

# Resilience, courage and humour

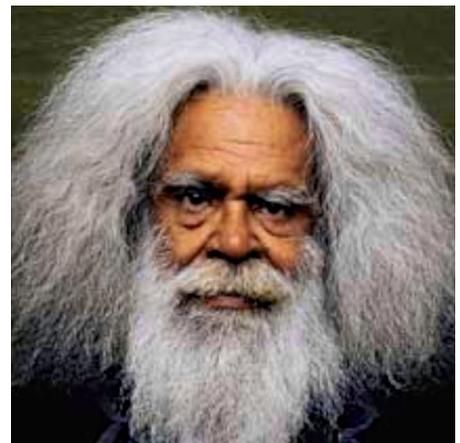
*An analysis of the 'Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage' report*

By Dr Des Griffin\*

*As the lights go down at the Belvoir Theatre, an elderly man with a wonderful white beard leads other actors in a recalled presentation to a Royal Commission.*

*In 1874 the Victorian government moved to close an economically successful enterprise at Coranderrk, near Healesville. Nearby farmers protested the land was too valuable for Aboriginal people. The people resisted. But anyway the area was closed in 1924 despite protests from Wurundjeri men, returned soldiers from the Great War: people were moved to Lake Tyers. There are scores of similar stories, hardly known.*

*Uncle Jack Charles, now 72, was taken from his mother at Cummeragunja mission as a one year old and raised in a boys' home at suburban Box Hill. He was the only Aboriginal child there: they "thrashed the living bejesus out of me", and worse. Jack was in and out of jail for minor crime and substance abuse. Reunited with some family at age 17, it was two more years before that included his mother. Jack is considered a founder of black theatre: he now helps young Aboriginal people.*



*As I watch Uncle Jack Charles perform\*\*, I perceive the resilience, courage and humour permeating every performance, comprising cultural achievement in spite of a life lived against the odds.*

Indigenous people are still here, teaching us cultural lessons, as we who are not indigenous have passed from hideous assimilation to integration through policies based on arrogance and now ignorance.

Denial, exploitation, removal of children, murder and rape, suppression of language. Refusal to acknowledge the past. Refusal to acknowledge a unique relationship with land with all its meanings, and managing the land through ice-age and desert periods. Refusal of equal rights despite judgements of the High Court, despite legislation, despite Royal Commissions, despite so many statements from elders white and black, despite increasing achievements in every field, not only music, painting and literature.

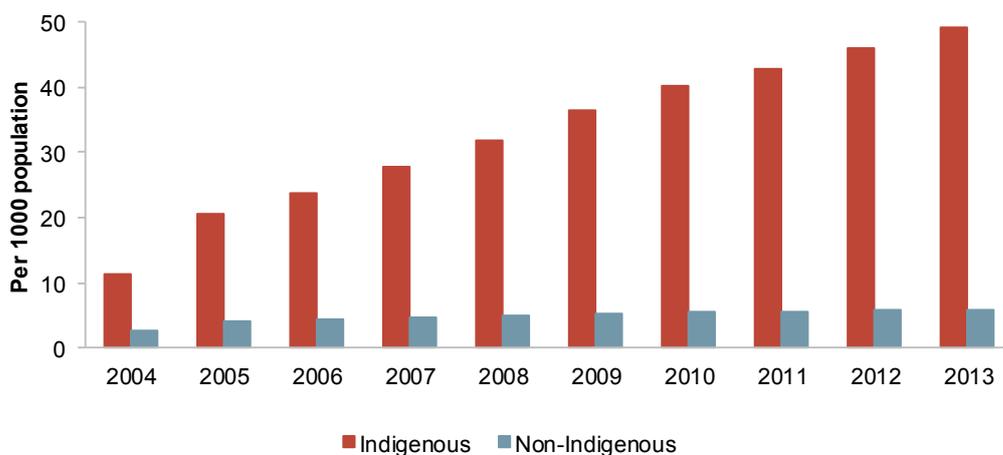
## Disadvantage: Closing the Gap?

