

Unweaving the web of Aboriginal welfare dependency won't be easy

HENRY ERGAS THE AUSTRALIAN SEPTEMBER 01, 2014 12:00AM

IT is not easy to imagine a less controversial statement than Tony Abbott's claim that the arrival of the First Fleet was the "defining moment in the history of this continent". Nor could it possibly be contentious that British settlement provided the foundation for Australia to become one of the most prosperous societies on Earth.

The howls of protest that have greeted those statements confuse matters of historical record with judgments about consequences. And even as judgments about consequences, they are poorly based.

But that in no way diminishes or excuses the enduring disparity between the life chances of indigenous Australians and those of Australia's non-indigenous population. The Northern Territory intervention focused attention on the unfolding disaster in indigenous communities; yet a massive expenditure of public resources has yielded little progress.

Don Weatherburn's just published "Arresting Incarceration" is required, if deeply depressing, reading in that respect. Weatherburn, the head of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research and one of Australia's most distinguished criminologists, diagnoses the factors that have led to a situation where indigenous Australians — who make up 2.5 per cent of the adult population — account for 26 per cent of all adult prisoners.

Far from shrinking, that disproportion, which is already far greater than that for black people in the US, indigenous Canadians and New Zealand Maoris, has been widening, with the ratio of indigenous to non-indigenous imprisonment rates rising 40 per cent since 2001. The gap in imprisonment rates is even larger for women than men, and also growing.

Weatherburn gently demolishes the claim that those outcomes reflect indigenous disempowerment. As he shows, the differences in incarceration rates actually declined after 1900, with the current gap only emerging in the 1960s.

Nor does Weatherburn's exhaustive analysis find any evidence that indigenous Australians are treated more harshly by the justice system than their non-indigenous counterparts. On the contrary, taking account of the factors courts consider, they are both less likely to be imprisoned, and when imprisoned, receive shorter sentences.

Rather, the rise in imprisonment rates reflects the changes the 60s brought: the equal wage decision in 1965, which accelerated the collapse in indigenous employment in regional areas; the dismantling of laws prohibiting the sale of alcohol to indigenous Australians; and the explosive increase in welfare payments.

The misguided changes recommended by the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, such as the decriminalisation of public drunkenness, then added fuel to the fire, with Weatherburn describing the commission's proposals as a "spectacular policy failure".

Together, these factors devastated one community after the other, unleashing an epidemic of violent crime in indigenous communities. Reflecting that epidemic, 60 per cent of indigenous prisoners are in jail for violent offences. and the victims of those offences are other indigenous Australians, with indigenous women having a hospitalisation rate for assault 38 times that for other women.

Aggravating the extent and severity of the violence is widespread substance abuse. Even correcting for differences in the age structure of the population, the rate of alcohol-induced deaths for indigenous Australians is 7.5 times the non-indigenous rate. And there is a direct link between drunkenness and crime: indigenous prisoners are nearly three times more likely than non-indigenous offenders to have been intoxicated when they committed their offence. But alcohol abuse is a symptom, not an ultimate cause: a symptom of ready access to cash without any real requirement to work, with that cash being spent on goods such as alcohol and drugs that dull boredom, are consumed in social groups, and can be enjoyed by the barely literate. And once entrenched, the cycle of substance abuse, violence, imprisonment and reoffending perpetuates the labour market exclusion that served to justify the welfare hand-outs in the first place.

Nor is there an improvement in sight. Rather, with up to one in four births in remote indigenous communities now suffering from foetal alcohol spectrum disorder (as compared to less than one in 1000 for the Australian population as a whole), the cycle of despair risks repeating itself for generations to come.

Andrew Forrest's report, "Creating Parity", released last month, seeks to break that cycle. As Forrest says, the difference in labour force participation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians has risen since the "closing the gap" strategy was adopted in 2008. Even more worryingly, the indigenous employment rate in major cities has fallen sharply, despite governments spending \$2.38 billion per annum on indigenous employment and training.

The result is that nearly half of all adult indigenous Australians are now primarily reliant on welfare — and many of those who are not are in protected or heavily subsidised jobs.

Most of Forrest's recommendations make excellent sense, including raising social housing rents, in remote areas, to levels that better reflect the high cost providing housing in those areas involves. As Forrest says, it is unrealistic to believe people living in places without viable jobs, where supplying basic services is prohibitively costly, will ever lift themselves out of welfare dependence.

Yet it takes enormous optimism to believe Forrest's prescriptions will solve the problems. As he so compellingly shows, virtually all the current policies aimed at specifically reducing indigenous disadvantage are poorly designed and even more poorly implemented; but that is scarcely for want of trying. The sensible conclusion could be one Forrest never contemplates: that the whole notion that government assistance, targeted at benefiting one group in the community, can erase the dependency it creates and legitimates is deeply ill-conceived. It would surely be better to be rigorously colourblind than to repeat what has failed time and again.

What is clear, however, is that those failures cannot be blamed on the arrival, more than two centuries ago, of the First Fleet. They are our disaster and our shame. And they are ours alone to address.

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