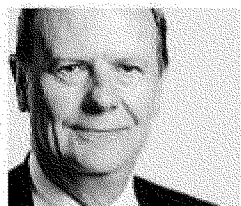


More facts would help Geldof see the truth



PETER COSTELLO

During his recent whistle-stop tour of Australia, Sir Bob Geldof described Australia's treatment of Aborigines as "absurd" and "economically stupid". "You've removed from your society of 'having a go' 500,000 of your own." He reckons the entire Aboriginal population has been removed from society.

If Geldof had turned on a television he would have seen Aboriginal footballers having a go in our premier sporting league. Indigenous players are over-represented in the AFL, and, like all players, paid extremely well. On the flight to Australia, Geldof could have watched *Bran Nue Dae* and seen Jessica Mauboy and Ernie Dingo star in an entertaining film based on the stage musical of Jimmy Chi. He could have talked to respected academics such as Marcia Langton or Mick Dodson, or visited Noel Pearson's Cape York Institute to look at just how indigenous entrepreneurs are "having a go". Plenty of indigenous people are high achievers.

If he had more time, he could have visited Aboriginal communities where there is real disadvantage. He could have seen health clinics and schools paid for by taxpayers, staffed by committed people who work day in, day out to develop opportunity for those in remote areas.

When he complained about removing indigenous people from "having a go", I doubt he was talking of the separatist policies of the '80s and '90s where communities were closed off to visitors and teaching was done in local languages. Together with welfare

and aid, this locked Aboriginal people out of the economic mainstream.

At the time it was called empowerment and self-determination. It was the policy of well-intentioned white activists. It was a disaster. Good intentions can lead to bad outcomes. Geldof has good intentions, but it is hard to be an expert on Aboriginal issues if you live in Britain.

He also had some things to say about Australia's foreign aid. "Australia is coming up ... The Prime Minister said they'd get to 0.5 by 2012 which is necessary for the millennium development goals they all signed up to."

Er, no. The Prime Minister said Australia would have its aid at 0.5 per cent of gross national income by 2015-16. It was a typical Rudd promise – to do something far away.

There are different ways to meet such a target. One is to lift spending on aid. Another is to have slower growth in national income. That is what has happened over the last two years. Slower growth will not deliver more assistance to the developing world, but it will help the government meet its target.

The previous Coalition government lifted aid by significant amounts. But it grew the economy even stronger – so aid to GNI did not grow so much. Aid organisations were extremely critical of this and campaigned for Kevin O'Rourke.

This year's budget cut foreign aid of \$1 billion over the forward estimates. The government did this with a tricky change to the estimate of GNI. It decided not to use international standards to measure GNI and consequent aid ratios, but to use lower estimates of

GNI allowing it to cut \$1 billion out of the aid budget and deliver savings to the bottom line. It's all described in *Budget Paper Number 2*.

I would not expect Geldof to know this. But I would expect the aid lobbies that campaigned for Rudd to know it. Mysteriously, there has been hardly a word of criticism from them despite it being either the largest or second largest spending cut in the entire budget. Maybe the aid lobbyists did not brief Geldof before his appearances on these cuts? Or were they happy to let him endorse the Rudd government regardless?

In Australia, Geldof addressed many worthwhile charity audiences that paid decent sums to hear his thoughts. They were entitled to think he had done his research – he is paid for these appearances – and accurately presented the facts. He is entitled to voice any opinion he likes, but the facts count.

In areas like foreign aid and Aboriginal policy, it is not enough merely to have good intentions. Well intentioned but misguided policy has done a lot of damage to Aboriginal people. It will do a lot of damage to Africa.

Those who really care will be careful to do their homework and listen to informed advice from those working on the ground. It is harder than you think to touch down in a foreign country – whether it be Australia or Africa – and instantly diagnose a country's problems. Harder still to have an all-purpose solution on how to fix them.

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