

Mindset of action must replace symbolic gestures

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During the past few weeks this paper, as it has done responsibly many times before, reported on the problem of violence in Northern Territory remote Aboriginal communities, specifically the Indigenous community of Wadeye, 400km southwest of Darwin.

Violence is only one of many problems facing Aboriginal people.

Others include limited opportunities for businesses because of a restrictive land tenure act that limits opportunities for individuals to own land; difficulties in providing quality education because of high staff turnover; crowded living; suicide; and alcohol abuse.

These result in too many Aboriginal people suffering unnecessarily and living shorter lives. There are successes, and these are to be celebrated, but there is still work that must be done.

Government knows the problems, yet they persist. Former Indigenous affairs minister Mal Brough was reported in this paper as asking, “What prevents our leaders, our journalists, from demanding an end to this destruction?”

The answer is that an old mindset dominates Aboriginal affairs that prefers words and symbolic gestures over action; shortterm thinking over long-term thinking; engaging in endless consultation, meaningless research, political speeches and report writing over addressing real problems such as poor health, poverty and violence; and a fear of being labelled racist for pointing out some inconvenient truths, such as stating that racism is not the big culprit holding Aboriginal people back.

This new government must embrace a new mindset when considering how best to empower Aboriginal people. However, with its focus on the Uluru Statement from the Heart, it is questionable as to whether such a mindset will be adopted. The principal focus of the statement, the Indigenous voice to parliament, seems to be a repackaging of the same old dogma that has defined (and failed) Aboriginal affairs for too many years; namely, that

only Aboriginal people are qualified to speak about Aboriginal issues.

We offer some ideas here that reflect a new mindset. This mindset will pave the way for a focus on jobs, education, housing, modern services and all the other benefits most other Australians take for granted. All this contributes greatly to long, rich lives, which is the absolute right of Aboriginal Australians as Australian citizens.

A new mindset must challenge the myth that Aboriginal people are vastly different from other Australians. While there may be some minor differences between Aboriginal Australians and their non-Aboriginal brothers and sisters, they have the same needs and desires: to live in safe and clean environments, to have an education that equips them for the modern world, to have an opportunity to engage in service to their local and broader communities, and to have access to basic goods and services such as modern health facilities and fresh food. In far too many communities these basic rights are missing.

This belief that Aboriginal people are a different species requiring “culturally appropriate” solutions has kept an Aboriginal industry thriving and allowed politicians, academics and consultants to build successful careers for themselves while people on the ground languish. Just look at how much attention this new government gives to the Uluru statement – considerably more than what is being given to the dysfunction in remote communities.

Where cultural differences exist, they should be respected, as they are for other cultural groups, but they should never be the defining feature of those people identifying as Aboriginal. Many successful Aboriginal people have proven they can participate alongside non-Aboriginal Australians without compromising their cultural identity. They have made us a better Australia, so let’s follow their lead.

This government must not bow to political correctness and assume Aboriginal affairs is the business only of Aboriginal people – government must affirm that Aboriginal affairs is everyone’s business.

Platitudes such as “Aboriginal people taking care of Aboriginal affairs” sound lovely but essentially amount to separatism; this is a mindset that has failed, with tragic consequences. We are all in this together, so let’s start working together. More will be achieved with an “us” mentality than an “us-them” mentality that has dominated Aboriginal affairs for far too long.

Adopting this mindset means Aboriginal Australians are seen like other Australians – capable, motivated to send their children to school and wanting to work.

The goodwill of Australians towards Aboriginal people is enormous. If we fail to act now, the next generation will be blaming us for yet another lost generation of Aboriginal Australians.

That will not just be a loss for Aboriginal Australians, it will be a loss for all Australians – we are all in this together.

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