

Policy panic is no solution

Gillian Cowlshaw says a new cycle of bullying won't heal old wounds in Aboriginal communities

It is difficult to take part in public discussion of the destructive violence in some Aboriginal communities because the imagery can add to the burden of public suspicion, sympathy or scorn that is so familiar to indigenous people. Widespread horror and the resultant sense of urgency to reverse immiseration is accompanied by the fear that more government intervention will exacerbate powerlessness and add to the huge number of Aborigines in jail. Debate is marred by ignorance of the communities and their histories, by crude conceptual dichotomies and by politics and preaching. What is badly needed is an understanding of the conditions that allow social pathology to emerge. "Social pathology" is not a term to be applied lightly; like family dysfunction, it is always a matter of degree and does not affect all individuals. But where the vulnerable are not protected, where they are violently and destructively exploited without redress or remedy, pathology seems an appropriate shorthand term.

Any small and isolated community offers a context for corrupt practices to flourish. Where privacy, autonomy or local authority is overvalued, predators and opportunists can become inordinately powerful. Fear undermines independent action and paralyses the moral impulses of other community members. Thus the family, that bastion of intimacy and nurturance, can become a haven of domestic violence, protected by outsiders' reluctance to interfere in the "private sphere". Small country towns, insulated organisations, powerful corporations or even government departments can become sites where freedom from outside scrutiny is used to further the interests of egotistical or predatory individuals.

Aboriginal communities became particularly vulnerable to corrupt, selfish or vicious individuals under bipartisan policies that were meant to allow Aboriginal people to control their own communities. But "self-determination" was always a pretence because economic and political power remained in the hands of government departments and the wider economic interests behind them. With the best of intentions, community councils, boards and committees were set up to mimic Western decision-making structures and to create the facade of Aboriginal autonomy. Real power was denied, partly because many Aboriginal people were lured into positions of responsibility but did not have the knowledge, the experience or the skills to meet the bureaucratic requirements for expending money. Inactivity and poor results were regularly forgiven provided the funds appeared to be acquitted in the correct ways. Corrupted forms of governance frequently emerged, protected by outside authorities, people who needed a semblance of Aboriginal-run organisations to consult with and to rationalise the programs that employed them. Many remote, rural and urban Aboriginal community organisations suffered from



Blaming 'traditional' culture for the failures of contemporary forms of governance is counter-productive.

Picture: GLEN CAMPBELL

systemic corruption for these reasons. An indigenous friend told me that rather than Aboriginal staff, what Aborigines needed and wanted was good staff; the rest was a bonus.

In this debate the term "culture" is often pronounced with deference, but its meaning is hitched to the policies being recommended or denounced. To anthropologists, culture is not bits and pieces of difference. It is everything entailed in the organic expression of a way of life. Aboriginal society has long had its former economic and political structures undermined, leading to other traditions losing their authority within communities. Other practices and new traditions have developed, shaped by the shifting policies and practices of governments, economic forces and the ever-changing army of whitefellas who actually ran the "self-determining" communities. In other words, paternalism was never reversed, and it was a poorly thought-out and poorly disguised paternalism. One significant influence, and a well-known feature of the Northern Territory environment when I was first there in 1975, was the dishonest opportunism of many who were appointed to work in, or to service, remote communities. The territory was described as a sieve — the government poured money into Aboriginal communities and white crooks, or entrepreneurs, collected it as it fell through hands that were unaccustomed to dealing with money. The fear of disrespecting budding "communities" — the term which had replaced "fringe-dwellers", "camps" and "missions" — and the fear of libel suits precluded publicising those scandals. Now the vogue is to

pretend it is all new and that things were more orderly in the old days.

