

## 1905 Act Thinking – Time to shift paradigms.

### A flawed paradigm

Next year we will mark the centenary of a piece of legislation that did untold damage to Aboriginal people in Western Australia. It built on and exacerbated attitudes that, I fear, remain largely with us today. It allowed us, in the name of 'protection' of Aboriginal people, to remove all power from those people, and usher in a century of systematic dispossession that continues to this day. It is time to challenge '1905 Act Thinking' and to challenge it, we need to understand it.

The central flaw that many of us - Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal are caught in, is that we believe that the locus of solutions lies with government. We maintain the myth that changing the way government departments go about their business can seriously address the issues that Aboriginal communities face. I have actively colluded in this fiction for the last 20 years, and feel that, for all my good intent, I may have contributed in small ways to on-going disempowerment. Because while we keep the debate focussed on what these departments are doing, we are distracting resources, energy, ideas, from the real solutions.

I think we are, at present, actively demonstrating the truth in Einstein's statement "We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."

Consider the thinking that created them. In 1905, through the Aborigines Act, we in WA launched a relationship between our Government and Aboriginal people that has proved disastrous. It has proved disastrous because it removed authority, from the people, over all aspects of their lives.

Human beings live their lives trying to ensure that their needs and aspirations are met.

Broadly speaking, there are 4 'spheres of support' that most of us can draw on in meeting our needs and aspirations:

Our self in our complex and rich individuality

Our family: those people we feel related to by blood or contract and in which there are certain forces of 'duty' at play.

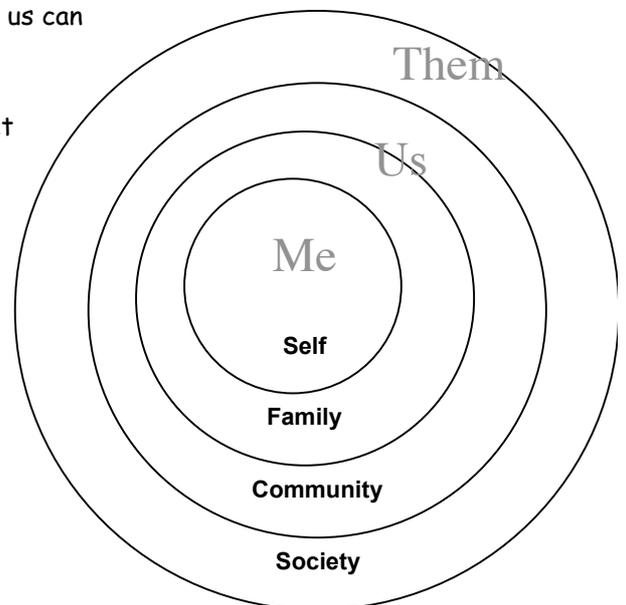
Our community: those people, beyond our family, who we feel ourselves to be in relationship with, and where forces of 'reciprocity' are at play - a balance of give and take that impacts on the strength of community for us

Our society: those people who we don't know who are slotted into organisations - departments, corporations, governments, where forces of formality (policy, programs, planning, rules, legislation) - are at play. We do what we do because we are required by written statements to do it.

Our self is the world of '**me**'

Our family and community are the world of '**us**'.

Our society is the world of '**them**' - people we don't know.



In Australia, all 4 spheres are **essential** to our well being, different spheres playing different roles in helping us meet our own needs and aspirations. The extent to which any one or more of them break down will be the extent to which people are unable to effectively meet their own needs and aspirations.

And in 1905<sup>1</sup> we embarked on a path of systematically **removing** authority, resources and responsibility from Aboriginal individuals (self), families and communities, and placing that authority, resources and responsibility with the government ('society'). The "Me" and "Us" for Aboriginal people ceased to have power in their own lives. "They" took the power. It was a disaster. Of course it was a disaster. So - in the 60's and 70's - we stopped - supposedly. Only we didn't. In trying to repair the damage that had been done, we moved to a passive welfare model. The 'solution' remained, from an Aboriginal perspective, with the 'them' of society.

This model was readily accepted because over three generations of **enforced** dependency, Aboriginal people had come to assume that authority lay with the government. Welfare dependency was born. Imposed dependency moved to internalised dependency, and the pattern continues today. The great cry from too many Aboriginal people remains 'what they should do about it' (which is the cry of a colonised people) rather than 'what we will do about it' (which is the cry of an empowered people).

