

Our challenge is to work with the difference, not disengage from it

By National Indigenous Times
guest columnist Scott Gorringe



My name is Scott Gorringe, my mob is 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.

Over the next few weeks I want to pick up on some key aspects introduced in my article in 377 Issue Vol 13 of the National Indigenous Times on pages 3 and pages 18-19. In this article I will focus on headlines in newspapers and how making things dualism (either/or) prevents positive actions occurring and blocks creativity and collaboration.

Wednesday, September 24 in the National Indigenous Times I wrote an article that focused on shifting a discourse of deficit in and around Indigenous Australians (discourse in this context refers to a system of ideas and attitudes, assumptions and practices that shape how people "know" and construct their world) and the challenges of "being heard" when your opinions are different to those in power – those of the dominant voices.

It was an honour for my article to be accepted yet the headline published on page 1 "Why doesn't Tony Abbott meet the real First Nation leaders" again highlights the complexity within this challenge of "deficit discourse".

I assume that media feel they need to be provocative to engage the audience, yet the emotive construction of a message that uses terms such as "real First Nations leaders" pits "black" against "black" and stifles any meaningful dialogue.

It's the assumptions within the delivery of such messages that continually prevent transformational change occurring within the Indigenous space. Media have multiple dilemmas, ones which conflict between political preferences, social capacity building, financial benefits, and ethical balanced reporting. What makes this so difficult is that even though one attempts to shift away from "deficit discourse", they can find themselves unknowingly participating in it.

Further, the National Indigenous Times goes on to a headline (page 3) that reads, "Scott Gorringe says it's time legitimate leaders took back control of the Indigenous agenda". While the reader may draw that conclusion, it is not what I said. For emotive statements like "real First Nation leaders" and "legitimate leaders" are examples of the very constructs of deficit discourse I am attempting to eliminate from the Indigenous space.

By using words like "real" and "legitimate" implies the assumption is there are "unreal" and "illegitimate" Indigenous leaders out there. I do not agree with, or assume that. Leaders such as Noel Pearson and Warren Mundine should have the same amount of influence and airtime as leaders like Rosalie Kunoth-Monks and Sam Watson, not more – the same!

Just because they have opposing views on the ways to approach Indigenous challenges it shouldn't mean one is more legitimate/real than the other.

The real tragedy here is that, if these are the assumptions that are held and promoted, we create a stand-off between who a government assumes are the "real" Indigenous leaders, and who Indigenous peoples consider are the "real" or "legitimate" Indigenous leaders. It initiates and perpetuates the "never ending fight" between Indigenous and Indigenous, as well as Indigenous and government about who has the right to speak for whom.

The "never ending fight" is a distraction that cheapens the big issues facing Indigenous Australia and devalues the positive contributions we can all make to end them.

As I have stated in the previous article, this challenge is about a discourse of deficit and a discourse of deflection, it's not about who



Mithaka man, Scott Gorringe ... "Just because there are opposing views on the ways to approach Indigenous challenges it shouldn't mean one is more legitimate/real than the other."

are the "real First Nation leaders" and who isn't. We are different and our leadership must embrace the diversity and strength from these views. "Real" and/or "legitimate leaders" should not be the major focus of Indigenous affairs.

The challenge to all of us, both government and Indigenous leaders alike is to engage in a way that reflects and values the existing strengths of Indigenous families.

My perception is governments attempt to engage with Indigenous communities on a broad scale by connecting with key Indigenous leaders, yet fail through their ignorance in assuming all Indigenous people think the same way and want to do things the same way.

Bill Shorten and Tony Abbott may have the same aspirations for all Australians yet they have very different ways of achieving them. No one believes that just because their skin is white that Shorten and Abbott should think the same, yet somehow there is a perception all Indigenous people should think the same.

Moreover, the key Indigenous leaders often don't attempt to engage with Indigenous communities because of their arrogance of thinking they know what is best for all Indigenous peoples. Couple that with the relentless deficit discourse of Indigenous peoples and the unwillingness to engage with people who think differently, it's little wonder we are in this current incapacitating space of Indigenous affairs.

To understand this deficit discourse a little deeper I want to present a few very quick examples.

Firstly, if an Aboriginal student completes 12 years of schooling, enrolls into University or gains fulltime employment the reason why is often put down to good parenting, supportive teachers and the diligence of the student, yet if they drop out at Year 9, is unemployed and engaged in destructive behaviours the reason why is so often put down to their Aboriginality?