The extraordinarily comprehensive and, in some places, terribly disturbing Productivity Commission Report of late 2014\*\*\* reveals trends that are a disgrace of international proportion against global standards. The report is comprehensive and detailed: every aspect of Indigenous disadvantage explored. It contains numerous examples of "Things that Work". And it received about as much media attention as the chime on a time clock.

Horrendous statistics overshadow small gains and losses. Health, education and housing, which characterise Indigenous peoples' problems worldwide, remain major issues. Australia is worse than anywhere: 78% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander households lack acceptable access to water, sewerage and electricity service, but that figure is 5 points down from 2008...so overcrowding declined!

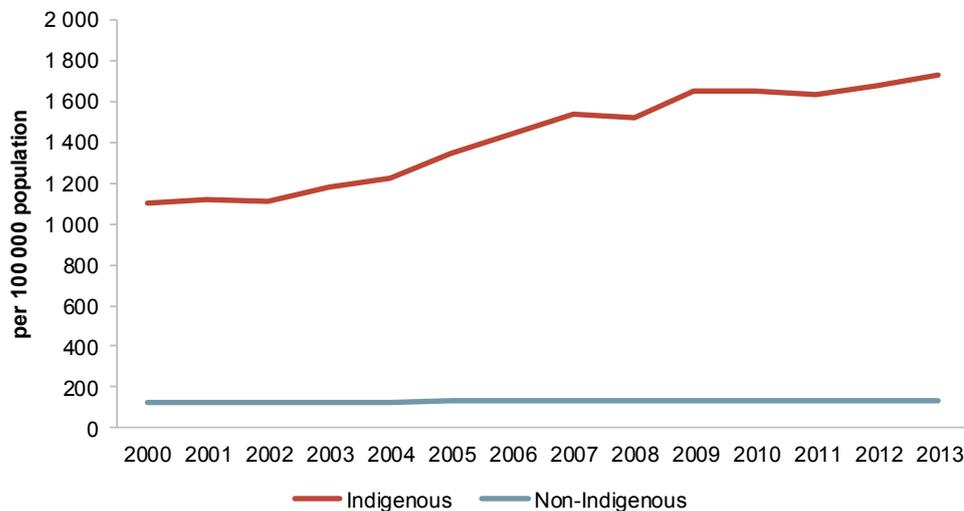
There is no progress in employment (likely affected by changes in the Community Employment Program), or in disability and chronic disease at 1.7 times the incidence for non-Indigenous people.

An increase in the non-Indigenous rate of family and community violence means the Indigenous rate remains 2.2 times the non-Indigenous rate. Over the nine years to 2012-13 the rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children on care and protection orders increased almost five times from 11 to 49 per 1000 children; for non-Indigenous children the rate was between 3 and 6 per 1000 children.



*Rates of children aged 0-17 years on care and protection orders, at 30 June.  
Figure 4.10.3 ODP report p4.82*

Adult Indigenous jailing increased by 57% in the past 14 years. Youth imprisonment increased sharply to 2008 and has since remained at about 24 times the non-Indigenous rate. Repeat offending is 1.5 times the rate of 55% for non-Indigenous prisoners, as in 2000.



*Adult imprisonment rate, at 30 June 2000 to 2013. Fig 4.12.2 p 4.103. Note the virtually horizontal line at bottom, while Aboriginal jailing continues to rise.*

The over-representation of indigenous people in prison in Australia is 10 times that of the USA!

The suicide rate in the five years to 2012 was almost twice the rate for non-Indigenous Australians. The hospitalisation rate for intentional self-harm increased by almost 50% to more than 400 per 100,000 in the past eight years; for other Australians it remained relatively stable.

In education, the figures are also far worse than for Indigenous people in other countries. In New Zealand, 85% of Maori have post-school qualifications and in the US it is about 65% of Native Americans: in Australia less than 20% have such qualifications.

### *Decades of continuing discrimination*

Gough Whitlam, on election as Prime Minister of Australia in 1972, directed one of his first two major initiatives at Aboriginal people: no more grants of leases on Aboriginal reserves in the Northern Territory, appointment of Justice Woodward to commence an inquiry into land rights, and establishment of special schools.

