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Beyond Closing the Gap: Valuing Diversity in Indigenous Australia

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ANU COLLEGE OF ARTS & SOCIAL SCIENCES

SERIES NOTE

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ABSTRACT

This working paper examines the notion of Closing the Gap in socioeconomic disadvantage as the new over-arching framework in Indigenous affairs promulgated by the Rudd government in 2008. It is shown that such an approach, seeking statistical equality between Indigenous and other Australians, has had a long policy history and so is not new. Some statistics are presented from earlier work with Nicholas Biddle and Boyd Hunter that track the historic record of Closing the Gap from 1971 to 2006 using census data, and some predications are presented on how long Closing the Gap might take across a range of variables. Some conceptual shortcomings of this framework are summarised and then two cases—focused on remote area employment and a livelihoods approach—are provided of the empirical and policy problems that these shortcomings create. The key argument in this paper is that there is an over-emphasis in the Closing the Gap approach on equality between Indigenous and other Australians and too little emphasis on diversity and difference. The paper concludes that enabling Indigenous Australians 'to do and to be' in the Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum sense of capabilities will require policy to broaden beyond Closing the Gap to ascribe value to diversity and difference as well as equality.

Keywords: Closing the Gap, equality of outcomes, diversity and difference, capabilities, Indigenous policy.

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INTRODUCTION

J ust over a year ago, the National Apology provided the development blueprint for the new Rudd government focused on Closing the Gap (CTG) (Rudd 2008). This paper argues that when operationalised, CTG *only* means socioeconomic equality. At best this top-down approach will provide only a partial solution to the Indigenous 'problem' in Australia, and at worst it could exacerbate the problem for some if not all Indigenous Australians.

My critique is based on an assessment of this dated state project of improvement that has strong links to a monolithic modernisation paradigm that has driven Indigenous affairs policy in Australia for most of the past 50 years.[1] This state project of improvement has positive sentiments, but is deeply flawed both conceptually and empirically. This is primarily because it looks for mainstream solutions to deeply entrenched non-mainstream problems, and partly because it does not recognise colonial history and the sheer diversity of contemporary Indigenous circumstance.

The substance of my critique is addressed using both historical evidence at the national level and contemporary evidence at the regional level. Each of the gaps identified in the federal government's CTG framework is problematic and none can be rectified in isolation. But for analytic purposes I focus here just on the employment gap: demonstrating how attempts to close this gap in remote Australia might in fact widen it and so adversely impact on people's livelihoods.

Indigenous development policy faces the complex task of balancing the often incompatible goals of socioeconomic equality for Indigenous citizens, and the recognition of difference, choice and self determination for first Australians as 'special' citizens. Balancing the need for a framework based on equality *and* difference is currently beyond the capacity of the Australian state, where the dominance of the equality approach based on neoliberal principles of individualism and unfettered economic growth is overpowering a subordinate culturalist discourse that values diverse life worlds and resistance to transformation and homogenisation.

In his Apology speech, the Prime Minister attempted to balance the symbolic with the practical while emphasising that 'business as usual' is not working. Ultimately though, the CTG approach *is* business as usual that fails to value Indigenous difference and fails to accommodate Indigenous aspirations in all their diversity. Unless we get beyond CTG, the next phase in Indigenous policy making and program investments is as 'destined to fail' as previous approaches.

I advocate for the pendulum to swing back, to accommodate and value diversity and difference rather than just statistical equality. In doing so, I provide some reflexive comment as an academic on these policy swings. In 2005, Tim Rowse and I wrote a piece on Indigenous policy that contrasted the contending approaches of economics and anthropology to Indigenous affairs policy: the first emphasising equality of socioeconomic outcomes, the second the facilitation of choice and self-determination. The former implies integration, the latter adherence to different and diverse life worlds (Altman and Rowse 2005). Over time, I have used economics and official statistics to highlight socioeconomic disadvantage and neglect, while at the same time using anthropology to critique any approach that uses mainstream social indicators that only reflect the dominant society's social norms. This paper will continue in the same vein, using a dual disciplinary approach. However, without being over-reflexive, as an anthropologist of development I am clearly uncomfortable with the current dominance of the CTG framework.[2]

Table 1. Ratio of Indigenous to non–Indigenous socioeconomic outcomes, 1971–2006

Variable	1971	1981	1991	1996	2001	2006
Unemployment rate (% labour force)	5.63	4.24	2.70	2.52	2.78	3.06
Employment to population ratio (% adults)	0.73	0.61	0.66	0.72	0.71	0.71
Private-sector employment (% adults)	0.65	0.42	0.51	0.47	n.a.	0.63
Labour force participation rate (% adults)	0.78	0.77	0.84	0.85	0.82	0.80
Median weekly personal income ($A 2006)	n.a.	0.55	0.62	0.64	0.56	0.58
Household size	1.35	1.32	1.38	1.33	1.31	1.31
Median weekly household income ($A 2006)	n.a.	0.72	0.77	n.a.	0.78	0.78
Home owner or purchasing (% population)	0.37	0.27	0.27	0.36	0.37	0.41
Never attended school (% adults)	37.83	15.29	5.10	4.43	3.20	3.00
Post-school qualification (% adults)	0.14	0.18	0.29	0.33	0.44	0.52
Degree or higher (% adults)	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	0.20	0.23	0.24
Attending educational institution (% 15-24 year olds)	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	0.56	0.61	0.62
Male life expectancy at birth (years)	0.73	0.79	0.77	0.76	0.74	n.a.
Female life expectancy at birth (years)	0.67	0.82	0.80	0.79	0.77	n.a.
Population aged over 55 years (%)	0.43	0.34	0.32	0.31	0.31	0.33

Note: 'n.a.' means that data was not available in that year. Results have been rounded to two decimal places.

