



Australian Catholic Bishops Conference
Bishops Commission for Relations with Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders

substance abuse in these satellite town settlements is testimony enough to the existence of confused minds in high places. There are no better prospects for meaningful employment in the towns than in the remote villages. Rural Australia is in a depressed state and the Aboriginal people in Rural Australia are better off when living on traditional lands than in exile away from it.

It is about time that governments at the State and Federal level got serious about the immense shortage of housing stocks in townships, instead of contemplating how they can make it worse by forcing more people from remote areas into town-zones already suffering from serious deprivations. The crime rate in townships is far greater than in remote areas, as is serious drug abuse. Needles are not found lying around in bunches in remote villages as they are in regional townships. Simply put, there is no evidence to suggest that leaving traditional homelands for life in towns will benefit the people presently living in remote villages.

The original argument in favour of closing off funds to many remote communities was an economic one. There is not enough money to pay for the homelands, it was said. It is simply amazing how it is in this country that whenever governments over-spend or income shrinks, it is always the poor who pay to rectify the fiscal shortfall. The money needed to sustain the remote communities into the future is a paltry sum. The social and financial costs caused by uprooting remote peoples from their homes and pushing them into towns, where often basic services are lacking, is overwhelming.

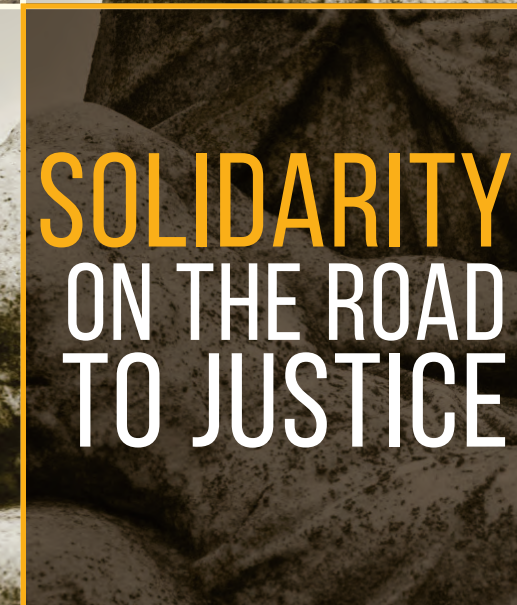
When this nation realises that more rather than fewer resources are needed to meet the needs of Aboriginal people in this country, then, and only then, will we begin to overcome the

challenges before us. Then might we effectively whittle away the disproportionate numbers of Aboriginal people who suicide, who are in gaol, are unemployed, are suffering ill health, are homeless, are under-nourished and who are oppressed by the effects of poverty and a poor education.

No matter the enormity of the challenge before us, we Australians need to be convinced of the worth of self-determination as a philosophy and a methodology in need of immediate adoption. The present day neo-Assimilationist point of view offers no solution to the task of finding a way forward for Aboriginal Australia. Non-Aboriginal Christians must stand in solidarity with their Aboriginal brothers and sisters, while Aboriginal Christians are called to be determined, not to falter, no matter the obstacles that rise up to make a just way difficult. In faith and through prayer the energy needed to seek justice, to right what is wrong and to find a new, positive way forward is at hand.



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SOLIDARITY:
ON THE ROAD
TO JUSTICE



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Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Sunday 2015



In a remote town in northern Australia, a teenage girl learns of the death of her best friend in a motor accident. Within a few hours she too is dead and her body is found by her brother. In another larger regional town, a young man is drinking into the early hours of the morning with two male relatives. In between drinks they share some cones of marijuana, as they did earlier in the day, and pass the hours in small talk or sometimes in silence. Before dawn the young man, in his mid-twenties, leaves the room without a word. After some time, one of the others goes out to look for the missing young man. He finds him and with the help of the third person

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cuts him down from the tree. A clergyman, experienced in ministry to Aboriginal people in rural Australia, speaks to an assembled group of priests about the strains and stress often encountered in such ministry and the hurt that often emerges when faced with the senseless tragedies of self harm in rural towns and settlements. He emphasises that people who work in those environs need useful and carefully placed support, if they are to survive the rigours and sorrows of almost daily living. As he speaks, one of those listening to him begins to weep, first softly and then uncontrollably - so much so that his confreres help him from the room. He had been assigned to a township where death and self-harm were constantly at the forefront of his ministry and where loneliness was his regular companion.