Before and since Whitlam, any moves to advantage Indigenous peoples have been opposed by special interests in pastoral and mining activities and by state governments, except South Australia. In Western Australia discrimination continues as Premier Colin Barnett does his best to remove Indigenous people from remote areas, refusing allocation of mining royalties to support them and maintains mandatory sentencing for minor crime.

In 2006 Prime Minister Howard and Minister Mal Brough established the Northern Territory Intervention or National Emergency Response (NTER) to address alleged high levels of child abuse and neglect, with some allegations later found to be fraudulent and invented by an employee in the Minister's office. The army was sent in, social security payments were managed, the Racial Discrimination Act was suspended. Contrary to recommendations from a government-commissioned report, action was centralised.



Delivering the 2007 Vincent Lingjari lecture, Reconciliation Australia co-chair Fred Chaney expressed shock: the Intervention was contemptuous of Aboriginal property rights and the principles of non-discrimination, authorised micro management of lives, forced people into towns with devastating social consequences likely returning people to dependence, crushing the engagement essential to progress.

The Intervention has produced no gains. In the five years to 2011 Indigenous hospitalisation rates increased by 14%, income support recipients by 20%, reported child abuse by 56% and school attendance declined by 2 percentage points according to emeritus Professor Jon Altman.

Professor Larissa Behrendt says trying to change behaviour through welfare quarantining in an already dysfunctional situation likely exacerbates the stress on households. Improved attendance would be better achieved by breakfast and lunch programs, bringing the Aboriginal community, especially elders, into schools; teacher's aides and Aboriginal teachers; a curriculum engaging for Aboriginal children which blends development self-esteem and confidence through engaging with culture as well as academic excellence.

*A failure of policy: What could have been*

Dr Christine Nicholls, now at Flinders University, was principal of Lajamanu School in Yuendumu for almost a decade. In *Quarterly Essay 36* (2009), she points out that the issues of housing, health and

employment need to be equal, simultaneous and concurrent foci of government and private attention before education can bring about real and lasting change.

People visited from government agencies out of town but nothing happened! The kids have otitis media (a disease of the Third World!) and can't hear properly: it is ignored.

*Right: Otitis media...If you can't hear, you muck up in school, and don't learn.*



Few ESL teachers are employed, the value of teaching in language is denied, housing construction is appalling (and successive governments have done nothing about it). There is nowhere at home to do homework, overcrowding (with its attendant problems of potential child abuse), compromised health and hygiene. Lack of work for parents. Successive governments come to power wanting to be the one that fixes "the problem". None do, small successes are not built on.

Many programs to advance Indigenous people are supported by private donations, corporate philanthropy, some together with government. Several help young people particularly. What on earth persuaded the Howard and Abbott governments to force on to Indigenous people wholly ineffectual policies that simply repeat all the mistakes of the past, are based on colonial and assimilative policies and in the end waste money and destroy people's lives?

Governments could have decided to be far more engaged in ensuring proper housing, education and health programs. They could have ensured a substantial funding component of every initiative went to training Indigenous people. They could have stopped trying to justify policy by lying! And the federal government could have rejected the sometimes racist and backward looking objections of many provincial governments. Almost none have the courage to face down critics wanting to solve it all through rational economic solutions like private ownership and put everything in the "they need to adapt to our society" basket.

The majority of Indigenous people live in New South Wales and Victoria. The situations revealed in the Aboriginal-directed and -produced, award-winning TV dramas *Redfern Now* are situations of all people in towns and cities on the margin: difficulties of employment and daily living: health issues flowing from bad diet, cheap fast food, substance and alcohol abuse, poor housing.

There are three fundamental requirements: Self Determination, Financial Security, and support of Women/Early Childhood and Parenting

### *Self Determination*

The right to self-determination must be embraced completely. Sovereignty matters! The Harvard Project on American Indian Economic Development has run hundreds of research studies over more than two decades in Native American communities. When Native Americans make their own decisions about what development approaches to take, they consistently out-perform external decision makers on matters as diverse as governmental forms, natural resource management, economic development, health care and social service provision.