Source: Altman, Biddle & Hunter 2008.

THE APOLOGY AND CLOSING THE GAP AS THE 'NEW' POLICY FRAMEWORK

Just over a year ago, on 13 February 2008, the Prime Minister of Australia delivered a belated apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples in two parts (Rudd 2008). The first very moving and compassionate part focused on the past, reflecting in particular 'on the mistreatment of those who were Stolen Generations— 'this blemished chapter in our nation's history'—and reminding Australia that such practice continued until the early 1970s. The Apology was widely acclaimed nationally and internationally.

The second part switched from the symbolic to the practical, from the particularity of the Stolen Generations to the generality of Indigenous Australians, and from the past to the present and future. In this part the focus was on building a bridge between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, a bridge based on a partnership to 'close the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in life expectancy, educational achievement and employment opportunities'. In aiming to close the gap, the

Table 2. Number of years till convergence of Indigenous and non-Indigenous outcomes

	Convergence based on long run trends since 1971	Convergence based on post-1996 trends
Unemployment rate (% labour force)	28	**
Employment to population ratio (% adults)	**	**
Private-sector employment (% adults)	**	23
Labour force participation rate (% adults)	100+	**
Median weekly personal income $A (2006)	100+	**
Household size	100+	100+
Median weekly household income $A (2006)	94	100+
Home owner or purchasing (% population)	100+	100+
Never attended school (% adults)	2	14
Post-school qualification (% adults)	44	25
Degree or higher (% adults)	n.a.	100+
Attending educational institution (% 15-24 year olds)	n.a.	63
Male life expectancy at birth (years)	100+	**
Female life expectancy at birth (years)	47	**
Population aged over 55 years (%)	**	100+

Note: If Indigenous and non-Indigenous outcomes are diverging then the entry is a double asterisk. The trends are based on the maximum period for which comparable data was available. For example, the long run convergence for income calculated from 1981 as there were no available estimates for 1971. If the number of years to convergence is greater than 100 years, then the table entry is shown as 100+.

Source: Altman, Biddle & Hunter, 2008.

Prime Minister set concrete targets for the future: to *halve* the *widening* gap in literacy, numeracy and employment outcomes, opportunities for Indigenous children, and infant mortality rates *within* a decade; and to close the appalling 17-year gap in overall life expectancy *within a generation* [emphasis mine]. It is noteworthy that within the Apology speech there is a brief three-line reference to diversity and flexibility that I will return to later.

It is this second part of the speech on which I focus. CTG was quickly adopted by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) as its over-arching reform agenda for the improvement of Indigenous Australians.[3] During 2008, six ambitious targets were agreed to 'close the gap' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians across urban, rural and remote areas, although in four of the six targets (mortality rates for children under five; reading, writing and numeracy levels; Year 12 attainment rates; and employment outcomes) 'closing' was used a little loosely, if realistically, to mean halving.

At face value, such lofty goals are precisely what the Australian state should be doing to address Indigenous disadvantage.[4] The Prime Minister, as the head of a new government notes that we need a new beginning and that a business as usual approach towards Indigenous Australians is not working. Such 'disowning of

COAG:
Council of
Australian
Governments

the past and symbolic re-establishment of something strong and new' (Sanders 1991: 16) is itself nothing new. It is precisely what the Hawke government did in 1983 and then what the Howard government did from 1996 in their attempts to grapple with the difficult and intractable issue of Indigenous disadvantage within rich Australia.

CLOSING THE GAP: A RE-BADGED APPROACH FOR A NEW GOVERNMENT

Since comparable statistics became available in the 1971 national Census, the extent of Indigenous socioeconomic disadvantage has been demonstrated using standard social indicators (Altman and Nieuwenhuysen 1979) and more recently through a needs-based discourse. Even before 1971 there was considerable evidence of Indigenous disadvantage, but an absence of reasonably robust comparative statistics at the national level to demonstrate this.

AEDP:
Aboriginal
Employment
Development
Policy

In 1987, the Hawke government launched its Aboriginal Employment Development Policy (AEDP) that aimed to deliver statistical equality between Indigenous and other Australians in employment, income and education by the year 2000 (Australian Government 1987; Altman and Sanders 1991).

In October 1998, then Prime Minister John Howard committed to vigorously pursuing the goal of 'practical reconciliation' to reduce Indigenous material disadvantage in the areas of health, housing, education and employment (Altman 2004). The Productivity Commission was subsequently commissioned to report on progress on a biennial basis which it has done with a series of *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators* reports in 2003, 2005 and 2007. It was only in 2007 and only in the Northern Territory that the Howard Government provided a time-frame of five years for such closing the gaps to ensure normalisation.

Even accepting what I argue below is the conceptually-limited CTG framework, the statistical evidence on performance is mixed. For example, using five-yearly census data at the national level for the period 1971 to 2006, Altman, Biddle and Hunter (2008) show that in both absolute and relative terms a number of socioeconomic outcomes have in fact improved (Table 1). So the notion of 'failure' that has so dominated policy and public discourse of late might be difficult to sustain based on such official statistics.

On the other hand plotting trends into the future based on past performance suggests that where there is *convergence* between Indigenous and non-Indigenous statistical outcomes, in many indicators it will take decades—even over a century—before gaps are eliminated (Table 2).[5] Such ambiguous interpretations raise the question of what is it that we are seeking to measure with the CTG framework and whether it is a sound basis for policy.

