

Time is now for leaders to come together for the common good

By Scott Gorringe



My name is Scott Gorringe, I am Kurrihalla Tjimpa, from Kirrenderri, Mithaka Country, if you're struggling to work out where Mithaka Country is, its borders are the Cooper Creek on the east and the Diamantina River on the west in far western Queensland. These waterways flow into the iconic Lake Eyre and are important to Australia's environment and its heritage.

I was recently at a conference in Cairns and listened to Richard Ah Mat, a member of Prime Minister's Indigenous Advisory Council, speak about the significance of Aboriginal people making decisions for themselves and the country we belong to, that we see as our obligation and in a strong sense that we own.

Cape York, or at least some of the Cape York mob have been afforded the opportunity to do this with politicians and other powerbrokers. Unfortunately, "the unheard" like me and others haven't been and we want that same opportunity. Currently, "the unheard" are being excluded from any decision making that affects us. Powers that be, abuse their positions of power to ignore and it appears to me that if you don't think the same way powerbrokers do, you never will be heard.

Richie Ah Mat and the Cape York Institute's dominant discourse (discourse in this context refers to a system of ideas and attitudes, assumptions and practices that shape how people 'know' and construct their world) of economic development and welfare reform is like a tsunami swamping everything in sight. For me, their strong message appears to be all Aboriginal people should buy into the approach of economic development to enable better health, education, housing, and other outcomes and to an extent I agree.

However, the economic development they appear to espouse is one based solely on the extraction industries and water storage. This resonates with the broader agenda of State and Federal governments. From what you read in the papers today, it would appear there is no other option. But this is not the case.

What if we don't want to go with the mining and irrigation approach? What if we want an approach that protects our lands and waters from destructive mining operations and irrigation? What if we want an approach that enables us to engage in other ways to sustain growth and development for our mob on our country?

In the Channel Country of western Queensland where I come from, there are already successful industries. These are not based on extraction but instead depend upon the pristine nature of the environment. These include, for example, a highly successful organic beef property, the largest in Australia. Should further mining and irrigation be introduced in my country it will threaten the very basis of the economic development that

people have worked so hard to achieve.

I have been reliably informed that contrary to the dominant message, mining will not and does not bring a large increase in job opportunities to local people, as it depends largely on fly-in, fly-out labour. That kind of operation, as we have seen across the country, threatens the social fabric of a region. Other mobs may choose mining for their development opportunities but our mob has categorically rejected it.

Along with 80 other Traditional Owners of the Lake Eyre Basin region we signed "The Tibooburra Resolution" in 2011 which unanimously supported a Wild Rivers Declaration for the Cooper Creek, The Diamantina, and the Georgina. We stood beside the pastoralists and the environmentalists to protect the waterways we all value. We applauded the Bligh Government for declaring these rivers under the Act and were appalled when the Newman Government rescinded the Declaration.

Given the way in which the Premier of Queensland, Campbell Newman and Noel Pearson and the media have unfailingly represented Wild Rivers as bad for Aboriginal people as a whole, I bet it comes to a surprise to you that this is not the case. You may also be surprised to hear, given Warren Mundine's recent attack on "the greenies" for keeping Aboriginal people in poverty, that we have and will continue to work closely with environmental groups to achieve shared objectives.

You will have heard the dominant rhetoric that extraction industries and the "real jobs" they are alleged to provide are the only solution to Aboriginal poverty. I have three issues with this type of rhetoric. The first, as I have explained above, is that extraction industries are absolutely NOT the only option. The second is the Aboriginal voices that oppose the mining lobby are ignored and the voices of those who support it are represented as speaking for all of us. Thirdly, underlying this rhetoric is a very troubling discourse that frames Aboriginal people as a "problem" that needs to be "fixed".