A priest in a remote town gathers a number of Aboriginal women from the local parish and hands out holy cards with images of the Blessed Virgin Mary - Our Lady of Fatima, Our Lady of Guatemala, Our Lady Queen of Peace and others. He wants them to choose an image of the Blessed Virgin Mary that appeals to them. It is his intention to purchase a statue for the church according to their wishes. And what do they choose? Nothing less than an image of the Pieta, of Mary seated with the broken body of her son cradled in her arms. And why that one? Because that is an image that they know firsthand, from experience. Suicide, car accidents, violence, drugs, lack of good health, dangerous habits. All of these causes have taken their toll among Aboriginal people in Australia, to a degree that might be described as horrific, scandalous, a most critical state of affairs and nothing less than a national shame.

For too many Aboriginal people, there is over them a pall of negativity, of failure and rejection. And those Aboriginal achievers who rise above the pervading feeling of low self esteem are themselves continually battling

to stay positive, remaining as role models to their fellow countrymen, or working very hard at being supportive to those around them who struggle with addictions, poor health, and abject poverty. Certainly there are numerous examples of Aboriginal people in Australia who have learnt to live above the quagmire of defeat, but there are many, many others who live below a robust capability.

For over two hundred years, since the earliest days of colonial settlement, the newcomers to this land have failed to take into account the need for meaningful consultation with Aboriginal People. Since earliest times, governance structures have been imposed on the country's First Nations while their primary assets of land and culture were hurriedly stripped away in the name of promoting European settlement. By way of justification of such land occupation, the term *Terra Nullius* was applied so that settlement might expand unhindered under the banner of that now disproved legal fiction.

Sadly, it appears that history repeats itself. Just when we thought that there was light at the end of the tunnel - the result of legal judgements like Native Title and Wik, and just when the Homelands Movement had proved a boon to displaced traditional owners, the ominous noise of negative change and repression is heard yet again.

In recent times we have witnessed the spectacle of politicians of the Government of Western Australia continuing the colonial custom of utter disregard for the feelings and opinions of Indigenous people concerning their future on traditional home lands, mostly in the remote parts of the State. It was only forty years ago that Aboriginal people were being encouraged to relocate from townships to isolated villages on their tribal land as these townships were considered inappropriate, even dangerous places for traditional owners to live. Violence, anti-social behaviour, substance abuse and low employment prospects were considered good reasons to sink bores in remote places and equip them with pumps and power houses to run them, and build houses so that a safer and more suitable environment might be established for traditional owners on their own land - something that would encourage their threatened cultural ways in the townships while at once nurturing their spirituality.

The threat of closure of remote villages without appropriate consultation by the Western Australian State Premier has been exacerbated by the intervention of the Prime Minister who, for whatever reason, decided that the term "lifestyle choices" could be gainfully used in this debate. To add to the complexity of it all, the Premier then revealed the existence of child abuse in remote villages as another reason he had in mind to pursue closure, as though instances of child abuse are unknown in towns and regional centres. A brief visit to any fringe-dwelling encampment to be found near most rural Western Australian towns, or a drive through a town reserve, reveals the extent of the fallacy of protection as a motivating factor driving the remote community de-funding. It is a fact that life is better in the remote villages than in the fringe dwelling settlements. Massive overcrowding of houses, a lack of working sanitation, the absence of any reasonable community facilities and the prevalence of

