



The Cape York Agenda –

“fundamental transformation through radical reform”

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Introduction

In 1999 I wrote 'Our Right To Take Responsibility', in which I drew attention to the devastating impact of passive welfare on our families and communities. Since then, through the work we have done in Cape York, we have learned more about the nature of the crisis confronting our people and how to address it. Consequently, the time seems right to set out what we have come to call the 'Cape York Agenda'.

The essence of this Agenda is the following:

Our ultimate goal is to ensure that **Cape York people have the capabilities to choose a life they have reason to value.**

Economic and social development is about expanding the choices available to people. This range of choices is enriched not only by income, but also other capabilities, such as education, health and community. Development will require **access to the opportunities of the real economy.** But to make this possible, **we must restore social order, attack passive welfare, and tackle substance abuse.**

This will only happen if we exercise our **right to take responsibility.** We have to be as forthright about our responsibilities as we are unequivocal about our rights – otherwise our society will continue to fall apart while we are still fighting for our rights

This is how we will deliver our future as a recognised **first world indigenous people,** retaining a culture which requires strong inherited and ongoing connection to ancestral lands, with the freedom to orbit into the wider world and return to home base again.

In the following pages, each of the elements of this Agenda is described in more detail.

Our ultimate goal is to ensure that Cape York people have the capabilities to choose a life they have reason to value

Amartya Sen defines freedom as the capacity to make informed choices about a whole range of things. Importantly, this agenda does not entail making choices *for* people, but is rather about expanding the range of choices people have available *to* them.

The opportunities available to Cape York people today look very different to the opportunities available to the vast majority of other Australians. **Economic and social development is about expanding the choices available to people.** This range of choices is enriched not only by income, but also other capabilities, such as education, health and community. Therefore, these capabilities must also be developed, so that people can lead lives of their choosing.

Given the level of disadvantage relative to the rest of Australia, **income is clearly a critical component of development.** Only the real economy can build income. While economic growth allows for higher levels of education, health and general consumption, more importantly it brings long term employment opportunities and economic independence. It thus enriches the choices available to people.

With economic development comes empowerment. Until the indigenous people of Cape York can largely generate their own incomes they will be dependent on income transfers, where someone else takes all of the rights and responsibilities to make decisions and take actions on behalf of a relatively powerless people. Economic development is therefore closely linked to self-determination.

The reason for emphasising the importance of economic development is not that the economy is more important than cultural and social issues. It is that without economic advancement, Indigenous Australians are more likely to lose their heritage and identity. The Cape York Agenda seeks to re-establish a society that is both economically and culturally productive.

While we must never forget history, this Agenda is about tackling the problems of the present in order to create a better future.

We have a right to a fair place in the real economy

The underlying cause of indigenous disadvantage is a lack of economic development compounded by the interaction with a welfare system designed for a rich country. This has resulted in an artificial or ‘gammon’ economy, so that **many of the incentives currently faced by people in Cape York are perverse.**

Incentives matter because they influence behaviour. Incentives can be in the form of both carrots (which ‘pull’) and sticks (which ‘push’). Currently, there are no meaningful sticks, and the only carrots ‘pull’ to passive behaviour instead of study or real work. The incentives inherent in current welfare arrangements in Cape York have led to an unemployment trap with all the resulting social consequences. This is crucial: these perverse incentives mean that if we continue to simply invest without also redesigning incentives, the dysfunction caused by passivity and addiction will ensure that we will not get the outcomes we seek.

Incentives are changed by ‘getting the price right’: people need to perceive greater benefits from working, entrepreneurial activity, and investing in themselves (in their education, health and so on), than from staying on welfare.

‘Real’ work is important for income, but also for a range of other reasons. The benefits of real employment over and above income are well known, as are the consequences of being unemployed. Apart from depriving people of a real income, unemployment has other more serious effects that cannot be ameliorated, and indeed may be exacerbated, by long-term income support. These effects include psychological harm, loss of work motivation, skill and self-confidence, an increase in sickness, and disruption of family and social life. Indeed, chronic unemployment of whole groups of people or geographic regions leads to social exclusion, loss of self-reliance and self-confidence, and damage to psychological and physical health.

Economic engagement is central to individual and social wellbeing. An artificial welfare environment sends the message: *‘there’s something about you that means you have to have extra assistance’*. To get at issues of agency, self-esteem and identity, full engagement in the real economy is necessary. It is a fair opportunity to engage in one’s own livelihood that underpins skill, pride, purpose, a sense of achievement and fulfilment, dignity and hope. If these latent benefits of work were not vitally important, then passive welfare would not be the social problem it is.

