

## **Give power to our people**

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*All human beings are packed with unlimited potential. Poor people are no exception to this rule. But the world around them never gave them the opportunity to know that each of them is carrying a wonderful gift in them. The gift remains unknown and unwrapped. Our challenge is to help the poor unwrap their gift.* - Muhammad Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank, Nobel Peace Prize laureate

Far north Queensland was swarming with senators this week. As well as the Committee on Constitutional and Legal Affairs Wild Rivers inquiry, the Committee on Regional and Remote Indigenous Communities was in town looking at a broad range of issues affecting indigenous people in remote communities. Having already appeared before the Wild Rivers inquiry, I accepted an invitation to speak to the other Senate committee dealing with remote communities.

It is the wellbeing of Aboriginal people that most concerns me. The Wild Rivers imbroglio of the past 12 months has been a wasteful and unwanted diversion from what should be our real work: social and economic reform in Cape York Peninsula.

We have put some important work aside to fight a rear-guard action to preserve the land rights of our people from dispossession at the hands of the new green rednecks.

I left the hearing quite depressed. I was just not convinced that this Senate committee was going to produce any great breakthrough report.

It reminded me of scores of such committees that have inquired into these same issues over the past four decades. Just Groundhog Day. It wasn't the fault of the senators particularly. It was as much my own for not being able to articulate the source of my depression.

This is what I should have explained to the senators so they could understand what I mean when I say governments, politicians and bureaucrats just don't get the point.

The fundamental difference between socialists and liberals centres on planning. Socialists believe the state can plan development. The liberals oppose the socialists on this point on a number of grounds, the principal being that it denies freedom to individuals to choose their own destinies and that the real engine of development - self-interest and freedom of choice - is lost to the socialist method.

Socialism is capable of development, if we are prepared to tolerate high levels of state dictation. However, self-interest and the freedom to choose within free markets is more powerful for development. And then there are all of the unintended consequences of best-laid plans.

Now, given that we accept the argument of the liberals in relation to this, one of the confronting questions of our reform agenda in Cape York Peninsula is the extent to which it is predicated on planning and the problem of social engineering.

A key aspect of our agenda that liberals would be concerned with is the extent to which our welfare conditions and the Queensland Family Responsibilities Commission take away individual responsibility.

In response, I have argued that the effect of passive welfare and the collapse of social norms that underpinned dysfunctional irresponsibility on the part of individuals made it necessary for society to mandate some basic personal responsibility.

The mandating of personal responsibility is justifiable because as soon as individuals assume their responsibilities they are free to make their own choices. It would not be necessary to mandate personal responsibility if our people lived in a real economy: it is passive welfare that corrodes (and excuses an abdication of) personal responsibility.

The measures of Cape York welfare reform are artificial but they are in response to an artificially created problem.

Having justified our measures, we must nevertheless be careful: there is no guarantee they will not result in unintended consequences. We are charting new territory.

We are trying to implement a policy aimed at tackling a problem occasioned by the intervention of government machinery - in partnership with that very machinery, using many of its methods and means.

That this is a source of great misgiving to us is evidenced by the difficulties we have had in explaining to government people what we mean by “passive service delivery”, that passive service delivery by government is part of the passive welfare problem.

Of course, market liberals also make plans. But they understand that planning is just a tool and understand the limits of planning. They know what is more important than the plan is the free individual who, motivated by self-interest and able to choose in a free market, will actually effect economic and social growth.

I think people fall on either side of the middle of a spectrum ranging from ultra libertarianism to five-year-plan socialism. Individuals of the centre-left and the centre-right may not be very far apart, but people’s basic philosophical disposition tends to be inclined towards planning or market choice.

People from government are generally planners. Since the 1980s, government bureaucracies have adopted business management concepts, so they increasingly fall closer to the centre, but no matter these adaptations, they are still fundamentally statist.

The problem with the Council of Australian Governments’ remote service delivery blueprint is that it is all about service delivery. Reform does involve the delivery of services, but services and projects are secondary enablers.

The primary drivers, the intangible engines of human motivation - self-interest, free markets, personal responsibility and social capital and the tangible human enablers who help to mobilise that motivation - are missing from COAG’s blueprint.

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