If an Aboriginal person becomes very successful in their chosen sport the assumed reason why is because they are running away from a terrible family life, a terrible community, or wanting to make good because all their family are not good. Sadly, the reason is most often not put down to their talent, dedication, skill and their commitment to training and development (Bamblett, L. 'Our stories are our survival' http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/asp/aspbooks/our_stories_are_our_survival.html) Aboriginality is often blamed for failure or used as a (deficit) reason for people to be better, yet never seen as the reason for success. It exists in the formulation of policy, embedded in practice and features strongly in media headlines.

The discourse of deficiency directs funding into schools, organisations and all things Aboriginal. All moneys allocated to schools for Indigenous students are grounded in deficit data, all focus on what the Indigenous student doesn't have with very little consideration of the strengths they bring.

Not surprisingly the Andrew Forrest report suggests a financial incentive to encourage good teachers to work in remote school communities, while at the same time suggesting financial punishment for Aboriginal parents who can't get their children to attend school.

This is only the tip of the iceberg with deficit discourse; its impact is massive and not only does it play out within the mainstream, it's also within Indigenous families/communities/organisations. We are not immune to this scourge of deficit though, even if we are Indigenous. Unknowingly we participate in it as well. This is what we need to understand before we can attempt to eliminate it.

While I admire Indigenous people who have the opportunities to negotiate with the politicians and other powerbrokers to support their aspiration and ideologies, I loathe the fact they lack the foresight and compassion to support other Indigenous people's aspirations; even if they are different to theirs.

If only they could use their power to broker talks between government and other Indigenous people who have different aspirations to theirs. That would be more favourable than abusing their power to ignore us. Today's current leadership represents a "grab what you can and stuff the rest" style of leadership that lends itself to a dictatorship, with the most dominant leading the way forward.

So how do we eliminate the scourge of deficit and exclusion from the Indigenous Australian conversations? As I stated in my previous article, dominant right wing or dominant left wing ideologies are not our greatest challenge within Indigenous affairs.

Leadership must be able to challenge disabling patterns of perceptions and behaviour while still recognising and embracing existing local leadership. To do this it must be capable of engaging in courageous, robust conversations that are free of deficit discourse. Our greatest challenge is shifting away from solutions framed in deficit theorising and practice.

The way government continues to selectively engage Indigenous leaders to speak on behalf of all Indigenous peoples needs to be seriously challenged. While I assume it is easier for Government to converse with a smaller number of people it should never be used as an excuse to engage ONLY with leaders who think the same way they do. This is not democratic, this resembles more of a dictatorship.

If people (Indigenous/non-Indigenous) assume Indigenous people can't read, lack capacity, won't work, are violent and lack leadership, of course they will set up disempowering approaches that "do to" and "do for".

The approaches to addressing the Indigenous "problem" are NOT WORKING, yet we seem to be trying to do what's NOT WORKING better than we've done it before.

Through the Forrest Report we are repeating the same old patterns and somehow believe that now a mining magnate and an Indigenous person are saying it's the right approach, that it's alright.

This is much deeper and more sophisticated than a "black/white" thing and as such requires a conversation at a much deeper level. Obviously, if there were strong support for the current way forward, then the evidence would be there with a large Indigenous presence of followership. Yet the evidence available says the opposite.

We require courage from media to honestly look at their roles in maintaining the perceptions, assumptions and practice and of deficit discourse within Indigenous affairs. Media have conditioned the public on competing and opposing views as a means to sell stories.

They can continue to pit Indigenous against Indigenous to reinforce a perception of disunity amongst the "blacks" – or not. As well, they can provoke a strength-based public debate to inform deficit free policy development that empowers people and enables transformational shift – or not.

They have the power though their circle of influence to change the conversation within Indigenous affairs in Australia with headlines and stories that focus away from negatively, dualism and struggles and toward ones that talks of strengths and aspirations. Governments have a responsibility to seek opinions from a diversity of Indigenous leadership and engage with their different aspirations. As well, Indigenous leadership has an obligation to itself foster honourable relationships between each other and powerbrokers that benefit as well as values the capacity of all Indigenous peoples.

Again I call for a "Bringing Together Leadership" that enables change, rather than imposes it. I call for a leadership that develops policy and embraces practices which recognise and value the existing strengths within people.

The power is within the difference, not the sameness. Our challenge is to work with the difference, not disengage from it.