

**Gerry Georgatos** has translated much of his academic and doctoral research for general and easy reading, willing much of his work into the public domain.

## **Forgiveness, redemption, ways forward instead of imprisonment and reoffending**



There is nothing as profoundly powerful as forgiveness. The forgiving of others validates self-worth, builds bridges and positive futures. Forgiveness cultivated and understood keeps families and society solid as opposed to the corrosive anger that diminishes people into the darkest places, into effectively being mentally unwell. Anger is a warning sign to becoming unwell. Love comes more natural to the human heart despite that hate can take one over. In the battle between love and hate, one will choose love more easily when in understanding of the endless dark place that is hate and of its corrosive impacts. Hate can never achieve what love ever so easily can. Hate and anger have filled our prisons with the mentally unwell, with the most vulnerable, with the poor – and not with the criminally minded.

I have worked to turn around the lives of as many people in jail as I possibly could but for every inmate or former inmate that people like me dedicate time to in order to improve their lot – ultimately there is a tsunami of poverty related issues and draconian laws that flood offenders and fill prisons. Jailing the poorest, most vulnerable, the mentally unwell, in my experience, only serves to elevate the risk of reoffending, of normalising disordered and broken lives, of digging deeper divides between people, of marginalising people. It has been my experience that in general people come out of prison worse than they went in.

We push maxims such as violence breeds violence, hate breeds hate but yet we incarcerate and punish like never before. Instead of prison sentences working as some sort of deterrent we have reoffending, arrest and jailing rates increasing year in year out.

One of society's failures is the punitive criminal justice system and the penal estate. However despite the punitive penal estate having clearly failed society, we continue with it. For some it has become easier to lie and act as if the failure is a success or as if there are no alternatives than to accept the workload in another direction. Fyodor Dostoyevsky, in the Brothers Karamazov, wrote, "Above all, don't lie to yourself. The man who lies to himself and listens to his own lie comes to a point that he cannot distinguish the truth within him, or around him, and so loses all respect for himself and for others. And having no respect he ceases to love."

We have lied for so long in this capitalistic meritocratic society that for far too many, especially for those in the consummation of privilege – they have ceased to love and to forgive. The psychological, emotional and spiritual wellbeing of others, of those most vulnerable – lost to them. The mantra these days is the suffocation of 'self-responsibility'.

Dostoyevsky, who also authored Crime and Punishment and the House of the Dead, wrote, "The degree of civilisation in a society can be judged by entering its prisons."

Australia has doubled its prison population in the last 20 years with a disproportionate hit on the marginalised, particularly the descendants of the First Nations peoples of this continent. First Nations people comprise 28 per cent of the total prison population though they are less than 3 per cent of the nation's total population. I estimate that by 2025 First Nations people will comprise one in every two Australian prisoners. This is an abomination – moral, political and otherwise. From a racialised lens, Western Australia, the Northern Territory and South Australia jail First Nations peoples at among the world's highest rates, with Western Australia competing for the mother of all jailers.

But what are their crimes? They have been born into extreme disadvantage, extreme poverty and into a spectrum with deplorable levels of likelihood of their deterioration from a state of hopelessness to being mentally unwell. Socrates understood that esteem was imperative to the striving for justice and goodness. This is where we fail people, we are not there to build or rebuild their esteem, to strive lovingly. Socrates would have us believe evils are the result of the ignorance of good. I am with Socrates, we have a society that is not bent by reinforcing the innate, of reinforcing 'good', but we are a society that demands an impression of what good might be and punish those who transgress. What we are after is unilateral orderliness among all people – and justice argues itself as blind, where everyone is equal but this is a stupendous lie, the law supports privilege and thrashes into the vulnerable, poor, sick – inequality is entrenched by the criminal justice system.

Sjoren Kierkegaard argued that sin meant wilfulness and unlike the Socratic view of ignorance of good, Kierkegaard was bent by the view that some people simply do not want to be good. As naïve as I may appear, the Socratic view aligns with what I have seen in prisons – of people who want to be good, innately are good, but who have accumulated despair, displaced anger, resentment from impoverished or disrupted upbringings.

– An inmate said to me, "It is best I am here, and best I keep on coming back, because it is the only hope my children have."

– An inmate said, "I have no hope in here but it's even worse out there."

The penal estate is not rehabilitative, not restorative. There are limited job skills programs, limited education opportunities. The penal estate should have been an investiture in people rather than a dungeon, an abyss. The opportunity for healing, psychosocial empowerment, for forgiveness, for redemption, for education skills and qualifications are continually bypassed. This madness never ceases to shock me.

Australia's overall prison rate of 151 prisoners per 100,000 population ranks 98<sup>th</sup> of the world's 222 ranked nations. Australia is an affluent nation, the world's 12<sup>th</sup> largest economy. However standalone Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders and compare their prison rate against the world's national prison rates and they would have the world's highest, just higher than the Seychelles which incarcerates at 799 per 100,000. The United States of America is second ranked at 698 per 100,000. However in Western Australia, First Nations peoples are incarcerated at more than 3,700 per 100,000. In Western Australia, one in 13 of all Aboriginal adult males is in prison.

No less than one in 10 and up to one in 6 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders living has been to jail.

Forgiveness is not an act of mercy but of empathy, compassion, of virtue. According to vast bodies of research forgiveness has many benefits, outstripping negatives and risks. Forgiveness strengthens families, communities, societies. The most significant finding is the obvious, that forgiveness makes us happier. Forgiveness improves the health of people and communities. Forgiveness sustains relationships. Forgiveness builds and rebuilds lives. Forgiveness connects people, and what better medium for this than through kindness. It was Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the chairperson of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission who argued forgiveness as the only way forward to "true enduring peace".

Someone I correspond with regularly emailed me the Chinese proverb, "It is better to light a small candle rather than curse the darkness."

We have seen where we will be led to when the only response to crime is punishment. The United States jails nearly one per cent of its total population – 2,300,000 people. Are so many really so bad or is the United States extremely harsh on its most vulnerable? One in four of the world's prisoners are in American jails. This is the future we need to avoid. If Australia would consider an amnesty – an immediate release – of very low level offenders – more than 8,000 of its 35,000 prison population would walk out today. If Australia was prepared to release its mentally unwell either into community care or specialist care, again more than 8,000 would walk out today. But at all times we should be working closely, lovingly, forgivingly with those inside and so bring them out of the prison experience not worse but better.

As it stands now, there is an elevated risk of death by suicide, substance misusing and misadventure in the first year post release – up to ten times according to all the research. We do ever so little for people pre- and post-release.

Society – the criminal justice system, custodial systems and ancillary support systems – will gain more from forgiveness, helping, empowering people than from any other measure. This is not to suggest some crimes should not require imprisonment but that all people are capable of redemption, and that

there are far too many who should not be jailed and instead supported, and that at all times we should be doing what we can for our most troubled souls.

People are more likely to be good without having to go to prison but instead who are supported. For those who are sentenced to prison, these must be places where people come first, not last. But there must be forgiveness. They must be assisted in every way to forgive themselves. As a society our focus must be on forgiving and redemption. The most powerful kick-start is a society – the justice systems and our Governments – who are forgiving and hence the message of love will rush to everyone. For far too many people, repentance without forgiveness is torturous. But we must be a forgiving society to make this possible, and for now the odds are against us, as for too many forgiveness is a radical, gratuitous proposition.

## Understanding difference and unfairness is a first step in suicide prevention



One Mile Community with Gerry Georgatos.  
Photographer: Ingetje Tadros

Globally, the majority of violent deaths are by suicide – nearly 60 per cent of all violent deaths. On average, annually, more people will die by suicide than will die due to war and civil strife. This statement will shock many people, especially because this has rarely been reported in the media. We hear of the violent deaths because of domestic disputes, of the violent deaths in the course of burglaries, of violent deaths as a result of gun-related offences, and we hear of the huge loss of human life because of wars and civil strife but yet all up suicide claims more lives than all these unnatural deaths combined. The majority of humanity is oblivious to the fact that the majority of violent deaths are by suicide.

According to the World Health Organisation, in 2012, it is estimated that 56 per cent of all reported violent deaths globally were by suicide. Death by suicide occurs at higher rates in middle and high income nations than in poorer nations. Death by suicide occurs at disproportionately horrific higher rates among the descendants of First Peoples in middle and high income nations which have relatively recent colonial oppressor histories. In these nations the descendants of the First Peoples have been transformed into discriminated minorities – with many of these people, especially those who reject assimilative influences, marginalised.

The more recent the dispossession of a people from their historical conditions the higher their resistance to assimilative imposts and expectations. The more recent such contact and confrontation between cultural settings, the more likely those cultures which have been dispossessed for instance of land rights and of true self-determination, that their identities are intertwined with their historical self, and that they openly distrust their oppressor.

Suicide rates among the descendants of First Peoples within middle and high income nations with colonial oppressor histories are the world's highest. Therefore the suicides are obviously about identity, resistance to assimilation, racialisation, racism, powerlessness, hopelessness, chronic pain and trauma. One of the strongest indicators for an individual or family for future suicide risk is the fact of a prior suicide attempt(s). Equally, this applies to groups of people, many through a racialised lens, such as the descendants of First Peoples. They can be disaggregated demographically to a region or community. Where for instance the community has a history of reported depressions and self-harms, of suicidal behaviour and suicides, then there is a future risk of self-destructive and suicidal behaviour within that community.

Suicidal behaviour is often the culmination of a set of experiences, events and of an underlay of feelings – how one feels about themselves contextually in light of the experiences and events. Self-destructive and suicidal behaviours can increase in a community that experiences trauma collectively – sharing around the trauma and the sense of hopelessness. Where Governments continue to fail communities, especially those populated by minorities, with disparity and inequalities in social wealth and health that should have been equivalent to the rest of the nation's social wealth and health, then often it is up to communities to tap into their trusted leaders to look out for one another and educate others to empowerment of the self, to a sense of self and place, and similarly so communally. People need people, especially in these communities that are deprived and discriminated by Governments. Many communities have third rate services, while some communities are effectively starved of some of the most basic services. In these discriminated communities, the residents cannot continue to cry out to Governments, because it is the very Government they cry out to who is their oppressor, who discriminates against them. Often if they cry out loud enough for long enough, the community is meted out punitive measures and controls which are more about blaming the community than helping them. With some communities, Governments have gone as far as shutting them down. Therefore the social and emotional wellbeing of the community is resigned to by its residents.

Hopelessness is a strong indicator of heightened vulnerability to self-destructive behaviour. Hopelessness has to do with the culmination of overwhelming feelings or beliefs that the future is bleak. Hopelessness exhausts motivation. Where hopelessness is engrained as a whole of family or whole of community approach, the despair and self-destruction begins from a younger age. "It's our lot". "It's the burden of our people." "Things will never get better."

The sense of hopelessness is chronic and for some becomes unbearable. Losing someone close to you is a devastating experience. Dealing with their distress in the lead up to their loss is a devastating experience. Having to deal with familial distresses, as if recurring, with other family members is destructive – the objects and functions of the family take a toll, a real beating. For some they are psychologically and emotionally battered, and the damage takes an overwhelmingly feeling of the irreparable. Having to deal with ongoing destructive behaviours, with a communal sense of hopelessness, with the overwhelming backdrop of a deprived and discriminated community, is tortuously exhausting and simply heartbreaking. Community distress and breakdowns occur just like a family can breakdown – indeed, a whole community can breakdown. Hopelessness and despair can be effected as if normalised.

Suicide prevention must be understood in terms of who it is we are responding to: an individual overwhelmed by expectations, an individual overwhelmed by a sense of failure, an individual overwhelmed by a sense of hopelessness, an individual overwhelmed by trauma, an individual overwhelmed by a sense that their identity is a liability, a family overwhelmed by trauma and grief, a community overwhelmed by most of the above: hopelessness, trauma, discrimination, deprivation, racism – the sense the future is 'bleak' and 'unfair'.

A couple of years ago I wrote:

- Suicides are nearly always the culmination of a sense of hopelessness and eventual loss of resilience in enduring unbearable conditions or from the result of intolerable failure(s) whether these failures are associated to low or high expectations. Suicide takes more lives of Australian teenagers aged 14 to 18 years than does any disease. Suicide has to do with the psychosocial identity – in a nutshell, to do with empowerment verse disempowerment.
- The journey to suicide is a psychosocial one – the eroding of identity or the stalling of its development; for First Peoples that can mean their historical and contemporary identities are both eroded and manufactured as a liability – and knowing this, living this, can lead directly to suicide. The suicides crisis is rising year by year and the median age getting younger each year.
- Social and economic development must arise in the dustbowl communities, in the shanty towns, which are the horrible work of Governments rushing people off Country, or which because of the outrageous neglect by Governments lack equivalency of social wealth to the rest of Australia's communities. But this social and economic development will at best only somewhat reduce the suicides crisis and the whole spectrum of issues that culminate in self-destruction, displaced anger, disassociated behaviours, self-harms and suicides, but it will not abate the crisis. We have two distinct cultures in this nation – Western-based cultures and First Peoples cultures, and they do confront each other, especially in the remote but also in urban centres, and they do clash. To reject this premise will translate in more failed policies or the setting up of more failure and of wasted expenditure. Failure adds up and there reaches a point where it becomes systemic, ruination and despair, genocidal.
- Far too many commentators, far too many politicians have been pushing the line that the suicides crises afflicting First Peoples communities are extremely complex and that the solutions are not easily identifiable, but ironically they then try to push on us simplistic solutions – they say we need to get people into education and jobs. Indeed it is somewhat the opposite, the causes are obvious and the solutions are a little more complex than 'education and jobs'.
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I also suggested:

- The management of ones place within society is critical, and we must be solid in our thinking so as to do everything possible to allow them to navigate their way through society and to their right to empowerment. The majority of First Peoples have taken generational hits to their identity and therefore into the engine room that is self-esteem. These hits have crippled far too many, and these hits distinguish First Peoples from the rest of the Australian population – First Peoples have experiences that non-First Peoples cannot fathom. For many First Peoples their identity is often a liability, historically, culturally and contemporarily. To compound this layered trauma is the fact that a fifth of all First Peoples live in third-world-akin conditions. And far too many are now broken by the crushed hopes they once pegged everything on. There was a huge investiture of faith in the freedom struggles of the 60s, 70s, 80s, in the land rights struggle, in the Black Power movement, in the striving for Treaty, in native title

expectations – but for all the good that has come for many there are also far too many who have had their hopes dashed, their expectations betrayed.

– In remote communities, where there is a disproportionate spike in the spates of suicides, particularly youth suicides, impoverishment quantifiably makes difficult the satisfactory navigation of one's identity through society. Children and youth in communities such as Beagle Bay, One Mile Community, Kennedy Hill, Mowanjum, Balgo for example watch their parents and the majority of their community languish in impoverishment. It gets worse for them – salt poured into the wounds – when they watch their families patronised by the sporadic visits of outsiders, by non-Aboriginal bureaucrats, by the affluent locals who come into the communities for a limited exchange of food, song, dance and 'reconciliation' events. Then they go, but their parents and community continue on in impoverishment and in hopelessness. These confrontational experiences wrought negative psychosocial effects on the children, driving in messages of inescapable inequality.