It is also important to note that the CTG discourse is undertaken at the national level, but there are variations evident at regional scales that can be statistically demonstrated cross-sectionally rather than over time. Some data from the 2006 Census are presented on this in Table 3. This is not the place to interpret these data except to note that inequalities between Indigenous and other Australians are evident everywhere, but they are greatest in remote or sparsely-settled areas.

THE CLOSING THE GAP FRAMEWORK: A DIVERSITY OF CRITIQUES

The CTG framework is based on an approach that measures socioeconomic disadvantage of a sub-population. Such forms of survey or census evolved in the 1950s and 1960s, and set out to include universal needs common to all people (King 2007). It is only from 1971 in Australia that censuses and some surveys include both Indigenous and non-Indigenous subjects who are self differentiated ethnically.

Table 3. Key Socioeconomic indicators by remoteness, 2006

Outcomes	Major cities Indig.	Non-Indig.	Ratio	Inner Regional Indig.	Non-Indig.	Ratio	Outer Regional Indig.	Non-Indig.	Ratio	Remote Indig.	Non-Indig.	Ratio	Very remote Indig.	Non-Indig.	Ratio
Unemployment rate (% of labour force)	15.0	5.0	3.0	18.4	5.6	3.3	17.6	4.8	3.6	14.5	3.1	4.7	10.5	8.9	1.2
Employment to population ratio (% adults)	47.5	61.4	0.8	42.1	56.8	0.7	40.8	60.3	0.7	39.9	69.3	0.6	41.4	76.6	0.5
Private sector employment (% employed)	77.4	84.7	0.9	78.9	83.9	0.9	72.7	83.4	0.9	65.5	83.5	0.8	46.9	80.6	0.6
Labour force participation rate (% adults)	55.9	64.6	0.9	51.6	60.1	0.9	49.5	63.4	0.8	46.6	71.5	0.7	46.2	78.4	0.6
Home owner or purchasing (% households)	38.4	70.0	0.5	40.2	74.6	0.5	38.8	72.3	0.5	28.3	63.1	0.4	9.0	48.7	0.2
Never attended school (% adults)	1.1	1.1	1.0	0.9	0.4	2.3	1.4	0.5	3.0	3.3	0.4	8.2	6.5	0.5	13.8
Post school qualifications (% adults)	26.0	44.0	0.6	22.4	37.9	0.6	18.4	35.4	0.5	14.6	37.2	0.4	9.8	40.6	0.2
Degree or higher (% adults)	6.3	19.4	0.3	3.8	10.9	0.3	2.6	9.6	0.3	1.9	10.4	0.2	1.0	12.1	0.1
Attending educational institution (% 15 – 24)	36.8	55.3	0.7	35.1	49.8	0.7	32.0	43.5	0.7	22.5	33.5	0.7	14.2	23.6	0.6
Population aged 55 years	7.6	23.5	0.3	8.1	28.0	0.3	8.7	27.1	0.3	8.5	22.6	0.4	8.6	20.4	0.4

Source: ABS Census data 2006, compiled by M. Yap.

The notion of CTG has always been a central element of national Aboriginal affairs policy. At face value it is indisputable that there should be no gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. But goals expressed in such statistical terms become somewhat rhetorical and hollow if they are not matched by effective policy action or analysis of the causes of socioeconomic difference, and if such goals do not reflect Indigenous aspirations.

Historically in Australia there have been a number of social science critiques of this dominant approach, yet these are consistently overlooked by new generations of politicians and ignored due to bureaucratic path dependency. In the following paragraphs, I provide some pertinent examples.

The Hawke Government's AEDP was criticised for emphasising statistical equality over equity (associated with social justice and cultural difference) and for lacking policy realism (Altman & Sanders 1991). In a telling critique when the policy was only four years old, Will Sanders (1991) published a paper with the very descriptive title, 'Destined to fail: the Hawke government's pursuit of statistical equality in employment and income status between Aborigines and other Australians by the year 2000 (or a cautionary tale involving the new managerialism and social justice strategies)'. Today's policy makers seeking to close the gap should revisit this article.

The Howard Government's 'practical reconciliation' approach was criticised for focusing only on mainstreaming and normalisation that allowed Indigenous communities little choice to be different while not neglected by the Australian state. As this approach became entangled in culture and history wars and false debates about practical outcomes versus symbolism (Altman & Hunter 2003), focusing on statistics and a needs-based approach was a convenient mechanism to eschew the Indigenous rights agenda and ignore history and the politico-economic causes of marginalisation in policy and politics. As Louise Humpage (2005) has noted in the New Zealand context—where the terminology of CTG was tried and then abandoned nearly a decade ago—such an approach is merely an expression of power relations, and provides a means to avoid the rights-based discourse of Indigeneity so as to focus on the needs-based discourse of citizenship (with which the state is much more comfortable).

Interestingly, the Howard Government was canny enough to set neither concrete targets nor timeframes for meeting its 'practical reconciliation' targets, despite its outspoken commitment to outcomes. It is here that the Rudd Government's new approach is more akin to that of Hawke, because it commits both to concrete targets and to annual reporting on progress. It appears that Labor governments in recent decades find it difficult not to be drawn into such an approach.[6]

This 'new' approach has already come under criticism on mainly conceptual grounds. Kowal (2008) —using a framework that contrasts her notions of 'remedialism' (elimination of statistical inequality) with 'orientalism' (Indigenous particularities and recognition of difference)—argues that dominant images of what she terms 'unsanitised alterity' challenge the liberal state's tolerance of Indigenous difference. She suggests that the politics of the gap have swung heavily towards remedialism and an intolerance of the long-standing tension between equality and difference.

