

## **Social housing model rips the heart out of indigenous communities**

Noel Pearson

*The Weekend Australian*

6–7 January, 2010

“I OFTEN take my doctors from the Third World on the short walk from the hospital to the prison nearby. It is the most instructive 800 yards.

The houses along the way are, as public housing goes, quite decent.

Unfortunately the yards are almost as full of litter as municipal garbage dumps.

I tell my doctors that in the nearly nine years of taking this walk four times a week, I have never seen a single instance of anyone attempting to clean his yard. But I have seen much litter dropped; on a good day I can even watch someone standing at the bus stop dropping something on the ground no further than two feet from the bin.

“Why don’t they tidy up their gardens?” asks a doctor from Bombay.

A good question. After all, most of the houses contain at least one person with time on his or her hands. Whenever I have been able to ask the question, however, the answer has always been the same: I’ve told the Council (the local government) about it, but they haven’t come. As tenants, they feel it is the landlord’s responsibility to keep the yards clean, and they are not prepared to do the council’s work for it, even if it means wading through garbage as it quite literally does. On the one hand, authority cannot tell them what to do; on the other, it has an infinitude of responsibilities towards them.”

– *Theodore Dalrymple, Life at the Bottom*

THAT welfare passivity has no racial basis is readily confirmed in the writings of the pseudonymous English doctor and author, Theodore Dalrymple, about life among the white tribes of contemporary Britain.

Dalrymple’s accounts of underclass pathos and dysfunction and the elite ideas that have created and sustain it, could well be an account of life an entire world away: Aboriginal communities in remote Australia.

Whatever the hemispheric differences in culture or history, geography and language, the cold urban slums of Leeds v the vast remoteness of tropical Cape York Peninsula, the parallels in social pathology are striking.

A friend from my home town laughingly told me of the instance when, as a foreman of the local council’s roads gang, he was flagged down by a community member who wanted him to use the caterpillar front-end loader he was driving past this person’s house to dispose of a dead cat lying in his driveway.

Whereas the citizen’s house and backyard were testament to his great tolerance for wading through garbage, when the cat started to decompose, even he was moved to do something about it.

Though we laughed uproariously at his story, my friend’s point was: too many of our people expect someone else, usually the local council, to do everything for them.

People mostly associate welfarism with unconditional income transfers from government, but there is relatively little understanding that the problem extends to many areas of government service delivery.

Housing in Aboriginal communities is central to the problem of passive welfare.

When we proposed welfare reforms in Cape York, we argued that families needed to move from public housing to home ownership. Families should be given the opportunity to own their own homes.

This is not a new idea. Aboriginal leaders and community members across Queensland’s remote communities have wanted home ownership for many decades. But it has never happened.

Instead, following the end of the mission era, housing in Queensland’s remote communities moved to the social housing model.

Whereas in the mission era families were frequently involved in the construction of their homes, the public-housing paradigm resulted in better standards of housing, but they were increasingly built by outside contractors.

The history of many communities tells the same story: more local people were involved in housing construction 30 or 40 years ago, than today.

It is true that the better standard of housing provided through public housing programs has necessitated skilled labour that often has to be brought in. But these better standards have not guaranteed longevity of the housing stock. The short average life expectancy of housing on Aboriginal lands is the central policy challenge.

Most people think that over-crowding is the main issue. For me the urgent problem of over-crowding (which certainly does depreciate the housing stock) is still second to a more important problem: how do we get skin in the game on the part of the people who live in these houses?

We can build all of the new housing we like, and make great headway into the over-crowding numbers, but if we don't solve the skin-in-the-game problem, we will only make momentary progress.

Pretty soon the good new housing will turn into bad housing and over-crowding will again increase when houses have to be condemned prematurely.

Tenancy, no matter how well managed by a landlord, is a form of skin in the game, but it is limited. You just don't get the same pride, the same sense of responsibility and, yes, financial self-interest that ownership gives.

Homeowners know that if they abuse their houses, they will have to pay for the maintenance. Homeowners know that if they plant trees and maintain their gardens, it is theirs. They know that the home which they look after with pride is the home they are likely to leave to their children.

Aboriginal people in these communities know this. That is why they have been waiting for a solution to home ownership for decades. But governments have never got organised to make home ownership happen.

I have been around long enough to have heard politicians pay homage to the ideal of home ownership, without ever having succeeded in helping one family to own their own home.

The Council of Australian Government's housing plans, under its Closing the Gap strategy, repeat this sorry history. The main focus is still the provisioning of welfare housing through the public housing model, with a perfunctory nod towards home ownership.

In fact the COAG plan has significantly derailed some real focus that the Bligh government had started to pursue with home ownership and making 99-year leases available to Aboriginal families.

The Queensland and federal governments have decided that reform means that Aboriginal housing should move from control by communities to management by the Queensland Department of Housing. This policy is called the One Social Housing System, replete with capital letters. Apart from the fact that this public housing model is the embodiment of passive welfare, the One Social Housing System is completely inconsistent with the nature and culture of the remote communities that I know.

Housing sites in these communities are not anonymous places where the housing department bureaucrat can allocate families indiscriminately on the basis of some housing allocation formula. As if Hope Vale or Lockhart River is a new public housing precinct in the suburbs.

Those mango trees over there were planted by my grandfather. My father grew up under that poinsettia. Our family have lived next door to such and such family since the beginning of the mission. My great-uncle gave my parents this block in the 1960s.

These were and are still villages: not housing estates. These are places of the heart, not just house sites. These places are imbued with memory and people like to maintain some sense of history and tradition in the way they choose to live.

The public housing model has come along and committed great violence against the sense of Aurukun or Wujal Wujal as a village. The move to the One Social Housing System is completing an Orwellian process of public policy takeover of these communities. So if you live in a Queensland community and you have a maintenance problem with blocked plumbing, or broken doors or your stove has kicked the bucket, then you must go down to the local administration centre. There you will find a blue phone.

You must pick up the phone and you will be transferred to a bureaucrat in the Department of Housing in Brisbane. You will need to explain your problem, which will be recorded.

The bureaucrat then sends your problem to someone, usually someone contracted by Q-Build, the Queensland government's public works agency, who will come and do an assessment. After that a contractor will be engaged to perform the maintenance.

Of course this extraordinary procedure does not guarantee you a solution. It is providence whether or not the system delivers a solution for your maintenance problem or not.

I am sure that there are no blue phones anywhere still extant in the former Soviet Union. The last holdouts of bureaucratic socialism on the planet live under the name of housing reform in remote indigenous communities.

*Noel Pearson is director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership.*