

Challenges of the First World

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The ultimate context in which indigenous people in Australia are situated is economic. In much of the discussion there is an assumption that indigenous people in Australia are in a similar position to indigenous people elsewhere in the world.

But there is a fundamental difference between indigenous peoples in a developed country, in our case Australia, and in developing countries, whether they govern their own nation-state (as in Papua New Guinea) or are minorities within a nation-state (such as in West Papua).

It is completely different for indigenous people to live within a welfare state provided by a developed country and in the absence of one in a developing country. The economic context in which Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders live is completely different from that of our indigenous friends in PNG.

The crucial thing about a First World welfare state is this: the safety net can completely replace the traditional or postcolonial economies of indigenous communities with income support through government transfer.

Passive welfare is today the predominant component of indigenous economies in Australia. The First World welfare state has completely replaced any real indigenous economy.

This distinction, between indigenous peoples living in a First World welfare state and those who do not, is decisive and is not understood when people think about the survival of indigenous cultures in a globalised world.

I watched a film from PNG and was struck by the cultural vibrancy and diversity of the country. Two thoughts returned to me.

The first was that across the world cultural and linguistic diversity is being maintained because the lifestyles around which these cultures exist continue and traditional economic life continues. It continues not just by these people's choice but of necessity. The livelihood of these societies is intimately connected with their lifestyle and traditional cultural forms.

The problem that indigenous peoples living in a First World welfare state face is this: there is no longer any need to maintain the traditional economy or lifestyle. The retention of traditional cultural forms then becomes a choice rather than a necessity.

The second thought was that passive welfare and traditional life are not compatible. Passive welfare undermines traditional relationships and values and gives rise to social problems and, ultimately, social breakdown.

There has been a refusal to accept passive welfare as real. The idea that income support programs help remote indigenous people to maintain a traditional lifestyle was the assumption behind commonwealth policy from the 1970s. It was assumed that: first, indigenous people in remote communities should decide what kind of lifestyle they wanted, including a traditional lifestyle (and assimilation would no longer be forced on them) and, second, they should receive income support from government to pursue this.

The story is complex before the 70s. My view is the decisive change that occurred after the 60s was the near-comprehensive collapse of (discriminatory) indigenous participation in the mainstream economy and their transfer to income support from government.

What choices do we face as an indigenous people living in a First World welfare state? There are three I can think of. One is to remain where we are: attempting to retain our traditions while dependent on passive welfare for our predominant livelihood. I would say this is not a choice; we can't continue as we are. If we do, the social and cultural pauperisation of indigenous society in Australia will continue and we will not establish the foundations necessary for cultural vitality and transmission to future generations.

The second choice is to go back, to maintain our cultural and linguistic diversity as the people of PNG are able to, or other indigenous people in the Third World. But this is not possible. We are engulfed by the Australian economy and society and it is impossible to see how territories could be established where the welfare state no longer reached and where traditional economies could be revived. (This is

not to say we cannot reform the welfare state within indigenous regions.) For one thing, our people would refuse this course in practice, no matter what romantic yearnings we may harbour.

The third choice is to find solutions to a bicultural and bi and multilingual future. That is, we must face the challenge that comes with culture and traditions no longer being linked with our economy in a relationship of coincidental necessity but rather one of conscious choice.

This is what I have in mind when I suggest a First World indigenous people rather than a Fourth World people.

This path has several elements. First, it is about being able to retain our distinct cultures, traditions and identity while engaging in the wider world to the extent of individual choice. This individual choice would need to be compatible with, rather than contradictory to, the maintenance of our communal identity.

Second, we need to ensure the economic structure underpinning our society is real. This will require reform to the welfare system affecting our people so we get rid of passive welfare. It will also mean our people gain their livelihood through a combination of real economic activities - traditional, subsistence, modern - and this will include the need to be mobile through orbits into the wider world and back to home base again.

Third, education will be the key to enabling bicultural and multilingual facility, as well as economic mobility.

Fourth, we will need to shift our cultural knowledge from its oral foundations to written and digitised foundations. The transition made by the Jews from oral Hebrew to written, thousands of years ago, is one we must make as a matter of urgency.

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