
Aurukun strife shows failure of our leaders

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Aurukun has been a blighted community for almost 40 years, since the Queensland government took control over the far north town in the late 1970s after it had been administered as a virtual Presbyterian state within a state for decades.

The Reverend William Mackenzie was the chief protector for the Aboriginal Protection Board, which used authority endowed by the state parliament. A reasonably vibrant community - where local indigenous peoples lived happily - was formed around commerce, with a butcher and a grocer and a job-creating employer running a sawmill. Today, there is no gainful employment beyond a general store. The community is anything but vibrant.

Aurukun has a special place in the heritage and traditions of indigenous people because it is part of the land of the Wik, with most of the people from this tribal group living in the town and inland to Coen. However, there has been a dark side to Aurukun for many years. Sexual assaults have shocked locals and caused outrage, while the history of education has often been a story of failure rather than success.

Recently, there has been progress. Extended school days and the introduction of indigenous languages, specific cultural education and the promotion of sports, music and arts have resulted in a sharp rise in attendance - from only 30 per cent of eligible students a decade ago to almost 70 per cent six years ago (this has slipped back in the past two years). The schooling runs to primary level only, in a unique partnership between Cape York Aboriginal Australian Academy and the state education authorities.

But what has happened to thrust schooling in Aurukun into the news this year is not a story of education failure. It is rather a law and order issue that state authorities have found impossible to control. Two weeks ago, the school closed after the principal was attacked by teenagers using an axe handle. When teachers returned a week ago, five refused to go back and it soon became clear the trouble was not under control.

This week there was another outbreak of violence - children as young as six threw rocks at the school and homes and tried to steal cars three days ago - and 20 teachers were again evacuated, with the school now shut until July. Dropping a new principal and two teachers in to the community next Monday to run a temporary school out of the PCYC will not meet the need and is almost certain to fail.

This is a completely unacceptable set of circumstances that should have been avoided. The trouble at Aurukun is not new - it has been brewing since the beginning of the year.

The dozen or so children involved are well known to police, local community leaders and the teachers. And yet the State Government, including Premier Anastacia Palaszczuk, who is travelling to Aurukun today, appears to have been caught completely off guard and has been let down by the local police. It is hard to believe the police were caught unawares and were unable to meet the challenge - especially after the normal 17-strong police presence was boosted by an additional four sworn officers. The Palaszczuk Government has been in office now for almost 18 months, which is long enough to own successes and failures. This is one complete failure they own - they have failed to anticipate what's been happening, they failed to respond to the first alarm two weeks

ago and failed to do anything since then, either through the education services or by ensuring the police were on top of things. As Ms Palaszczuk flies in today she has to accept this is her mess to clean up and the buck stops at her desk.