

If separatism is such misery, do we try integration?

[Henry Ergas](#) 12:00AM June 12, 2020



We cannot 'pin the repeated failures on anyone but ourselves'.

That indigenous Australians, who make up 3 per cent of this country's population, account for 30 per cent of its prisoners is a national disgrace. That by the time they reach the age of 23, 75 per cent of young indigenous people in NSW will have been cautioned by police, referred to a youth justice conference or convicted of an offence in a criminal court — compared with just 17 per cent of their non-indigenous counterparts — makes the disgrace all the more searing.

And the fact that just in the past five years nearly a quarter of the indigenous male population has been arrested and more than 10 per cent jailed, while one indigenous child in five has, at some stage, lost a parent to prison, raises that disgrace into an outrage.

However, the worst of it is that the fault does not lie in the criminal justice system. After all, were these shocking outcomes due to racial bias, the path to a solution would be straightforward.

But indigenous Australians are not imprisoned at such appalling rates because our system of law enforcement treats them unduly harshly.

Rather, they are disproportionately represented in this country's jails, and in the deaths that occur in those jails, because they are far more likely to commit violent offences. Nor is that seriously in dispute. On the contrary, as Don Weatherburn, perhaps Australia's most eminent criminologist, concludes in a recent paper with Hamish Thorburn, "the overwhelming weight of evidence" confirms that "differences in rates of offending (and reoffending) account for most, if not all, of the difference in imprisonment rates" between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians.

And with indigenous women being nearly 40 times more likely to be hospitalised for intentionally inflicted violence than are Australian women generally, it is also beyond dispute that the harm those offenders inflict falls most grievously on indigenous Australians themselves.

Yet none of that lets non-indigenous Australians off the hook. It was not indigenous Australians who destroyed thousands of Aboriginal jobs in country areas by suddenly raising the wages of cattle station labour in 1965; it was the Commonwealth Conciliation and Arbitration Commission.

Nor was it indigenous Australians who decided, just as the commission's judgment was having its devastating effects, to massively subsidise remote Aboriginal settlements, condemning generation after generation to inadequate housing, an education scarcely worth having and a future shorn of jobs and hope; it was the Whitlam and Fraser governments.

And it was not indigenous Australians who removed the prohibitions on the consumption of alcohol by, and the sale of alcohol to, Aboriginal

people that had been in force throughout Australia since 1929.

It was state and territory governments that, in keeping with the 1960s zeitgeist of self-determination, repealed those controls and decriminalised public drunkenness, plunging fraying Aboriginal communities into a spiral of alcohol-fuelled violence and helping to ensure that indigenous offenders are nearly three times more likely than non-indigenous offenders to be intoxicated when they commit their crimes.

The result, as one Aboriginal community after the other succumbed to the epidemic of substance abuse, was that indigenous incarceration rates, which had been falling since World War I, began to soar.

Far from slowing that rise, the explosive growth in welfare outlays that followed the onset of the crisis perpetuated the pathologies by allowing dysfunctional communities to survive. And instead of frankly confronting the root causes, successive governments relied on grandiose statements of good intentions and on torrents of cash in an increasingly futile attempt to paper over the cracks.

Had the thousands of Australians who marched last week learned from that history and drawn its lessons, one could only have cheered them on.

Of that, however, there was no sign. Epitomised by the participants' slavish imitation of the ritual gesture of kneeling — which has clear resonance in America because of the prominence of the kneeling slave in the imagery of the abolitionist movement, but which lacks those associations in Australia — the rallies were copycat protests at which self-proclaimed representatives of indigenous people could vent imported rhetoric in tones of punitive hysteria.

No doubt the slogan-mongering went down well with the crowd, many of whom had been chafing at the bit to return to protesting, regardless of

the health risks that imposes on the community as a whole.

And it would have been mother's milk to the young Australians who had been taught since childhood that Europe's expansion was a plague on the skin of the earth, that its civilisation was a monstrous imposture and that its arrival on these shores 2½ centuries ago heralded the destruction of a Garden of Eden.

But demeaning the past does nothing to heal the present. Nor, for that matter, does setting ambitious targets that we do not know how to achieve, as the government seems intent on doing.

Rather, what is needed is honesty and clear-sightedness. And the starting point must be to confront some uncomfortable realities. It is, to begin with, clear that much-touted nostrums, such as diverting juvenile offenders from the court system, have been tried and largely found to fail, with most studies concluding that they do not decrease the risk of reconviction, the time to reconviction, the seriousness of further offending or the number of reconvictions.

And it is equally clear that while those approaches are not a viable solution, imprisonment does reduce the extent and incidence of serious offending, as well as shielding, at least for a time, the victims of violence from their tormentors.

That hardly implies we should simply accept the dreadful costs mass incarceration imposes on indigenous Australians and on the moral fabric of the nation.

What it does mean, however, is that we face an alternative. We can salve our conscience by retaining the unstated premise that has led to the current calamity: that indigenous Australians are essentially a separate race, who should be funded to live at enormous expense in places where there are no viable jobs, where supplying basic services is prohibitively

costly and where alcohol and drugs are the only antidote to squalor, boredom and despair.

If that is our choice, today's pathologies, and the mass incarceration that is their symptom, will persist for decades to come.

Or, while recognising the deep and enduring scars, we can reconsider the whole notion of racial separateness, reaffirm our commitment to the ideal of integration and begin the transition to a country whose principles, policies and ways of life are genuinely colourblind.

The one thing we cannot do is pin the repeated failures on anyone but ourselves. They are a tragedy of our own making. And more than ever, they are our responsibility to repair.