Development Issues

Equity and institutional reform in Aboriginal Australia and Zimbabwe: a framework for analysis

Christine Fletcher

97/2
© Economics Division, Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University, 1997.

This work is copyright. Apart from those uses which may be permitted under the Copyright Act 1968 as amended, no part may be reproduced by any process without written permission from the publisher.

Published by the National Centre for Development Studies
NCDS Online Publications
http://ncdsnet.anu.edu.au/publications/online

The Economics Division acknowledges the contribution made by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) towards the publication of this working paper series.

ISBN 0 7315 2354 0
ISSN 1441-9475

Key to symbols used in tables

- n.a. Not applicable
  - .. Not available
  - - Zero
  - . Insignificant

Christine Fletcher is Unit Director of the North Australia Research Unit, The Australian National University, Darwin.
Abstract

This paper has attempted to identify some of the problems of inequity associated with the globalisation of public sector reform principles which societies in developing countries (Zimbabwe) share with indigenous societies in developed countries (Australian Aborigines). The decision to take an institutional approach to comparative research in Zimbabwe and Australia arose from pressures to reform and perceptions of democratisation, including recognition of the need to develop stronger and more substantial processes for ensuring equity in development.

The role of democracy in public sector reform remains unresolved in the Zimbabwe one-party state where the costs of compromising the mechanics of democracy remain to be seen. Assistance with economic and democratic development needs to be carried out in a strong framework of self-determination. Without self-determination, it is difficult to effect a coordinated approach to public sector reform in any substantial way; without institutions that can respond to self-determination, there is little chance of reform. The Zimbabwean public sector is on a steep upward learning curve. Strikes and confrontations have been unsettling but, in this case, they should be seen as a sign of healthy unrest—people taking issue against corruption, demanding to have the right to free association, demanding democracy and, to be governed through a more equitable process. In Australia, the democratic institutions are entrenched—constitutionalism is a fundamental principle. But institutional equity and the ability of the system to respond to the needs of the Aboriginal people is unresolved. Democracy and liberalisation do not guarantee equity.
Adopting new methods of public administration has become a global phenomenon and a challenge for developing countries at every level of government (Peters 1996; Rondinelli 1993). Reform has also become a challenge for indigenous societies in developed countries. Problems range from lack of equity in the public sector (Zimran and Fletcher 1996), overcentralisation (Wunsch and Olowu 1990), inappropriate infrastructure in rural development (Ostrom, Schroader and Wynne 1993) and attempts to transpose universal western democratic principles onto non-western societies (Diamond 1993). The globalisation of these issues carries certain costs—a disregard for diversity is one that springs to mind—but there are also benefits, one of which is greater exposure of development issues in current mainstream policy literature (Peters 1996) and an increasingly critical approach to the relevance of western concepts of governance and society (Osaghae 1995; Doan 1995; Fatton 1995). At a specific level, for example, defining administrative culture, or the culture of new public sector management as characteristically relevant to a particular country, is now receiving a great deal of attention in the broader policy arena (Hood 1994; Smith 1996).

Differences between developing and developed countries are structural and systemic making institutional comparisons so valuable and, at the same time, so obviously difficult, a problem which is consistent with the history of comparative analysis that dates back to Almond and Verba’s famous Civil Culture (1963). It is virtually impossible to control variables for a comparative analysis of two societies which operate in entirely different paradigms. But, what if we want to compare political principles essential to an indigenous society which, as a minority, is governed by a western post-colonial government in a developed country—the Australian Aborigines are an example—and a more powerful group of indigenous societies governing for itself—for example, Zimbabwe? In this paper, the comparative element is the principle of equity.¹
The potential for comparative research on institutional reform, particularly public sector reform, in Zimbabwe and Aboriginal Australia arose from a recent combined teaching project embarked upon by the Australian National University, the University of Zimbabwe and the Faculty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, Northern Territory University. The general aims of the project were to explore common principles of government which are used to reinforce governing institutions in Zimbabwe and Australia and which involve ancient societies that have been traumatised by colonial rule. The objective was to develop a framework which could highlight the crucial importance of culture and history in the reshaping of public institutions.