Using a somewhat different framework, Melinda Hinkson and I (Altman & Hinkson 2009) argue that the styles of life chosen by remote living Aborigines pose a fundamental risk both to themselves in terms of self-harm and to late modern Australian society—because they do not behave like other Australians and are not motivated by the same aspirations. We see Kowal's 'unsanitised alterity' as aspects of Indigenous cultures that are interpreted as representing risk to Indigenous people themselves, a view that has also been promulgated by some influential Indigenous spokespeople (Pearson 2000; Langton 2008). The state's focus on mainstreaming and on individualism in this framing can be interpreted as means to creatively

destroy distinct Indigenous institutions in the name of improvement, individualism and the market—as suggested in global contexts by David Harvey (2007), and by Pierre Bourdieu (1998) when he asked whether neoliberalism is a programme for destroying collective structures that may impede pure market logic. Hinkson and I argue that under current global circumstances the quest for cultural homogeneity and economic sameness represents great risk to Indigenous Australians.

There are numerous other salient critiques of such a framework that can be made that I will not engage with or detail here, but they would include:

- **Postdevelopment theory** that would interpret the CTG framework as just an antiquated form of imposing a top-down modernisation approach on Indigenous subjects (Ferguson 2006). As an element of this theory, anthropologies of development would critique such universalistic top-down approaches as disruptive of local solutions and cultures, and fundamentally reflecting a discourse of power (Escobar 1995).

- **Indigenous standpoint theory** that would just see this approach as a means to legitimise state intervention, to define Indigenous difference as in need of remedy, to mainstream non-Indigenous standards, and to avoid acknowledging Indigenous notions of outcomes that might include self-determination, autonomy and self governance (Humpage 2005).[7]

- **Culturalist/relativist critiques** that note how such an approach only uses the social norms of the dominant society, and so fails to value different life worlds and social norms whether in remote (Peterson 2005) or metropolitan (Cowlishaw 2009) Australia.

- **Methodological critiques** that describe how social indicators can be culturally inappropriate. Statistics focus on *averages* of individuals, and so present a statistical fiction of subjects as independent of kinship or community social settings (Taylor 2008).

- **Political economic critiques** that emphasise how such a framework conveniently fails to acknowledge that poverty is a symptom of powerlessness, and hence fails to address politico-economic relationships, the structural sources of inequality, their evolution and how they might be rectified (Li 2007).

The question here is why the Australian state and policy community is not engaging with this range of conceptual critiques. Is it, as Patrick Wolfe (1999) might suggest, that the logic of the settler colonial state and society is still premised on the destruction of Aboriginal societies? Or is it that the state project to address disadvantage can only, to paraphrase anthropologist James Ferguson (1994), render the problem technical and seek technical solutions? Or is it, as suggested above, that Indigenous societies represent unacceptable risk to neoliberalism (Altman & Hinkson 2009) even in its 'new' social democratic manifestation (Rudd 2009)?

REGISTER SHIFT 1: EMPLOYMENT POLICY—FROM ABSTRACTA TO OFFICIAL STATISTICS

I want to shift registers now and adopt the lens of labour market economics to focus on one CTG objective: to halve the employment gap within a decade. This is already being interpreted as halving the differential in the employment to working-age population ratio between Indigenous and other Australians between 2006 and 2016, a beginning and end year when census data will be available to measure performance.

My focus on employment policy can be justified on the following grounds:

1. the availability of official statistics, the extent of the future challenge and past performance are measurable

2. waged labour is recognised as a key means to raise people's capabilities (Parfitt 2002) in the sense advocated by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2009)

3. a policy reform process is currently under way that, paradoxically, is likely to *widen* the employment gap

4. this is an area where, even since the setting of the CTG goal a year ago, the Australian labour market is facing new challenges owing to the global financial crisis.

Much of my discussion will focus on remote Australia, where mainstream jobs are least available.

The employment goal has been driven by a state agenda to provide 'real jobs' to Indigenous people. However, what is meant by 'real jobs' is generally undefined. The goal of closing the employment gap has been strongly supported by some high profile Indigenous spokespeople, a number of whom are advising mining magnate Andrew Forrest's Australian Employment Covenant initiative. The Covenant was launched last year by the Prime Minister, and seeks to create 50,000 new private sector jobs, initially within two years but now to an undefined timeframe.[8]

Research shows that, between 1996 and 2006, less than 50,000 new jobs were created for Indigenous Australians. The Labour Force Survey estimates that between 2002 and 2007, 20,000 new Indigenous public and private sector jobs were created (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2008). Biddle, Taylor and Yap (2008) estimate that to halve the employment gap by 2016 will require between 71,000 and 106,000 new jobs, an extremely ambitious target given that only about 140,000 Indigenous people are currently employed. There are enormous variations in projected Indigenous jobs required depending on the region of residence.

ABS:
Australian Bureau of Statistics

CDEP:
Community Development Employment Program

The chance of finding mainstream employment in remote Australia is limited, owing to geographic isolation. Recognising this, in 1977 a scheme was created called the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP). This is an Indigenous-specific program that is cost-effective because it pays community organisations the equivalent of participants' welfare plus an add-on fee for administration. Participants in turn are allowed to work extra hours and earn extra income. Over the last 30 years CDEP has proved very popular with Indigenous people, and grew to a point where it employed nearly 40,000 participants, mainly in rural and remote Australia. From an Aboriginal perspective, CDEP is liked because it provides a means to undertake meaningful activity, work extra hours, earn extra money, to have the flexibility to participate in the customary economy and in ceremony, and to live on ancestral lands. ABS data indicates that all these things are happening. And in accord with International Labour Organization conventions, CDEP participants are categorised as employed.