– I have met a great many community leaders in my travels, and interviewed many of these leaders. The themes are the same, and the impacts are the same – suffering. Assimilation is only well and good for those who want it but wholesale assimilation is indeed a crime against humanity. Assimilation is no longer a silent killer – we see day in day out the tragedy and extensiveness of the suicides crises. Humanity works best by carrying all people, and by unfolding through an engagement of one another, and certainly never by a majority trying to outmuscle a minority. Humanity must unfold ways forward, and exert endless patience, and never bully others. Assimilation demands the extinguishment of a cultural normative. The humiliation that those children feel in the communities I named offends the psyche and permits anger to arise; this anger can run amok.

– Anger is displaced to the parent, back on to the self, displaced to extended family, back on to the self, displaced on to community, this can lead to violence, the anger always comes back to the self, displaced on to authority, often leading to confrontation and arrest, to incarceration where self-destruction is at a premium, and for those who do degenerate into confrontations with community and authority, and who do not have solid support to turn to, the anger accumulates, becomes unbearable and to find relief it culminates in self-harm, in substance abuses, and tragically for some, in suicide.

In being honest about suicide prevention we must understand the person, family or community we are responding to. We must respond to who they are and therefore to how they should be treated. It is not an equitably fair world. To act as if it is or that it should be is to dangerously dismiss the stresses unique to some but not to others. To act as if life should be fair to people living in deprivation and discrimination when life will not be fair to people living in deprivation and discrimination is to pass the buck to an argument that redress is the solution, when in fact this will be the least likely outcome. To quote Professor Taiaiakei Alfred, the 'chattering classes' can carry on all they like about 'reconciliation', and I'll add in, 'closing the gap' on inequalities, but life/society, the products of dominant cultures, of the ruling classes and of their Governments, are unfair. In order to deal with the narrative of those in the now, rather than deal with a body politic, we have to accept that life is shit for far too many and acknowledge their anguish, pain, discrimination and suffering as real and longstanding. Our immediate aim must be to help them to develop and understand resilience and help them with a context of a meaningful life from which they can beat a path away from or around the effects of the unfairness. We cannot dictate to everyone who is discriminated while they are suffering that we must strive for a 'fair' or 'fairer' world. This will come at the cost of their wellbeing and that of those to follow them. Let us work with people first, and worry about changing the world second. To understand people in terms of their discrimination, whether this discrimination is dished out inadvertently or intentionally by Governments, and by some of the 'chattering classes', is a step in the right direction. When I say or write that "People need people", I mean this in that we must focus on each other, not pass the buck to blaming someone for their lot. We can see the poor and marginalised are victims, blaming others will still not help anyone. We must understand, that racism, and other imposts, are the landscape for many. To pass the buck here by blaming racists for racism, is a waste of time. The end to racism has quite a journey to go. In understanding this rather than denying this by getting angry at the unfairness of the racism, of the discrimination, by saying merely it

should not be this way, is a step in the right direction. We should not posit the crap that the answer to someone's suffering is to change the landscape, because in doing so we leave behind the victims for longer journey. Each person, each family, each community in distress needs our undivided attention – this constitutes the biggest first step in helping those who are victim day in day out to discrimination, unfairness and so on.

## People strengthening people – focus on suicide prevention





Suicidal behaviour does not mean that someone wants to die, this is another dangerous myth. Suicidal behaviour is a scream for help – people need people. It is a fallacy to presume 'self-responsibility' as a way forward for someone in a dark place. People need people to strengthen their resolve to the ways forward. Suicidal behaviour is destructive behaviour that can lead to impulsive actions such as a suicide attempt.

Access to emotional support can save lives. It may never be realised this was the case but person to person support is a huge factor in the improving and saving of lives. Resilience and empowerment are gradually accumulated over time, to the point there comes a time that there is no looking back. It is not true that once someone has exhibited suicidal behaviour that they are forever trapped in the heightened vulnerability to recurring suicidal behaviour.

It is true that a powerful indicator to future risk of suicide is a prior suicide attempt however this does not mean that the heightened risk shall be there for life. Indeed, with the coming together of emotional wellbeing and meaningful contexts, there develops resilience within the individual that can make one stronger than ever before. With the right sort of support, protective factors can guard people against the risk of suicide.

Suicide prevention should not be focused alone on reducing risk factors but just as focused, if not more so, on increasing protective factors. The most powerful protective factors include building a connectedness with other people – they do not need to be about direct and targeted support. This connectedness with other people should include the types of engagements that allow the individual to directly and indirectly draw information about wellbeing, about navigating ones journey through society, and therefore predominately focus on self-worth, identity and conflict management.

Most importantly, healthy relationships will contextualise a meaningful life, an honest life, and this in itself is a relief from the conflict and discord that arise from unhealthy levels of expectations. Personal relationships are important, where the support person can understand that they are about support and not about any particular targeted responsibility to the individual. More research needs to be disaggregated on suicidal behaviour and mental disorders, but it appears the majority of suicidal behaviour is not linked to mental disorders and rather to a sense of deep unhappiness. Therefore families and communities can contribute significantly to the improving of the life understandings of a troubled person.

The risk of suicidal behaviour increases when individuals suffer various discord – such as relationship conflict or from a sense of loss or from a sense of failure. People need people. Isolation is dangerous. The best support comes from ones closest social circle. Protective factors, support comes from the development of ones context of meanings but these too are contributed to by ones social circle. Where whole of communities are at heightened risk of community distress, the greatest success found in reducing the levels of communal distress is when the social circle that is the community comes together to support one another – therefore inherently highlighting the context of their meanings. Inherently rather than troubled individuals isolated and effectively judged, they are understood and supported. This type of coming together by families, friends and/or communities to a troubled and isolated individual is about wellbeing. There may have been childhood trauma, interrupted childhood development – a series of emotional instabilities and turmoils that have affected personality traits which have given rise to unhappiness and suicidal risk factors. But good self-esteem and protective wellbeing factors will come from people coming together with the troubled individual at whatever point in time. These developmental interruptions, life stresses and unhappiness are not mental disorders that require specialist health

practitioner support. Rather this is all about people coming together to secure healthy and positive relationship building, to patiently assist one with their self-esteem, to contextualise the path to positive self-identity and the pathway to positive outlooks. Attitude is imperative but it is something shaped by the individual and by those around the individual. People do listen; they listen to the negative and to the positive. Positive adaptive outcomes must be patiently but relentlessly educated and shaped, and the familial and community support self-evident and generous.

Once positive attitudes and positive coping understandings settle in as personality traits, the formerly troubled individual is effectively 'safe'.

There needs to be in society greater onus on shared understandings of contextual meanings of what it takes to shape positive coping strategies in overcoming childhood adversity – abuse, maltreatment, of exposure to domestic violence, of parent mental disorder. There should be less focus and judgment on the fact of any difficult past, it should not be the focal point but if you read newspapers it is the focus. This bent for the past is damaging because it is a trapping. The discourse needs to be focused on the ways forward and in not holding oneself hostage to any past, or in holding any person or any set of events as responsible for any ongoing damage. Positive meanings and positive attitudes will lead to an understanding and forgiveness of the past and that the present and future can be shaped.

Destructive and self-destructive behaviours should be understood as situational and that individual, familial and community attitudes determine the length of these behaviours. Governments investing their attention in helping resource communities for instance to support others is imperative.

Globally, on average, suicide is the leading cause of violent deaths. Self-destructive and suicidal behaviours are responsible for more hospitalisation and for the descent into more social ills than by any other behaviours. Most suicidal behaviours are linked, and usually exclusively, to unhappiness. Therefore suicidal behaviour is preventable. I would argue that suicide and suicidal behaviour are the major health problems society face but of all our major health problems suicidal behaviour is the most preventable. Yet adequate suicide prevention is not prioritised by Governments. Where causality is limited to relationship and social factors and to vulnerable individuals sense or feelings of hopelessness, the descent into a sense of entrapment and the responsive trait of impulsivity, then this behaviour can be addressed by positive mentoring.

Unhappiness is something that can be addressed holistically rather than it being compartmentalised as some sort of mental disorder manifestation and as of a runaway train risk factor to mental disorders. Unhappiness is a manifestation. The prevalence of suicide and suicidal behaviour is higher in high and middle income nations as opposed in low income nations. Similarly, rates of reported depressions and of hospitalisations from self-harm are higher in high and middle income nations. Life stresses that lead to suicidal behaviour in some cultures do not lead to suicidal behaviour in other cultures. Therefore the context of our meanings and our support groups are pivotal.

The outlier in the above are discriminated minorities and peoples. In nations, especially high and middle income nations, with relatively recent colonial oppressor histories, the descendants of First Peoples have been degenerated to discriminated minorities. Unless the descendants of First Peoples accept homogeneity and hard edged assimilation they consequently experience a deep sense of discrimination. This goes to the heart of identity, to self-worth and esteem and their historical and contemporary identities become a liability. These disaggregated groups have the world's highest rates of depressions, unhappiness, self-harms, suicidal behaviour and suicides. It is all about identity, whether for a vulnerable

child, young adult, cultural group – the answers lay in respecting one another, being there for the other, empowering each other through meanings, relationships, freedoms and attitudinally.

Suicide prevention is about the positive self and any comprehensive response includes everyone. A comprehensive national response for suicide prevention requires understanding the above. Loose understandings will tighten if we begin to understand that the majority of suicidal behaviours are directly linked to trauma and unhappiness – to situational events. Contexts and understandings can be changed before dangerous reliefs from substance abusing are sought or before serious mental disorders set in.

The point is that suicides, our leading cause of violent deaths, which receive relative little mention in the news, are the most preventable violence. Self-destructive behaviours that can culminate in suicidal behaviours and distress families and communities are in fact a leading cause of familial breakdowns and of community distress. Once again, the point is that this behaviour is the most preventable of the various destructive behaviours that impact families and communities. These need to be prioritised in national conversations, by the media, by our Governments.

There are many ways forward. More to come.

## **Oppression is the cause of the majority of the suicides**

In societies where the people are exposed to relentless oppression, suicide is a normal response – the ultimate form of resistance to the prolonged violence of oppression. It is not the individual who takes her or his life who is responsible for this culmination but the act of relentless oppression that is responsible. The impacts of colonisation wherever in the world have come with dehumanisation, demonisation and repression of peoples, all in the name of justifying dispossession. I am writing this article so the discrimination and racism that does lead many to suicide can be better understood and for many others that it can be at long last acknowledged. Racism and discrimination are the direct result of the ruthless colonisation and they are impossible to separate.

Globally, in general, suicide takes more lives than all other forms of violence combined, including wars and civil strife. The underlying factors include a suite of psychosocial, psychological and psychiatric culminations and breakdowns, where the human will to survive and overwhelm imposts are finally whittled down to least resistance. Ultimately, it can be argued certain conditions, the relentless nature of these conditions, diminish the capacity or ability to resist. One rationalises the recourse to relief from the tumult of painful conditions – suicide.

However, the victims of colonisation and their descendants register the world's highest suicide rates – from the Guarana peoples of the Amazon, to the Inuit and Lakota of North America, to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples of the Australian continent, and to the many other peoples right around the world. The colonisers ruthlessly exploited the planet – murdering large numbers of the rightful inhabitants of their lands, terrorising them, dispossessing them, brutally exploiting them, corralling them in apartheid, and relentlessly smashing into their historical and contemporary identities, demanding a remake of who they are and what they should be about. Assimilation is not just about social engineering madness, assimilation is more regularly a tool for exploitation. It is used by the oppressor to ensure the oppressed do not simmer resistance.

For many of the oppressed, suicide is an act of resistance. It is rationalised. It is natural to resist the impost of racism and fight daily against situational, multiple and composite traumas and the relentless impacts of colonisation. They fight against the ongoing impacts of colonisation – fight against the expectation that they should assimilate, fight against the implications of the demonisation of their identity – cultural and historical, fight against the attempts by the oppressor to make them feel lesser than, inferior and powerless.

Racism is also felt to varying extents by the waves of migrants from non-Anglocentric cultures that come to Australia. Multiculturalism, in terms of its cultural prowess and dignities, in terms of its exacting a real say, in terms of plurality, does not exist in Australia – it is a myth and secondly an indictment of the Anglocentric oppressor. Our federal parliament is comprised of 226 parliamentarians – 213 are of Anglocentric origins, with the majority with more than 100 years of colonial ‘settler’ familial history. The stranglehold by the colonial oppressor is one of stricture. It is relentless because any respite will undermine the oppressor’s power. They are tied to their origins-of-thinking, one and two centuries old and this is reflected in their expectations, in policies of assimilation, the viciously punitive controls, and in their inherent bent to exploit. But let us understand what the colonisers were predominately about – to exploit. This bent for exploitation underwrites everyday laws and policies. Therefore the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy remains and there has been little respite. There has been little progress in unfolding social justice, equality and equity.

First Peoples, right throughout the world, resist. The culmination of this resistance can be suicide – the ultimate sacrifice – the ultimate act of resistance.

The higher the cultural content of a peoples, the greater the will to resist, the more powerful the acts of resistance, the more significant the fight, the anger and the displaced anger. Peoples who have only been relatively recently impacted by the colonisers or their descendants – these days they are termed as ‘developers’ among other nom de plums – have higher rates of suicide than peoples five and ten generations removed from the original impacts of colonisation.

In my view – estimations – the Kimberley is one of the world’s worst hit regions from the impacts of colonisation. The majority of the Kimberley’s Aboriginal peoples have only had significant contact with non-Aboriginal peoples for less than a century – they remain high cultural content peoples with the centrality of culture and identity psychosocially imperative. They have among the world’s highest suicide rates. Nearly seven per cent of the Kimberley is homeless – 638 homeless per 10,000 population. Outside natural disasters and civil strife this is one of the world’s highest homeless rates. Nearly all this homelessness is comprised of the region’s Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples – and I have worked out that this translates to thereabouts 12 per cent of the Kimberley Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples in some form of homelessness. The extreme poverty that many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples live in is abominable and an indictment of Australia, one of the world’s most affluent nations, the world’s 12<sup>th</sup> largest economy – a nation with the world’s highest median wages. Australia ranks 2<sup>nd</sup> for public health on the United Nations Development Program’s Human Development Index but when I stand alone Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders their equivalent ranking on the global scale would be 132<sup>nd</sup>. In my view, the racialised economic inequalities are racism – beginning and end of story – and to this we must stay solid-in-our-thinking or we will go backwards.

The racism must be addressed – the racialised economic inequalities must be addressed – the right to land, culture and identity in the realest of rightful ways must be responded to if the suicides, the attempted suicides, the acute and chronic depressions are to be reduced at least to parity between the

two populations, that of the First Peoples and the rest. Till then the acts of resistance will continue. Right through humanity's history wherever there has been oppression, wherever there has been discrimination, consequently there is the will to resist, the acts of resistance. The ultimate act of resistance for many oppressed is that though you relentlessly punished my body you will not also take my soul.

