

Long-term thinking required as COVID heightens challenges

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FULL TEXT

Coronavirus and social injustice represent a perfect storm if their crossover is ignored, writes TONY DREISE.

The year 2020 once held great promise. The policy poets among us have long toyed with the romantic notion of a year steeped in a "2020 vision"; denoting clarity, foresight, and perfect vision. And now halfway through 2020, the year has been downright stormy. COVID-19 and the Black Lives Matter movement have had major impacts both here at home and abroad.

To COVID first, the crisis is far from over. Even when a vaccine has been discovered and globally applied, the head count of coronavirus victims is likely to be in the hundreds of millions as measured economically and socially for many years to come.

The Black Lives Matter movement has reopened old wounds among families, even while applying the pressure on policymakers. 2020 comes almost 30 years after the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. The statistics that show Indigenous incarceration rates remain at alarmingly high levels. More than 4 per cent of Indigenous men in this country are currently behind bars. This is our national shame. We are constantly reminded of how frustrating the bridge-building between First Nations and the colonial states of Australia are when we see an Aboriginal teen punched in the face by police in the regional town of Casino, while another is forcibly tackled to the ground by police in inner city Sydney. But the tragedy of 432 Indigenous deaths in custody since the 1991 royal commission speaks not just to discriminatory policing, but to the structural racism that has denied First Nations peoples the ability to control our own destinies.

Together, COVID and social injustice in Australia represent a perfect storm if their crossover is ignored. Good governance and policy leadership will not only be measured by effective epidemiological responses to coronavirus in an immediate sense, but in the form of a longer-term socio-economic policy response. The decisions made and priorities identified by our leaders this and next year will be arguably the biggest test of public policy and politics in this the first year of a new decade.

In Australia, who will pay the biggest bill in terms of the long-term social and economic costs of COVID? Chances are it will be Indigenous young people. Let us look to the data.

Fresh data compiled by colleagues at the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University show that pre-COVID Indigenous people, especially women, were far less likely to be employed than all Australians. And work that is available is far more precarious: 34 per cent of Indigenous women's jobs were casual contracts, 31 per cent were in temporary positions, and 28 per cent wanted more hours. Indigenous poverty rates were already high pre-COVID, and were above 50 per cent in remote communities in 2016.

There is little question that education and skills are key to reducing unemployment and poverty rates. However, the post-COVID scenario for First Nations communities is not looking pretty. Despite some progress in closing the gap in Year 12 attainment rates, a significant share of Indigenous youth is not transitioning to post-compulsory education and training. And Indigenous youth, already marginalised in the labour market, are perhaps most vulnerable of all Australians to the economic impacts of COVID. The proportion of Indigenous young people qualifying for income support for jobseekers shot up dramatically to 27 per cent in May.

One of the few bright spots in social policy during the COVID pandemic has been increases to payments to

financially stressed households and families. The Coronavirus Supplement has lifted tens of thousands of Indigenous people out of poverty. Sales of food in some communities have increased by as much as 40 per cent as Indigenous families are finally able to meet their basic material needs. But what will happen in September when the supplement is due to expire? The year of 2020 can still be visionary. As a nation we need to keep one eye to the health challenge that COVID presents, while turning the other to social policy leadership and structural change. To that end, governments need to be less punitive and more an enabler. They can do this in several ways. First, allow the Indigenous policy space to breathe. The space should be one that fosters boldness, imagination and safe-to-fail environments, as opposed to becoming that risk-adverse to the point of being entirely useless. Secondly, there are major gaps in Australia's policy landscape. This country does not have a lifelong learning policy when we desperately need one in this COVID era. Nor does Australia have a national cultural policy. A cultural policy could nourish our collective identity and give unity to our nationhood. Finally, Australia should give serious consideration to an Indigenous grants commission or reconstruction agency, one with a capacity to invest over periods of 10 to 20 years, thus giving confidence and certainty to community builders. Governments have to enable long-term thinking and long-term planning. The challenges confronting First Nations communities will not be solved quickly. One- or two-year funding contracts deny community-building organisations the ability to invest in their own future. None of this will work without structural reform. Governments need to take seriously the injunction to hand power to First Nations across the country to manage their own affairs. This does not mean withdrawing from Indigenous Affairs. First Nations people want to take the wheel of government, not turn off the engine. Black lives matter in 2020. Policy needs to make sure they do in 2030, 2050, and forever. Professor Tony Dreise is head of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research at the Australian National University.

DETAILS

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