

# Indigenous identity distracts from the real issues

## OPINION

By Anthony Dillon

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**Aboriginal identity is a topic I have written on previously here on The Drum and elsewhere.**

Most recently, some of my thoughts were published in an article by Caroline Overington in The Weekend Australian Magazine of the Weekend Australian (March 24-25, 2012). On the front page of The Australian, there was a story that spoke about fraud where non-Aboriginal people pretend to be Aboriginal. Why would they want to do this?

In brief, there are benefits for identifying as Aboriginal. The benefits typically relate to schemes and incentives to address the disadvantage experienced by many Aboriginal people. In theory, specific strategies to address this disadvantage are a good thing, but there are problems. Specifically, should all people who identify as being Aboriginal be entitled to access such benefits?

I think a better approach to addressing the disadvantage and despair that characterise some Aboriginal communities and individuals, is to focus on need, rather than race. If this was the approach used, then a lot of the controversy about Aboriginal identity and allocated benefits would cease; but not completely. Based on my observation, there are non-financial benefits which are just as attractive, and sometimes even more attractive that can be motivators for identifying as an Indigenous Australian. Before exploring these benefits and the problems they pose, I will first discuss some aspects of the notion of Aboriginal identity.

Firstly, I identify as a part-Aboriginal person. I have been told that use of the term "part-Aboriginal" is offensive and that I should not use it. Nonsense. I can describe myself in any way I wish. People, in their concern/criticism sometimes say "Well which part of you is Aboriginal?" Or some Aboriginal-identifying people may say "Well I am a whole person, I am not 'part anything'".

What I have in common with these people is that I am a whole person also. I am so whole in fact, that I recognise other aspects of my being, and don't let my life revolve around one aspect of my being, namely my Aboriginal identity, which is only one part of who I am. Where I differ to some of these people, is that I am happy (and proud) to acknowledge all of my ethnic heritage and not just a part of it. I am often curious why some Aboriginal-identifying people only focus on their Aboriginal heritage, and for some of them, neglect the other fifteen sixteenths of their heritage.

The current definition of Aboriginality is exactly that - a definition. All definitions, without exception are based on the perceptions and motives of people with vested interests - and the less objective reasoning there is for the definition, the more the definition is emotionally influenced. Definitions do not have any inherent truth of their own - they are arrived at by consensus. As an analogy, consider a comparison between gold and copper. It is a self-evident fact (that cannot be changed by consensus), that gold is heavier than copper. However, to suggest that gold is more precious than copper is merely an agreement arrived at by people using many criteria. With regard to the definition of an Aboriginal person, the notion that an Aboriginal person is anyone with some proven or documented Aboriginal ancestry, even if very minimal, is simply consensus-based. This rule is endorsed and used by the Government.

I find it interesting that many people are quick to adopt this government-endorsed definition of Aboriginality (which they would never ever dare question as being anything else other than truth) simply because it is government-endorsed, but are prepared to question many other government endorsements and rulings. It is also interesting that this requirement (of some ancestry) to establish Aboriginality is one that is not agreed on by all people who identify as an Aboriginal, particularly some of those living in remote parts of Australia, who have minimal contact with non-Aboriginal people.

I was recently told of one Aboriginal-identifying man who uses the following analogy to establish his Aboriginality: If you have a cup of coffee, even if you add a lot of milk, it is still a cup of coffee. From this analogy, I guess he means that a person who identifies as an Indigenous Australian, is one even if he or she has a small amount of Aboriginal ancestry in comparison to their non-Aboriginal ancestry. While I acknowledge that all analogies have their limitations, there are a



PHOTO: Man holding an Indigenous flag (Getty Images: Simon Fergusson)

couple of significant problems with this one that cannot be overlooked. Firstly, if the gentleman using the coffee analogy was to order a cup of coffee in a shop and was presented with a cup of milk with a small sprinkling of coffee powder, would he be satisfied that he received a cup of coffee? Secondly, the assumption that the analogy of the cup of coffee represents Aboriginal ancestry/identity and the milk represents non-Aboriginal ancestry/identity is completely arbitrary. The coffee could also just as easily represent non-Aboriginal ancestry and the milk represent Aboriginal ancestry and the analogy used to establish a non-Aboriginal person's ethnic status.

But I don't have a problem identifying as Aboriginal. That is an individual's business and right. I just question public policy that uses public money that focuses on Aboriginality as a way of addressing problems. I think focusing on race hinders us in addressing the needs of those in our country who are most disadvantaged, whether they be Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal.

So what are the non-financial benefits for identifying as an Aboriginal person? I am all for people with Aboriginal ancestry being involved in Aboriginal affairs with the goal of helping to close the gap. But having Aboriginal ancestry alone does not necessarily provide a person with any special knowledge that enables them to address the problems facing some Aboriginal people. Further, once identifying as Aboriginal, some have a ready-made excuse for anger, bad behaviour (such as flag burning), etc. – "As an Aboriginal Australian I am angered over how the whites raped and murdered my ancestors" or "White fella should be paying us rent for being on our land!" What happens in the case (which I suspect is the majority of cases) where a person is of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal descent? Do they pay themselves rent?

So why am I saying all this? Because I think that by focusing on who is Aboriginal and who is not, we distract ourselves from addressing the problems of poverty, crime, homelessness and sickness that need urgent attention. Yes, we can all be proud of ancestries, but let's not see ourselves as different and separate to one another. Let's adopt what I believe is a traditional Aboriginal belief and see ourselves as one people with one spirit. Once this happens, we can then more effectively engage in providing help to those fellow Australians who most need the help.

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