From 2005, CDEP has been systematically dismantled by the Commonwealth employment portfolio, to which its administration was transferred following the abolition of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. Why this is occurring, even as the labour market goes into steep decline, is a complex issue, but fundamentally CDEP is being blamed for cost-shifting by governments and for poor mainstream employment outcomes. There is some truth to the former (although this is the fault of other government programs more than CDEP) and little evidence for the latter. A major 'problem' with the scheme appears to be that it is more generous than welfare and that it is open-ended, unlike other labour market programs (Australian Government 2008). The government agencies that now administer CDEP argue that Indigenous people should be treated the same as other welfare beneficiaries rather than differently, with the *notional* CDEP link with welfare being used to define it *as* welfare (which it is not). As CDEP is dismantled, participants

will be given the choice of mainstream work or welfare, with the proviso that work might require migration from home communities. People will be moved from productive work to welfare. As Peterson (2005) notes, this policy change fails to recognise Indigenous aspirations, cultures and life projects.

What is lost in such ideological debates (which at times border on myth-making) is that CDEP is *not* welfare and that the abolition of CDEP will greatly widen the employment gap that government is 'committed' to reducing. Abolishing CDEP will impact on people's livelihoods and self-esteem, and will jeopardise the many local, regional and national benefits associated with Indigenous contributions when working on CDEP, issues to which I will turn to below. To again paraphrase James Ferguson (1994), rendering the deep employment problem technical becomes very problematic when the ideological rationale of the improvement scheme becomes entangled with the messy world it would transform and improve.

This brief survey of employment policy raises a number of questions:

1. Why is public policy setting targets that are 'destined to fail', to use Sanders' (1991) evocative term? Is closing the employment gap just an example of what political scientist Murray Edelman (1977) termed 'words that succeed and policies that fail'?

2. How can policy reform that will widen, rather than close, employment gaps for the poorest Australians be considered, especially at a time when the Australian labour market is shrinking?

3. Is there a hidden meaning to committing to only a 50 per cent employment gap closure? Will there be distinct differences based on region as well as growing Indigenous disparities between the mainstream employed and the to-be-trained unemployed?

REGISTER SHIFT 2: THE HYBRID ECONOMY—SHIFTING FROM ABSTRACTA TO LIVELIHOODS

In some very remote regions, Indigenous people have made their own adaptations and strategic choices in pursuing livelihood approaches that involve engagement with market, customary economies, and the adaptation of state support. I want to look at just one case study in remote Australia, the Kuninjku people of western Arnhem Land. This case is probably at one extreme end of the spectrum, as here the colonial state encroached only late in the 1950s; people have land rights; and distinct Indigenous social norms and practices focused on links to family, land and language still dominate. I present this extreme in part because it represents everyday reality in western Arnhem Land, where I have worked with the Kuninjku people since 1979 (Altman 1987); and in part to challenge abstract notions of statistical equality with lived livelihood reality.[9]

Kuninjku people produce goods and services to sustain their livelihoods. Some of these activities can be summarised as follows:

1. **Harvesting game for local consumption**

   People harvest a wide range of wildlife. Recent research undertaken in mid-dry season 2002 and mid-wet season 2003 observed 26 and 18 species respectively being harvested. This game was produced at the rate of 1.6 kilograms per capita per day in 2002 and 0.4 kilograms per capita per day in 2003, with much of this variation being explained by seasonality (Altman 2003). Hunted game was also distributed to relatives.

Fig. 1. The hybrid economy
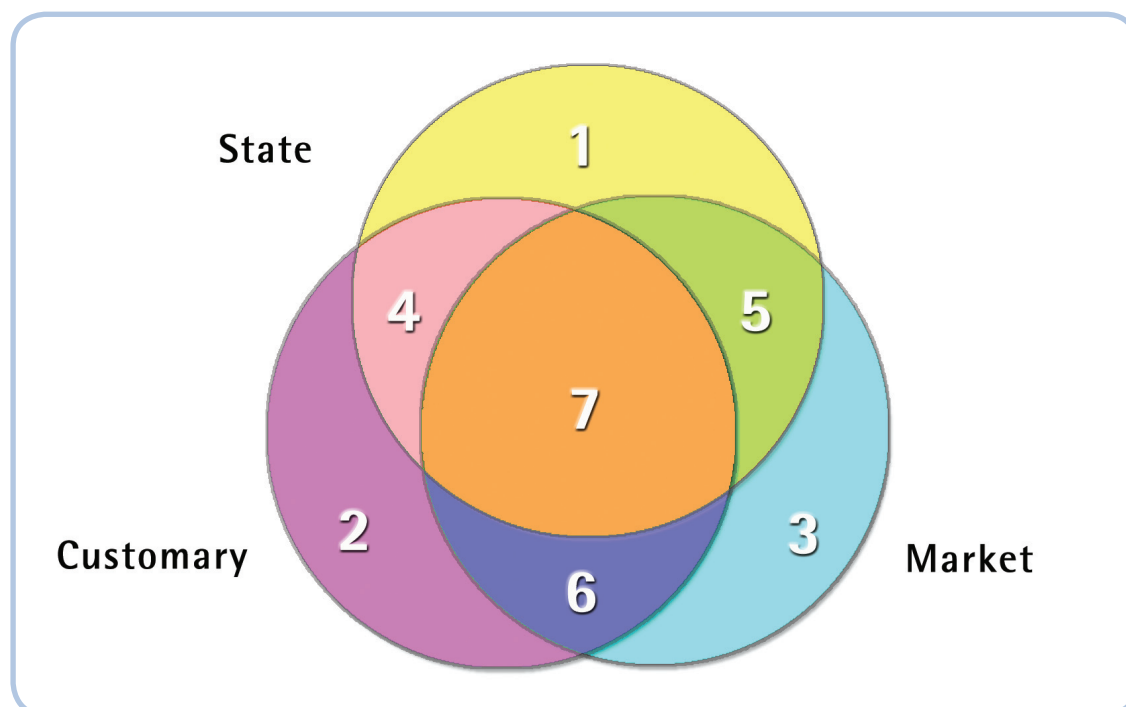
Source: Adapted from Altman 2005.