In Zimbabwe and other parts of southern Africa, the European colonisers layered their public institutions over the top of existing tribal structures. The same thing happened in Australia except that, there, the very nature of government itself was a western concept and the colonials continued their control over the governing institutions through a federal constitution. The colonials overwhelmingly outnumbered the indigenous Aborigines through ongoing immigration programs which initially allowed only whites to immigrate to Australia. The White Australia Policy, restricting Asian migration, was abolished in the 1960s (Birrell 1995). The small administrative systems that the regional settler communities erected were based totally on British principles and municipal law. In setting up governments, however crude those institutions may initially have been, the settlers transported their European philosophies about representation, constitutions, legislatures, responsible government, democracy and even the role of their local road boards, to the colonies. British and European philosophies, and economic principles influenced by American internationalism, remain dominant in public administration. In Zimbabwe the institutions controlled by the Rhodesians before the revolution in 1980 were characteristically British also: that is, they were constructed on a history of ideas derived from British and European philosophy which accumulated throughout the evolution of western civilization. The affects of colonisation and the disruption to traditions of social and economic survival characterised institutions in both countries although outcomes have been obviously very different.

Some of the literature on development in African countries argues that certain universal principles are associated with democratisation, public sector responsiveness and good governance and that these principles should be regarded as a focal point for the organisation of more equitable administrative systems (Udogu 1996; Duncan and Fletcher 1996; Gertzel 1996; Moyo 1991; see also Peters 1996). The central principle for reform is equity. Equity encompasses fairness, rights, accountability and representation—all appear to be essential for stability.

The aim of this paper is to provide an introduction to the importance of equity in the public sector by explaining the significance of history and culture as a guide to
reform. Traditional non-western, or tribal societies have had to deal with disruption to their institutions caused by European ideas left behind in some of the institutions constructed (and also discarded) by the colonials. People in developing countries have to deal with questions of how central governments can be constrained; how to secure the basics for human survival; collect revenue; bring the informal sector under legitimate control; how to administer community justice under scrutiny of the courts, and so on. The significance of these issues is explained with reference to the historical circumstances that shaped current political conditions of the Aboriginal Australians and the Zimbabweans. By broadening the meaning of development to include the underdevelopment of indigenous societies, a much broader set of institutional configurations are included in the comparison which might otherwise be excluded. One of the benefits of this approach is that greater insight into problems of dealing with equity in development might be possible—if culture is ignored, no amount of democracy and liberalisation will guarantee equity.

**Equity**

How societies cope with the added pressure created by inequities depends on whether the processes and institutions are adequately equipped to deal with the problem.

Equity is an integral part of good governance.

- It is the basic ingredient for the decentralisation of methods for distributing grants and essential services from central governments to regional governments.
- It ensures that poorer regions receive sufficient resources.
- It ensures that local communities have access to the decision-making process.
- It places constraints on government and affects the quality of public sector outputs.
- It determines whether public institutions are culturally and historically suited to the people they are supposed to serve.
- It encourages the process of democracy and economic liberalisation.

Key issues of democracy, development and equity are related directly to the responsiveness of governments and this paper makes the point that democratisation and decentralisation in some form or another is one of the most important criteria of success or failure. Moreover, governments are a conglomerate and in a relatively decentralised system it might be possible for a central part of that conglomerate to provide an anchor for equity principles which, if based elsewhere in the system might be lost completely. An example is the Financial and Fiscal Commission (FFC) in South Africa—a central government institution entrenched in the constitution and with the power and authority to define the meaning of equity, directly in relation to the regional
distribution of expenditure (Brand 1996). Australia has a similar institution (the Commonwealth Grants Commission) which served as a model for the FFC in its design of a methodology to identify regional disabilities in South Africa. Disabilities can range from poor infrastructure, regions with low income groups, lack of service facilities, language differences, ageing population, low rainfall, remote regions (CGC 1996).

Equity in public policy is a principle concerned with recognising diversity, building government tolerance into policy outcomes, creating a stable political environment, treating communities in an equal way and providing ordinary people with access to an acceptable level of essential services. Equity can be achieved at any level of government in areas that range from the redesign of public sector agencies so as to make policy decisions more relevant to regional communities, through to the ability of civil servants to meet the objectives of their political masters without having to compromise policy outputs.