Finally, it is chiefly by working that parents convey the message to their children that opportunity exists for the taking, ensuring that attitudes of defeat are not inherited across generations.

There has been much discussion about **the ‘compatibility’ of Aboriginal values and social arrangements and the mainstream economy.** Tensions have been identified between:

- immediate sharing and individual accumulation
- loyalty to kin and impartiality to all
- individual autonomy and the authoritarian practices of the school and workplace
- individual advancement and remaining at one with the community

- exploiting land and living with it

It is true that Aboriginal values and social arrangements are not the same as those of the wider Australian community. But these tensions are **challenges rather than insuperable obstacles**, problems that can be resolved as the circumstances facing our society change. We must never forget that cultures are flexible and dynamic.

Tensions like those laid out above are not unique to Aboriginal society. They confront many, if not all societies (or have confronted them in the near or distant past). Tensions always arise with every major change in the economic base. Aboriginal people are no less capable of dealing with these.

We should be clear that there are **challenges to growing a real economy in Cape York**: many communities are small, leading to issues with scale, and they are mostly remote. There is often understandable but unproductive suspicion about outside investment. Additionally, the form of property Indigenous Australians have cannot be used to secure loans or raise capital; in other words, it is 'dead capital'. An intelligent compromise to enable the individual capacity to lease and otherwise use land under an umbrella of community ownership still lies ahead of us. Combined with the perverse incentive structure discussed above, these factors mean that the development of a real economy under current policies and approaches is unlikely in some communities.

In this context, there may be **an important role for orbits**, where people head out to engage in the real economy, and then return to home base again, bringing the resources they have earned with them. It is the strong continuing cultural connection to their land that provides the basis for people choosing to maintain and return to their communities. The viability of a community is conditional. It depends on whether, after maximising opportunities through education and mobility, people choose to maintain their home community by pursuing local development opportunities. External government support may still be required, but it must be provided in a way that does not create the circumstances of passivity that we see today. There is a tension between economic integration and retaining a culture that is based on a strong ongoing connection to ancestral lands. But this is a tension, not a contradiction. **Enjoying mobility through 'orbits' into the wider world and back home again** would mean that we could maintain our unique identities and homelands but have the capacity to move between two worlds and enjoy the best of both.

Communities are people as well as places of residence. The Cape York community is a people not just defined by those who reside in the area. There may be Wik people in Melbourne, there may be Guugu Yimithirr in Singapore and of course a great many of the tribes of Cape York will live in centres of economic growth such as Cairns. What might this look like? Say 30% are in orbit, and 90% of those would be relatively close (probably in Cairns), while the other 10% would be further afield (even as far as Harvard). People will choose the scale of the orbits on which they embark, and though we are a mobile community we will not lose our character as a united people connected with our homeland.

We have a right to a fair place in the real economy. With that opportunity, we are more able to be responsible for ourselves. Responsibility must coincide with opportunity.

Social order must be restored

Mainstream Australia has social order, maintained through both visible (law enforcement, neighbourhood watch groups &c) and invisible (social norms that act upon and influence individual behaviour) means. These ensure that in mainstream Australia, bad behaviour has consequences. In contrast, Cape York is operating at a **social order deficit**, largely due to breakdown of social norms.

In other words, Cape York is not only severely disadvantaged, but is also dysfunctional. Indeed, our social life has declined even as our material circumstances have improved greatly since we gained citizenship. As well as poverty, we suffer from passivity and addiction, compounding historical losses to lead to social disorder.

The core difference between poverty and passivity, between disadvantage and dysfunction, is outlook. Poverty is a material, economic question, characterised by inadequate income to make basic provisions, while people living in passivity often have adequate income to make basic provisions. Poor people have problems with access to basic services; in the passive welfare paradigm, basic services are 'administered'. Poor people are generally dissatisfied with their situation and hungry for opportunity, but passive people are often indifferent to their situation and hungry only for excuse. What was once structural lack of opportunity is now behavioural indifference to it. Our problems are therefore behavioural as well as structural.

We need to be clear that our current situation is the legacy of historical structural causes, of dispossession, trauma, discrimination, and the undermining of indigenous leadership and authority. Our people have been immensely scarred by history: it was what made us vulnerable to substance abuse in the first place. We fell into passivity because in the years following our attainment of citizenship we were alienated from the mean hold we had in the real economy. **The past in the present is strongly with us**, but while we must never forget history, we must also engage for the future. It's now a question of personal responsibility as well as legacy.