Wherever the colonisers went in this world of ours, they sought to exploit. Wherever these exploiters found humankind was in their way they gilded a suite of justifications to underwrite the demonising and the apartheid. We are still parcelled the demonising – the racism – because it is the most powerful justification, the most powerful tool of the exploiter, the oppressor. Racism sells people as uncivilised, heathen, stone-age like, child-like, inferior, different.

Selling ideas is a dime a dozen. We are sold the idea of multiculturalism but which in Australia the multicultural heart in fact does not exist. The oppressor paints the picture of multiculturalism but does not allow multiculturalism. They control its public discourse, its messages, and they corral people with assimilation. The oppressor is bent on the selling of misoxeny. All lives should matter but do not matter to the oppressor. Power matters to the oppressor and everything that facilitates power. Assimilation is imperative. The act of resistance is treated as dangerous radicalism and portrayed as treachery.

The colonisers were vicious, ruthless and murderous despite the onus by them to sanitise the annals of history, to fill the libraries of lands they barbarically dispossessed into their custody with barest comment about the rightful inhabitants and with one-sided vainglorious tales of themselves. The oppressor continues with the bent for zombie assimilation. In 2012, Professor Paul Gilroy of Kings College, London University, referred to zombie multiculturalism – where equality and cultural plurality are promoted but not effected, where the exact opposite occurs, a lie is sold while the oppressor denies the social equity to the oppressed and therefore disavows them from the equality that is touted. This may smack of institutionalised racism but it is a different form, however I will leave this for another article. The colonisers murdered, raped and pillaged. They created underclasses of extreme poverty and they were history's greatest slum builders.

The racism will end when all this is addressed. Till such time the prisons will be filled, the acts of resistance will continue and many of these acts will translate as suicides. It should be understood, that this sense of racism and the culmination of suicide are never directly resultant from the victim but are incurred by the oppression, the relentless oppression, by the oppressor. The oppressed are never the problem. The oppressor is the problem, always. Where suicide rates between the descendants of the dispossessed and the rest of the population are dramatically disparate then in two words it is 'structural racism'.

When we look through the cultural lens and see that people are committing suicide ten times the rate of the rest of their region's population then there are racial divides but built on the oppressor and oppressed dichotomy.

Oppression causes suicide and the natural human response is to resist oppression. The normal human response is not to allow oneself to be broken, beaten or dominated by oppression. The significant consideration is that if oppression causes suicide is it then in fact suicide? Or is it murder? Oppression kills. In my view it is murder and until we focus on the oppressor and urge the ways forward, address the inequalities, end the oppression, then the murders will continue, tragically at the horrific rates that have been naturalised.

The violence of ignorance will continue these narratives – this is why I write articles such as this, to take on the social and political force of these abominable narratives.

- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples of the Kimberley, the Northern Territory and far north Queensland have among the world's highest suicide rates. Their youth and children more than likely the world's highest suicide rates.
- Nationally, nearly one in three deaths of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples aged 15 to 35 years are suicides. Suicide is this age group's leading cause of death.
- One in ten deaths of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children aged 14 years and less are suicide. Suicide is this age group's 2<sup>nd</sup> leading cause of death. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children aged 14 years and less suicide at 8 times the rate of non-Aboriginal children. In some regions the rate is 10, 20 and 30 times.

## **Risk of death high after release from prison**

Not enough is being done for people while in jail. There are far too many people in prison mentally unwell rather than criminally minded. There are far too many incarcerated for low level offending. When it comes to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, just about every family has had a family member or close relative incarcerated. From a racialised lens Australia jails Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples at among the world's highest rates.

Having visited prisons and long worked with ex-prisoners, most of them soon after release, to improve their lot, it is my view that in general people come out of prison worse than when they went in. Trauma – situational, multiple and composite – is the end-result for the majority of the prison experience; particularly for those who were dish up a prison sentence for effectively 'non-criminally minded' offences such as fine defaulting. The mentally unwell become more unwell, with many breaking down altogether. Those who went in for low level poverty related offending come out of prison 'brutalised' by abuses, fear, anxieties and debilitated in having to face much the same of what led them into prison. They face a life without secondary and university qualifications, without job skills. They continue on in the harsh reality of poverty and in a society that does not give the poor a break.

The prisons I have visited are the sorriest tales of punitive tribulations, of neglect, of lost and troubled souls. Prisons are not about restorative and rehabilitative practicalities but places with the inmates in the longest queues – begging for education programs, including literacy. Only the few will score participation in the handful of education programs offering the opportunity of qualifications. The unmet need is not just sad but it is disgraceful on the part of governments – State and Commonwealth. More can be done but it is not.

I am not going to argue the economic benefits to society; that it is cheaper to invest in people's education, training up, in alternatives to incarceration than it is to incarcerate and punish. These arguments disgust me. These arguments indict our national consciousness, our logic and our collective values. The economy should be geared to society and not the other way around. I prefer to discuss and urge moral imperatives instead of framing our values in economical imperatives.

We should be abominated by a society that incarcerates the poorest of the poor, the sickest of the unwell, that effectively punishes minorities because assimilation wants them to give up their cultural being. We should be abominated by this nation where at least one in 10 and up to one in 6 of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders living have been to jail. This horrific statistical narrative should have long ago galvanised the nation to redress the intolerable racialised inequalities, the economic inequalities, the discrimination.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 86 per cent of prisoners did not complete Year 12. More than 30 per cent did not get past Year 9.

According to researchers Kate van Doreen, Stuart Kinner and Simon Forsyth – “the risk of death is greatly elevated among ex-prisoners compared with the general population.” They stated, “Although many deaths are drug-related or the result of suicide, little is known about risk and protective factors for death in this population.”

I have long argued that a significant proportion of suicides are of ex-prisoners and in most cases soon after their release from prison. It aches the heart to comprehend that people may have felt more secure while in prison than back in society despite that prison damaged them. The death rates from external causes and suicides of ex-prisoners are themes throughout our world and not confined to Australia. A number of studies estimate that these death rates from unnatural causes are up to 10 times the rates of death while in any year in prison.

Importantly, Kate van Doreen, Stuart Kinner and Simon Forsyth suggest, “young people experience markedly increased risk of death in the year following release from adult prison.”

“This elevation in risk is greater than that experienced by older ex-prisoners. Among young ex-prisoners, the majority of deaths are due to preventable causes, particularly injury and poisoning, and suicide.”

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander comprise more than one quarter the Australian prison population and standalone their median age is much less than the rest of the prison population. It is estimated that more than 90 per cent have not completed a secondary education. The majority come from the most impoverished contexts. They have little, if any, prospects post-release. I have brought a number of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander ex-prisoners into various educational institutions. Every single one of them took up the offer. Noongar man Mervyn Eades is the director of Ngalla Maya Aboriginal Corporation – an employment training provider for ex-prisoners. Mervyn knows what prisoners go through, understands their lot, having done time himself and Ngalla Maya enjoys a high retention rate among ex-prisoners working towards the pick up a qualification, to be able to legitimately compete for a job.

I am not interested in economic imperatives. I am interested in moral imperatives. It is the right thing to do for us as a society to improve the lot of others. The suicides will be reduced. The unnatural death rates that are damning this nation will be reduced. The impacts from loss and grief on families will disappear. I estimate, though the research is not yet in, that one quarter of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander suicides are linked in one way or another to ex-prisoners just out of prison – more on this in future articles. In my view a significant proportion of the prison population should not be in prison and instead supported with all sorts of educational and other assistance. Prisoners should not just be locked in those damn cells – instead help them with psychosocial counselling, mentoring, educational

opportunities, job training and let us improve their lot. It is a disgrace and an indictment that prisons are missed opportunities for healing, education, the improving of one's lot. Actually, it's bullshit.

There is no greater legacy than to improve the lot of others – to the point of truly changing lives, saving lives. Actually, it is easy.

## **40 million life years lost to suicide**

Globally, each year at least 40 million life years are lost to suicide. In Australia, each year at least 100,000 life years are lost to suicide. In general, suicide takes more lives than all forms of violence combined. There are always pressing issues but suicide is a pressing issue that is yet to translate as a national priority. Officially, on average, suicide takes the lives of seven Australians each day and more likely ten Australian lives each day. Among Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples suicide is a catastrophic humanitarian crisis – within the 15 to 35 year age group, nearly one in three deaths a suicide.

The leading cause of death for Australians aged 15 to 45 is suicide. More lives are lost to suicide than to road fatalities. The average age of suicide is 44.5 years, much lower than age medians of other leading causes of premature death, including cancers and heart diseases. For Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders the narrative is dramatically worse, with 88 per cent of suicides being of people aged less than 45 years.

On a per person average, suicide takes more life years than any other leading cause of death in Australia. Overall, Australians lose more than 30 life years and standalone, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders in the vicinity of 50 life years. To put this into context, the average per person loss of life years for Australians who die from cancer is 8 years. With heart disease it is 4 years.

Statistics can appear impersonal, and people are not numbers, but there are narratives that only the statistics can profoundly highlight – and one of these narratives is that suicide is skewed towards people in the prime of life. Life stresses are on the increase and the expectations, the competition, the demands on the individual ever increasing from the accumulation of imposts by society.

Overall, officially, one in 19 of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders suicide – for too long for too many Australians were not aware of this and this had been Australia's hidden truth, for a time a dirty secret. Because of under-reporting issues I believe the suicide rate is much higher, possibly even as high as one suicide in 10 deaths.

Then there are the high risk regions – the Kimberley and far north Queensland endure high suicide rates but when rates are standalone for their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander populations, they are abominable – at 70 suicides per 100,000 population. The world's highest national suicide rate is 44 per 100,000 (Guyana). The Kimberley's and far north Queensland's Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander suicide rates are also higher than the world's highest national homicide rate, that of Venezuela, 53 murders per 100,000.



Australia is one of the world's wealthiest nations per capita and one of the world's sturdiest economies but Australia is a tale of two peoples – the First Peoples, who are now less than 3 per cent of the total population, and the other 97 per cent. Australia's population is around 24 million and the descendants of the First Peoples number around 700,000. But in the Australian context more than 200,000 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders live in relative extreme poverty. More than half the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander population endure a significant direct impact from the not so long ago Stolen Generations and of the stretch that allowed for the Stolen Wages and the horrid segregation of people into missions and reserves. The Stolen Generations bred despair and hate, distrust and fear. The pain and suffering was self-evident in the tears that flowed during the Stolen Generations Apology on February 13, 2008. The missions and reserves indentured everyone as to a formal underclass of inequality and poverty and shovelled it to them as their lot, as an inescapable way of life. The missions and reserves were near lawless environments where many of those who administered and worked in the missions and reserves inflicted violence, sadomasochism, psychological, emotional, physical and sexual abuse. The missions and reserves were brutal environments, where Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children were despicably brutalised during their most important years of their life – in the years that determine their form and content, their self-determination, their psychological and physical wellbeing.

The missions and reserves were in effect hellholes, where many became mentally ill, broken down, traumatised, psychosocially broken or at best reduced. On leaving the hellholes there was no trauma recovery, no psychologists, no healing. There was silence and at best, for better or worse, the only respite was within families. The hidden toll of the missions and reserves plays out today not just in transgenerational poverty but in transgenerational violence and various abuses.

Though most Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander families, like most Australian families, do not fall victim to violence, various abuse including sexual abuse, it is true that the rate of domestic violence, violence in general and sexual abuse are higher in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander families. Of course, wherever there is extreme poverty the rates for violence and abuse are higher – it's a theme throughout the world; of extreme poverty found in middle and high income nations. However, I also believe the pronounced rates of violence, domestic violence and sexual abuse found in the statistical narratives of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities have a lot to do with the brutality and horrors of the Stolen Generations, the missions and reserves.

The bulk of global research on sexual abuse argues that the majority of violent offenders and in particular sexual abusers were victims themselves. The majority of perpetrators of child sexual abuse were themselves victims. To keep to context, the majority of victims of sexual abuse and violence do not manifest as offenders, but some do. The bulk of research suggests that more than 90 per cent of offenders are former victims. Victims of sexual abuse, particularly child sex abuse, self-harm and suicide. The Royal Commission into Institutionalised Sexual Abuse has demonstrated the deplorable extensiveness of the brutality of the missions and reserves and the Boys Homes and of the ongoing impacts, the trauma, the lifelong breakdown of people. It has also been shown that there was no-one for the victims to turn to, and that many knew what was occurring but no-one would protect the children.

I have a number of friends who were sexually abused in the missions and reserves of the 1950s and 1960s or in Boys Homes during the 1970s and 1980s – and to this day they have not fully recovered, they visit psychologists – they break down – and for some, they have lived broken lives. They are the survivors, for many more than you'd imagine have taken their lives.

There is a lot of pain out there, unresolved, some of it acting out in negative and dark ways on others, those immediate to the sufferers.

There needs to be a focus on people strengthening people, on trauma recovery. For too long either by neglect, silence, narrow minded blame, or the wrong people leading in the space of trauma recovery and suicide prevention we are losing people at never before rates to depressions, mental illnesses, self-destructive behaviours, violence and suicide. The silence, narrow-minded blaming and too many people leading the show with merely the lived experience as their lot often perpetuate trauma and sideline the healing.

For all Australians, deaths by suicide have reached a ten year peak. For Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples the levels of suicide are a humanitarian crisis.

The research shows that for every suicide, it is estimated as many as 30 people attempt suicide.

There should be just as much focus on suicide prevention as there is with trying to prevent homicides and domestic violence. All lives matter. There is no greater legacy that any Government can have than in the saving of lives.

But there is not the same level of focus by Governments on suicide prevention. Yet suicide takes more lives than homicides and domestic violence combined.

During the last ten years Australian homicide rates have been decreasing though tragically the number of women murdered by a current or former partner has been increasing. Domestic violence takes a life every eight days and many are calling it a national crisis.

Every death is a tragedy. Suicide takes seven lives each day.

Comparatively, Australia has a low homicide rate – 1.1 homicides per 100,000 population while Venezuela, as already noted, has a homicide rate of 53.7 per 100,000 population. The majority of middle and high income nations have a homicide rate between 5 and 15 per 100,000 population.

There were 254 homicides in Australia in 2012.

There were 2,535 suicides in Australia in 2012.

Where there is a homicide thereabouts every 18 hours in Australia, there are seven suicides within 24 hours.

While homicide rates have been decreasing, suicide rates have been increasing – with the suicide rate at a ten year peak. The suicide rate is at 11 per 100,000 population, up from 9.9 in 2011.

1,901 Australian males suicided in 2012 – 16.8 per 100,000 population.

634 Australian females suicided in 2012 – 5.6 per 100,000 population.

The rate of suicide is ten times the rate of homicides.

For each of 2013, 2014 and 2015 the suicide toll will come in tragically higher than 2012.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, in the ten year period to June 30, 2012, there were 2,631 homicides. But there were 2,535 suicides in 2012 alone.