Among the policy issues that have captured the attention of peoples and governments in Zimbabwe and Australia is land use, land ownership and land rights (Alexander 1994; Dodson 1996). Societies in both countries have a sense of traditional community but the notion of a national interest in terms of land ownership in Zimbabwe is consistent with a post-revolutionary society—that is, as a nation, there is concern that one ‘special’ group should not have rights over other ‘special’ groups. For example, according to Raftopoulos (1992:62)

[t]here are indications from the various farming bodies, and signals from the State, that any future reform must be less concerned with need than with proven farming ability.

By comparison, in Australia, Aborigines are recognised as the original inhabitants (indigenous) and, as a consequence of a judicial decision, they can claim links to their land through a form of native title. Native title was identified by the High Court of Australia in 1992 and is derived from British common law which recognises that Aborigines had a form of indigenous rights before the Europeans arrived. Aborigines can claim native title over pastoral leaseholds but then they face the difficult task of proving that their people have uninterrupted links with a particular stretch of land from before the time of European settlement. Native title legislation came into existence in 1993 and since that time, native title claims have not been successful in reinstating land to the Aborigines. Native title has, however, become a measure of the type of society that Australia has become. For example, according to the National Native Title Tribunal, established by the Commonwealth (national) Government to receive, register and accept native title claims,
The extent to which questions of the existence of native title can be resolved in the short term is uncertain, but the Tribunal will continue to seek practical solutions to improve relationships, to promote reconciliation, and to facilitate ultimate agreement on native title (NNTT 1996:9).

Notwithstanding the ambiguities of the issue of native title, in principle, most governments in Australia recognise that cultural differences need sometimes to be protected by law. However, support for cultural protection often depends on the political realities of the dominant governing paradigm. Typically, principles in support of Aboriginal issues fail to translate into positive policy outcomes.

The table below sets out some key structural differences between Zimbabwe and Australia, including Aboriginal society. Zimbabwe is treated as a single party state because the Shona-Ndebele conflict was absorbed into a national unity pact through agreements in 1987 between PF-ZAPU (Patriotic Front-Zimbabwe African People's Union) and ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union-Patriotic Front). The two official parties were merged in 1989 leading to a defacto one-party dominated government (Herbst 1990; Moyo 1991). There was never any formal consent between the Aborigines and the settlers although, in the classic sense, participation in the political process does imply consent. However, since Aboriginal people were denied citizenship until thirty years ago, that sort of consent is questionable as a basis for participation (see Pateman 1970).

Different societies try and cope with public sector reform and pressures for democratisation in ways which are best suited to the institutional configurations of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Zimbabwe</th>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>Aborigines in Australia</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-western</td>
<td>Western</td>
<td>Non-western/land based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uni-cameral</td>
<td>Bi-cameral</td>
<td>No legislature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unitary system</td>
<td>Federal system</td>
<td>Indigenous system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribal Indigenous</td>
<td>Multi-cultural</td>
<td>Indigenous traditional/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-liberal</td>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>Non-Liberal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Defacto one-party</td>
<td>Multi-party</td>
<td>Inconsistent weak party on a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>State basis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black majority</td>
<td>White majority</td>
<td>nil representation at a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>national level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National self-</td>
<td>Regional self-</td>
<td>Sub-national/community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>determination</td>
<td>determination</td>
<td>self-determination</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
government and, respectively, to each community’s particular cultural needs. That is why, ideally, government outputs are driven by principles—principles are the essence of effectiveness as well as being vulnerable to interpretation. But principles provide opposing parties or groups with a negotiating point. Obviously, once principles begin to be put into practice the issues that they raise then become complicated—settlement can become difficult or even impossible. In which case, principles such as equity are even more important. For example, equity is an important part of governance in both Zimbabwe and Australia but its interpretation is based on the cultural and political experiences of the two (broadly speaking) different societies. Also, in Australia, the institutions of government are characteristically western—a major point of departure between Zimbabwe and Australia—the complications associated with transforming governing principles into reality are of a different variety in Zimbabwe compared to Aboriginal Australia. Nonetheless, recognition that culture is both a local and a national issue encourages an historical approach and draws attention to the importance of avoiding institutional reform that might lead to social, economic and political disaster (Said 1994). Recognising culture also underlines the potentially fragile nature of relationships between different societies that share the same institutions of governance. The following section provides a background sketch, first of the circumstances facing peoples in Zimbabwe and second, the indigenous peoples in Australia.

