Day for Treaties has gone, and road ahead holds key solutions

THE movement to recognise Aboriginal people in the constitution has been severely compromised by Warren Mundine’s suggestion the government pursue treaties with individual Aboriginal nations. The time for treaties is long past. The time and resources that future treaty negotiations would consume could be put to better use.

Constitutional recognition is the opportunity to formally recognise a more truthful story of our nation’s history. “Our” nation – that’s the reality of a shared past and a shared future. Constitutional recognition grows this spirit of co-operation; treaty negotiations escalate lengthy arguments. Aligning the first movement with the second is likely to result in the accomplishment of neither.

As traditional societies we are not on equal footing with Australia as a nation. Debating individual treaties is likely to undermine the progress we have already made with native title and land tenure. The ultimate composition of each language group is often an argument in itself, which is unlikely to be progressive or inspiring.

A treaty movement will undoubtedly improve the lot of lawyers in cities and regional towns and provide fodder for debate by numerous pundits. Meanwhile, out bush, we are still seeking the practical measures that will allow Aboriginal people to thrive both culturally and economically. These are the real changes we hoped the Indigenous Advisory Council would drive.

The way forward, particularly in remote Australia, is to improve access to high-quality education and job opportunities while developing the motivation and self-esteem of Aboriginal people to take on these challenges. This involves rigorously evaluating the productivity of our schools and allowing parents to choose schools for their children that are competitive in the mainstream.

In the Northern Territory, our numerous small remote schools will never be able to provide the intensive, challenging, high-quality education that our children require.

More and more families are sending their children interstate for their later years of school. This practice could be replicated for a broader cohort by facilitating boarding in regional centres and supporting transition of remote students to mainstream schools.

We must ensure that these children receive an education that is world-class, not just good enough for a remote community. The latter does not lead to success. We must all support and develop the individual career goals and talents of Aboriginal children and not restrict them to an image of what an Aboriginal person should be.

However, education is not simply about preparing people for work. It also allows adults to fully participate in the world in which they live. Perhaps more importantly, it provides the confidence for people to participate in government and affect decision-making at all levels.

Through education, Aboriginal people find their voice and learn how to use it in the mainstream. By moving into positions of power in our society, Aboriginal people will become true partners in the development of our nation.

These are the shifts and changes we need to see. These are the present, pressing tasks: they should
take priority over talks and long negotiations dealing with the past. And we need to focus not just on
schools, but on the jobs that must follow after schooling.

When Aboriginal people are employed, they change the culture of the workplace. When they are
present in the discussions where decision-making takes place, their opinions have maximum impact.
When there are Aboriginal people at the table, the conversation changes and Aboriginal cultural
influences automatically become ingrained in everything we do.

Too often, even in central Australia where Aboriginal people comprise a significant proportion of the
population, critical issues are discussed without a single Aboriginal person present. Regularly, it is only
once decisions have been made that they may be presented to the people most affected. Thus,
Aboriginal people are left out of a significant part of the decision-making process. It will benefit all of us
when more Aboriginal people achieve real day-to-day management positions, not just seats on boards.

Unfortunately, disillusionment with work has developed over time and now it has permeated younger
generations. The concept of employment is not new to Aboriginal people. Remote community members
have worked before and they have travelled long distances for work as well. The reality is that often
Aboriginal people have not been able to achieve the same benefits from work that others do.

Housing is a prime example. On remote Aboriginal communities, joining the workforce has not brought
Aboriginal employees better housing. There is no private housing market and public housing is in short
supply. Even when local Aboriginal people take on a government job in their community, they don’t get
offered staff housing, as do workers from outside the community.

Why not develop public-private partnerships to construct housing for local working families? This would
be an immediate incentive for people to find and maintain a job. There is no need for it to be
segregated housing, either.

In central Australian remote communities, the commonwealth’s commitment to indigenous affairs will
not be judged by a few well-chosen words, it will be judged by new bricks and mortar. Economic
development requires infrastructure. Out bush, we are off the grid in so many ways: few bitumen
roads, an inconsistent mobile network, intermittent power, limited housing, no available office space.
These are the key factors that will hold back business development.

A government’s commitment to the future of a community is made obvious by the quality of the roads
that lead to it. In the Northern Territory, bitumen is a luxury; two lanes of it are a miracle. Noticeably,
there are still two speeds in the Territory. There is the fast lane to Darwin and the rest of us, bogged
down on a dirt road.

Here is another indicator of the road your community is travelling on. Were there cheap demountable
buildings installed in your community to support a program called Stronger Futures? Are these
demountables surrounded by a man-proof fence? The irony is not lost on us. We need to do more on
remote communities than just provide a comfortable place for visiting Centrelink staff to rest their
heads.

Arguing over treaties won’t bring about the change we all desire. The changes we need must inspire
confidence in the future of our remote communities. That requires real investment, in both basic
infrastructure and our human resources, followed by a return on that investment.

We need to move beyond a time when we are consumed by “the problem of indigenous Australia”.
Aboriginal people are one of Australia’s greatest assets. The commonwealth must decide to capitalise
on that. And we, as Aboriginal people, must convince our children that our best time was not in the
past, but ahead of us in the not-too-distant future.

Alison Anderson is the member of the Northern Territory Legislative Assembly for Namatjira.