Of the 2,631 homicides, 41 per cent were domestic violence related deaths or 1,088 domestic violence deaths over the ten year period, with the majority of these the deaths of women.

There is a domestic violence related death – by a partner or former partner – every eight days. Domestic disputes are also a factor in suicides, with partners, mostly males, taking their own lives.

Suicide is the leading cause of death for Australian teenagers aged 14 to 18 years.

Suicide is a leading cause of death for Australians aged 10 to 45 years of age.

The same effort that Governments have put into raising awareness of tobacco-related illnesses and deaths and the same effort they have put into campaigns to reduce road fatalities so in the least they should put into suicide prevention.

## **Hidden truths – it is worse, not better, for many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders**



Gerry Georgatos at One Mile Community, Broome – Photo, Ingetje Tados

It is stated that that we should inspire change by giving onus to the good news stories, to the inspiring role models instead of the bad news stories, instead of narratives of despair. Yes, tell the good news

stories, inspire as many as is possible but how can we deflect from the narrative when the divide is as wide as ever and all is getting worse? In order to sell the good news story as the big picture, the statistical narrative is being doctored. Collectivised data and medians are telling a different tale to the one that I experience on the ground, at the coalface, in my many travels to hundreds of communities.

We are misinforming Australians with collectivised data, loosely put together, when disaggregation continues to tell abominable narratives of half-lives, of the worse getting worse.

Those with some Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage are doing better, much better, than those with mostly Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage. At least 671,000 Australians identify Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage however the collectivised medians mask the reality that much has not improved for the majority of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders who have historically been separated from the Australian nation.

Despite the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) recently suggesting that life expectancy for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders has significantly decreased this is not true if we for instance disaggregate to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders remote living. For remote living, or Northern Territorian living, or Kimberley living, or far north Queensland living Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander life expectancy is up to 25 years less than the overall Australian life expectancy median. But with more and more people identifying Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage the medians on mortality, on life expectancy are increasing and therefore for many others their truth is masked. At each Census since the 1980s tens of thousands of Australians have taken pride in identifying Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage. But we must not let go of the standalone narratives of those whom have always identified, lived Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, who have life expectancy up to 25 years less than the national average. We should know if health, mortality and other measurable indicators have improved or not. According to the 2011 Census, an additional 20 per cent identified as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders since the 2006 Census – this is what reduced the life expectancy gap – not primary and secondary health factors. There is no population explosion just more Australians identifying their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage. Because of intermarriage and more Australians identifying hence with each generation there are proportionately more Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders.

In order to do the justice in legitimately 'Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage' then the must-do of disaggregated statistical narratives must be preserved as we must have indicators to measure targeted change against – improving the lot of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged.

This continent's highest suicide rates are in the Kimberley and far north Queensland regions – and when disaggregated to these regional Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander populations they are nearly four times the rate of the national average of suicides for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders and nearly eight times the overall Australian rate of suicide. But the national Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander suicide rate is twice the Australian rate – deplorable but at first glance it masks the catastrophic tragedy among Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander populations in the Kimberley and far north Queensland.

In various disaggregation in parts of the Kimberley, the Western Desert, Anangu Country, in some towns of western NSW, life expectancy is 25 years less than the life expectancy of Australians. In various regions, such as in some of Yolngu Country in the Northern Territory, people live on average 17 years less than Australians. The extreme poverty, the third-world-akin existences are far too many and should not be skewed and subsumed by collectivised data and by the pride of people who all of sudden identify

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage. It is our moral obligation to not lose sight of the most vulnerable and marginalised, who are becoming a hidden third world poverty – of people whose poverty is sold as lessening when in fact their lot has not improved as the overall averages would like us to have believe.

In the Northern Territory and in the Kimberley, thereabouts one in eight Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders languish in one form of homelessness or another. Outside natural disasters and civil strife these are among the world's highest homeless rates. In a number of regions of the Northern Territory, if you are an Aboriginal adult male you have a life expectancy of 52 years. If you are an Aboriginal baby born in the Territory your life expectancy is 63 years, 20 years less than the national average. In the Kimberley if you are an Aboriginal male, one in three will be dead by 45 years of age. Nationally, nearly one in three deaths of Aboriginal and/Torres Strait Islanders aged 15 to 35 years will be a suicide. Suicide is this age group's leading cause of death – but it is even more diabolical when disaggregated to high risk regions. Australia continues as the only developed country to not eradicate trachoma.

Over the past five years, the ABS reported an increase in the life expectancy for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders. The life expectancy medians disguise a narrative that we must address. The medians have improved because of people identifying Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander but who have not lived marginalised and in racialised economic inequalities.

The ABS reported that life expectancy for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander males from 2010 to 2012 was 69.1 years and 73.7 years for women. ABS researcher Bjorn Jarvis said there is no one particular reason for the changes.

“It brings together a whole range of different things that are happening in public health and socio-economic factors,” said Mr Jarvis. According to the ABS, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait islander men will live 10.6 years less than non-Aboriginal men and for women it's 9.5 years less. These are medians where everyone with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage is heaped together – but is Australia really closing gaps? I argue that it only appears so.

The ABS notes that the five yearly Census has “unexplained growth in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Census counts relative to the previous Census.” The ABS notes that “over the past 35 years, there has been a clear upward trend in Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Census counts, beginning with the 1971 Census.”

According to the Australian Human Rights Commission, “the increases in the Indigenous population cannot be accounted for by birth rate alone. The ABS attributes the increase to a growing propensity of people to identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander, and the greater efforts made to record Indigenous status in the Censuses.”

Despite the pride and right for people to recognise and identify their Aboriginality, these aggregations skew and hide realities.

In order to understand the extent of how data on life expectancy rates has been impacted by the increase in population well beyond fertility rates we should consider the 1971 Census when 20,200 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people were counted between the ages of 0-4 years. Four

decades later, in 2011, two-thirds of that age-group should be alive in accordance with the 1971 life expectancy rate, but instead in 2011, instead of 14,000 between the ages of 40 to 44, there were 33,605. The increased numbers arose from mostly citizens who had not lived marginalised and who registered their Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander heritage. But the overall life expectancy, and other narratives, of the 14,000 who remain from 1971 are vastly different from the overall life expectancy and narratives of the 33,605.

Much is not getting better for the majority of those whom I visit in the homeland communities, in the shanties, in the impoverished communities where up to 20 live to a shack, who are increasingly becoming the forgotten and those who languish on in the ghettos of the urban masses. Everyone matters however the way forward is always the bottom up approach, in identifying the most disadvantaged, oppressed and marginalised and with the onus in redressing this.

## **Some want to portray things on the improve but the statistical narrative says the divide is widening**



There are racial divides that despite all the projects working to bridge these divides, they are in fact widening. Economic inequalities are not being addressed and instead a tsunami of poverty related – extreme poverty – issues are flooding us with high mortality, homelessness and appalling incarceration and suicide rates. For every person that crosses the divide to the Elysian Fields, many fall forever into the chasm, into the Rubicon, while many remain lost on the poor side of the divide, marginalised in hopelessness.

Yet we keep on getting told that even if slowly everything is changing, that things are improving, that the gap is being closed. It is not true. Unless we start with the truth, from an informed context then we are delivering hidden poverty and underclasses.

This is not only so for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders but for many cultural groups, for many migrant Australians who are spiralling into poverty-emblazoned underclasses, racialised. Nearly one-third of Australia's homelessness are of people born overseas. However, those who have it worst, for those whom the statistical narrative is an abomination – morally and politically – are the descendants of the First Peoples of this continent. If the divides can be bridged for those whom have it worst, for who are hit the hardest, then we'll begin to get it right for everyone.

Till such time, Australia will continue to be defined by the maltreatment and predicaments of those who have it worst. Of all the middle to high income nations with recent colonial oppressor histories, Australia

has the widest divide of its measurable indicators between the descendants of its First Peoples and the rest of its population. However unlike poor and low-income nations Australia is an affluent nation with the world's highest median wages, the 12<sup>th</sup> largest economy.

Let's look at the Australian story through the facts alone.

- According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics one in 200 Australians is in some form of homelessness. But one quarter are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders despite that overall Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander are only 3 in every 120 Australians.
- One in 24 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders live in some form of homelessness.
- In Western Australia, one in 16 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders live in some form of homelessness.
- In the Kimberley and in the Northern Territory, one in 8 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders live in some form of homelessness.
- In Australia, nearly 20,000 children aged 12 years or less are homeless – the majority are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children.
- In the Northern Territory, 25 per cent of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander households – shanty-like dwellings – are home to 20 people.
- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander youth are 26 times more likely to be in detention compared to non-Aboriginal youth.
- In Western Australia, the rate is 53 times.
- Nationally, one in 28 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander boys spent time in juvenile detention while for girls the rate is one in 113.
- Today, there are 10,000 adult Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders in prisons – about one in 35 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander adult males are in prison.
- A few years ago, I had estimated that one in 20 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders living have been to prison but even this abominable statistic is worse than I first estimated. It is somewhere between up to one in 6 and no less than one in 10 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders living have been to jail. From a racialised lens this is the highest jailing rate in the world.
- The Northern Territory incarcerates nearly one per cent of its total population – one in 120 Northern Territorians – but 86 per cent of the Territory's prison population is comprised of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders. The Northern Territory's jailing rate is higher than the world's leading national jailing rate, that of the United States of America.
- The Northern Territory's juvenile detention population is comprised 98 per cent of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander youth.
- Western Australia is the mother of all jailers, with one in 13 of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander males in prison.
- Australia has the world's highest median wages but if we stand alone Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander median wages, with various adjustments, they are not in the world's top 100. In recent years, Australia has ranked, 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> in the world on the United Nations Human Development Index – for public health and other social wealth factors – but when I disaggregated stand alone to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders the equivalent ranking on the global scale would be 132<sup>nd</sup>.
- One in 19 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander deaths is by suicide. This horrific rate is an abomination – and likely the world's highest from a racialised lens. However, the suicide rate is much higher – there are under-reporting issues – and I estimate it at around 1 in 12.
- Nationally, if you are an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander aged 15 to 35 years, nearly one in 3 deaths in this age group will be a suicide. This abominable rate of suicide should have galvanised a national emergency – but no.
- The Kimberley and far north Queensland regions have among the world's highest rates of suicide when disaggregated to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.

- Nearly 90 per cent of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander suicides are of people aged 45 years and less.
- It is true that there is a higher incidence of domestic violence callouts, violence and sexual abuse among Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people than the rest of the population but the cesspool of ingredients that give rise to this – extreme poverty, various traumas – are once again disproportionate. As controversial and upsetting as this is, the majority of perpetrators of sexual abuse have been victims themselves – there is no justifiable excuse that mitigates but causality must always be reflected upon and understood. Many were physically and sexually brutalised in the missions and reserves. I am working on various research in this area. The Royal Commission into Institutionalised Sexual Abuse has demonstrated the extensiveness of the brutality and horrific abuses in the missions and reserves. Many have since died unnatural deaths or suicided while a small percentage degenerate as perpetrators of violence, controlling behaviours, sexual abuse. There is much for Australia to be shamed about in the cesspool of atrocities it inflicted upon people during its apartheid practices – the breaking of the human spirit.
- Suicide takes more lives than all other forms of violence combined.

The tragedies that I describe are compounded by the political abomination of one Government after another pushing the bent for assimilation on remote living Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander living peoples. Scoring a good education is one thing, no issue with this but culture as central to identity cannot be eroded by external factors, it is brutally damaging. With any cultural group on this continent – migrants or otherwise – it is imperative to not inhibit the freedom to navigate their two cultural settings, their own and that of the dominant one.

**CAAMA Radio – Speaking out on Aboriginal suicide**

**CAAMA Radio – Researcher says Poverty is driving incarceration of Aboriginal people**

**CAAMA Radio – Seven per cent of the Kimberley homeless!**

**CAAMA Radio – The suicide crisis**

## **Understanding the abominable jail & suicide rates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders**

The record-high suicide rates among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are the result of the racist policies of one government after another. Government after government have degraded the majority of their communities to the most abominable social health quotients. They have denied Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities an equivalency of social wealth enjoyed by non-Aboriginal communities. They should have been entitled to this equivalent social wealth with which to navigate two cultural settings without impost. In trying to understand the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander suicides we must shift from focusing per se on the individual and instead focus on the circumstances.

Without an economic response to the impoverished communities that at long last bespeaks of equality there can be no building of resilience.

When governments end their depraved racist policies and finally believe in equality ‘without exception’ and demonstrate this by doing the equality then Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children will not be born into a sense of hopelessness, into a racial divide. Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children



aged 14 years and less are eight times more likely to die by suicide than non-Aboriginal children aged 14 years and less. This is a moral abomination.

For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders aged 15 to 25 years they are nearly four and half times more likely to die by suicide than non-Aboriginal Australians aged 15 to 25 years.

The most shocking statistic – the one that should toll loud and clear through the national consciousness – is that nearly one in three Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders aged 15 to 35 years die by suicide. One in three deaths by suicide.

The suicide rates for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders aged 15 and 25 years and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders aged 25 and 35 years are both nearly 40 suicides per 100,000 population. The national trend for suicide for the Australian population is 10 per 100,000 population but for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders standalove the suicide rate is 21 per 100,000 population. For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living in the Kimberley and in far north Queensland their suicide rate is higher than 70 per 100,000 population.

Suicide is the tragic end, the tip of the iceberg – the various cumulative distress is on the increase, correlated by increasing daily hardships and the constant of a declining social health quotient (composed of the social determinants). In the 2012-13 financial year stretch nearly 2,500 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander were admitted to hospital for intentional self-harming. In the last ten years the sense of hopelessness in steeply degraded communities has led to significant increases in self-harming in both women and men, to levels now more than double the number of hospital admissions ten years ago. This is a clear indicator that hopelessness is overwhelming, entrenched.

Extreme poverty is the major driver to the disparity in economic and social determinants. Extreme poverty is what has led to 15 per cent of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population of the Kimberley eking out life in one form of homelessness or another. Extreme poverty is what has led to 13 per cent of Western Australia's Aboriginal adult males in prison. Extreme poverty is what has led to 98 per cent of the Northern Territory's juvenile detention comprised of Aboriginal youth.

A startling statistic is that two per cent of the continent's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population is in prison – this is higher than the world's highest national jailing rate, that of the mother of all jailers, the USA, which has imprisoned nearly one per cent of its total population. It is self-evident that poverty is what is driving the horrific American incarceration rate.

This tragic statistical 'victory' over the American jail rate must be in understood in context – as to how dramatic the American jailing rate is. The United States of America has the world's highest incarceration rate – 716 people jailed per 100,000 of the national population. The USA represents less than four and half per cent of the world's population but accounts for thereabouts 22 per cent of the world's prisoners. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the national average imprisonment rate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders is 2,241 per 100,000 adult Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population – more than three times the rate of the mother of all jailers.