**Zimbabwe**

For the past 17 years Zimbabwe has been attempting to reinvent itself as a new, free, post-colonial African state. During that period, Zimbabwe has put all of its efforts into shaking itself free of the shackles left by Rhodesia and correcting its image to coincide with what is expected of a relatively strong black African state. This has meant Zimbabwe has taken control of its own emerging national culture while, at the same time, attempted to build institutions which are suitably equipped to support its various regional economic identities. One of Zimbabwe’s problems is that the two characteristics of Zimbabwe’s past—its Rhodesian inheritance and its black African inheritance—have become fused and, from an overseas aid perspective, there is a tendency to judge Zimbabwe’s economic performance in view of political rhetoric rather than on its own strengths and weaknesses (Meldrum 1996). Zimbabwe, as a country, is still very young. Also, comparatively, problems of democracy are probably less drastic in Zimbabwe than those in other southern African countries, with the qualified exclusion perhaps of South Africa.6

Zimbabwe inherited a political and economic burden from the Rhodesians and, during the apartheid regime in neighbouring South Africa, the Zimbabwean economy and its political institutions, were severely destabilised by conflict. Since the end of
apartheid in South Africa, world attention has focused for obvious reasons on strengthening South African democracy, but the affect of South African apartheid and its subsequent demise has been dramatic for Zimbabwe also (Sandbrook 1993). For the first time, and with a sense of relief, Zimbabweans have expressed their freedom through resentment at the influence wielded by non-Zimbabweans (Rhodesians), the accountability and expectations criteria demanded by international institutions such as the IMF involved in financing loans and investment and at what many believe is the growing economic fragmentation of their recently acquired sovereignty. As recent events unfolded with the strikes by health workers and civil servants in Harare in late 1996, it became clear that Zimbabweans are increasingly weary of ineffective policies, poorly maintained infrastructure, poverty, and low wages. Moreover, the government has found it difficult to put its reforms into place in a way that attracts, rather than repels, international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (Bloch and Robertson 1996). Australia by comparison has a history of stable government for all of this century—discounting an Aboriginal perspective.

**Australia: a background sketch**

The Australian colonies were settled during the late 18th and early 19th century, mostly by people classed as criminals by the British and transported on board prison ships from Britain to Australia. Evidence suggests that the Aborigines, estimated at somewhere from half to one million people when the British arrived in 1788, had occupied Australia for over 70,000 years. Soon after federation in 1901, their numbers plummeted to around 60,000 and, officially, the Aborigines were classed as ‘dying out’ (Barnes 1966). Under the jurisdiction of the state governments until the constitution was altered by referendum in 1967, the Aborigines were considered irrelevant. Laws were made to exclude them from almost every aspect of life. They lost their land, their communities were decimated, they became a cheap source of labour and many were murdered. The national (federal) government became responsible for the welfare of the Aboriginal people at around the same time as they were granted citizenship in the 1960s. Three decades on from the 1967 referendum, the Aborigines are still suffering deprivation. They have the highest unemployment record of all Australians and are represented in Australian jails at up to ten times the national average (ABS 1997). Moreover, young Aboriginal males die in police custody at such an alarming rate that the national government conducted a Royal Commission into the issue in the late 1980s. Since then, the rate of Aboriginal deaths in custody has further escalated (Dodson 1996).
Institutionalising equity

Equity is a key principle in the way the Australian system is meant to operate although, judging from the evidence, equity favours the non-indigenous population, largely because governments do not understand the significance of indigenous culture. Issues become more complicated in a federal system, where there is a degree of sub-national sovereignty associated with the position of states or provinces. Equity has two main characteristics in Australia: first, equity is entrenched by statute to ensure that the regional (state) governments receive a fair share of grants from the national government. Distribution criteria are based on a formula that weights the cost to regional governments of providing a standard service in one region against the cost of providing the same standard of service in another region. The second characteristic of equity lies in efforts by some governments to use the principle as an organising device for providing Aboriginal communities with budgetary powers and a decent standard of service.