Three decades ago I saw one remote community struggling to understand the eager government officials who were putting self-determination in place by offering to fund "their" cattle station on country that, it turned out later, was not suitable for cattle. Senior authoritative men were taught to write their names in order to appear on the books as managing directors, while the white manager — ex-Africa — struggled to explain the wage system that had been decided for them. They were becoming familiar with the public servants who would arrive regularly to "consult", which meant gaining community assent to some modification to the project, when suddenly a change of government policy scrapped the whole thing and the working men were put on unemployment benefits. They felt they had failed, and were seen to have done so, even though they had had no control over the decision-making. Such conditions are still the norm. Budding leaders are trapped into a mendicant stance by the national discourse of concern and the insistent offers of "help" which are, in fact, coercive as there is little real negotiation. No official has to take responsibility for the failures and they are soon forgotten, except by those whose social lives are being shaped without their participation. There is a deep-seated lack of respect for Aboriginal people here, a condition that is allied to a lack of knowledge, and a lack of concern. Some professionals and public servants whose job it is to provide services to Aboriginal communities, often for a couple of years in a spiralling career, become impatient,

disappointed and disillusioned.

Hidden behind offers of autonomy, including self-determination and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission, is a pervasive diagnosis of victimhood. The fear of blaming the victims often paralyses critical thought and prevents the naming of failures. Concerned and troubled whitefellas had to put ever more effort into ministering to what many think of as helpless, damaged or delinquent Aborigines. The struggles of indigenous people to develop their own forms of modernity have been hampered by a stifling and disempowering national sympathy, which is now eroding. What has taken its place is a barely disguised irritable impatience among policymakers which justifies heavy-handedness, not just where it is needed to remove pathological predators and corrupt councillors. Respectful negotiations with those community members who have been trying honestly to fulfil their roles for decades, and with those committed whitefellas who work beside them, are in danger of again being overridden. Instead, governments want to treat the bullies with bigger bullies, thus reproducing the entire pathology.

Just as in the 1970s, we have government panic, sudden changes of policy (or policy rhetoric), and no one, including government agents, really knows what the results will be. Who, after all, are the experts on social or cultural change? Anthropologists believed that governance would be enhanced by better understanding of the traditional culture, that is, the values and conceptual frameworks that inform Aboriginal people's responses to modernity. We are

now accused of being a protection racket for indigenous traditions and perhaps it is time that, as "cultural experts", we paid attention to the dominant culture and the way it has precluded indigenous people from being welcomed and respected as equal citizens.

Some have argued that Aboriginal culture must give way to modernity, but that argument is redundant. Aboriginal culture has always given way to modernity, and it continues to do so. Despite "assimilation" being a bad word, associated with coercion and disparagement of other cultural ways, there is a continuing assimilative process that need not be frowned upon. It may be an inevitable, if tragic, loss that cultural variation among human beings is reduced as we are all caught up in processes of modernisation and technological change. But what is more distressing is the idea that family and kinship must give way to individual autonomy. Enjoyment of many extended-kin networks is somehow problematic in the social conditions which prevail today. Isolated individuals looking out for their own interests hold the keys to success in the contemporary world. And perhaps one factor in the ability of violent and predatory individuals to escape punishment in remote, and some rural and urban, Aboriginal communities is that kin loyalty makes it difficult to turn on one's senior relations. However, such issues pale into insignificance beside other determinants. The senior relative may be seen as "a leader" and nurtured by government officials and outsiders. And we have heard about the abject failures of police, the courts and the law to properly identify and punish men guilty of sexual abuse and violence towards weaker relatives. Then there is the inadequacy of housing and infrastructure in many places. Thus, blaming some feature of "traditional culture" for the failings of contemporary forms of governance in Aboriginal communities seems particularly cruel and counter-productive.

As has emerged in some press reports, amazing human beings can survive among pain and suffering. There are skilled and knowledgeable people, locals and outsiders, working to reverse awful conditions. These are the people who must be listened to. The epidemic of alcohol consumption can be reduced; communities can be encouraged to expose and discuss the violence in their midst; corrupt leaders can be located, named and removed; effective health and housing programs do exist and can be properly funded; education is widely valued and can be properly established; indigenous people can participate productively in the economy. Rather than panic in response to an old scandal being exposed, adequate resources and long-term commitment must be given to actions that are known to be working on the ground.

Gillian Cowlshaw is the author of *Rednecks, Eggheads and Blackfellas: Racial Power and Intimacy in Australia and Blackfellas, Whitefellas and the Hidden Injuries of Race*.