



THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY

---

CENTRE FOR ABORIGINAL ECONOMIC POLICY RESEARCH

# INDIGENOUS SOCIAL POLICY AND THE NEW MAINSTREAMING

CAEPR Seminar Series

Seminar Notes

13 October 2004

by

Professor Jon Altman

Director

Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research

Australian National University

## NEW AND OLD ACRONYMS

---

CDEP	Community Development Employment Projects [scheme]
CGC	Commonwealth Grants Commission
CIC	Community Incentive Coordinator
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CPA	Community Participation Agreement
ICC	Indigenous Coordination Centres (with regional offices)
ICCP/T	Indigenous Communities Coordination Pilots (Trials)
MCATSIA	Ministerial Council on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs
NATSISS	National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey
OIPC	Office of Indigenous Policy Coordination (with State offices)
RPA	Regional Partnership Agreement
SRA	Shared Responsibility Agreements

Professor Jon Altman is Director of the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research,  
The Australian National University.

---

Published only on the World Wide Web at: <<http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr>>

## INTRODUCTION

---

This seminar was going to be different, it was going to be a survey of articles in the *Australian Journal of Social Issues* over the last 40 years for a special issue of that journal to be published next year. I decided to change the seminar to generate some discussion about changes in Indigenous affairs that are likely to be implemented after the federal election on 9 October 2004.

I want to do the following:

1. Provide a brief historical account from the forthcoming *CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 266*, 'Indigenous socioeconomic change 1971–2001: A historical perspective' that I have written with Boyd Hunter and Nick Biddle. That paper analyses trends across a number of socioeconomic outcomes for Indigenous Australians from the 1967 referendum to the present.
2. Read from three texts on new directions in Indigenous affairs, these being:
  - Peter Shergold's 'Connecting Government: Whole of Government Responses to Australia's Priority Challenges' dated 20 April, less than 6 months ago, focusing on the sections that highlight Indigenous issues;
  - Senator Vanstone's Opening Address to the Bennelong Society Conference 'Pathways and Policies for Indigenous Futures' on 4 September 2004; and
  - The Howard Government's Election 2004 policy, *Indigenous Australians—Opportunity and Responsibility*, released in September 2004.
3. This reading will be influenced by research I undertook in July for a paper 'Practical Reconciliation and the New Mainstreaming: Will it make a difference to Indigenous Australians?' published in August 2004 in *Dialogue* and now available at <http://www.assa.edu.au>.
4. As suggested in the seminar blurb, I then want to look at some potential strengths, weaknesses and concerns I have about the new approach, before concluding with a few challenging questions for us all.
5. This is obviously very new terrain for everyone, and I will try and get through this paper quickly to allow lots of time for questions and comments; I am no instant expert in this area, just a long term researcher on Indigenous public policy.

## INDIGENOUS SOCIOECONOMIC CHANGE 1971–2001: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

---

[CAEPR Discussion Paper No. 266, available from the CAEPR website at <http://www.anu.edu.au/caepr/discussion2.php#266>].

Starting from a long-term statistical base is always sensible! The 1971–2001 time-frame is as historical as one can get with broad national Indigenous policy evaluation; it is essentially apolitical, and the census data that were used (1971, 1981, 1991 and 2001) allow both comparative and absolute assessments of change at the national level.

Looking at available statistics on health, education, income, housing and employment; and working hard to get comparative data over time, we found almost all indicators showed improvement. The exception was health status, measured by a variable, population aged over 55 years, that is very imprecise, but the best available. The gaps are closing both absolutely and relatively.

Using these data we made three broad observations:

- There has been slow improvement over time at the national level, counter to popular current views. Whether this has occurred quickly enough [an efficiency issue] or whether improvement has been equitable between Indigenous people are issues of a different order.
- This suggests that broad policy settings have been favourable, for they have resulted in improvement, not failure. This is not to suggest that policy refinements are not needed at the sub-national level: indeed it is incontestable that extremes (e.g. remote and very remote regions), and outliers (e.g. particular communities), abound.
- The statistical equality agenda implied by such analysis and by policies as diverse as Bob Hawke's employment equity or John Howard's practical reconciliation are problematic. Similar outcomes between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people will be dependent on similar resource endowments, histories, legacies, aspirations, value systems, location of residence, etc. And any realistic notion of long-term equality would be dependent on addressing current shortfalls. Despite this, the notion of 'closing the gaps' is at the core of Indigenous affairs policy and approaches across the political spectrum.

## CONNECTING GOVERNMENT: WHOLE-OF-GOVERNMENT RESPONSES TO AUSTRALIA'S PRIORITY CHALLENGES

---

[This paper is available at [www.dpmpc.gov.au](http://www.dpmpc.gov.au)].