This discourse constrains the way people think and is very powerful. Keeping the spotlight constantly on "the problem" is a strategy for suppressing opposing views. For example, if you challenge mining you can be accused of wishing to keep Aboriginal people in poverty. It was the same thing with the Northern Territory Intervention - if you opposed it, you were accused of supporting violence and sexual abuse. It is a clever device used to ignore, ridicule and dismiss those who hold a different view about how to achieve change.

It's not the formulation of the "problem" I am questioning here, it's the deficit assumptions that inform and direct a particular conversation to solve the "problem"; that's the real challenge we face.

There are massive challenges in and around all the big-ticket items like education, health, housing and the like. All of these have a commonality of the "deficit mist" that smothers them and disables any transformational dialogue or success.

The Noel Pearson way of articulating the "problem" is intoxicating and resonates comfortably with many people. He is a great orator in some ways. Yet from my perspective, the solutions put forward by him as the way in which to address the "problem" are grounded in the same set of assumptions that created them in the first place. Albert Einstein once said: "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them" and I feel it's apt in this context.

Also, Prime Minister Abbott (12 February 2014) said: "The challenge is to turn good intentions into better outcomes". The problem within and around this comment is not that it's something not worth doing, or the fact this has been a mantra of many a government in the past with very little shift. I have no doubt Noel Pearson and the Abbott Government want to see huge gains toward a better outcome for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Unfortunately, like many others before them, I believe they will make



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the same mistakes. It's never been about lack of desire, compassion, or effort, or the lack of good will to turn good intentions into better outcomes.

The challenge is within formulating "the what" we do and the different approaches to "how we do it" on a set of assumptions that are fundamentally false. Because, it's these assumptions and perceptions that determine the outcomes. False assumptions (in this case, deficit) will undermine all good intentions. Edward DeBono said: "No amount of excellent logic will make up for errors of perception".

I position the current approach to Indigenous affairs squarely at the feet of the ideals of the Noel Pearson-led Cape York Institute and the influence these ideals foster with such strong bilateral Government support. It's these approaches that I question and I call for an honest and open critique of the underlying assumptions within them.

Unfortunately, conversations, policy development and practice around the "Aboriginal problem" have very dangerous assumptions that lead to the same approach being driven by the same simplistic, ideological solutions.

These issues are much more complex than just Blackfella and Whitefella. These conversations and this thinking sit at an ideological level and goes beyond skin colour and race. It's how we see the world that determines how we operate within it. It's this that shapes our conversations and informs the approaches put into place and it's these that determine the outcomes.

Historically, Aboriginal people have always been seen as being "deficient" and the approaches to this perceived deficiency are embedded in all forms of policy development and practice today. All have been grounded in dominant assumptions of "we know what is best for them"; "we have the answers"; "we know what they need"; or, "they are all



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drunks, they are all lazy, they are all violent"; "they don't value education"; "there is no leadership or capacity within them" and; "we know how to fix them".

Media plays a huge role here in either continuing with the negative stereotype headlines, or not. The headlines in major newspapers across Australia contribute greatly to the mainstream assumptions and perceptions of Aboriginal peoples.

These assumptions and perceptions become problematic because it only enables people to see negativity and "lack of", which in turn leads to a support of predominantly "doing to" and "doing for" approaches. Thus, Noel Pearson's powerful articulation of the "problem" and his attack of the "welfare dependency modelling" and the fact it can and has led to mostly disempowerment and apathy are critically important in this space. Yet from my perspective, his approach (the "what to do" and the "how to do it") are still embedded in the same old disabling assumptions that created them.

There is no one answer to all these challenges, yet at the moment we appear to be driven by one set of ideologies with the one preferred answer/solution to the many complexities we face and then that solution is imposed on everyone and onto everything.

To the people who continually advocate for the current dominant approach to these very complex challenges of health, education, housing, economic development and employment, I ask you: What are your underlying assumptions and perceptions about Aboriginal people? How are your assumptions formed? Where's the evidence and the independent research that prove current approaches put forward, actually work? How are people being valued and honoured in these current approaches? And do you have the courage to see that it's "your assumptions" that might be the "problem"?

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