2. **Producing art for market sale in the national and global art markets**

    People produce art which they sell to a regional marketing organisation, Maningrida Arts and Culture. Kuninjku are amongst the most prolific artists in the Maningrida region, regularly producing an estimated 80 per cent of the sales made by Maningrida Arts and Culture. In the most recent financial year, about $A1 million was returned to Kuninjku artists by Maningrida Arts and Culture (Maningrida Arts and Culture 2007).

3. **Being employed in paid provision of environmental services**

    People provide environmental services both formally and informally. Formal provision occurs as community rangers working for the Djelk Rangers, a project run by the Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation. Informal provision occurs when people are living at outstation and seasonal camps on their traditional lands. Services provided include the monitoring of targeted species like pig and feral buffalo for the Australian Quarantine Inspection Service or undertaking coastal surveillance work for the Australian Customs and Border Protection Service. Djelk rangers and people living on country also collaborate in a regional project to implement strategic fire management activity to offset greenhouse gas emissions from the Liquified Natural Gas Plant in Darwin. These environmental services are funded from a diversity of sources:

    *   service agreements with government agencies;

    *   contracts with the private sector (Darwin Liquified Natural Gas, a subsidiary of ConocoPhillips); and

    *   wages paid under CDEP (see Bawinanga Aboriginal Corporation 2007) and more recently under the Working on Country Program funded by the Commonwealth Department of Environment, Heritage, Water and the Arts.

Table 4. Indigenous population in survey areas who did and did not fish or hunt in a group in the last 3 months, by recognising and living on homeland, 2002[a]

	Does not recognise homeland	Lives on homeland	Does not live on homeland	Total
Did not fish or hunt in a group	25.8% (800)	15.3% (3,400)	18.9% (4,200)	17.6% (8,400)
Fished or hunted in a group	74.2% (2,300)	84.7% (18,900)	81.1% (18,100)	82.4% (39,400)
Total	6.7% (3,200)	46.7% (22,300)	46.7% (22,300)	100.0% (47,800)

Note: a. The relevant population numbers are provided in parentheses.

Source: Customised cross-tabulations from the 2002 NATSISS.

Table 5. Percentage of Indigenous population who participated in, and were paid for, various cultural activities, by remoteness, 2002

	Arts or crafts	Music, dance or theatre	Writing or telling stories
Non-remote			
Participated	15.1	7.5	12.4
Paid (of those who participated)	20.5	34.9	20.8
Remote/Very remote			
Participated	19.1[a]	10.4[a]	12.9
Paid (of those who participated)	51.9[a]	26.3	23.7

Note: a. The remote/very remote estimates that are significantly different from the non-remote estimates at the 5% level of significance.

Source: Customised cross-tabulations from the 2002 NATSISS.

I have termed this form of economy the hybrid economy (Altman 2005: see Fig. 1).

A feature of the hybrid economy is its flexibility, it allows people to move between sectors of the economy, to live on country and to retain customary skills as well as develop new ones. I should emphasise that gaining a livelihood in this economy is not easy and will never statistically close the gap. But it has proven to be environmentally sustainable, although today it is economically dependent on some form of state support, either through the provision of Working on Country jobs or CDEP. Some might argue that this support facilitates a strategic choice of exclusion from the mainstream for greater autonomy and to sustain culturally distinctive ways of life. This is not the way Kuninjku see it, although given their history and kin-focused social norms it is undeniable that they would struggle to succeed in the mainstream. The issue that this raises is why would government policy seek to force these people into the alien mainstream? The answer appears to be because of the dominance in policy of the formal equality principle and the under-valuing of diversity and difference.