The 'new' mainstreaming in Indigenous service delivery accompanied the demise of ATSIC and was foreshadowed by the Australian government in April 2004. It involved the re-allocation of ATSIIS indigenous-specific programs to a number of mainline departments. In late April, Peter Shergold,

Secretary of the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C), explained this bold experiment as a key example of whole-of-government responses to Australia's priority challenges.

Shergold suggested that 8 Council of Australian Governments (COAG) trials (Indigenous Communities Coordination Pilots or Trials, also called ICCPs or ICCTs) provided a glimpse of what could be achieved through collegial leadership, collaborative government and community partnerships that recognize the distinctive needs [or difference] of particular communities.

The new whole-of-government mainstreaming will be marked by five characteristics:

- **Collaboration:** All key agencies would work together to ensure better outcomes from \$2.7 billion of Commonwealth expenditure, based on a framework of cooperation from top (departmental secretaries) to bottom (Indigenous communities): single shop front Indigenous Coordination Centres (ICCs) would be established over time and would enter framework Shared Responsibility Agreements (SRAs) with Indigenous communities to work together to take joint responsibility to meet agreed community and government goals.
- **Regional need:** A tripartite approach would be agreed by Commonwealth, State and communities to ensure appropriately different consultative and delivery mechanisms to deliver programs that are responsive to local needs: there is a clear recognition of diversity and difference here.
- **Flexibility:** Program guidelines would be relaxed so that departmental allocations could be moved about between agencies and programs in pursuit of outcomes.
- **Accountability:** There would be annual reporting against a range of socio-economic indicators to test how effectively practical reconciliation or 'closing the gaps' is being delivered: secretaries from the Secretaries Group in Canberra would be held to account for their performance.
- **Leadership:** The leadership that secretaries have demonstrated in overseeing the COAG trials would be extended to the national level—they would be accountable for serving government and delivering to Indigenous communities. Again, their performance pay will depend on it.

## SENATOR VANSTONE'S OPENING ADDRESS TO THE BENNELONG SOCIETY CONFERENCE 'PATHWAYS AND POLICIES FOR INDIGENOUS FUTURES'

---

[This paper is available at <<http://www.bennelong.com.au>>].

Noting that the Society's purpose is to promote informed debate and discussion about Indigenous affairs, Senator Vanstone provided a thoughtful speech that acknowledges the complexity of Indigenous policy and the diversity of Indigenous Australia that makes public policy so very difficult.

While committed to the Howard government priority of practical improvements to the lives of indigenous Australians in health, education and housing, the Minister identified four main changes needed:

- **Listening to the locals:** In concert with Shergold's framework agreements there is a need to listen to local communities and families rather than to use intermediary representative organisations [like ATSIC, which is democratically elected, but by only 20% of eligible voters].
- **Simplifying government services:** There is a need for a coordinated partnership approach to build on the COAG trial model(s), and government agencies need to streamline their services and operate as a one-stop shop, Shergold's ICCs.
- **Partnership:** The relationship between governments [the state] and its Indigenous citizens must change: while governments have responsibilities, so must communities. There is a suggestion here that self-determination blocked engagement between the state and citizens ,and a suggestion that behaviour should change, for example that parents should enforce their childrens' attendance school. There is reference to incentives and sanctions to change behaviour and to an abandonment of unconditional welfare, with a suggestion that activity test exemptions will be removed, *as far as possible*. (Community Participation Agreements (CPAs) are already doing this). It is noted that encouraging behavioural change might be more effective for government than patching up the problems, a reference, perhaps, to Douglas and Dyall type concerns about negative and positive funding of Indigenous and mainstream programs in New Zealand some 20 years ago.
- **The long-term view:** There is an articulated desire for a community focus on the longer term—say 20 years—with aspirations articulated. It is suggested, for example, that a health intervention to increase child live birth weight might be linked to longer term education outcome like all students finishing Year 12. A view is presented that education is the passport to those individuals who want a better future, suggesting that anyone can successfully migrate to employment in cities, while keeping connections with home communities. At the same time it is recognized as important that economic development occurs in home communities and on Aboriginal land to increase engagement with the national economy.

## THE HOWARD GOVERNMENT'S ELECTION 2004 POLICY: INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIANS – OPPORTUNITY AND RESPONSIBILITY

---

[This policy was released in September 2004, and is available at <<http://www.liberal.org.au/documents/ACFE972.pdf>>.

The Howard Government has committed to spend \$3.1 billion in 2004–05 on Indigenous-specific programs. Its way forward is built around ongoing maintenance of its practical approach to reconciliation, together with radical reform that will target Indigenous-specific resources at those Indigenous Australians in most in need.