The imprisonment rate for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander females is now at 439 per 100,000 adult female Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population. The imprisonment rate for Aboriginal and Torres

Strait Islander males demonstrates Australian made racism – 4,092 prisoners per 100,000 adult male Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Extreme poverty in Australia is racialised – marginalised wholesale to a multitude of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities – impoverished communities. Then there is the composite trauma from inter-generational traumas borne of the colonial oppressor and the litany of cruelties of their apartheid regime.

According to the ABS the number of prisoners increased by 10 per cent in the past year to reach a high of nearly 36,000, with the national imprisonment rate climbing to 194 prisoners per 100,000 adult population – the brunt borne by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. Thereabouts 10,000 prisoners are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders – an abominable number, with 90 per cent males and 10 per cent females.

Western Australia is the worst culprit in the nation – jailing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders at 3,700 per 100,000, followed by the Northern Territory at just over 3,000 per 100,000 and then South Australia at over 2,500 per 100,000. The more west we journey across the continent the worse it gets for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples – the more extreme the poverty, the higher the homelessness rates, the higher the arrest rates, the higher the jailing rates, the more the suicides.

I know my writing over the years about the incarceration rates, about the reasons behind the arrest and jailing rates and about the suicide rates had become somewhat of a broken record, but in the last year more journalists have been writing about these than before. This augurs a little well, it is a beginning. What we need now is for these same journalists and public media analysts to focus on the true cause to these cruelly disparate rates – and if they do this then this will lead them to what many of us know, to the cesspool of Australian made racism that has delivered the extreme poverty in which one quarter of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders have been marginalised within – corrals of misery, the narrative of abominable human suffering – utter racism.

There is no 'Indigenous disadvantage' spending to address this. Less than 50 cents additional for every dollar spent on Australians in general is spent on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and most of that 50 cents does not hit the ground, instead ends up with bureaucrats and carpetbaggers. To address the disadvantage, to redress within a generation all the injustices hit on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, the spending on the affected would have to be at least \$6 dollars additional for every dollar spent on each Australian, not less than 50 cents. This is the very least that we can do. The incarceration and suicide rates will continue unless we address the social determinants with equality.

## **The issue of our time – 1 in 3 deaths by suicide**



Suicide rates in the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander age group of 15 to 35 years are at horrific rates. Suicide is the leading cause of death in this age group. Thirty per cent of deaths in this vast age group over the five year period 2008 to 2012 have been by suicide. This is nearly 1 in every 3 deaths by suicide.

This statistic and the narrative of human suffering and misery should have our governments and their many instruments focused on doing something about this. A critical response should be a national priority. This humanitarian crisis is the issue of our time.

It gets worse. There are under reporting issues and the suicide rates are not just more than likely higher, they are higher than the reported rates by the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare and the Australian Bureau of Statistics. However I will leave this for another article.

Children are taking their lives at ages so young and in numbers so high that it is an indictment of the Australian nation, its governments, for feet dragging. Government investments in one day workshops and in celebrity ambassadors will not make any lifesaving difference.

We were not put on this earth to bury our children but we do. We were not put on this earth to betray the other but we do. The moral abomination is that we know what is happening and yet the critical response of people strengthening people and the critical mass of improving the social health quotient is just not happening. But it must happen. In all my government engagements, on the boards I sit on, with the projects – national and community – I am involved in this is what I am urging, without compromising what needs to be said, without fail. I am praying that we get across the line to making the difference in the lifesaving ways that matter.

The children of the First Peoples of this continent, those children aged 14 years and less are eight times more likely to die by suicide than non-Aboriginal children. Unbelievably, suicide is the second leading cause of death for these children in this age group. When one in ten deaths over a five year period from 2008 to 2012 of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children has been by suicide then there is something dark, wrong, immoral and abominable in this nation. Australia is the world's 12<sup>th</sup> largest economy, one of the world's wealthiest nations per capita and according to the United Nations Development Program's Human Development Index ranks second among nations, behind Norway, for the quality of its public health. But when we stand alone Australia's population of First Peoples, who comprise so little of the Australian total population, they have an equivalent rank of 132<sup>nd</sup>. The poorest among them have social health quotients equivalent to nations in sub-Saharan poverty. Of the world's middle and high income nations with colonial oppressor histories Australia has the widest divide of all measurable indicators between the descendants of its First Peoples and the rest of the population. This is racialisation, and racialisation is a layer of racism, indeed it is racism.

One in ten Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children aged 14 years and less lose to suicide. This is eight times the rate of their non-Aboriginal counterparts. Eight and nine and ten and eleven year old children taking their lives is heart wrenching, but the moral abomination rests with the nation, with its consciousness, with its imprimatur – governments – for not prioritising humane responses.

The further west we journey across this continent the worse it gets for the descendants of the First Peoples, the more the hits, whether the extreme poverty, the homelessness, the arrest and jailing rates. It is third worst in South Australia, 2<sup>nd</sup> worst in the Northern Territory and worst in Western Australia.

The national suicide rate is around 10 per 100,000 population and when collectivised significantly obscures the narrative of human suffering, of misery, of premature and unnatural deaths that is the lot of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders. The national suicide rate for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders is close to 21 per 100,000 population but we must disaggregate to jurisdiction and age groups. I remind that there are under-reporting issues and the real suicide rates are significantly worse, but the reported rates are loud and clear of the humanitarian crisis at hand that begs for a humane critical response.

Over the five year period, 2008 to 2012, NSW's First Peoples endured a suicide rate of 11.5 per 100,000 compared with Western Australia's 35 per 100,000. The Western Australian rate is a crisis. But the Kimberley region's First Peoples endured a rate of over 70 suicides per 100,000. Similarly, the First Peoples of far north Queensland endured over 70 suicides per 100,000 over the same period. The Northern Territory's First People aged 25 to 35 years also endured a suicide rate of 70 per 100,000. The most at-risk group are Aboriginal adult males aged 25 to 30 years who have a suicide rate of over 90 per 100,000.

From 2001 to 2010 the Australian Bureau of Statistic figures describe a suicide rate of one in 24 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander deaths. It has got worse – in the 2008 to 2012 stretch the rate of suicide is now one in 20 deaths. Once again it is significantly higher than reported but ultimately if we couple suicides with other unnatural and premature deaths for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders we have a humanitarian crisis of catastrophic proportion.

It saddens me every time I write these articles, more than 200 articles in the last couple of years, because the already high frequency of reported suicide as a cause of death has a traumatic effect on peoples who already endure a disproportionately overwhelming burden of bereavement stress because of the high rate of premature and unnatural deaths. However, if we are to end this crisis, if we are to save lives, if we are to do the right, if we are to improve the lot of others then we have to do the truth. The truth is the only means to the ways forward.

In some communities, life expectancy is thirty years lower than the national average and one in three of their people are dead by 45 years of age. Child mortality rates are double and triple the national average.

Of the 117 reported Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander suicides in 2012, 34 occurred in Western Australia, 29 in Queensland, 27 in the Northern Territory and 20 in NSW. Queensland and NSW have more than double the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander populations of Western Australia and the Northern Territory. These tragic deaths are the tip of the iceberg. The levels of community distress, various trauma – usually multiple trauma – are at systematically dangerously destructive levels, taking down families and communities. The selling of resilience alone are not the solution, to tough it all out, we have to dish out the equality governments have been holding back.

The Northern Territory has generally maintained a horrific suicide rate among Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples at 35 per 100,000 since 2007. But it was worse for the Territory at the beginning of this new millennium, with a peak of 50 per 100,000 in 2002, decreasing to less than half that by 2006. In that year the Federal Government's Emergency Response ('The Intervention') was launched. In subsequent years the suicide rate increased to thereabouts 35 per 100,000 where it has remained since. In 2002, 33 lives were reported lost to suicide in the Territory, decreasing to 16 lives reported lost to

suicide in 2006, but increasing to 29 in 2007. In both 2011 and 2012, 27 lives were reported lost to suicide in the Territory.

The majority of suicides among Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples are before 35 years of age, with just about all of them before 45 years of age. For the non-Aboriginal Australian population highest risk groups are well above 50 years of age, with the highest risk group above 80 years of age.

For every suicide there are many more attempted suicides, and hundreds of incidences of self-harm. To some extent the estimations of the number of incidences of intentional self-harm are measured by the number of hospitalisations. The hospitalisation rate for intentional self-harm for non-Aboriginal Australians stands currently at 142 per 100,000 people but for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Australians the rate is 379 per 100,000. The hospitalisation rate for intentional self-harm for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people has increased from about 260 per 100,000 in 2004 to 379 today. Whereas Aboriginal males are nearly three quarters of all Aboriginal suicides, intentional self-harm hospitalisation rates are higher for Aboriginal women. Aboriginal women endure hospitalisation rates of 440 per 100,000 as opposed to 320 per 100,000 for their men. According to the Productivity Commission in 2012/13 there were two and half thousand Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders admitted to hospital for self-harm.

The fact is, nationally, one in 20 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders are reported to die by suicide. My research estimates that it may be as high as one in 10. The fact is, nationally, one in three Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders in the age group 15 to 35 years are reported to die by suicide. This is this age group's leading cause of death. The fact is that one in 10 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children aged 14 years and less are reported to lose their lives to suicide. This is this age group's second leading cause of death.

## **A moral abomination – a narrative that is racialised, of human suffering and misery**



Aboriginal and/or Torres youth are 26 times more likely to be in detention than non-Aboriginal youth. By 2025 they will be 40 times more likely to be in detention. From a racialised lens they are already being jailed in juvenile detention at the world's highest rate.

The statistics would higher but in Queensland, if you are 17 years old, the criminal justice system considers you an adult.

One in every 28 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander boys have been in juvenile detention and one every 113 girls has been in juvenile detention.

There are more than 10,000 adult Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders in Australian prisons. That translates to one in 35 of all adult Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders in prison. From a racialised lens I have estimated that this is the highest jailing rate in the world. I also estimate that 1 in 10 of all Aboriginal and/or Torres Islanders living have spent time in jail. It is a moral abomination that this horrific racialised narrative is occurring in one of the world's wealthiest nations, the world's 12<sup>th</sup> largest economy.

Australia has the world's highest median wages, but of the all the high income nations with relatively recent colonial oppressor history, Australia has the widest divides in all the measurable indicators between its First Peoples and the rest of the population.

This is a moral abomination.

Such horrific tales of racialisation are without any need for further explanation racism.

With the mother of all jailers of First Peoples, Western Australia jails Aboriginal and/or Torres adult males at the world's highest rate – 1 in 13 of Western Australia's Aboriginal adult males are in prison.

From a racialised lens Western Australia incarcerates Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander youth at the world's highest rate. They are jailed in juvenile detention at 53 times the rate of non-Aboriginal youth.

What is so deplorably wrong with Western Australia that its statistical narrative impugns the State as a backwater of racism. When a narrative is so chronically and acute racially disparate then it is not rocket science that racism has its filthy footprint all over the place. Racism has many veils and layers. What is disturbing is that the narrative of human suffering and misery, all the measurable indicators are getting worse, each year. In any number of ways, Western Australia is to Australia what in the 1960s Alabama was to the United States. The Western Australian narrative includes that of the First Peoples jailed at the world's highest rates, of Aboriginal youth jailed at the world's highest rates, First Peoples dying of suicide at among the world's highest rates, of extreme poverty and third-world-akin shanty town existences racialised only to the State's First Peoples.

It is a moral abomination that one in twenty of Australia's Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders will die by suicide.

It is a moral abomination that Australia jails Aboriginal youth at the world's highest rate.

It is a moral abomination that Australian governments have degraded Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Homelands to dustbowls, to third-world-akin poverty.

It is a moral abomination that those with voice in the highest corridors of power in this nation – whether they are Black, White, non-White, do not speak the truth when it matters and where the ways forward can be borne – in those the corridors of power and in the public domain.

80 per cent of Western Australia's juvenile detention is comprised of Aboriginal youth – by 2025 it will be around 95 per cent.

The Northern Territory has already tragically achieved this.

98 per cent of the juvenile detention population in the Northern Territory is comprised of Aboriginal youth.

Poverty is the predominant driver of the increasing incarceration rates and in Western Australia and the Northern Territory as in northern South Australia the extreme poverty has been reserved for Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders. In Western Australia the response to poverty related offending is mandatory sentencing. More than 80 per cent of people sentenced under mandatory sentencing laws are Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders. Instead of doing something about the extreme poverty, they lock up offenders but the cesspool of poverty giving rise to the poverty-related offending continues. The self-responsibility mantra can only go so far in adjusting behaviours. What will radically reduce arrest and jail rates, community distress and suicide rates is the improving of the social health and infrastructure of a community – you know, to an equivalency of that of a non-

Aboriginal community or town. The problem is inequality, and when it is racialised it is without any doubt racism.

Adelaide based Narungga Elder, Tauto Sansbury has spent a significant portion of his life helping youth. In addition to his lived experiences and his career work in health and also at the coalface, he has qualifications in Juvenile Justice and in Community Development.

“The solutions are not in programs alone. The problem is the extreme poverty dumped on our people.”

“Too many of our people are extremely poor.”

“Native Title has failed us, governments have failed us and then they make it worse for us. Those who speak on our behalf do a poor job, too frightened to speak to the issues because they may well be out of job.”

“We can help some people with programs but that type of help takes time, patience with each individual while the poverty that has been made for our people will in the meantime churn out crowds of troubled people with no sense of hope . They were born into unfair conditions, into inequality,” said Mr Sansbury.

“If we want a fair and equal society let us have it for everyone. Let us fix the poverty without a day's further delay. But if we do not speak to what the problems are then they are not going to be fixed.”

“Our youth are entitled to genuine hope.

## Understanding Australia’s suicide crises

Each day, a suicide is brought to my attention. I have written widely on the suicide crises. I have written about the disproportionate rate of death by suicide for the descendants of the First Peoples and for first and second generation Australians and for LGBTQTI Australians. Recently I wrote about the tragic suicide of 18 year old Philinka Powdrill, who represents so many of the suicides that tear at families long after one is gone. In the last few days, I learned of three more young Aboriginal persons suiciding while in the prime of life – all of them women; one of a 26 year old woman last night at Baluyu community, 10kms from Fitzroy Crossings. Another of a 24 year old mother in Balga, Perth.

The only jurisdiction in Australia to record an increase in the rate of suicide between 2006 to 2010 compared to the previous five years, according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) was Western Australia. But this outlier spike in suicides in Western Australia disguises the fact that little has improved. The State Government may argue that they have lowered suicide rates but this is against the outlier. When you remove the outlier, the otherwise long term high rates of suicides have not decreased.

As a result of the horrific increase in suicides in Western Australia during that five year period, the State endured an increase from 11.8 suicides per 100,000 population to 13.2 suicides per 100,000. But across the nation there was an overall decline from 11.4 to 10.7 suicides per 100,000 population.

During the five year horror stretch for Western Australia, a disproportionate number of the suicides occurred in the Kimberley – particularly in and around Fitzroy Crossings, Mowanjum and Balgo.