So, while our inequality and dysfunction have larger structural causes, they are ultimately realised in the behaviour of real human beings – who have the potential for insight, organisation and agency. If you don't confront behaviour – and indeed you choose to absolve people from their behaviour because you do not wish to 'blame the victim' or you wish to demonstrate your larger understanding of the structural causes of dysfunction – then you deny the importance of human agency in confronting disadvantage and inequality, and you therefore perpetuate both disadvantage and dysfunction.

Dysfunction has ceased being just a symptom or consequence of poverty and has also become a causal factor. A still-worsening culture of dysfunction has become a major hurdle to the re-entry into the real economy of marginalised groups. Societies do not prosper in the absence of social order, leadership and authority. **As a prerequisite to accessing the opportunities of the real economy, social order needs to be restored – a basic, stable, functioning base must be established as a platform for building opportunity.**

Passive welfare must be attacked

Classical welfare (such as the Australian welfare system) **was designed to be reciprocal**, where working taxpayers collectively finance systems aimed at their own and their families' security and development. This is 'classical welfare', which has the following features:

- redistribution (cash or services) from 'rich' individual to 'poor' to assist getting them on track
- redistribution of income and services over an individual's life cycle
- provision of basic services (e.g. healthcare, education) to ensure people can participate in the marketplace

Classical welfare is therefore about security and investing in capabilities, and has produced many great benefits for the great majority of Australians. It was a great and civilising achievement for Australian society.

However, Indigenous Australians have largely not experienced the positive features of the mainstream welfare state – public health, education, infrastructure, a helping hand during short-term unemployment, and other aspects which have underpinned the quality of life and the opportunities of generations of Australians. We have only experienced the income support that is payable to the permanently unemployed and marginalised. Because of our history of dispossession, our remoteness from economic growth centres and our current inability to compete on the labour market, rather than the income support safety net being a temporary solution for our people, this safety net became a permanent destination for our people.

Therefore **classical welfare (a civilising achievement) is to be distinguished from passive welfare (which has the effect of poison).**

Why is passive welfare poison? **It is because of the nature of the income.** Over time, unearned income can develop a fundamentally different meaning to earned income. Permanent income provisioning contains the message 'you are useless, and that's why we have to keep giving you this money – and the fact that our assistance is in perpetuity confirms that we don't think you will ever have the capacity to be any different'. This is the message latent in the passive welfare paradigm. Unlike earned income, the unearned income of passive welfare leads to a 'gammon' economic relationship, where transactions between the provider and the recipient are not based on reciprocity. The recipient gets money but gives or does nothing in return. It is 'money for nothing'.

As more members of a community become dependent on passive welfare, the adverse effect on a community seems to increase exponentially. As we said earlier, economic engagement is central to individual and social wellbeing. Without it, passivity and all its other attendant dysfunctions is likely to result. Our experience in Cape York suggests that the nature of income is an important determinant of social functionality.

Welfare is also a way of ruling people, where a dominant power makes all the decisions. In other words, it takes all the responsibility away from the people.

Finally, **welfare has become a mentality**. People have internalised the irrational economic relationship to the point of seeing ‘free’ money and services as a right. Recipients see themselves as victims and in need of assistance without ‘doing their bit’ in return. Our people think they are incapable and that the solutions to our problems lie outside of ourselves. We think that ‘someone else’ will address the problems, be it the government, white people or other Aboriginal people, but not ourselves. Our people therefore fail to take responsibility for ourselves as individuals, for our families, or for our communities. Extremely poor outcomes in education, health, employment, law and order can all be related to passive welfare (particularly combined with substance abuse).

First world indigenous peoples can never escape the all-encompassing effect of a welfare system that was designed for a rich country, because that **welfare system can completely replace any need for a real or a traditional economy**. The safety net guarantee of sustenance for all citizens means that indigenous peoples in a first world situation can cease their traditional economic activities.

Over time, our people have come to see it as their *right* to have assistance without reciprocation. Indeed they have been encouraged to do so.

We don’t have an inalienable right to dependency; we have an inalienable right to a fair place in the real Australian economy.

