

Senators, start up the intangible engine of human motivation

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Last weekend I told readers about my appearance before the Senate select committee on regional and remote indigenous communities at hearings in far north Queensland.

In essence the good senators are inquiring about how development may take place in remote indigenous communities. I despaired in my failure to communicate my conviction that the overwhelming focus of Australian governments on service delivery will not produce development. Man needs services, but he cannot live by the hand of government alone. I now feel I should have talked to them about the importance of the intangible engines of human motivation: the engines that drive development and contribute to wellbeing.

It is hard to capture the intangible engines of human motivation in a service plan or a program plan. Services and programs can be only secondary enablers and supports. Without the primary drivers there will be no fundamental and lasting change.

At the level of the individual, the engine of human motivation that must be mobilised is self-interest, particularly the ability to make decisions, in a free market, in one's own interests and that of one's family.

Self-interest is structurally thwarted in the indigenous communities that I know. The absence of free markets in key areas of individual endeavour (for example, training and employment opportunities, housing and enterprise) means that individuals are constrained in their ability to choose and to vote with their feet and take with their own hands.

Desired goods are obtainable only through public community-distribution channels that subject people to the daunting internecine politics of the public community. Those who succeed at politics succeed; those who cannot, miss out.

Individuals who are defeated by this system are struck with a structural apathy. A pall of ennui afflicts these places where many people are resigned to not pursuing their interests in the public realm.

But it is not that self-interest is absent. Unable to be pursued within free and impartial markets, self-interest is pursued in the public domain by those willing to play the stressful games of community politics. Nepotism and petty organisation-centred scrambling are usually the result of self-interest in the public domain.

For too many people daunted by the prospect of realising self-interest in the public domain, self-interest is pursued within the kinship and demand-sharing network of the community's culture. Traditional cultural reciprocity and generosity turns into humbugging, bludging and manipulation, exploitation and plain theft and fraud within and between families.

Stealing your disabled relative's keycard or conning a loan out of a neighbour: these are weekly episodes of self-interest being pursued at the most miserable level.

The dominance of the public sphere and the stunted private sphere in the communities reflects the limited individual freedom in these places. The reform agenda we are trying to pursue in Cape York is about growing the private sphere and limiting the public sphere to its rightful role.

We must keep in mind Nobel laureate Amartya Sen's point: for individuals to have real choice, they must have the capabilities to choose. Reforms must aim to help individuals develop their capabilities, so they can make real and advantageous choices.

As well as tackling the structural barriers to individual choice, the challenge for our reform agenda is this: how do we mobilise self-interest where it is dormant and a mere pilot light flickering in the uncertain breasts of people?

Self-interest can be externally constrained by structural barriers, as well as internally inhibited by a lack of confidence, inexperience, fear, lack of ambition and limited outlooks: the absence of hope.

When Australian politicians and policy-makers - black and white - look at Aborigines, they make an unconscious discrimination between, on the one hand, those people who believe self-interest is relevant and improve their lot through seizing opportunities, taking up jobs and owning their own homes and, on the other hand, those for whom self-interest is irrelevant, alien, even unsavoury.

Those in this latter category are assumed to be too backward or a different kind of human for whom materialism and self-regard are antithetical to their essence as cultural beings. So don't even think about home ownership for them. Don't even think about whether they would want to have more income. In effect this view says: if they abandon their poverty, they will abandon their identity.

I refuse to accept this latter categorisation. It is probably descended from Rousseau's noble ideal, and the contemporary non-Aboriginal purveyors of this view nurture this idea because they are projecting on to native peoples the kind of disavowal of materialism that they know Western man will never make.

Our reform agenda is based on the belief in the possibility of all individuals. Reform is about recognising and mobilising the passions, talents and preferences of individuals.

This is what English social entrepreneur Andrew Mawson said when he came out to Australia in 2000: "My experience of people in the East End of London is that we all have passions of one kind or another. Some of them might be a bit dodgy, but actually we have got them and you have actually got to start where people's passions are. We began to back people, not structures."

The pursuit of self-interest by individuals produces a social result in at least two ways. First, strong and functional families are a product of self-interest. Individuals have a great interest in their own families and this interest produces a good social result.

Second, the sum total of having functional and strong families that are the product of individuals within these families pursuing their self-interests is this: you have a strong and functional community: a great social result. Self-interest does not just produce good for the individual or their family, it produces a social good.

This point is important. Many people assume that self-interest produces only private gain. They don't get Adam Smith's point that it produces social gain as well.

Humans are not just motivated by self-interest: they have interests and a sense of duty and belonging outside of their families, and with a wider community. This desire to belong and to contribute to a community is another engine of human motivation.

My dear senators, the starting place must be an acceptance that self-interest is the engine that drives individuals and ultimately social progress. It is this engine that must be cranked up and allowed to flourish. It is the same for peoples the world over.

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