### **Changing the paradigm**

So we need a profound change in direction, and the change can only be led by Aboriginal people. Over the last 2 decades, many Aboriginal leaders have emerged who understand that it is time to move beyond the (essential and important) fight for rights, to an expanded fight for genuine self-empowerment.

But if it is true that Aboriginal people must lead the way in their recovery, where does that leave us - we non-Aboriginal people who want to see genuine justice come to our nation? Our role is acknowledging the causes, then making the space for Aboriginal people to play their role, then responding, with appropriate resources, to the ideas and initiatives that emerge.

And the role of our political and moral leaders is to say to our nation - "strive to understand what has happened here, and if you don't or won't understand, at least back away and give Aboriginal leaders the space to do those things they need to do." Because virtually everything we have done, as governments, has failed, resulting in steadily more dysfunction within Aboriginal communities. The answer lies within the families and communities, yet all of us - Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal - are so distracted by questions of what society (governments and other strangers) should do that we draw energy and resources away from families and communities.

A few years ago I was doing a youth needs study in Stirling. I held a number of meetings with Aboriginal groups. A young man in one of these groups said this to me: "I'm going to graduate from University at the end of this year. I have a family of around 300 - 400 people. I could do fantastic work with and for them. I could make a real difference. But no-one will pay me to do that, and I want to buy a house. Instead, I'll be snapped up by a bureaucracy and told that I'm not to focus on my family or community."

Effectively, then we have a nation wide 'asset drain' from families and communities (where the real solutions lie) out to society. We are paying Aboriginal people millions of dollars to work in bureaucracies (and virtually all that I meet are working hard and passionately to the point of burn-out). Why are we not paying people millions to work with their own families? Why, when they try to do that, do we habitually call it nepotism?

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<sup>1</sup> through the 'Aborigine's Act 1905'. similar legislation was introduced in all states of Australia.

Some of the wisest Aboriginal people I know - people who I believe have genuine solutions - are unemployed because they don't want to work in ways that make no difference. So they stay poor, and work directly with their families, trying to help their young survive and prosper. Others take a job for 6 - 12 months to top up the income, then go back to the 'real work' of working within their own families and communities. Because we won't resource it. Because we're still stuck in a fantasy that the locus of solutions is out there in the realm of 'society'. Many of those who are employed in government feel that their constant struggle is to make those departments somehow relevant to their families and communities. But the paradigm of 'society'; of 1905 Act thinking - is so strong that this is a burdensome struggle.

The way forward, as articulated by so many Aboriginal leaders, lies with people in families and communities healing; standing up, refusing to collude in their own dispossession. They cannot do this under a siege of judgement and misunderstanding. What they need from us, mainly, is space to get on with their own re-empowerment. They need us to be ready to channel government resources in response to genuine community dialogue, rather than channelling government resources into government initiatives.

### Wadjella work.

It seems to me, then, that the work of Aboriginal people is to stand up and move forward, and their leadership is working tirelessly to make that happen. The work of us non-Aboriginal people is to get out of the way so they can do this. We get in the way by judging them negatively for who they are; by ridiculing or denying or silencing their voices and their history and even their cries; by thinking we have something to offer, when the solutions look frighteningly like the problems. We get out of the way by deeply, genuinely acknowledging what has happened, because that acknowledgement moves people beyond victim mode. Once people are heard, they can begin to move on. Like the Vietnam Vets walking down the streets of Sydney 20 years after the event and saying, as so many did, " I feel like I've arrived home at last".

The next stage, after this acknowledgement, is to be ready to respond to Aboriginal leadership, (including leaders who are immersed in their family and community, even though they may be unrecognised beyond it). This is far more valuable and effective than, as Geoff Gallop has so damagingly done, criticising and attacking the leadership for their lack of success, so far, in healing the inter-generational impacts of systematic dispossession and trauma.

For us Wadjellas, the acknowledgement must continue. Just like Anzac Day. And we must step back from our old 'great white saviour' ways and be ready to listen, respond to and work together with the Aboriginal people who find, within their own families and communities, the strengths and wisdom that will help their children and grandchildren grow strong.

In 2005 let's finally step away from our 100 year old thinking, and allow the space for self-determination to become reality rather than rhetoric.