

## **Blame game ends here**

By Noel Pearson  
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In an article about the Aurukun rape case this week, academic Marcia Langton wrote that “it would be a fair bet that each of the adults who pleaded guilty to raping this child was receiving a government social security or Community Development Employment Program payment. It is difficult not to draw the conclusion that dysfunctional Aboriginal behaviour is financially supported by government funding.”

Langton, in her article (“Stop the abuse of children”, *The Australian*, 12 December), identified the nub of the problem in remote communities: government funds dysfunctional behaviour and there is no connection between what a person or a community does and the income they receive.

Money for nothing - passive welfare - is in the long-term corrosive.

The other explanation that has been offered for the social breakdown in remote communities is government under-investment. Anthropologist David Martin said this week that Aurukun has been “abandoned and neglected”. “By any measure,” Martin said, “Aurukun is hugely under-invested in by government in terms of all the things we know are essential to civil society: decent health, decent education, decent housing, decent food, law enforcement.”

I agree that government investment should have been greater and must increase. However, those who attribute dysfunction in remote communities mainly to government underfunding must answer this question: For people who live in a welfare economy, can increased government service delivery compensate for the total absence of the kind of incentives and signals that in the mainstream inform people’s behaviour and form their personalities into functional citizens?

I maintain that it cannot. Mainstream Australians – with jobs and mortgages – can hardly imagine what is like to live in a community where personal behaviour carries no rational consequences.

In remote communities, people’s behaviour makes no difference to their circumstances; irresponsibility elicits almost no reaction from government or community.

The situation in Aurukun is the direct opposite of mainstream Australians’ experience, which makes them functional, affluent people. In the mainstream, people’s efforts directly determine their circumstances. They take this for granted to such an extent that it has taken them many years to understand what is missing in places such as Aurukun.

I and other Cape York people have advocated a fundamental change from unconditional to conditional welfare. There are many more dimensions to our reform agenda, but putting in place some basic, universal obligations on adults who receive income support through the social security system is key.

When everything in a person’s life is provided by someone else and nothing is expected in return, you set in place an economic and social system of taking and no giving. Then you add alcohol to the mix and, later on, drugs. And you keep giving the money for free. So that recipients can pay for food, shelter and necessities, but increasingly, as addictions grow, the money is allocated to grog, drugs and gambling.

And you do this in a society where what the anthropologists call “demand sharing” is a strong part of the cultural system: people in kin relationships cannot resist sharing their consideration and possessions.

But it’s not barramundi or wild honey that is shared: it is money for drinking, drug-taking and gambling. Unconditional welfare plus addictions plus demand sharing: you have all the ingredients for social disintegration and the abandonment of responsibility.

For this analysis we have been accused of blaming the victim. But, as Langton pointed out, remote

indigenous people are victims of dehumanising government policies.

The worst of these policy failures is the total disconnect between income support (including CDEP), which is mainly federal, and government service delivery, which is mainly provided by the Queensland Government.

The Family Responsibilities Commission, which is the centrepiece of the social reforms that the Cape York Institute has suggested to the Australian and Queensland governments, is intended to remedy this fatal systemic flaw.

The FRC will be charged with making decisions about whether welfare recipients are fulfilling their obligations. We have recommended that four obligations be attached to welfare payments. In short:

- Each adult who receives welfare payments and is the parent or legal guardian of a child should be required to ensure that the child maintains a 100 per cent school attendance record (other than explained absences).
- All adults must not cause or allow children to be neglected or abused.
- All adults must not commit drug, alcohol, gambling or family violence offences.
- All adults must abide by conditions related to their tenancy in public housing.

Our plan provides for a retired magistrate to chair a panel in each community, including two senior elders from the community, to make the relevant decisions and hold individuals accountable to their families and especially their children.

We proposed that the Queensland Government create the FRC (the Howard government allocated funding for its operation) because this body needs to work closely with state government agencies, such as the Queensland departments of education and child safety.

Let me illustrate how the FRC is intended to work by explaining how it could have intervened in the dysfunction that led to rape of the 10-year-old Wik girl.

If the FRC had been in place before the girl returned to Aurukun from Cairns, it is possible the gang rape would not have occurred. For instance, the mother of the girl could have been referred to the FRC for failing to meet one or more of the obligations outlined above. If the girl did not have a 100 per cent school attendance rate (a reasonable assumption), or if she was unsupervised by her mother and not kept safe, then the mother would have been referred to the FRC. The issuance of a child protection order and the subsequent removal of the girl from Aurukun would also have triggered a referral of the mother to the FRC.

Assuming the mother was referred to the FRC for not meeting these obligations, the two local elders and the retired magistrate would have been able to refer the mother to support services to address her and her family's challenges, such as a program to improve her parenting skills, alcohol rehabilitation, or assistance with money management.

A case manager would also have been appointed to provide support and advice to the mother, and to assist the FRC. The FRC could also have referred the girl (reportedly intellectually impaired) to appropriate mental health services.

The FRC could also have redirected the mother's welfare payments to a responsible adult who would care for the girl. Alternatively, the FRC could have redirected the mother's welfare payments to our proposed conditional income management regime, whereby the family does not lose the benefit of its income. Rather, the FRC would determine that the welfare payments must be spent on essential expenses such as food, rent, bills, medicine and education.

The FRC would also have been able to intervene in the cases of the alleged perpetrators. The parents of the younger perpetrators would have been referred to the FRC if their boys did not have a 100 per cent school attendance rate or if they were left unsupervised and not kept safe. Likewise, the adult perpetrators would have come to the attention of the FRC if they had breached alcohol or violence laws. The FRC could have referred these parents and adults to support services.

The anticipated results of the introduction of the FRC are that local indigenous authority is rebuilt, the

essential expenses of children are met, welfare payments are not spent on grog and gambling, parents take increased responsibility for their children and positive social norms are restored with regard to issues such as education, child neglect and alcohol abuse.

The first thing we need Queensland Premier Anna Bligh and Prime Minister Kevin Rudd to decide on at next week's Council of Australian Governments meeting is which of their governments will legislate to establish the FRC at the first parliamentary session of the new year. There should also be a decision to prepare legislation for introduction at the first session of whichever parliament is going to have carriage of this legislation.

The Aurukun Shire Council is committed to these reforms. I look forward to the ending of the intergovernmental blame game at next week's COAG meeting so we can start tackling the problems at Aurukun.

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