

## **Taking ownership**

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IS inadequate housing and overcrowding the cause of the social chaos and abuse in my home town, Hope Vale, that I described in *Inquirer* two weeks ago? I may placate my critics if I said yes, but there is no necessary causal connection between overcrowded housing, under-investment in infrastructure and abuse.

There are many places in the developing world where large extended families live cheek by jowl in miserably poor housing, and there is no violence, incest and chaos. Many of the world's poorest people are strong in family life and socially rich, even if they are materially poor.

Poor, overcrowded housing does relate to health issues and many social tensions and problems. But it is to engage in denial to say sexual and other violence against one's own people is the consequence of government neglect of housing and infrastructure needs.

The honest answer as to the source of the abuse I described last week is grog and drugs. It is the epidemic of grog and drugs, and the chaos and breakdown of social and cultural norms that they have occasioned, that have resulted in people abusing their own kith and kin.

Abuse is not a question of bricks, mortar and money. It is a question of collapsed social and cultural norms and the breakdown of moral codes within families and communities. The problem with the prevailing norms today is that there is too much tolerance of abuse. The great majority of people in dysfunctional communities are not engaged in pathological behaviour and they are opposed to the abuse. The problem is that they are passive and there is a social paralysis in the face of horrific problems.

Most Hope Vale people hate the abuse. But they won't stand up to the abusers. And they won't insist that the behaviour of the abusers must be confronted. Many of them deny the connection between the grog and drugs and the noise and abuse. Yes, they will admit the connection when pressed, but then they will say; "Oh, but it's the irresponsible drinkers who make it bad for the responsible ones." Or they will say: "It's not the grog that's the problem, it's the boredom", or the lack of jobs, or government neglect, or the lack of recreational facilities, or the overcrowded housing.

This is what is known as the symptom theory of substance abuse. This theory argues that addictions to grog and drugs are not the primary problems; their abuse is only a symptom of other problems.

The symptom theory is an ideology of social denial of addiction. The denial that the individual addict needs to avoid facing up to their addiction as the cause of their misfortunes, and that of their kin, is furnished by the progressive ideology of the symptom theory. Therefore the editor of the National Indigenous Times newspaper, Chris Graham, argued last week that the main cause of violence in indigenous communities is government under-spending on Aboriginal programs and infrastructure. Both the addicts engaged in abuse and the majority of Hope Vale community members, who would love nothing better than for the abuse to stop, are misled by people such as Graham who put forward the so-called "bleeding obvious" explanation of overcrowding and under-investment in bricks and mortar as the reasons for social problems.

I would say most indigenous people and leaders across the country would concur with Graham's view. It is a measure of the extent to which we are unable as a people to face up squarely to the devil of substance abuse and the perverse ideology it generates.

Does this mean overcrowding and insufficient investment in housing and infrastructure are not substantial problems? Of course not. But if we invested the \$2.3 billion that has been estimated as the shortfall in indigenous housing provision tomorrow, we would make little progress with social problems. This investment would be wasted without fundamental policy changes.

The policy changes we propose as part of our reform agenda for Cape York Peninsula proceed from an analysis of housing that differs from that of people such as Graham and Social Justice Commissioner Tom Calma, who see overcrowding and under-funding as the principle problems. While we agree these and other issues such as poor construction and inappropriate design are relevant factors, we believe the poor state of housing is also attributable to the behaviour of householders. Good houses are too rapidly turned into bad houses. The life expectancy of houses on Aboriginal land is ridiculously low, from 10 to 20 years, compared with 50 years for public housing in the mainstream.

Under-funding is not the only cause of overcrowding. The short lifespan of houses worsens the situation as it reduces the number of habitable dwellings. When construction costs of housing in remote areas range from \$250,000 to \$400,000 a unit, then patently we have to confront the problem.

The causes of the destruction of indigenous homes include passivity (people don't value what has been delivered as passive welfare) and the collapse of responsibility. No matter how strong our analysis is on dispossession, government responsibility and indigenous rights, we cannot avoid speaking the truth about passivity and lack of responsibility.

Families must have skin in the game if indigenous housing is to move from passivity to responsibility. This means ownership.

The welfare housing model introduced into Aboriginal communities 30 years ago was a poor, inappropriate model characterised by: perpetual tenancy; a mixed record of tenancy management by community council landlords who lose nothing because there is always the next government grant; insufficient rental rates; poor rental collection; and poor maintenance of stock.

This model has shaken down to the situation we see today: houses that cost a bomb to repair; houses that have a short life; families expecting to be given a replacement house when the old one disintegrates.

Before we turn to housing on Aboriginal land, we should first acknowledge that home ownership off Aboriginal land - in the mainstream - is an outstanding success. The indigenous home loans program administered by Indigenous Business Australia has resulted in more than 12,000 homes being owned by indigenous families across the country.

You compare these privately owned homes with the houses rented by families, black and white, from welfare housing organisations. The contrast is profound. They are well maintained, the owners do not allow over-crowding problems, there is pride and all of the benefits that flow from owning a home.

Home ownership off Aboriginal land is outstandingly successful policy, while welfare housing on Aboriginal land is an irrational disaster. Federal Indigenous Affairs Minister Mal Brough should be working with Aboriginal housing organisations to privatise their housing stock and to vastly increase the funds available through the home loans program administered by the IBA. There should not be waiting lists for loans. Instead of simply cutting off welfare housing allocations to urban areas, the Government should be building on success and pushing the revolution forward. By all means, get away from welfare housing and move people into home ownership, but don't be mean about funding.

As for housing on Aboriginal land, I want to get two issues clear about my views.

First, community members should obtain long-term leases, for example 99 years, from communal land trusts, on which they can own their own homes. There is no question of holes appearing on Aboriginal land as a result of foreclosure because the land would remain inalienable outside of the community.

Second, this limitation on alienation outside of the community would mean that no real property market can be created in relation to housing on Aboriginal land. Houses will be largely unrealisable assets, more valuable as homes than real estate.

A home ownership program must take into account, therefore, the following issues: first, the affordability of homes in a situation where construction costs are high and incomes are low; second, the undesirability of promoting economically irrational decisions by families as to where they invest their

capital (they may be better off investing in realisable assets elsewhere), while understanding the decision to live on Aboriginal land does have its costs.

The Government is talking about 99-year leases, not freehold alienation of title. Why is loss of land therefore being raised as the fear against home ownership? The fact the Government made legislative changes last year that have gone beyond the facilitation of private ownership of leases to community members, and eroded land rights, partially explains the paranoia. But the other source of objection is the failure of people who own their own homes to imagine that the rest of our mob would like the same thing, too.

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