Substance abuse must be not be tolerated

Of course our history (including dispossession, trauma and racism, compounded by passive welfare) has made some of us more susceptible to start using alcohol and drugs. But, crucially, **addiction is now a condition in its own right, not just a symptom**. We need to distinguish between ultimate and proximate explanations: established addiction must be dealt with as a problem in its own right, rather than as merely a symptom of the causes of the first consumption of the addictive substance. The decisive factor in beginning to drink or use drugs is the existence of what has now become an epidemic. People can be recruited to the grog and drug coterries today because it is no longer a breach of social norms to abuse substances.

Substance abuse is the main cause of indigenous **over-representation in the criminal justice system**. There are certainly other causes, but the majority of Aboriginal criminal cases – especially those of violent crimes and homicides – involve substance abuse. This is not to say that there are not other factors involved in over-representation, and that the criminal justice *system* is not in many respects still antipathetic to Aboriginal people – but rather it is to recognise that substance abuse is the immediate cause of a very large proportion of this over-representation.

Grog abuse is the main cause of all types of Aboriginal **violence** and violence-related injury. There has been a debate about the relevance of characteristics of traditional and semi-traditional indigenous culture to understanding contemporary violence. But we need to avoid attributing violence to culture rather than to grog. Whatever inherent propensities to use physical means of resolving disputes there might be in traditional culture, the fact is that substance abuse results in violence, the nature and magnitude of which is of a vastly different proportion to that in traditional culture.

Substance abuse is also strongly implicated in **cultural erosion**, both through hindering the transmission of cultural knowledge across generations, and through the distortion of Aboriginal traditions and values. Certainly there are other challenges to preserving language and culture. Tackling these challenges is difficult enough sober, but is virtually impossible for a people addicted. What was a cultural obligation to share food with countrymen is turned into a cultural obligation to share grog. Whilst the relationships between drinkers are reciprocal, the relationship between drinkers and non-drinkers is not reciprocal. The drinkers take; the non-drinkers (are forced to) give. As such, obligations and relationships outside the drinking circle, for example to children and old people, are ignored or abused.

Finally, it is a critical factor in **poor health**. As well as the direct causes of chronic disease, such as diabetes or heart disease, substance abuse prevents the lifestyle changes necessary to address other factors, such as poor diet, lack of exercise, lack of services, and poor environment.

‘Harm minimization’ – dealing with the consequences of substance abuse so as to minimize harm to self and others – essentially accepts abuse as a given. Rather than deal with the consequences of abuse, we should not tolerate it to begin with.

To tackle violence, improve health, and maintain our culture, we need to rebuild a social, cultural, spiritual and legal intolerance of substance abuse.

We have a right to take responsibility

Like all other Australians, people from Cape York have **rights as citizens** of Australia. We also have **rights that are derived from our status as Indigenous Australians**, in particular the right to retain our relationship to ancestral lands and culture, fundamentally different in kind to settlers inheriting their family's farm. This will need to be accomplished not just through our own efforts but also with the legislative and administrative support of government, and the enduring goodwill of the non-Indigenous majority.

But **with rights comes responsibility**. The achievement of the vast proportion of human rights requires individuals, families and communities to take responsibility for effecting the social and economic changes that would enable indigenous peoples to enjoy justice in reality, not in just theory. If the rights of indigenous children are to be enjoyed by them in practice, then some people have to take responsibility for producing the conditions for them to enjoy these rights. **Responsibilities and rights therefore are inextricably bound together. They are two sides of the same coin.**

Historically there was a lot of responsibility in the traditional economy. If you didn't work, you starved. But no responsibility and no reciprocity is built into our present artificial welfare economy. It is all take and little give. Responsibility and reciprocity have also been distorted by substance abuse. Aboriginal values of responsibility and sharing have been changed into exploitation and manipulation.

Our current lack of responsibility is manifested in dysfunctional behaviours. For example, in functional societies people take personal responsibility for themselves and their families. They don't need their leaders or their government to tell them what to do about basic things - such as to care for the welfare of their children - because these responsibilities come naturally. They do so because of their natural love and regard for themselves and for their own.

An example of the dysfunctional behaviours in Aboriginal communities is the failure of some parents to attend sufficiently to their children's personal hygiene, resulting in serious health problems. There are a couple of possible explanations for this. One is that there has been a failure of awareness on the part of the Aboriginal people, and so it may be necessary to undertake 'health promotion'. Another possibility is that there is a failure of expectation - that is, poor hygiene has become so entrenched that no one expects parents to fulfill their natural responsibility to attend to their children's hygiene. Other community members have long held no expectations, schools hold no expectations - everyone has become used to not expecting parents to fulfill their responsibilities.