Fig. 2. The Indigenous Estate and discrete Indigenous communities

Legend
- Indigenous held land
- Govt. held land for Indig. use
- ● Discrete Indigenous community
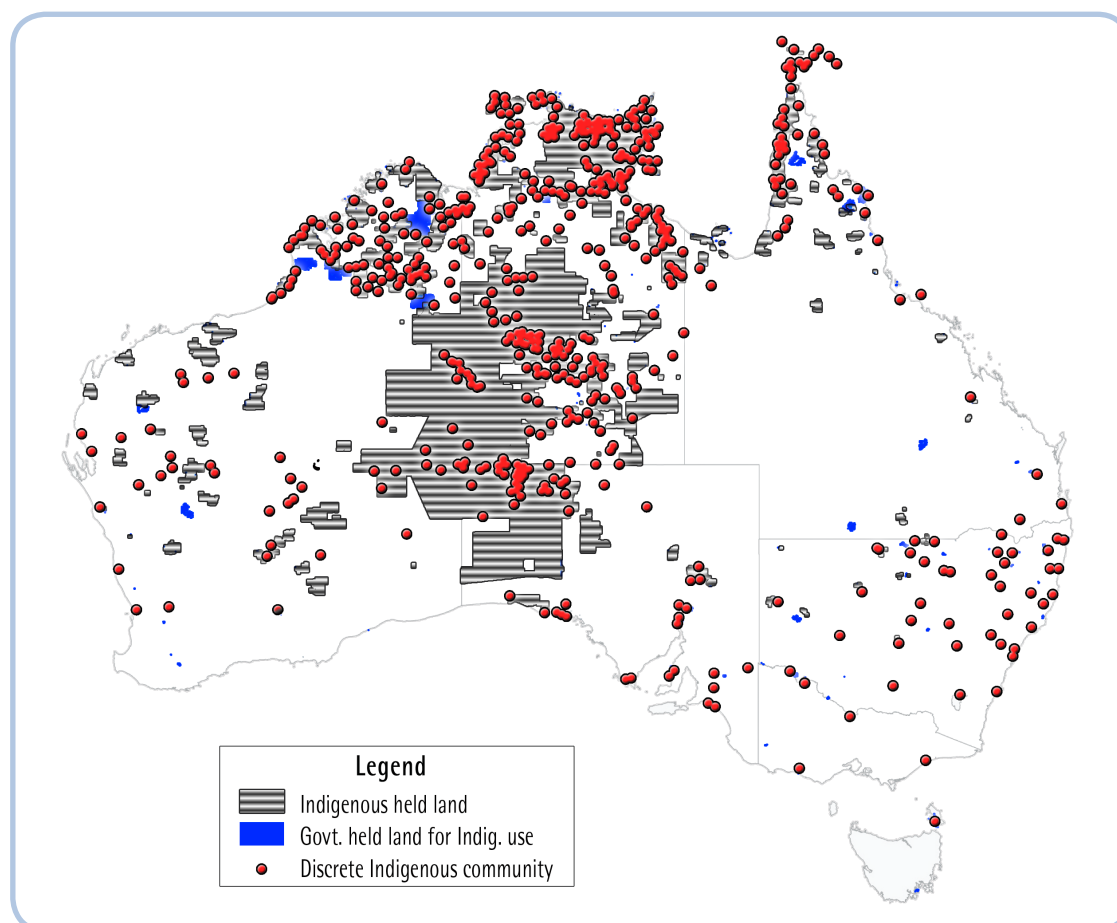
Source: Adapted from Altman, Buchanan & Larsen, 2007.

VALUING DIVERSITY IN INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIA

Moving now from employment policy and the particularities of the Kuninjku case to the more general, one important Indigenous adaptation in remote Australia has seen the development of diverse hybrid economies, which empirical evidence indicates are the 'real' economy in this part of Australia. This form of economy reflects Aboriginal people's engagement with the market and the state and the customary (or non-market) sectors of local economies to highly varying degrees.

NATSISS:

National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey

Information from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS) indicates that such diverse economic activity is buoyant (Altman, Buchanan & Biddle 2006). In remote Australia almost all people in Indigenous communities engage in some hunting and fishing (Table 4) and one in five in the production of art (Table 5). What is especially significant is that such engagements can be highly productive, while at the same time reflecting Aboriginal people's wariness about overreliance on any one portion of the market, state or customary sectors. The hybrid economy also allows Aboriginal people to retain and revitalise their productive relationships to country. It is predicated on a degree of flexibility, not just in occupational movements between sectors, but also between waged work and other forms of meaningful activity.

The Australian state needs to adopt approaches that can accommodate and value such diversity. One obvious opportunity exists in environmental stewardship. The Aboriginal estate covers 1.5 million square kilometres (over 20% of Australia) and almost all discrete Indigenous communities are located on Indigenous owned land (Fig. 2). Natural resource atlas maps indicate that many of the most intact and nationally important environments are located on this estate. Mapping also shows that these lands are at considerable risk of species extinction, and face major threats from feral animals, exotic weeds, changed fire regimes, pollution and over-grazing (Altman, Buchanan & Larsen 2007). On top of these threats, the latest available climate science suggests that substantial biodiversity is at risk on this part of the continental landmass.

Australians are increasingly concerned about the issues of climate change, water shortage, environmental degradation, and ecological sustainability. What is not yet well understood is that Aboriginal people, given their substantial land holdings and remote residence, have a crucial role to play in confronting these challenges and finding solutions which are in the national interest. In the face of this, an innovative national policy approach is required to support community-based efforts to ameliorate threats and minimise adverse biodiversity outcomes. Addressing under-investment in the management of the Aboriginal estate could provide a major development impetus that is so desperately needed in remote Australia.

This alternate vision is predicated on the reality that, for the majority of Aboriginal people in remote communities, migration away from ancestral lands—often hard won through legal claim—and from extended kin networks will be neither an aspiration nor a solution. This in turn suggests that key institutions like CDEP that are currently being dismantled will need to be retained. Community-based organisations are critical to enhancing prospects and links with the market, as is currently illustrated by innovative Aboriginal engagements in carbon abatement and offsets trading activities.

This alternative sees value in cultural plurality and economic diversity at a time of great, possibly historically unprecedented, uncertainty. Cultural plurality suggests that there might be multiple interpretations of life worlds—where the state might see failure, mendicancy, dysfunctionality, and poor outcomes measured by social indicators, many Aboriginal people identify certain features that lie at the heart of their worldview.