Self-determination is a constant theme in every speech by Indigenous people. It is an expression of control over one's own life. Many, non-Indigenous and Indigenous, have pointed out that redressing disadvantage in the longer term depends upon people having the power to make decisions that affect them, to be responsible for the programs designed to meet their needs, and accountable for the successes and failures that follow.



Michael Dockery (photo) of Curtin University has found these same outcomes for Indigenous people in Australia. But no notice is taken. What is axiomatic for white groups in society is seen as a threat if given to black groups! Capable institutions of governance, adoption of stable decision rules, establishment of fair and independent mechanisms of dispute resolution and leaders who introduce new knowledge and experiences, challenge assumptions, and propose change are recognised as essential by Harvard.

### *Financial security*

Second is equitable funding as the bottom line, and more beyond that as success builds. Under-funding has typified programs for more than 100 years. Except for the Whitlam government, almost every federal government has strenuously failed to adequately fund Indigenous programs. Wages and social security payments have been withheld and compensation ignored. The funding must acknowledge the right to determine the nature of projects directed to community improvement.

Under the government of Prime Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Tony Abbott:

- \$43 million will be removed from legal aid over four years;
- \$160 million is being cut from health programs;
- language support has lost money; and
- funding for the National Congress of Australia's First Peoples was eliminated.

Recently Prof Altman has pointed to the success of the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme which began in the 1970s: it increased earnings, provided more time for ceremonial activities, and crime decreased. Howard cancelled the increasingly demonised scheme because it wasn't "real work". In December 2014 the Abbott government announced a work for the dole scheme for remote Australia. Utterly pointless!

### *Early childhood and parenting*

Australian and international understanding of early childhood, mother-child relationships, cognitive development and the impact on later life has increased significantly. These relationships are critical. The stimulation and warmth of the relationship contributes to a successful later life. Young children learn how to behave, and about human relationships and self-control which is a greater predictor of later "success" than any other indicator. And they learn self-confidence which helps manage the stress of later life better.

Recalled experiences in early childhood carry over to later parenting situations. So a potential cycle is developed. Therefore maximum support must be given to women and young families. Preschool staffed by qualified teachers and before that maximum effective support. Later, while Indigenous parents may not be clear about what school has to do with education, because of their background, that does not mean they have no interest in education. On the other hand intervening at school age will not likely undo the damage of early life. And availability of jobs after schooling is completed is essential.

### *Conclusion*

The Productivity Commission and many people working and studying in the area have identified successes. But generally governments have not addressed the causes of problems, they have not co-ordinated the policies across significant areas and have not recognised the obligations to First Peoples whose right to the land was denied for 200 years. The invidious comparisons with the Indigenous peoples of other countries testifies to that.

There is a crisis of intellectual laziness combined with arrogance. In particular, the critical importance of cultural issues have not been attended to, nor has the impact of removal from land and of forced removal of children from families, which continues. Nothing has been learned from elsewhere.

The paternalistic approach which denies people any sense of control over their own lives leaves them more than marginalised. A friend points to the fact that many Aboriginal people have little understanding of white institutions and the implications of such things as court judgements.

But they know very well what denial of liberty means. Anything approaching racial profiling, failure to deliver in the judicial and police arena, criminalising minor crimes, mandatory sentencing and imprisonment produces more destructive behaviour and undermines progress elsewhere. It should be stopped immediately. Everything should be geared to developing a sense of self-worth grounded in a unique culture so that Indigenous identity is genuinely valued by the whole Australian community. Surprising as it may seem, many Aboriginal people regard all white people as of greater value than any Aboriginal person.

David Gulpilil won best lead actor for his role in Rolf de Heer's film *Charlie's Country* at the annual Australian Academy of Cinema and Television Arts (AACTA) event in January 2015. There are lessons in that if we only think about them.

ENDS

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\*\* *Beautiful One Day*, a play for schools (and adults): Ilbijerri Theatre Company and Belvoir Theatre: <http://tinyurl.com/meaaqdn>

\*\*\* *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage* report, 19 Nov 2014, by the Productivity Commission: <http://www.pc.gov.au/research/recurring/overcoming-indigenous-disadvantage/key-indicators-2014>

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10 Feb 2014