There is suggestion that support will be targeted to remote and very remote communities where 120,000 Indigenous people live, where there is rapid population growth, and where problems appear most severe. In line with Minister Vanstone's Bennelong speech, there is a focus on young people, education and migration options, and on individuals.

Of particular significance is the broad aim to improve access to mainstream programs in urban and regional centres, so as to free up more Indigenous-specific resources for meeting backlogs in remote communities. Five strategies are highlighted:

- **Economic Independence Strategy:** Most of this strategy seems to focus on the Northern Territory (where it is termed 'economic development') and on the use of ABA resources (Aboriginal monies) for development projects. It is suggested that activity testing will be introduced to remote communities (as elsewhere in Australia), but that communities will determine the nature of activities (unlike elsewhere in Australia, as with CPAs). This will presumably use the Ministerial Council on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs (MCATSIA) Economic Development Strategy developed in 2003–04.
- **Strengthening leadership:** Significant resources will be allocated to assist in the development of future Indigenous leaders; developing community capacity through the Indigenous Community Volunteers Program and special new scholarships. Some resources will be allocated to assist communities develop long-term visions that will form the basis for interaction with government(s).
- **Indigenous Youth Mobility Program:** A new program will be developed to assist up to 600 youth over the next 4 years to migrate for employment and training away from remote communities.
- **Improving school attendance:** Measures will be introduced to ensure school attendance in accord with State laws. Future SRAs will include school attendance as a pre-determined outcome. It is suggested that the 'No School No Pool' program is beginning to produce remarkable attendance results, and subject to signing up to this approach communities will be eligible to funding for a community swimming pool. (Only 11 communities in the NT currently have pools.)

- **Promoting Indigenous art:** \$4 million over 4 years of new money will be allocated to support Indigenous art through training for young artists, the upgrading of facilities and the funding of marketing initiatives. On top of this a National School of Indigenous Art will be established, art will be commissioned for Reconciliation Place and ABA funds will be released for an NT Indigenous art development strategy.

All up, \$46.5 million over four years extra is committed to these initiatives.

## ANALYSIS: STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES AND SOME CONCERNS

There are aspects of this new approach that appear to be major strengths. Foremost among these I would identify the following:

- The focus on equitable funding of Indigenous Australians as citizens is long overdue. If a combination of the Secretaries Group in Canberra, tripartite agreements between the Commonwealth/States and Indigenous communities and a breaking down of program silos can achieve this, then the 'new mainstreaming' could make a real difference. The Commonwealth Grants Commission (GCG) Indigenous Funding Inquiry showed that this was *not* happening as recently as in 2000.
- The focus on the most difficult situations certainly accords with census and NATSISS 2002 statistics indicating that remote and very remote communities are the outliers that are worst off. This is not to suggest that other circumstances are not dire, but clearly remoteness and small community scale are factors that warrant special attention.
- The recognition that problems are interconnected and need holistic multi-agency responses also accords with standard approaches to economic, community and regional development.
- The commitment to annual monitoring of outcomes progress will make a major difference from reliance on the five-yearly census and on official statistics. Presumably SRAs will allow some community assessment of governmental performance, as well as vice versa. Such annual monitoring will also allow adaptive management of program delivery.



There are also some potential weaknesses in the new approach, with the following coming to mind:

- While the election platform notes that \$3.1 billion will be spent on Indigenous-specific programs, in real per capita terms this is probably little different from the past. It is unclear how the billions of dollars of identified backlogs in housing, infrastructure and other community facilities will be filled. Resources allocated to new initiatives are very limited given the scale of the backlog. This might sound predictable, but to put into some context, a modern community-based art center, essential infrastructure for arts success, costs about \$3 million, or three times the annual Australia wide allocation to Indigenous arts! It is likely that there will be a high level of competition for minimal new dollars.
- The shared responsibility framework and COAG trials suggest that sign-off could take many years, and that the major hurdle might be between the Commonwealth and States, rather than the community partner. It is unclear why corporates and the philanthropic are needed to join in to partnerships to meet state obligations to its citizens.
- Mutual obligation policy. 'No work, no pay' is as much about communities deciding on activities (as with CPAs) as about 'the ensuring state' providing real development opportunities to communities, even if only through CDEP employment and enterprise. There appears to be no commitment to rapidly expand CDEP if more rigorous activity testing to be applied to welfare payments. It is unclear how, if 'no work no pay' is to be vigorously pursued, how this will assist health, education and other reconciliation outcomes. After all, 'no pay, no food!'
- Agreement making will clearly be of crucial importance, not just in SRAs but also in Regional Partnership Agreements (RPAs). While there might be an imagined equality between the state and communities in negotiations, in reality power relations are heavily skewed towards those controlling the dollars. Already it seems that certain preconditions, both in terms of non-negotiable preconditions and time frames, are being imposed by the state. What models of 'intense consultation' are proposed for 'listening to the locals'? And can 50 or 80 SRAs really be completed by 30 June 2005, when hardly any COAG trial agreements have been signed off after 2 years?
- There are a number of issues surrounding surveillance, transparent evaluation and performance monitoring. Much onus is placed on community organizations to implement agreed policies, be it 'no work no pay', or 'no school no pool'. It is unclear, however, if communities have either the resources or the desire to undertake such continuing surveillance and regulation. There is also some suggestion that Community Incentives Coordinators (CICs) will be appointed, but it is unclear who these might be and how they would operate effectively without increasing community conflict rather than cohesion. It is similarly unclear how transparent and independent monitoring will be undertaken, and by whom—certainly none of the COAG trial sites have been through such an exercise. And much of the reporting suggested is far more about participation or inputs than about outcomes: this varies from