Strategically, equity manifests itself in two ways in Australia: the reasons for this are historical. For three decades after federation the economic position of the small states deteriorated as a direct result of their diminished revenue base. Following threats of secession by some states (Western Australia and Tasmania), the national government established a statutory authority, the Commonwealth Grants Commission, and directed it to adopt a policy of horizontal fiscal equalisation in its formulae to distribute equity to the regional governments. The second institution designed specifically for the distribution of equity in Australia lies within the process of government and in the way the public sector actually functions. In this case, essential services and grants to Aboriginal communities are coordinated by a national (federal) government statutory authority known as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) is comprised of a centralised bureau, a number of regional offices throughout the six States and two Territories and 36 special regional councils which are supposed to represent the policy interests of the Aboriginal communities. The Commission (ATSIC) can be described as an experiment in administrative democracy. The ATSIC regional councils have an electoral mandate through a process of democratisation—groups of elected regional councils elect a regional commissioner who, through the Commission’s chairperson, informs the administrative regime about policy directions. But there is no particular forum established outside of the regional council meetings where elected members can directly participate. Basically, ATSIC is a form of institutionalised self-determination. The regional councils are often surrounded by a degree of controversy within Aboriginal communities because the councils can exercise economic and political power over community budgets. The budgetary process at a local level is shaped by groups, families and individuals in configurations that sometime conflict with indigenous traditions. Also, competition for policy outcomes can cause rifts. Aboriginal communities often
find it difficult to meet the western standards demanded by public administrators (Zimran and Fletcher 1996). Moreover, public administrators find it virtually impossible to meet the standards demanded by the Aboriginal communities. When accountability problems arise, the situation for Aboriginal organisations is not helped by the practice of being publicly named by governments and in the media as irresponsible, leading to resentment and, at times, generating ugly racist responses from the non-indigenous community.8

Western-style expectations raise issues which sections of the Zimbabwe public sector have been also forced to confront. Public sector circumstances are quite different in Australia to Zimbabwe although the quality of life that people expect to experience in both countries is directly influenced by the effectiveness of the machinery of state. The Zimbabwe public sector is said to be overly centralised, making access to government difficult and administrative responsiveness often impossible. There are regional governments but, politically, they are lame. There are historical explanations for this degree of centralisation. Under the colonial regimes in southern Africa black peoples were relegated to positions within the state keeping them out of reach of the levers of power. Fearing reprisals, the whites constructed repressive centralised regimes. A climate of entrenched impoverishment was maintained by legislation, fear, and force (Herbst 1990). The settler communities exploited the blacks for economic purposes — to reinforce the economy and weaken black control. From a financial perspective, the pattern for centralisation was set prior to independence in 1980 when the rate of income tax in Zimbabwe was around 60 per cent for company tax and around the same for individual tax and a highly centralised colonial government. As soon as Zimbabwe emerged as a new state, it found itself at the mercy of cyclical structural adjustment policies and five year plans—almost all driven from the top down. Zimbabwe lacked any stable lines of communication (and coordination) between regional communities—or even within metropolitan communities—and central government. Government rhetoric and its apparent aggressive response to demands from international organisations is a sign of post structural adjustment fatigue, a situation not helped by the public’s demands for a better quality of service and relief for an impoverished public sector. Sections of the Zimbabwe civil service are facing a deepening crisis of low moral. But even these problems are partly grounded in the past when the colonial government relinquished its hold in former Rhodesia, the Zimbabweans found that economic and political survival was pegged directly to their capacity for institutional reform (Herbst 1990). Performance on the domestic scene was, and is, a measure of Zimbabwe’s acceptance by the international donor community—the Zimbabwe government’s relationship with the IMF almost came to grief on more than one occasion (Meldrum 1996; Rondinelli 1993). Outside pressure is perceived as a direct interference in Zimbabwean sovereignty. Zimbabwe has had a role in regional southern Africa with precedents dating back to the colonial era—to the Treaty of Rome when European
nations, the colonisers, entered into agreements with associations of African colonies with the aim of providing them with access to the European markets (Clapham 1996). That activity generated an outlet for trade but, for Zimbabweans, the yolk of colonialism persisted and by 1980 European market philosophies seemed to be out of step with the practical reality of life in southern Africa. Since then, the Southern African Development Co-ordination Conference has been formed—referred to by some as the ‘bread-basket’ (Herbst 1990:91; Weeks 1996; Tsie 1996; Bloch and Robertson 1996). Can inequities be explained with reference to democracy? Australia is a multi-party mature democratic system and yet the Aboriginal peoples are marginalised and excluded from sharing equitably in national living standards. Zimbabwe, in contrast is quasi one-party and tenuously linked to democracy. Whatever the measure, the future of civilisation is seen by the international community to profit from the principles of democracy.

