


Indigenous People can Lead the Way to Better Future - 16 June

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As an Indigenous person you can often be subjected to no end of views, advice and ideas on what Indigenous people need to do to make their lives better. From Perth to Canberra attention is given to politicians, police and others on their opinions on how to fix this Indigenous 'problem'. More often than not our 'problem' is defined as an inability to deal with alcohol or drugs, or maybe to look after ourselves, our children and families. When the problem is defined like this then of course the solution becomes simple – ban alcohol, manage our money for us and take even greater control over our lives. 

The reality is that the problem is far from simple and the solution far from simple. It becomes disheartening to sometimes see and hear such educated people believe that the wrongs, pain and suffering of a people over so many years can be so easily ignored. I know the intention in most cases is good. What they often fail to see though is that Indigenous people actually want to be able to participate and prosper in the new world economy but with a strong grasp on our unique cultural, belief and value systems that has developed over thousands of years – in a way, this is not dissimilar to the desires of the many waves of migrants that have come to Australian shores over the years.

The plight of Indigenous people is well documented, but not so well understood is how this trauma over two hundred years continues to tear at the inner spirit of many of us. Successive policies may have been well intended and there is no doubting that many non-Indigenous people truly want Indigenous people to take their place equally at the table. The policies have however failed too often because of poor decision making by our non Aboriginal leaders. It goes without saying that Indigenous people deserve to not only be consulted on decisions, which does not happen enough before pronouncements are made, but we also deserve to be supported in delivering the solutions.

Over the years we have seen incidents where police have been assaulted when dealing with intoxicated people and on some occasions these people are identified as Indigenous Australians. These are unfortunate incidents but the resulting generalisations about Indigenous people made by some provide little if any help. Alcohol and drug related violence is an Australia wide problem. You only have to ask police and hospital staff about their weekend at work to understand how pervasive the problem is today. Indigenous communities face these same problems but because of generational pain and suffering these problems can be magnified.

As was highlighted by our Prime Minister in a speech to Parliament... *'Addressing harmful alcohol and drug use is complex for all communities including the Indigenous population which suffer grossly disproportionate rates of disadvantage in education, health, employment housing and opportunity'*.

We are the most disadvantaged of all Australians. All of which contributes to increasing the likelihood of misusing alcohol and drugs. Whilst many often react to any incident with 'new' calls for action, it is concerning that it always seems to mean greater control over our lives with more law enforcement or punitive measures. The evidence shows that these measures on their own simply do not help a person with an alcohol or drug problem. We already have appallingly high rates of incarceration amongst Indigenous people which have increased each year since a Royal Commission 20 years ago that aimed to reduce this rate. Indigenous people want to see this approach change.

It's easy to get despondent about this, but there are answers and it is being tackled in a way that is based on evidence and in consultation with Indigenous people.

Indigenous people across the nation are meeting this week at the first National Indigenous Drug & Alcohol Conference to take responsibility by working with each other and other Australians to share and learn. We want to build and restore strong social and cultural norms in our communities.

At Fitzroy Crossing in the Kimberley, women led a community campaign for alcohol restrictions which resulted in the incidence of domestic violence and alcohol-related injuries going down, and a safer place for families and children. Now the community is working with police, business and government to improve services in their community. In Halls Creek, the community's push for alcohol restrictions last year has brought a sharp drop in the incidence of arrests and domestic violence, whilst, in the Northern Territory the implementation of OPAL fuel that is "unsniffable" has seen a dramatic decrease in petrol sniffing.

There are also some great examples of Indigenous innovators that are determined to make things better. Indigenous doctor Noel Hayman is one such person.

Working for many years at the Inala Indigenous Health Service in Brisbane Noel had a vision to encourage young Indigenous people into the health profession. Like many Indigenous people, Noel came from humble and traumatic beginnings. His grandfather was taken away from his family around 1914 and placed at Purga Mission just outside Ipswich. In years to come Noel would become one of the first Indigenous people to complete medicine at university, where he is now an Associate Professor. Today his real vision is coming to fruition with a Centre of Excellence in Indigenous Health Care at Inala, to be opened in 2011. It will provide innovative and alternative teaching for medical, nursing and allied health students, and give them an environment in which they can excel. Noel has always wanted a place that encourages Indigenous people to utilize their cultural knowledge and learn about western medicine to give them the best medical research and training on offer. Thus the Centre will also contribute to research with links to the University of Queensland.

Generations of Indigenous disadvantage cannot be turned around quickly. Governments must take responsibility for addressing their past failures and all Australians must take greater responsibility for change. Change begins in the lives of every individual and family and leaders must accept that Indigenous people can lead the way.

Associate Professor Ted Wilkes is the Chair of the National Indigenous Drug and Alcohol Committee for the Australian National Council on Drugs.

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