BEYOND CLOSING THE GAP: BEING ENABLED 'TO DO AND TO BE' IN MULTI-CULTURAL AUSTRALIA

I have argued that, at a broad level, the pragmatic politics of equality is over-determining Indigenous affairs public policy in contemporary Australia, while the more complex and subtle politics of difference and diversity is being excessively subordinated. Hiding behind the term 'Closing the Gap' and its statistical orientation is the enormous complexity of diverse, Indigenous, culturally-distinct ways of being. This complexity is not entirely lost on our leaders. Hence in the National Apology speech the Prime Minister noted that in his new beginning and new focus on CTG there needs to be 'sufficient flexibility not to insist on a one-size-fits-all approach for each of the hundreds of remote and regional Indigenous communities across the country but instead allows [sic] flexible tailored local approaches to achieve commonly-agreed national objectives that lie at the core of our proposed new partnership' (Rudd 2008). Despite this statement, there has, as I have outlined, been no negotiation of agreed objective and no evidence that the policy juggernaut is countenancing 'flexible tailored local solutions'. In reality this qualifier is mere lip service.

The Australian state remains committed to livelihood improvements for Aboriginal subjects that privilege the mainstream, an option that is extremely risky for Aboriginal people given the vagaries of the market that are all too apparent today. As a growing body of literature observes (see for example Ferguson 1994;

Li 2007; Scott 1998) the state looks to bring about order, but simultaneously overlooks its role in creating chaos. There is a clear logic for the settler-colonial state in rendering Aboriginal disadvantage a technical problem with no history, and rendering cultural difference either invisible or too visible and something to be eliminated. Such an approach allows the state to ignore politico-economic relations and the distribution of property and power, and to instead reframe difficult political questions as technical—to close the gap. Indeed, the logic underpinning the CTG framework is little different from the formal definition of the assimilation policy made in 1961 that expected all Aborigines and part-Aborigines [sic] to attain the same manner of living as other Australians, and to live as members of a single Australian community (Altman & Nieuwenhuysen 1979: 24). This approach is a version of the modernisation paradigm that has failed to close gaps, even as it has delivered some beneficial outcomes, as measured by mainstream standard social indicators. This raises the important question of whether Indigenous affairs has ever actually escaped the dominance of this paradigm.

How in all this, I ask, are Indigenous people, in all their diversity, being enabled 'to do and to be' (Naussbaum 2009; Sen 1999)? Where is the conceptual space for a more equitable and balanced form of power sharing? Surely this is an appropriate moment in Australia's history, when neoliberal economic rationalism and globalism are under challenge, to consider alternatives? Surely if the state's project of improvement is to succeed, it has to align with Indigenous goals and aspirations in all their continental diversity?

There *is* a way forward, and in confronting the abstract framework of CTG with conceptual and empirical critiques and demonstrating value in alternate ways of being and doing, I am not advocating that the discourse of equality should be abandoned—that would be an unacceptable over-reaction. We have certainly seen in the past how an emphasis on a culturalist discourse of difference can lead to state neglect, and this too is unacceptable. Instead I am advocating for a broader policy framework that goes beyond a simple trade-off—equality *or* difference—and is instead based on more coherent and inclusive notions of equality *and* difference.

Such a framework will need to be based on three components, as has occurred to some extent in nearby New Zealand (see Barber 2008; Humpage 2005). The first encompasses the notion of equality and is the meeting of Indigenous people's citizenship rights on a transparent and equitable needs basis; equality of inputs is essential, although difference in outcomes is inevitable. The second, and fiscally separate, element needs to encompass the notion of difference: Indigenous-specific programs negotiated on social justice and human rights principles. Such rights should countenance the option for voluntary exclusion as strategic choice. The third, again quite separate, component needs to encompass the notion of historical legacy, the compensatory measures rarely mentioned today, to allow catch up for decades of neglect and the legacy of stolen generations. Such a policy framework will obviously be hard to sell politically and would entail considerable challenges. But it is essential if we are to transcend the insidious homogenisation embedded in the CTG approach, and instead seek to pursue a kind of multiculturalism that can seriously accommodate and value Indigenous diversity and difference.

NOTES

1. There have been minor deviations from the assimilationist tide, evident for example during short policy phases such as 'self determination' between 1972 and 1975; and around key statutory or common law events such as land rights and native title.

2. A reader of this paper, David Cooper, reminded me of the distinction made between 'formal' equality and 'substantive' equality under international law. Formal equality requires the treatment of all people in the same way, whereas substantive equality countenances treating different people in an appropriately different manner depending on relevant differences between them (see Clarke 1997: 23–24). I could have used such a legal framework here. The similar welfare economics notions of horizontal versus vertical equity could also be used to frame my argument. Here though, I have focused on statistical equality versus diversity and difference.

3. This is not to be confused with the non-government organisation initiated 'Close the Gap' campaign that aims to focus on health outcomes using community development approaches.

4. Interestingly, since the joint adoption of the CTG framework by all States and Territories in 2008, the Australian state and its Indigenous affairs policy approach is more homogeneous and amenable to analysis.

5. Using projections based on long-run trends since 1971 there were three areas where there was divergence; using a short-run series 1996–2006, there were six areas where the relative statistics diverged.

6. Coincidentally, the Rudd government handed down its first annual report on Closing the Gap just a few hours after the initial version of this paper was delivered on 26 February 2009 (see Australian Government 2009).

7. Although it is important to note that some influential Indigenous leaders advocate for the CTG framework, so Indigenous standpoints too have diversity.

8. On 18 February 2009, some six months later, Andrew Forrest lamented a lack of progress owing to bureaucratic hurdles, although 10,000 opportunities are reportedly available for trained and job ready Indigenous people.

9. In delivering the conference version of this paper, I presented my data with a selection of photographic slides, just to remind us all how differently some people continue to live within late capitalist Australia.

10. Hence when the abstract model in Fig. 1 is empirically quantified the size of each segment and the nature of sectoral overlaps vary considerably.

11. In reading this paper, Will Sanders noted that he essentially came to the same conclusion in an article focused on income support and housing (see Sanders 2008).

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