Democracy and development

Democratisation is seen as a significant stage of the process towards institutional reform. Democracy provides us with government representation—how can administrators be responsive if there is inadequate communication between the communities and government? Whenever democracy is put at risk, and despite its obvious fragility, international perceptions of domestic stability become tinged with pessimism. But democracy and development are strange companions, raising the question of how democracy is positioned in relation to different types of communities (Diamond 1993). The survival and quality of democracy in development rests on the effectiveness of at least three sets of circumstances: first, a respect for culture and history; second, the way that the infrastructure of the nation state actually operates—the constraints on centralised power, the bureaucracy, the judiciary, legislatures, processes for the transfer of resources, regulations, the role of the military and so on; third, an acknowledgment of the spirit of democracy, particularly in the recognition of diversity (Osaghae 1995). History is witness to the experience of countries in transition, be it from a closed to an open market economy (Eastern Europe) or a transition from traditional/indigenous to ‘western’ style, and when a system switches from being a single authoritarian regime to adopting a form of democratic representation, transitions must be accompanied by principles, beliefs, ideas and infrastructure compatible with reform (Wallich 1996). South Africa also provides an example—a point made earlier. It is not uncommon for ideals to be expressed in the form of principles rather than as practical realities—ideals and principles which are difficult to apply (or which have a poor success rate) are common in both developing and developed countries. Australian Aboriginal affairs policies are laced with principles and ideals but, in reality, infrastructure is in crisis.
and quality of life in indigenous communities is poor (Zimran and Fletcher 1996). Despite the democratic process, the general institutions are ill-suited to respond to the nature of the indigenous culture.

The principles of democracy are a source of direction to the architects of change but cannot work without a responsive public sector. Democracy is often flagged at a national level but the roots of its stability rest on local foundations (Udogu 1996). Under traditional circumstances, indigenous societies do not automatically operate along western democratic lines. People might be enfranchised under national (and state/regional/provincial) legislation but, at a traditional level, community governing processes and local traditions do not embrace local democracy in the western sense unless electoral infrastructure, and the will to vote, becomes part of the national political culture. Realistically, responsiveness by government usually means that some restructuring is necessary. At the other end of the spectrum, public sector restructuring is often a response to pressures from international donor agencies and may be more suited to global ‘models’ of efficiency, rather than a response to domestic needs (Bird 1992). Democracy, in the western sense, empowers its citizens with political clout and, in principle, it is the method by which a dictatorial regime can be replaced with representative constitutionalism. But, trying to adapt to more efficient methods of governance in response to international institutions does not necessarily lead to more effective government at a local level. For example, in many tribal and indigenous societies in North America and Australia, typically, democratic frameworks have been constructed as an addition to (and often in conflict with) the cultural traditions of indigenous institutions and totally oblivious to the realities of regional diversity. At an international level, this might seem irrelevant but, nationally and locally, evidence suggests that government can become ineffective if the public sector approach is unsuitable to regional circumstances. Papua New Guinea is an example not only of economic failure but of a country which is still economically on a downward spiral, accumulating the scars of social and institutional erosion caused by colonial interference on the part of Australia. Access to government requires institutions to be responsive—to recognise the significance of equity. Access and equity are part of the process of democratisation—whether or not the one party state, or two party defacto states can deliver an adequate standard of equity is a moot point. However, there are persuasive arguments to support the view that strong cultural frameworks which are community based do actually operate along lines which are receptive to the principles of democratisation, particularly in southern African states (Udogu 1996). Generally, though, equity depends on whether community traditions of shared resources can be extended upwards to the government—national regimes do not exist in many African countries particularly where the national government has proved incapable of responding to different communities (Osaghae 1995).
Liberalisation