Suicide and severe self-harms are crises that need to be addressed. They will not be solved with piecemeal funding approaches for one-off workshops and ‘suicide prevention ambassadors’. The social health and well-being of communities, towns and city districts must be evaluated and redressed. Support services and empowerment programs must be assessed in terms of their capacity to engage with people and whether they are able to do so 24/7.

Suicide is the number one cause of death in Australia for males who are aged 14 to 50 years. More lives are lost to suicide nationally than are lost to any other tragedy including road fatalities.

Suicide is disproportionately higher among First Peoples but it is a problem for all Australians. However more needs to be done for First Peoples than for all other cultural groups though suicide is higher for many migrant groups as opposed to most of the rest of the population. Suicide rates are also very high among LGBTQTI Australians. However First Peoples, other cultures and LGBTQTI are not adequately represented across the board in discussions on mental health and suicide prevention. Their exclusion or their just being tagged on by research groups, think tanks and conference groups risks a one size fits all approach to policy making.

Suicide prevention must become one of the nation’s priority agendas. People need people and this is the fundamental underwriting of suicide prevention. Over the past five years, the average number of suicides each year have been close to 2,500. There are on average seven suicides per day. However,



the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander population is only 2.5 per cent of the national population however one in every 24 deaths of an Aboriginal person is by suicide according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics. This is a horrific rate but according to my research, when we include estimated unreported and unclassified suicides I believe the rate is 1 in 12 of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander deaths by suicide.

The overall national suicide rate peaked at its highest in 1963, at 17.5 per 100,000 and many of the suicides were within first waves of migrant groups. Loneliness, isolation, racism and racialisation were huge factors. Today we find the highest suicide rates among First Peoples and then among first and second generations of 'migrants'. In 1997, the national suicide rate was 14.6 but has since fallen to generally less than 12 per 100,000 each year.

The highest age-specific suicide rate for males in 2012 was within the 85 years and older age group – 38 per 100,000 population. The rate is considerably higher than all the other age groups – for instance 27 per 100,000 for the 45 to 49 year old age group. In 2012, three quarters of all suicides were by males.

According to the World Health Organisation the highest national suicide rate is French Guyana at 44 per 100,000.

So, here is the grave disparity.

In 2012, suicide accounted for 1.7 per cent of deaths. Male suicides in 2012 were 2.5 per cent of all male deaths – 1 in 40. Female suicides were 1 per cent of all female deaths – 1 in 100. However 4.2 per cent of all Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander deaths were by suicide – 1 in 24. I argue even higher, that it is more likely 1 in 12.

Why is this happening? Major contributors are disregarded by certain researchers, policy makers and Governments. These contributors and stressors, although not limited to, include cultural settings, a confrontation of cultural norms, racialisation, racism, the psychosocial identity and extreme poverty.

The highest suicide rates were in the Northern Territory where one third of its total population are First Peoples. Then followed by Tasmania and Western Australia but when the suicide rates are disaggregated to First Peoples alone, then it is a whole different story.

The descendants of First Peoples are less than 2.5 per cent of the total Australian population, however their children make up nearly 6 per cent of the total Australian child population. If the suicide rates are not reduced in the years to come the overall national suicide rates may increase to what they were in 1963 and 1997.

The majority of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander suicides occur before 35 years of age. This has devastating psychological and social impacts on families. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, the most vulnerable age-specific category are the 25 to 29 year old Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander males – 91 suicides per 100,000 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander population.

So, where earlier I wrote about 11 suicides per 100,000, 18 per 100,000 and for 85 year olds a high of 37 per 100,000 population now we are looking at figures like 91 per 100,000 when we disaggregate to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders.

Here is where we must ask the big questions of race, racism, racialisation, marginalisation, extreme poverty and social health. There are no other explanations even if the nay say mob and the one size fits all reductionists argue otherwise.

Nationally, Aboriginal males aged 15 to 19 years have a suicide rate of 44 per 100,00 compared to non-Aboriginal males 15 to 19 years of 19 per 100,000.

20 to 24 year old Aboriginal males have a suicide rate of 75 per 100,000 compared to non-Aboriginal 20 to 24 year olds, 22 per 100,000.

25 to 29 year old Aboriginal males have a suicide rate of 91 per 100,000 compared to their non-Aboriginal counterparts, 18 per 100,000.

30 to 34 year old Aboriginal males have a suicide rate of 60 per 100,000, as opposed to their counterparts of 15 per 100,000.

Spatial mapping and disaggregating are imperative eye openers that have been long neglected. Over certain periods of time some regions have endured suicide rates of more than 100 and 200 per 100,000 population but even outside these outliers, the long term suicide trends, age-specific or overall, of First Peoples are worse not just more than the rest of the nation but also worse than most of the rest of world's suicide rates.

Several years ago, a spate of suicides in a part of the Kimberley was touted 182 times the national suicide rate. But despite the normal retraction of this outlier, Governments should not insult researchers and their constituents by suggesting they have somehow brought down the suicide rate when they have not. They should not be making out they have responded to the long term suicide crisis because the outliers have flattened to out to what are still high suicide rates.

They should make their statements contextually against the long term trends and not against outliers.

Last year, the Western Australian Auditor-General, Colin Murphy criticised the inadequate suicide prevention strategies by the Government. Mr Murphy stated in a report tabled to Parliament that strategies and policies were inadequate. However, the State Government remains bent on a selling a message that it has responded.

Mr Murphy warned the Government to not delay in putting forward a substantial approach to suicide prevention.

“When we look at the implementation (of suicide prevention programs) there was certainly an opportunity to do much better, it didn’t go as well as it could have.”

“Changes were made in 2012 and 2013, increasing the number of community action plans, but other parts of the strategy were not completed.”

In 2012, there was an increase above the national average in suicides across the nation among First Peoples. It was worst in Western Australia. Western Australia’s overall suicide crisis is demonstrated by the fact that in 2012, the State reported 366 suicides, up from the very high 194 of 2004. A disproportionate burden of these suicides was among the State’s First Peoples who comprise less than 3 per cent of the State’s population. The Kimberley where half the population is of First Peoples was the worst affected region. For the first ten years of the new millennia there were 996 reported suicides of First Peoples, about 100 per year. But tragically the loss of life by suicide increased in 2011 and 2012. It is all getting worse for First Peoples – arrest rates, jail rates, homeless rates, extensiveness of extreme poverty. The more west we travel across the continent, the worse it gets for First Peoples, worse in northern South Australia, worse throughout the Northern Territory, and worst of all, Western Australia.

The horror of all this is compounded by the estimate that for every suicide there are up to 40 attempted suicides, and each year there are tens of thousands of hospitalisations for self-harms.

Last year, Kija Elder and Kimberley parliamentarian Josie Farrer said to me, “There is not enough funding for our people in support and counselling services, for healing and for grief. They are left to themselves and to the community alone.”

“The communities need not only services but also economic and social development. They are impoverished and are not able to keep up with the cost of living let alone enjoy the aspirations most of the rest of the nation enjoys.”

“Can you imagine what it is like for a young father on Centrelink or on low income to have to meet rising costs to keep a roof over his young family and to have to afford nutritious food for the table but then to not be able to afford all this?”

“Healthy food is much more expensive in the remote and regions than it is in capital cities and in big towns. Price hiking doesn’t worry whether you are poor.”

Western Australia has a high child suicide rate. From 2007 to 2011 there were 36 reported suicides of 13 to 17 year olds alone. 13, or 36 per cent, of these suicides were Aboriginal children but in Western Australia Aboriginal children make up less than 6 per cent of children in this age category. It is important to note that all but one of these Aboriginal children were in school, so let us drop at least one of the racial stereotypes that some will assert. Broader statistical reporting reflects the crisis with Aboriginal youth aged 15 to 24 years. Their suicide rate is 42 per 100,000 as opposed to the 8 per 100,000 for non-Aboriginal children aged 15 to 24 years.

It is a nightmare of neglect for all our children, for the whole nation, but of catastrophic proportions for First Peoples.

What needs to be done will only be achieved when the right people are in the right appointments to lead the way. This is my close up experience.

## **Generations yet to be born will be lost to the prison system & to suicide**



Generations of children are growing up without any parenting, set adrift by the impoverishment that led their parents to low level offending, by a shallow system bent on retribution. Many Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children are growing up with at least one parent in jail. These children are hit by the trauma, but their trauma is multiple, composite and often escalates to complex trauma. They are intersected by disadvantage, dysfunction and this translates toxically as racism.

American researchers lament the plight of African American children with a parent in jail. Nearly one per cent of the American population is incarcerated, with the poor filling the prisons. America is a nation with a ruthless bent to lock away its poorest. It is estimated that one in fifteen African American children have a parent lost in the penal estate. However Australia per capita is wealthier than America. Australia in general is nowhere near as punishing of its poorest with the exception of the descendants of its First Peoples, the cultures of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders. From a racialised lens, Western Australia jails its Aboriginal adult males at the world's highest rate. One in 13 of the State's Aboriginal adult males are in prison. Western Australia, the Northern Territory and South Australia have abominable jail rates when stood alone to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples.

What does this mean to the children? It means they are without a parent while at the same time dealing with the drudgery of poverty. It means many of them will finish up without an education, finish up in prison. Many will die young – substance abusing, suicide. It is obvious that there is an elevated risk of high levels of psychological distresses, acute depression, suicidal ideation if someone's mum or dad, or both, are in prison.

The most recent Australian Bureau of Statistic's Census reported that only 14 per cent of prison entrants had completed a Year 12 education. Only 40 per cent had got past Year 9. This speaks volumes. What are our governments doing about this? Next-to-nothing... The Arnhem community of Gunbalanya scored its first two female high school graduates in December 2013. The Northern Territory competes with the Americans on the jail rates – both have incarcerated nearly one per cent of their populations. But with the Northern Territory, 86 per cent of the prison population is comprised by Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples. The Juvenile Detention population is 98 per cent Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait

Islander youth. The generational poverty can be significantly reduced if prisons are transformed – to bastions of education, opportunity, hope.

For now prisons are dungeons.

Between one in six to one in ten Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander people living today have been to jail. This horrific statistical narrative has decimated Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander society. Continually, they've got to dip into 'resilience' to carry on but the narratives of premature deaths, suicides are telling a different tale. Families are devastated, psychosocially, psychologically, psychiatrically. It does not pay to be Aboriginal in this nation, one that does not understand its common humanity. It is estimated that one in 15 African American children have a parent in prison. I estimate that at least one in 8 to one in 10 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children have a parent in prison. As the incarceration rates of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples increase – without fail every year for the last two decades – so too have the child removals, so too have the rates of shattered families and the collective culmination of high levels of psychological distresses in communities, particularly in the remote (homelands). Concomitantly, tragically, so too have the child and youth suicides. In the last ten weeks I have responded to a dozen young suicides – in the approach to the Christmas stretch there are elevated risks for struggling families, for families who have lost a loved one recently, for families with a loved one in jail. It breaks my heart; young people taking their lives in the lead up to Christmas or in the lead up to a birthday. In one community three young souls were buried next to each other, in a row; three funerals in five days. I attended. The youth suicides continue.

Generations of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander youth will continue to be lost unless we address racialised inequalities. Generations of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander youth will continue to be lost unless we transform prisons. Firstly, the majority of poverty related crimes, the low level offenders, should not be in jail. But if jails must be persisted with then we need to transform them to bastions of healing, psychosocial rebuilding, to mentoring people through to positive pathways, to education, to opportunities. It is not hard at all. It is only the will to do this that need be sought. I know first-hand that you can turn around lives, change lives, improve the lot of others. I have visited prisons, talked to prisoners, brought many of them into university education and other opportunities. None of those whom graduated from university went back to jail. We need to ensure a fair society, not this degradingly unequal, classist and racist society.

Generations yet to be born face being lost to everyone unless we do in the now what should long ago have been done. Prisons should not continue as dungeons of despair, as chambers of torture. Communities cannot be allowed to continue in racialised poverties. Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities must be provided with the full suite of services and opportunities equivalent to non-Aboriginal communities. True multiculturalism means that everyone should be allowed opportunity and the inalienable natural right to navigate their cultural settings without impost.

I reported in this article that one in every 13 of Western Australia's Aboriginal adults are in jail. Well, I have been to communities in Western Australia and the Northern Territory where the sorry narrative is even worse. I have been to communities where one in six, one in seven, one in eight of all the males aged 20 to 40 are in jail. In small remote homeland communities of say 300, 400, 500 residents the impacts are visibly pronounced. The communities mourn, grieve the loss of fathers to the prison system. The spouses, the children grieve. Many fathers never return, some die in jail or soon after their release. Others come back in a worse state than when they were carted off to prison. Families and communities are further traumatised. The children are tormented. The next generation destined to more suffering. The

unborn generations will feel the loss. It is not just that those left behind become economically poorer, worse is that they become emotionally poorer.

Being without a father in a toxically racist society intersected by disadvantage is often an overwhelming problem but to cripplingly compound problems more mothers too are finishing in prison. The grandmothers and grandfathers do what they can but the burden is growing. Then there is the rise of families with two, three and four family members in prison or who have done prison time. This is doing in all hope. The grief is too much and far too many turn to demons, alcohol and drugs.

Children need their father and mother. The system has to be reset to assist their parents. And everything possible needs to be done to score the children an education, a quality one. Education has proven again and again to radically reduce offending.

### **Related articles by Gerry Georgatos**

#### **Forgiveness, redemption, ways forward instead of imprisonment and reoffending**

Australia's overall prison rate of 151 prisoners per 100,000 population ranks 98<sup>th</sup> of the world's 222 ranked nations. Australia is an affluent nation, the world's 12<sup>th</sup> largest economy. However standalone Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders and compare their prison rate against the world's national prison rates and they would have the world's highest, just higher than the Seychelles which incarcerates at 799 per 100,000. The United States of America is second ranked at 698 per 100,000. However in Western Australia, First Nations peoples are incarcerated at more than 3,700 per 100,000. In Western Australia, one in 13 of all Aboriginal adult males is in prison.

No less than one in 10 and up to one in 6 Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders living has been to jail.

Forgiveness is not an act of mercy but of empathy, compassion, of virtue. According to vast bodies of research forgiveness has many benefits, outstripping negatives and risks. Forgiveness strengthens families, communities, societies. The most significant finding is the obvious, that forgiveness makes us happier. Forgiveness improves the health of people and communities. Forgiveness sustains relationships. Forgiveness builds and rebuilds lives. Forgiveness connects people, and what better medium for this than through kindness.

#### **Risk of death high after release from prison**

We should be abominated by a society that incarcerates the poorest of the poor, the sickest of the unwell, that effectively punishes minorities because assimilation wants them to give up their cultural being. We should be abominated by this nation where at least one in 10 and up to one in 6 of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders living have been to jail. This horrific statistical narrative should have long ago galvanised the nation to redress the intolerable racialised inequalities, the economic inequalities, the discrimination.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 86 per cent of prisoners did not complete Year 12. More than 30 per cent did not get past Year 9.

