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No Call To Heed A Divisive Voice

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Localism, property rights and regional economic development will help improve the lives of indigenous Australians more than another Canberra-based body.

In his delivery of the 19th Annual Vincent Lingiari Memorial Lecture last week, Indigenous Australians Minister Ken Wyatt ruled out holding a referendum on inserting an indigenous-only voice in the Constitution. This is the right call. Such a voice would be divisive, illiberal and inequalitarian. More important, the voice would not resolve the systemic problems facing many indigenous Australians.

According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare report, Australia's Welfare 2017, 29 per cent of indigenous households live in social housing, compared with 4 per cent for non-indigenous households; 61 per cent of indigenous Australians are in the labour force, compared with 77 per cent of non-indigenous Australians; and the age-standardised indigenous imprisonment rate is 13 times more than for non-indigenous Australians.

These challenges are not the product of a lack of welfare. A 2017 report by the Productivity Commission estimated that direct welfare expenditure per person on indigenous Australians is \$44,886, about twice the rate for non-indigenous Australians at \$22,356.

The first step to addressing challenges in indigenous communities is to assess why welfare doesn't appear to be working. It could be because of the unavoidable incentives that welfare creates, the money isn't reaching those who are in most economic need but is being siphoned off by intermediaries, or that welfare has played an important role but has reached the point of diminishing returns and perhaps is causing decreasing returns (every additional dollar making the situation worse).

Governments also must change the overall approach and mentality towards indigenous policy.

In many ways, there is no difference between indigenous and "non-indigenous" policy. The basic underpinnings of a successful and flourishing life are not culturally contingent but include access to economic opportunity, safe communities, caring families and high-quality healthcare, education and infrastructure. It is unclear why an indigenous-only voice would be required to communicate this.

There are, of course, important local differences that must be taken into account with policy implementation and delivery, as with all public policy. And advocates of a voice are right when they say that voices in remote Australia aren't being heard by city-based policymakers.



But the answer is not to have another centralised, Canberra-based body but the opposite: to embark on a program of broadbased decentralisation and localism where Canberra devolves power to the states, which in turn devolve power to regional and local authorities.

In an earlier speech to the National Press Club on July 18, Wyatt acknowledged the issue of centralisation when he argued that “even the most well-intentioned modern policies and programs have still tended to take a top-down command-and-control approach”.

At the heart of decentralisation is the individual and their property rights. Indigenous Australians must be able to enjoy the bounty that property rights offer in the same manner as non-indigenous Australians.

This means the ability to buy and sell their own land as individuals or families, borrow against that property, and decide what types of economic development will or will not take place.

The final policy focus ought to be regional economic development. Indigenous Australians need jobs in the same way non-indigenous Australians do. In practice this means removing the barriers to economic opportunity such as red tape, environmental regulations and special legal privileges that allow activists to engage in frivolous and vexatious litigation to thwart development.

An exemplar in how not to advance indigenous economic success include the native vegetation laws introduced by the Queensland government in May last year, which made it harder for farmers to clear native vegetation on their private land to allow for new agriculture projects. Among those adversely affected were indigenous landowners in the Cape York region of far north Queensland.

Indigenous activists such as Noel Pearson strongly opposed the laws. At the time the laws were being debated in 2016, Pearson stated: “We’re (indigenous Australians) not going to lift ourselves out of the poverty and misery we live in unless we have balanced development.” In other words, it’s our land and we should be able to do what we want with it.

Practical policies that create jobs, encourage more children into school, and reduce violence will improve the lives of indigenous, and indeed all, Australians. We do not need a race-based body to tell us that.

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