

REMOTE COMMUNITIES AND THE RIGHT TO DECIDE

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The recent discussion on the closure of Indigenous remote communities should be a concern to all Australians. Indeed `Country' is at the heart of Aboriginal cultures and languages and is also part of the living heritage of all Australians.

For Aboriginal people, care of Country has centred on sacred ritual that has occurred over many thousands of years. One's Country is full of sacred icons, similar to the icons that for Christians, hold deeply sacred and spiritual meanings.

In remote communities Aboriginal children grow up not with one language but with many. Aboriginal children are multi-lingual; learning the language of their people; the language of other Indigenous nations and the English language. Most of these children speak 4-6 languages by the time they are ten. Language is very much connected to a strong identity. While there were more than 600 spoken languages within this country, there are just over 100 that continue to be spoken. The closure of these communities will mean that very soon, these ancient languages will no longer exist.

The discussions surrounding the closure of communities is based on issues related to poverty. While some of these communities have high rates of domestic violence, alcohol foetal syndrome and poorer health standards, so do many other non-Indigenous locations.

In parish work, I have ministered in rural communities where prostitution, domestic violence and alcohol foetal syndrome are prevalent. I have seen small children in this diocese hunched over a backyard fire in winter, because of a lack of electricity. However, we do not like to think that these issues exist in rural Australia – such things only ever happen in Black Australia.

The targeting of remote Indigenous communities by state and federal governments should cease for other reasons. The history of black/white relations has always been determined by the needs of a growing economy.

In the first 100 years of European invasion, constant battles were fought on this continent by Indigenous Australians in defence of land and its resources. More Aboriginal people were killed in these battles, than the number of combined deaths of Australians in the First and Second world wars. Again, we do not like to acknowledge such a fact.

In the following period, the establishment of reserves and missions were also about the needs of a growing economy. Certainly, the often forced removal of Aboriginal people off the land meant that generations of Aboriginal children would provide free labour. Many thousands of these children were removed from the land to be trained as domestics, drovers, and labourers for Australia's infrastructure.

In 1993 the Native Title Act was introduced and enabled Aboriginal people to regain access to Country through applying for Crown land. In the same year, Western Australia sold much of its crown land.

Western Australia also has one of the highest incarceration rates of Indigenous people in the world. It is now the Western Australian government that is supporting the discussions on the closure of remote communities. This is an interesting development on the back of the downturn in mining across Australia, especially since that state is highly dependent on the mining industry. Certainly access to land and its rich resources would be far easier, if the Custodians of sacred Country were no longer present!

We must reflect on the actions of our predecessors and the present government in determining the fate of these people. In the twenty first century, surely they have the right to determine that for themselves!

By **Archdeacon Karen Kime**