for the allocation of more police, harsher prison terms or the deployment of the army.

Reviewing the lessons of history—from the murder and dispossession that accompanied colonisation to the era of the "stolen generations", when children were forcibly separated from their parents, through to the spate of deaths in custody in more recent times, the late Aboriginal worker and Socialist Equality Party member Yabu Bilyana would constantly warn that without the fight for a socialist program, Aboriginal people faced the prospect of a future more terrible than their past. That warning is, already, being tragically vindicated.

And it has a much wider application. The demands for police-military intervention and harsher punishments to deal with the crisis in remote Aboriginal communities is the surest sign that the days when the capitalist order could meet social problems with reforms, however limited, have long gone. The repressive measures being prepared for impoverished Aboriginal communities will be utilised elsewhere, as the social ills generated by the current social order continue to escalate.