#### **Listen to the alarm bells, child suicides higher than coronial findings suggest**

The total number of suicides among Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children, for all children in fact, appears low. The registered suicides are probably two to four times higher depending on the State and Territory jurisdiction. In some States and Territories the coroner is unlikely to provide a determination of 'suicide' to a child aged 13 years and less because of the presumption that children below that age are not capable of 'forming' an adequate understanding of 'suicide'. Therefore some coroners provide an 'undetermined intent' finding or an 'external cause' finding.

# Deaths in custody – why even 30 years later the justice matters?

It is approaching a quarter of a century since the final report from the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. The suite of expectations that were effectively promised by the Royal Commission have for the most part long been betrayed. The majority of deaths in custody are of natural causes but a significant proportion are attributed to external causes, with some having been homicide. Police prosecutors are steadfast that violence that leads to death – a single punch for instance – is homicide and that such violence must be punishable. How then is it possible for the police to stay silent or justify violence because it is by themselves and/or one of their own?

I am writing about the inexcusable violence that led to the death of John Pat. The unjustifiable violence that led to the death of Mulrunji Doomadgee. The obvious violence that led to the death of Eddie Murray. And there are the many others – and not just the violence that leads to death but that is injurious, that is unnecessary, unwarranted, that we are now increasingly viewing through CCTV. The violence that is damned by coroners but little is done about.

Police have a tough gig but the public trust is undermined by the putrid refusal to own up to the brutal and violent behaviours among them. The Kafkaesque conduct of the police is abominable and it would be fair to comment that the steadfast refusal of police to own up to the violent and murderous among them casts a dark pall upon the police. There are coppers who do not like what is happening in their ranks, who are appalled by the rogue violence and they will not work with coppers they reckon “are out of control” but still they stay silent, because they fear that the day they speak up “will be my last day in the job.”

The hypocrisy and cowardice on their part is not just their problem, it is our problem too, because of the impacts on society. Coppers that speak out, who whistleblow or who have led to Royal Commissions, well their lot is never again easy. There need to be bona fide whistleblower protection laws but in this nation there are no real whistleblower protection laws for anyone. Whistleblowing can finish up with you prosecuted and jailed. Then there is the damnation of litigation – a powerful tool that those who can afford it can misuse to suppress the public interest. The abominable misuse of litigation particularly by the wealthy and powerful has made a mockery of the rule of law and of its capacity to determine truth.

It is important to chase down the killers of Eddie Murray, John Pat and Mulrunji Doomadgee. If they are brought to account or if they own up – redemption – well then this is more likely to spark real change, to change laws and protocols. Change will not be coming anytime soon without the rogue police being brought to account, including those who covered their backs and those too who remained silent. Change will not be coming anytime soon while the police and their mouthpieces in governments dedicate all their efforts to deny wrongdoing. In my view, where police as a whole do the silent bit, reduce accountability, do not own up, then this is an obstruction of the intentions of justice, a perverting of the administration of justice – of the justice that they otherwise so claim to seek to uphold; it is corruption. An ordinary citizen who knows of a crime can be charged – police let you know this. Someone should tell them it goes for everyone.

We need to name the killers of Eddie Murray. We need the killer of John Pat to come clean despite his acquittal by an all-white Karratha jury three decades ago. We need the justice sorted in Mulrunji Doomadgee's death. It is not too late. If the killers and those others who were brutal in their silence are

finally brought to account so too will others. If this were to occur the violence will be reduced. The public trust may be rebuilt in the ways it should. Good coppers will not be tarnished by bad coppers.

The fact that coppers are protected is corruption. And then there are the structural and institutional biases – the systemic classicist and racist biases. Because of the deplorable protection of wrongdoing among the police and the lameness of Governments to do something about this, society instead is shovelled classicism, racism, one stereotype after another – we divide, fracture society.

The fact there has never been a successful prosecution of an Australian police officer – of any unnatural hand in an unnatural death – illuminates a darkness that haunts us all, that damns us all.

It is said that no lie lives forever but I do not believe this. The damage done by a lie is often told in many broken lives. Lies outlive generations. The toll is not hidden even if it is denied.

Investigations into the deaths of Eddie Murray, John Pat and Mulrunji Doomadgee must be reopened. Political climates aided the protection of the (police) killers of Murray, Pat and Doomadgee. Let us test the political climate of 2015.

In my view, it is indisputable that Wee Waa police killed 21 year old Eddie Murray on June 12, 1981.

Eddie Murray was not arrested but detained under the NSW Intoxicated Persons Act. The coppers, one of whom killed him, said that they found Eddie Murray hanging in the police cell less than 100 minutes after he was first detained. But no other person was witness to this – including the ambulance officers who were called in. At the 1981 Coronial Inquest, the verdict was inconclusive – that Eddie “died at his own hand or the hand of person or persons unknown.”

Counsel for the Murray family, Kevin Coorey said it better when he submitted to the Royal Commission in Aboriginal Deaths in Custody that Eddie “died at the hand of a police officer or police officers unknown.”

Wee Waa Constable Rodney Fitzgerald was one of the three officers who took part in the detainment of Eddie. Three witnesses presented testimony towards this. I raise this because at the Coronial Inquest Mr Fitzgerald testified that he was not one of the officers present in detaining Eddie, he claimed he had been elsewhere in Wee Waa. But three witnesses were steadfast that he was one of the officers. His whereabouts at the time of Eddie’s death remain an unresolved issue.

At the time, members of the Murray family, including father, Arthur Murray, “recalled conversations with Eddie in which he stated that he had been pressured and threatened by Constable Rodney Fitzgerald.”

At the time, Wee Waa was in the heart of a belt of racism. Eddie’s father, Arthur, had copped a lot of racism, as had just about anyone Aboriginal in Wee Waa. Arthur had been a stalwart as a rights advocate for Wee Waa’s Aboriginal peoples, Aboriginal workers, especially the cotton-pickers who were being exploited by the town’s robber barons, and for the disadvantaged. Arthur pissed off the exploiters and the racists.



At the time of Eddie's death, according to the 1981-82 Bureau of Crime Statistics report, the rate of detention of Aboriginal people in north-western NSW under the Intoxicated Persons Act was 93 times the overall State rate – astonishingly 1266 per 1000 of the Aboriginal population! They were being locked up around the clock.

The original post-mortem examinations by Dr Eric Mulvey have long disappeared – mysteriously so. They were therefore never presented to the Muirhead inquiry.

Former Wee Waa ambulance officer, Harold Lewis gave evidence that Wee Waa police did not call the ambulance service till after 3:30pm. But police records state the ambulance left with Eddie's body at 3:10pm. This reminded me of the death of Roebourne's John Pat two years later – where the coppers washed his body to cover up their crime. It is indeed fact that John Pat was bashed to death and it does not matter that an all-White jury acquitted the bastards.

If the coppers lied and indeed the ambulance officers are correct, then more than twenty minutes have never been accounted for. The clothes that Eddie died in, the clothes he was arrested in, the clothes that I believe he was bashed in, they disappeared. The family has long asked for his clothes. "Where are my brother's clothes?"

On the 28th of September 1983 a young life came to an end and which moved a community to tears and then rage. A mother lost her eldest son, 16 years young.

John's mother, Mavis said, "My son did not have to die, they did not have to kill him, none of our children should be dying."

The community of Roebourne has never forgotten John Pat. Roebourne, for the most part an impoverished community is surrounded by the mining boom and native title that have both forgotten Roebourne's people.

John died because he was 'Black', because of the colour of his skin, because of racism. Four off-duty police officers and an off-duty police aide laid into half a dozen Roebourne youth. Only minutes before, one of the coppers had said to one of the youth, Ashley James, "We'll get you, you Black cunt". The copper followed him out of the Victoria Hotel and laid into him, a brawl took shape. John Pat tried to step in and pull his mate Ashley out of harm's way. The copper then laid into John.

John Pat died at the hands of the copper, his aorta torn, broken bones, bruised and battered he fell backwards to the red earth. Roebourne became to Western Australia what two decades earlier Birmingham had become to Alabama.

The young Yindjibarndi John Pat, was then tossed it was said by a witness like a dead kangaroo into the back of a police van.

The coppers washed down his body and changed his clothes at the police cell before investigators could view him. The five coppers were charged but despite various evidence including that the charge-sheets and testimonies were falsified, an all-White jury in another bullshit decision found them innocent.

Western Australia is the mother of all jailers of First Nations peoples, and from a racialised lens when it comes to Aboriginal people, it has the highest arrest and imprisonment rates of First People in the world. If this is not racism then what is?

At the commencement of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, John's mother, Mavis, said, "I don't know what is going to come out of the Royal Commission but I hope it makes everything better for Aboriginal people."

Many years later Mavis told me, "Nothing has got better, if anything it is worse."

The late Dr Jack Davis wrote an ode, "Write of life, the pious said, forget the past, the past is dead. But all I see, in front of me is a concrete floor, a cell door, and John Pat. Agh! Tear out the page, forget his age. Thin skull they cried, that's why he died! But I can't forget the silhouette of a concrete floor, a cell door, and John Pat. The end product of Guddia Law is a viaduct, for fang and claw. And a place to dwell, like Roebourne's hell, of a concrete floor, a cell door, and John Pat. He's there – Where? There in their minds now, deep within. There to prance, a long sidelong glance, a silly grin, to remind them all, of a Guddia wall, a concrete floor, a cell door, and John Pat."

Those who say that racism does not burn bright throughout this continent know not what they are talking about. For from that racialised lens it is fact that for far too many much has got worse.

We were not put on this earth to betray one another, we were not put on this earth to bury our children. But we are betrayed, again and again and again. It will take the marches on the streets; it will take the people to call for the justice, for the light of day. We have to stay solid-in-our-thinking and in-our-actions to bring on the cultural shift, to bring on the justice, because it will happen no how else, no way else.

Social justice stalwart, Sam Watson has often said, "We know who was responsible for many of these deaths, for Mulrunji, for John Pat. Let us call a spade a spade, the coppers killed them.

Ten years ago, Mulrunji was the 147<sup>th</sup> Aboriginal death in custody since the end of the Royal Commission in 1992.

On November 19, 2004, Mulrunji was walking his dog on Palm Island, and he was singing 'Who let the dogs out?' Sergeant Craig Hurley who was driving by slowed down and took exception, instead of moving on.

Only a little while later, Mulrunji would lay dead on a police cell floor. The autopsy by Coroner Michael Barnes reported Mulrunji suffered four broken ribs, a ruptured spleen and ruptured liver. He died from "an intra-abdominal haemorrhage caused by a ruptured liver and portal vein." He died because he was bashed.

Earlier in the morning, Mulrunji visited his new baby niece. He had a little to drink. He had been carrying a bucket with a mud crab which he intended to sell. The walk from his sister's house was fateful. He was singing "Who Let the Dogs Out?"

Officer Hurley was with Police Liaison Officer Bengaroo. Mulrunji sang out to Officer Bengaroo, "Why do you help lock up your own people?" Mulrunji then walked away. It could have ended there but Officer Hurley drove up to Mulrunji and arrested him for 'creating a public nuisance'. Mulrunji was bundled into the back of the police vehicle.

Everyone knows what really happened in the police cell. The 36-year-old Officer Hurley would be responsible for causing the death of the 36-year-old Mulrunji. Less than an hour after Mulrunji was 'thrown' into the police cell he would be pronounced dead. Mulrunji was more than likely dead less than fifteen minutes after being bundled into the cell and then beaten.

Despite the fact that other officers were present at the watch-house, "none of them heard or saw anything." Officer Hurley said he noticed Mulrunji "motionless" and "cold" when touching him. He applied an "arousal technique" by "kicking him twice" but Mulrunji remained motionless. An ambulance took fifteen minutes to arrive and in that time not once did any of the police officers attempt to resuscitate Mulrunji.

One week later, Coroner Barnes' autopsy report was handed to the family. A riot followed – more than 400 people raced to the Palm Island Police Station, half of them were children. The local courthouse, police station, Hurley's home and the police barracks were burned. More than 80 police officers from the mainland would be sent to the island, dressed in balaclavas and riot gear to back up the island's eighteen police officers.

Palm Islander Lex Wotton copped jail time but Officer Hurley was protected effectively by the Queensland Government and the Queensland Police Union. This business of police investigating police ensured that Senior Sergeant Hurley was not charged and instead he received various confidential payouts from the Queensland State Government. After three months of paid leave, Sergeant Hurley was appointed as a duty officer on the Gold Coast. However in September 2006, Coroner Christine Clements found that Mulrunji died of the punches inflicted by Sergeant Hurley.

The cover-ups including police officers telling investigating pathologist Guy Lampe that Mulrunji had swallowed bleach.

Coroner Clements stated that the police failed to rightly investigate the death of Mulrunji. Importantly, Coroner Clements stated that Mulrunji should never have been arrested – just as Mr Ward should never have been, just as Mr Briscoe should never have been, and just as the 340<sup>th</sup> death in custody since the Royal Commission, Ms Dhu should never have been

On January 4th, 2007 the review commenced, however the key witness, Mr Bramwell was found hanged on Palm Island, January 16.

On January the 26th, the Street review overturned the Department of the Public Prosecutor decision to not lay charges. The review recommended that Sergeant Hurley should be charged with manslaughter.

But like the four police officers and the police aide who were acquitted by an all-White jury of killing 16-year-old Yindjibarndi John Pat in 1983 so too was Sergeant Hurley acquitted in 2007 by an all-White jury in Townsville.

So once again, it was okay for a copper to step out of line, go rogue and thrash punches into a Black person. It is not enough that Mulrunji was arrested for next-to-nothing but we have to accept that the crimeless Mulrunji for some reason deserved the beating he got. First People endure the highest arrest and imprisonment rates in the nation, many of them for poverty related or low-level offending. Aboriginal Legal Services are stretched to the hilt in having to represent far too many for next-to-nothing offences.

So yep, Sergeant Hurley was acquitted.

Grievous injustices carry a burdensome legacy. They say from little things big things grow – good and bad. Mulrunji was arrested for singing a song and then resulted a litany of broken lives. Mulrunji's 12-year-old son, Eric, led his father's funeral cortege. At 18, Eric was found hanged in Palm Island bush – July 19, 2010.

On May 14th, 2010, another coronial inquiry found that police colluded to protect Sergeant Hurley and shortly after a Queensland Crimes and Misconduct Commission report leaked to the media stated that up to seven police officers should be charged. None have ever been charged. The Commission's chairperson Martin Moynihan clashed with the Anna Bligh Government in that there is a "culture of self-protection" for police. Premier Bligh dismissed calls for a Royal Commission and instead accepted the April 2011 410 report by Queensland Deputy Commissioner Kathy Rynders – that no police needed to be disciplined over the death of Mulrunji. She recommended "managerial guidance" for one of the officers. So it's not a crime to cover-up, to lie, to bash someone if you're a police officer.