governmental expenditures at the national level (spending more?) to anecdotal comments about the effectiveness of 'no school no pool' policies. There is little evidence that an independent transparent framework to assess outcomes on an annual basis has been either planned or established. Clearly baseline data are needed now.

## CONCLUSION: A FEW CHALLENGING QUESTIONS FOR US ALL

---

There are some emerging issues in the new mainstreaming and proposals for a new approach that, despite the rhetoric, bear semblance to long-held ideological debates between conservatives and progressives. As in many such debates, it is not a question of one approach or another, of false binaries, but rather the need for a mix of both.

My experience suggests that a mix of both might be needed in the following areas:

- **On Indigenous representation**, while the government is adamant that it will negotiate directly with communities, it also will seek input from an appointed National Indigenous Council of experts to advise the Secretaries Group in Canberra. It seems to me that there are real dangers of selective representation without a national, democratically-elected body. For example, much of the moral authority for the rhetorical assault on passive welfare comes from the writings of Noel Pearson, referred to 14 times in Tony Abbott's speech 'Seize the moment' to the Bennelong Society [available at <<http://www.bennelong.com.au>>]. However, Pearson's views are very Cape York-oriented and are currently the subject of vigorous and proper debate within Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal domains, if not by like-minded politicians and policy makers.
- **On the issue of choice**, it is proper for government to ensure that individuals have opportunity, but it is also important that communities have opportunity. Some individuals might want standard Australian lifestyles and livelihoods, others may have different prerogatives. Certainly there is not going to be wholesale migration from remote and very remote regions in the near future—history has taught us that—nor is this necessarily in the national interest to have empty tracts of Australian coastline or continent.
- **In agreement making**, there are strong tones of developmentalism and paternalism in proposed agreements and talk of incentives and sanctions that might potentially be applied to communities as well as individuals. What if a community wants a non-standard development future, will its members be treated differently from others, or penalised? History suggests again that coercion, paternalism and authoritarian styles of government have been unsuccessful in relations between the state and Aboriginal communities in the past, is there some new evidence that this might change?

- **On the distribution of Indigenous-specific program dollars**, the government seems determined to complete the task that the independent CGC would not undertake for them in its 2000 Indigenous Funding Inquiry. That is, to recommend redistribution of scarce Indigenous-specific dollars on an equitable basis within the Indigenous population, without any reference to the wider community. Historically, this can be seen as an attempt to counter the redistribution of Indigenous-specific dollars to settled Australia that occurred during the ATSIC years 1990–2004, but it also makes assumptions about whether Indigenous people in States like NSW will be able to readily access mainstream services on the basis of need. There are early indications that the NSW government is not convinced that this will happen in the state with the largest Indigenous population.

Ultimately, it seems that a discourse of crisis has led to a major change in policy direction, yet the historical analysis with which I started questions whether this is warranted. Recourse to concerns about individual choice, mutual obligation and the undeniable negative impacts of long term inactivity and substance abuse in many places have resulted in an apparent Indigenous legitimization of the practical reconciliation agenda. As *The Australian* editorial noted on October 4 2004, election day, 'a new generation of Aboriginal leaders are attuned to Mr Howard's practical reconciliation agenda'.

The question that was raised at the outset is whether such an agenda is sufficiently attuned to difference to be achievable; and whether it is achievable given the current inequitable distribution of human and resource endowments. Development in such contexts is desperately needed, but it will require much more than the market-driven solutions that struggle to deliver to Indigenous people, especially in remote and very remote regions. There will be need for innovation, realistic and equitable support from the state (not so-called 'investments', after all, Indigenous Australians are all tax payers now), access to capital, risk taking and risk management, devolution to the regional and local, and listening to locals, but by using appropriate formal representative institutional machinery that now needs re-establishment. And in all this development it will be important to bolster and support, rather than marginalise, the important contributions that can be made by the Indigenous or customary component of the productive economy, in all its diversity, across Australia.