Currently, a dominant power – the Government – takes all of the rights and responsibilities to make decisions and take actions on behalf of a relatively powerless people. **In order for us to be able to take responsibility, Government must let go of it.** We need to make our own decisions and act on our own behalf. Service provision is currently largely from outside (government fly-in, fly-out), on an 'active government, passive clientele' model. Through its many welfare services interventions, Government intrudes into Aboriginal life, undermining our initiative

and incapacitating us. Government must step back if individual and community responsibility is to flourish.

We urgently need to rebuild responsibility and reciprocity. We have to be as forthright about our responsibilities as we are unequivocal about our rights. Otherwise our society will fall apart while we are still fighting for our rights.

We need to take responsibility to maintain our languages and culture, for engaging in the real economy, for breaking out of the passive welfare mentality, and for rebuilding our intolerance of substance abuse and social disorder. Making our own decisions and being accountable for them is the opposite of the easy way out.

This is what self-determination is: exercising the right to take responsibility.

It is essential that we maintain our identity as a people

This Agenda tackles how we will deliver our future as a recognised **first world indigenous people**, retaining a culture which requires strong inherited and ongoing connection to ancestral lands, with the freedom to orbit into the wider world and return to home base again. This section describes the importance of these issues to our people in Cape York.

Land

Retaining our culture requires **strong inherited and ongoing connection to ancestral lands**. The ongoing struggle for land rights is therefore crucial for our people. In addition, land rights are property rights, and are valuable. Communal title is integral to indigenous culture, but fungible property rights are equally essential to economic development. As such, we need to explore intelligent compromises to enable the individual capacity to lease and otherwise use land under an umbrella of community ownership.

Orbits and identity

We're trying to conceive of a Cape York where young people can go and pursue their goals in the wider world whilst always knowing they have a home base. And unlike the departures of the past, where too often our people left and never returned, we want to provide the means for them to make **active contributions back in their home community**. This could include **cultural investment**: sending remittances back to communities and outstations for 'cultural capital maintenance'. For orbiting to work, communities cannot be parochial: they must value those who have gained connections and experience in the wider world. People will only be able to 'give back' to their home communities if they are welcome to do so.

The concept of orbits is disturbing for some in remote communities. People understandably worry that their children will lose their identity and their links with home. The parental hesitation around encouraging their children is partly due to this. But the only alternative is to leave people uneducated in the confines of their home communities, remote from the centres of economic growth and remote from the centres of their desires. This can only resign young people to a problematic future. **A choice to stay, or to come back after some time away, needs to be a choice based on capability rather than one made simply because there is no other choice.**

Culture

We must not let anyone dictate to us what our identity should be, either by prescribing what behaviour, work, interests or endeavours are essentially Aboriginal and those that are not, or by promoting racist views that we are a less than fully capable people. **We must fight racism, without letting it be our disability**, or get in the way of taking responsibility. Similarly, **we must fight victimisation, without becoming victims**. Individuals and groups in our society are victimised in a variety of ways – and there truly are victims. But adopting the mentality of victim-hood concedes defeat. The one power that victims need in order to survive is to defy the victimisation – to say 'yes, I have suffered victimisation, but I'm not giving in by becoming a

victim.' We must not allow racism and victimisation to reduce us to seeing ourselves as if we are not fully capable people in our own right.

We must maintain our identity as a people, but **encourage individual excellence and achievement**. We should be a community that values our sense of relatedness and obligation whilst at the same time supporting individuals to take their place in society and to capitalise on their talents.

Encouraging individual excellence and achievement will involve **finding solutions for a bicultural and bi- and multilingual future**, so that we are able to retain our distinct cultures, traditions and identity whilst expanding our identity through engaging in the wider world (to the extent of individual choice).

We have defined freedom as the capacity to make informed choices. We need to **make transmission of our culture and traditions a conscious choice**, for they are no longer linked to the structure of a real economy. Education has a critical role in the transmission and preservation of culture and language, as does technology: we will keep our diverse languages and cultural knowledge by excelling in western education and by understanding that literacy and digital transmission of culture is the only means of arresting (and reversing) the decline of our ancient oral traditions.

Our Aboriginal values - that we care for each other, that we respect our elders, that we value our culture and traditions - **make us a rich people**. **In taking the responsibility to address our economic disadvantage and social dysfunction, we will maintain this rich heritage.**