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Bill Leak cartoon is right when it comes to the big picture

ANTHONY DILLON THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM August 5, 2016

On seeing Bill Leak's cartoon in this newspaper yesterday morning, I was relieved and thought: "He gets it and is able to communicate it so others will listen. Thank goodness he does."

Leak was referring to the havoc that alcohol abuse and irresponsible parenting are having on many Aboriginal children today.

In the past, through his cartoons, Leak skilfully has highlighted the broader problems facing Aboriginal Australians. His latest instalment is another timely reminder to stay focused on what matters most.

I should remark upfront that my positive attitude towards the cartoon was not because I am part-Aboriginal but because the children being referred to are Australian children and therefore deserve what most other Australian children take for granted.

This cartoon and the tragedy it depicts is not a race issue, even though some would like to make it a race issue. Leak was communicating a message that many Australians would like to express but are afraid to do so for fear of being labelled a racist.

I know this because in response to my articles I have received many emails through the years stating: "Anthony, I'm glad you said that because as a whitefella I would have been called a racist." It should not be that way. Let's not forget that Aboriginal affairs is everyone's business.

Much of the public, in their insatiable desire for a quick fix or opportunity to play judge and executioner, are keen to see the end consequences of alcohol and parental neglect as shown in images of children in detention centres. However, they are less keen to hear about the causes.

Leak's cartoon boldly presents the causes. His cartoon in no way dismisses the need for a thorough investigation into the operation of detention centres but clearly shows, to those who are willing to see and listen, that greater attention should be given to the factors that land children in detention centres in the first place.

Leak's cartoon has done precisely that. For, if we don't deal with the causes, we will continue to have a situation where far too many Aboriginal children are raised in

detention. And where do they graduate to on release? Few will go to university or

detention. And where do they graduate to on release? Few will go to university or get a secure job but are likelier to go on and parent children who will experience the sorts of childhoods they themselves experienced.

Fortunately, a few others, such as Jeremy Sammut, Kerry Pholi, and Janet Albrechtsen, have understood the gravity of the situation depicted in Leak's cartoon, and have written about it in *The Australian* in the past week. A picture speaks a thousand words and Leak's cartoon spoke some hard truths — truths that make some very uncomfortable. Why they are uncomfortable is what we should be focusing on now.

Predictably, the “offenderati” victim brigade and race hounds have been out in full force. They typically use the logic that if they find it offensive then it must be offensive.

First, let's be clear on one matter: Leak's cartoon does not cause offence. However, people can choose to take offence and many do. Yes, there is a choice. If there were no choice, then everyone reading the cartoon would be offended. To say his cartoon or anybody else's causes offence is like saying living next door to a fast-food outlet causes me to put on weight; it does not, it only provides an opportunity to which I have a choice as to how I can respond.

So why would the offended choose to be offended? Taking offence is a sure way to silence those whose words we don't want to hear. On this matter, many do not wish to hear the realities of the horrors that lead these children to detention. They do not wish to hear about violent communities, kids wandering the streets at night and child abuse. This shatters their image of the idyllic culture of the wise Aborigines living off the land.

The saying attributed to Einstein is relevant here: “The ears won't hear what the heart can't accept.” Leak's cartoon has simply highlighted some problems facing Aboriginal people that need to be discussed openly. Rather than taking offence, discussions should be solution focused.

But focusing on solutions to the problems of employment in remote areas, violence and child abuse is difficult. Taking offence is so much easier.

But focused on solutions we must be, and the first step towards solving the problems is to cease the denial.

While this newspaper continues to provide a forum for discussing the serious problems facing Aboriginal communities, I have observed far too often the common response of: “Yeah, but these problems are in the non-Aboriginal population as well.”

This is true. Interestingly, when discussing the problem of diabetes within the Aboriginal community, I have never had anyone retort: “Yeah, but diabetes is in the non-Aboriginal population as well.” Yes, dysfunction (like diabetes) is present to varying degrees in all communities, but it is undeniable that it is a far more serious problem in Aboriginal communities.

Predictably, the accusations of racism have been forthcoming. Let’s be clear; this is not about race. These children who are ending up in detention and fast becoming another “stolen generation” are Australian children. Let’s not forget that Aboriginal people are people first and Aboriginal second.

The obsession with the spectre of racism is yet another distraction from discussing the more serious problems that Leak and others bring to the public arena.

Let’s get our priorities right. I ask those who are fearful about the consequences of free speech, or are upset by a cartoon, if they worry about where their next meal will come from; if they will sleep in a safe dwelling tonight without having to share a mattress with a dog; if they have a job, and if their children are in a school receiving a first-class education. I ask because it is a reminder of where we should be focusing our time, energy and resources.

And when I say “we”, I am of course referring to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Australians alike. One group of people should not be precluded from talking about Aboriginal matters and criticising attitudes and practices purely on the basis of race. Again, Aboriginal affairs is everybody’s business.

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