Deaths in custody are the tip of the iceberg – they bespeak of a dirty underbelly. Much needs to change. It will take much to get that change. Black and White lives are lost in custody. 18 per cent of deaths in custody are Black deaths. But they die in custody younger. If you are 50 years of age or more and White and in jail you are more likely to die from natural causes. If you are 20 years of age and Black and in jail you are more likely to die from unnatural causes. Whether Black or White and in a prison, you are more likely to die of natural causes than if in custody in a police cell. One is usually held in a police cell 24 to 96 hours before being released or transferred to prison. If someone dies in a police cell during a short stay then of course it is nearly always the case that the death was of causes unnatural.

Coppers as a whole will do themselves a favour, do us all a favour, if they scrub up as they want of all of us. There is no right for anyone whomsoever to bash someone. No place for a copper who fabricates charge sheets, who railroads someone into prison, who has lost the confidence of the people.

The deaths of Murray, Pat and Doomadgee must be reopened.

# 1 in 6 jail rate and 1 in 3 suicide rate are tools of the oppressor – institutionalised racism



Globally, the impacts of colonialism have seen a widening divide between the First Peoples of lands they once inhabited effectively uninterrupted for tens of thousands of years and the new dominant populations who at most are only hundreds of years old. The dominance of these new populations, whether they are the majority or the minority, has been delivered on the back of ruthless oppressor/oppressed dichotomies. Today, suggestively in the anathema of presumptive post-colonialism, the impacts have become less. But every measurable indicator states a different story, maybe even a dark and sinister tale.

The bloodshed of colonialism continues in other forms – in narratives of human misery and suffering, in a climate of death; in the suicides and in the premature and unnatural deaths. The descendants of the invaders are now established as the governments, ruthlessly gripping power. Modalities such as institutional racism continue the one-sided deliverance. Marginalisation appears entrenched. It is impossible to be without marginalisation when there is oppression unless it is eliminated by genocide. In my making these statements, the soldiers and advocates of the neoliberal colonialist regimes argue we are perpetuating trauma and that we maintain the oppressed as the victim. They argue that we need to move on. But move on from what and to where? How?

Australia is the world's 12<sup>th</sup> largest economy and one of the world's wealthiest nations however of all middle and high income countries, Australia has the world's widest divide between its First Peoples and the rest of the population with all the measurable indicators. Two of the indicators are the suicide and jail rates. From a racialised lens Australia's First Peoples fare worst in the world. If you are an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander aged 15 to 35 years, one in three deaths in this age group will be registered as suicide. Suicide is the leading cause of death in this prime of life age group. If you are an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander child 14 years or less then you are at least 8 times more likely to suicide than a non-Indigenous Australian child. In some regions the suicide rate is 10, 20 and 30 times. It is the second leading cause of death for this age group. These are the world's highest rates of suicide of First Peoples in these prime of life age groups.

But the meritocracy and the chattering classes, who are predominately borne of the once oppressor classes or who had assimilated to these classes continue the oppressor/oppressed dichotomy – and institutionalise racism – by arguing the 'move on argument' and that people should improve their own lot, that there is opportunity all around them. However the Homeland communities, the majority of them have been either degraded by one government after another, or forever denied the social infrastructure and suite of services enjoyed by non-Indigenous communities.

There is next to no hope on the horizon for these communities to navigate without impost their two cultural settings but nevertheless their situational trauma is compounded into multiple and composite trauma by the statements of the oppressor and assimilationist; that they should shut up, move on and grab opportunities even where they do not exist! In other words settle for what is, even if it is unfair or comes with sacrifice.

In fact, I do see these communities, even the most degraded, do their best and with a deep silence – even if they can go nowhere or even if they are going backwards – and it breaks the heart, the spirit of the young. There is a lot of displaced anger, on the self and on each other. There are a lot of broken spirits in a sea of courage.

Oppression, assimilation, racism have culminated so many issues, entrenching them, that even those who tinker with social justice, they move away from all concept of addressing the underlying factors and instead tinker with issues further along the spectrum till sadly they lose all sight of the underlying factors – this does suit the institutional racists and those who can then turn on the oppressed and drop all blame on them.

Then there is the other ‘indicator’, the one where a lot of the above leads to – jail. Prison is an abominable experience – nothing redemptive or positive about the prison experiment. It has been my experience in general that people come out of prison worse than they went in. Today, we have the drama of the penal estate monetized and that an industry has been formed around it, in addition to the argument that as a society we are becoming ever so more impatient and exploiting the prison experiment/industry to relocate out of sight people that we do not want to help, who we are not prepared to dish out equality to, to whom we are not prepared to assist in improving their lot. As a result we are building underclasses of poverty, marginalising humanity, fracturing society.

Prison never had to be about bars, steel doors and cages. The United States of America is the mother of all jailers with nearly one per cent of its total population in prison. But Australia jails its First Peoples at a higher rate – chasing down two per cent of the Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander population. We are heading to two per cent of Australia’s Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander population in prison. It is indeed racialised imprisonment. At least one in ten and up to one in six of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islanders living have done jail. Australia is the mother of all jailers of First Peoples, with the Northern Territory and Western Australia the worst offenders. The suicides and the jailing are indeed despicable, abominable indirect and direct forms of institutionalised racism – the oppressor’s tools. The jailing is just not the result of the impacts of institutionalised racism but is effectively a tool – the locking of people and punishing of people are the direct result of the betrayal of all hope, the result of the racialised economic inequalities and of the constant rubbishing of people’s historical and contemporary identities. The suicide crisis is the direct result of the racism, of the racialised economic, social and political inequalities. They know why the suicides are occurring but our governments and their instruments continue on with the relentless damage.

Where are we heading?

We are not closing any gaps and we are not improving the lot of the marginalised or of the majority of the nation’s First Peoples. For all the good stories are outstripped by a tsunami of poverty related issues that are flooding us with a narrative of despair – abysses of hopelessness – culminating in broken peoples, in a climate of racism. In turn to hide from the shame, the governments and their advocates –

some of whom genuinely deluded – turn on the oppressed, on the marginalised and the broken, damning them with blame and shame, relentlessly.

In Western Australia the poor finish up in jail – low level poverty related crimes now result in a quarter of the State's prison population. The State is planning to introduce additional mandatory sentences for 16 and 17 year olds who are convicted of violent burglary. The Bill has already been passed and will become the law in November. The State Premier, Colin Barnett is concerned about the rights of one layer of society but possibly not about the other layer I have been describing – the marginalised.

Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander children in Western Australia are 53 times more likely to be jailed than the non-Indigenous children. Mandatory laws have failed to reduce offending, incarceration numbers, so why then this bent? Addressing economic inequalities and dealing in redemptive policies are much cheaper and obviously of greater benefit for everyone and this is well known, it's not rocket science. Maybe in the end, the oppressor has done it this way for so long that they have cruelly hardened themselves towards the oppressed. The ways forward are not myriad, they are not complex, they are obvious but it is important for the time being to continue portraying the true landscape and the political reality till as such time the informing of the ways forward will be finally heard and have some meaning.

## **“Not all cultures are equal”**

I do not often write about what individuals say or do, I rarely chase down people for their transgressions, instead I spend my time on issues and focus on systemic changes. I am not interested in low stakes assaults on others, not interested in low stakes journalism bent on tripping up people and their worldviews. I abhor hatchet jobs and lampooning. Yes, I am known to have chased the corrupt, those whose corrupt ways impact adversely on the lives of many others, who cheat people of improving their lot, of rising out of abject poverty.

The two years that Tony Abbott misspent as prime minister, I did not write a word about him. I am someone who spends his time trying to change the narratives of those whom I can assist and do not spend my time worrying about incongruous views, no matter how dumb. Getting caught up in that is a vicious cycle, a game that I want no part of – misspent energy that just pits people against people. I am not interested in pitchfork standoffs. I agree with Plato that we need to engage our parliamentarians because otherwise we risk being governed by the 'dumb'. Mr Abbott was always going to go because he wore his heart on his sleeve. He was there for all too see, someone living in an abominable past, his servitude to the draconian big end of town, his inability to disguise all this – as many of his colleagues on all sides of politics do disguise – was always going to do him in. It did. There was no need for vulture journalism and cheap shot commenting.

He is gone as prime minister.

One comment he made has swirled around in my head.

“Not all cultures are equal,” said Mr Abbott.

Well, Mr Abbott, all people on this earth, under this sun and moon, are indeed equal, no-one is more or less than anyone else. I banked on this reasoning since a kid, since the tumult of racism I experienced day in day out and that was dished out to my parents. I stored hope in that in time societies would unfold to such understanding. We have the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948 that reason procured, which is a document of moral understandings. In time maybe we will get there, so I hoped. Whenever I present on whatever issue to any audience I greet everyone equally. In general, I do not pay any particular attention to presumed luminaries, just one greeting from the podium to everyone. I thank them equally for attending. We are equal and anything else is make-believe titles and utterings of no positive consequence. I do not wear any title conferred upon me, never.

If human beings are equal, then cultures are equal. Pure reason delivers this premise, this is a categorical imperative. Mr Abbott languishes in strictures that we hope are on their way out. He languishes in simple axioms with their origin-of-thinking, their justifiability in the two century old colonial invader – axioms and tenets proposed and propagandised by an oppressor. The colonial invader justified their actions with inequalities, with unreasonable dialogue, with incongruous statements of others that led to the immoral and amoral despite claiming at all times that they were 'moral' and 'ethical'. But they were lies and with lies they fall apart and that is what is happening in our generation with the lies of previous generations. Morality and the ethical can only arise from pure reason and not from anywhere else. There are those who claim morality and the ethical are standards, but they are not, they are instead reason. Many societal experiments and their institutions attempt to subsume morality and ethics as part of their prescription; religious and political dogma does this, but in the end they are dogma, not morality and ethics. Morality and ethics are categorical unlike dogma. Our vocabulary has had its well poisoned by the misuse of morality and ethics.

What of Mr Abbott and his heart on the sleeve 'racism' – that cultures are not equal, that in his mind terra nullius was the case, that assimilation is the only way forward? He has gone, but what of the rest? What of all those who manage this nation's fortune, its direction, who are responsible for myriad narratives on the Australian landscape? What of all our parliamentarians who deep down think pretty much as Mr Abbott does? At least Mr Abbott was honest about who he is and in what he believes in? If only this was the case with everyone. We'd then know where we stand and in turn be able to do something. However far too many stay quiet on what they really believe or even worse say one thing and on the sly do otherwise. The racists I grew up, some of them not understanding the extent of their racism, are now in our parliaments. The generation of racists I grew up with are the ones who grew into the generation who delivered the Northern Territory Intervention, who destroyed the hopes that Mabo's Native Title win offered, who failed to establish the long overdue conversation in this country that we needed on racism and the ways forward and instead we had to soak up the Cronulla Riots, Islamophobia, every imaginable xenophobia, the turning back boats of asylum seekers, and the degeneration of immigration detention centres into dungeons where children, mothers and fathers are cruelly punished because they sought out a better tomorrow. But according to Mr Abbott, "not all cultures are equal". In my experience many of our parliamentarians, that far too many people 'look up to' also think alike but just don't say it. I have met many of Australia's parliamentarians and I have heard first-hand their racism. Racism has been with me since I was little kid, since as a child when I was made to feel that I am not Australian, when my family and their 'community' were referred to as "you people". I've spent my life arguing the ways forward, not to keep people – perpetrators and victims – hostage to racism. My academic work has been dedicated to a better understanding of the ways forward, two Masters and PhD research in racism.

Racism is yet to be discussed in this nation and for far too many they remain in denial.



Tragically when discussion on racism gets a gig it is instead glossed over because ludicrously our governments, media and institutions have the discussions with anyone but the victims of racism. White panellists tell us all about racism. Sadly, they throw the odd non-White, usually someone hounded into assimilation, too terrified to speak freely because there will not be another gig if they do. This does no favours for anyone, not the oppressor and the oppressed. It is an insult that White 'guilt' should discuss the ways forward on racism. But that's the whole deal we have dished out to us with structural and institutional racism, and which has led to the cheapest rendition of a wannabe multiculturalism. If we do not start getting it right soon we are looking to worse times, to uglier racism, to a fracturing of society, to underclasses, to hate at parallels long presumed gone.

It is this denial of this nation's abominable racism that has continued the narrative of human misery and suffering among the majority of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders – the First Nations Peoples – whom Mr Abbott has never understood in his disastrous stretch as the prime minister for Indigenous Affairs. We have White privilege hogwash that substantive changes are delivering Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from the abject poverty that apartheid and the Stolen Generations thumped the majority of them into. We have the merchants of make believe telling us how better things are getting, thanks to stronger assimilative efforts – yes, it's all still assimilation. We are told the disadvantage gap is closing but all the while the arrest, jailing and suicide rates are increasing. The extreme poverty is more extensive. One in four of Australia's homeless are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. One in 19 deaths of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are by suicide and my research argues that because of under-reporting issues it is as high as one in 12 suicides. Both are staggering statistical narratives. Coupled with unnatural death rates, premature deaths, we have a climate of death. Nearly two and half million Australians live under the Henderson Poverty Line, that's abominable, and ten per cent of the total national population but half of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander population lives under the Henderson Poverty Line. We have racialised economic inequalities with remote homeland communities degraded by one government after another, their assets stripped, their schools closed. When they finally appear dysfunctional that's when they 'score' a gig in our news media. Now that is all part of institutional racism. No less than one in ten Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders living, and possibly up to one in six, have been to jail. That's racialised, it's racism, structural, institutional, call it whatever you want, it is racism. The tsunami of poverty related issues are filling the prisons. By 2025 more than half the Australian prison population will comprise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. And then we ask why are suicide rates among the world's highest? If you are an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander aged 15 to 35 years, one in nearly three deaths will be a suicide.

I do not have issue with Mr Abbott, he is who he is and I appreciated knowing his real self because then we know where we stand and what to do. I do have issue with those who do not let us know, who do not tell us what they really think, who pretend to be onside but who instead stab us in the back, who lie. But because we can't get them on the public record with what they're really about there is little that can be done. But the impacts are felt far and wide, from the urban masses to small communities.

Paul Keating, despite being a deluded neoliberal stooge, did support Native Title and did encourage discussion on racism but it went nowhere thereafter. Native Title was watered somewhat by Keating and then butchered by John Howard and today we have a Native Title Act that is so weak and has degenerated to a debacle of utter exploitation, a buy-in for the carpetbaggers, and has not just divided but fractured and sold out those it was intended to compensate. Keating's greatest mess was the disaster of the Quarantine Bill that his colleague Gerry Hand crafted. A sloppy piece of legislation intended to quickly screen asylum seekers but because it was so poorly written it has degenerated in effect to a Bill that allows the indefinite detention of asylum seekers. That nothing has been done about this Bill is racism.

Today we have anti-terrorism acts but these acts serve only to terrify Australians, to turn people against people. When you do not believe that all cultures are equal then it is simple to get the Kafkaesque across the line, to legitimise it.

Our parliaments are the citadels of White Australia and they do not reflect the demography of this nation. Of 226 federal parliamentarians, only 13 can argue they are non-White. Not until the demography of this nation is reflected in our parliaments can we boast any semblance of real hope for the human fabric of this nation, and till then we must endure, but let us be honest in that till then it will come with a human cost, with narratives of human suffering and misery.