Some societies have based their public sector reforms on market principles that are directly related to economic efficiency, adopting an open, or semi-open market, approach—all within a doctrine of anti-liberalism—while maintaining a legitimate political presence at the helm of the state: Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia are three that spring to mind. Zimbabwe has also faced the realities of free market principles. Other countries have attempted to fit democratic principles, customary law and tribal societies into the same institutions, arguably, with varying degrees of success: for example, South Africa, Papua New Guinea and Indonesia. Moreover, the rhetoric of ‘liberalisation’ is often used to indicate the extent to which a closed economy has responded to outside pressures for an open market approach but with the essence of economic liberalisation linked to competition for investment, interest rates, credit control and the role of financial institutions approach (Montiel 1995). At a political level, particularly in a democratic context, this appears to be a far cry from political liberalism subscribed to by the west (Sandbrook 1993). However, it is related—political stability is a form of national order: and there are arguments that reinforce the view that political instability leads to economic disruption and so on (Duncan and Fletcher 1996). According to Huntington (1991:9) for example, liberalisation is simply ‘a partial opening’. The reform of bureaucracy and more equitable governance is something that takes time to evolve. In developed countries, the process of reform is ongoing and, while the human stakes might not be as high in western countries—with the exception of indigenous societies in Australia, Canada, the United States and parts of Europe—as in developing countries (debt crises, drought, instability) economic costs and benefits are measurable. By a similar measure, if there are institutional inconsistencies—if the public sector is ineffective in meeting community needs—stable patterns of equity in reform and development are less easily identifiable in developing countries than in systems with a history of established western bureaucracy. One reason why equity is an evasive quality in relation to development is the overcentralisation of government and ambiguities associated with what it is that decentralisation actually delivers—perhaps, in some cases, central control actually becomes stronger rather than weaker, in a region.

Centralism and federalism

Centralism remains one of the main barriers to government responsiveness in developing countries. Arguably, centralism became a white African plague during the colonial era—a limit to regional development, a muzzle on unity and a crucible for democracy (Wunsch and Olowu 1990). Centralism fits comfortably into hierarchical
systems, particularly when based on a policy planning system. In terms of authority, centralised control is usually a feature of unitary rather than federal systems. Zimbabwe is a centralised unitary system but with regional governments, so also is South Africa. In contrast, federalism separates authorities, multiplies jurisdictions and decision-making processes are moved away from the central government and towards local communities. Australia has a combination of both features. Centralism and federal decentralisation are mixed: the former results from strong centralised revenue powers and the latter is a feature of the constitutional sharing of power between different levels of government. Every system organises its government according to the way power is shared. The net result in Australia is a system of government which emphasises equity in the design of some of its government institutions, mainly in the formula used for distributing expenditure to the states and local governments and, in an experimental way, through attempts to democratise decision-making in the administration of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs (ATSIC). Part of the reason why administrative responsiveness has become an issue in public sector effectiveness is that, until 1967, the Aboriginal peoples had no citizen rights—under the Australian Constitution Aborigines were excluded from the national census.

Australia’s administrative institutions, British in origin and Westminster-styled, were established by six separate colonial governments during the 19th century. Federation institutionalised the principle of decentralisation. However, what characterises Australia as unique among western federal systems is its ability to accommodate centralism—a product of the national government’s authority to raise almost 80 per cent of the nation’s revenue (Walsh 1996). This peculiar combination of centralised revenue raising and federalism has produced institutions which embody the principles of equity (CGC 1996). Putting federalism and centralism together within the same constitutional framework gives Australia an unusual appearance to international observers from countries with developing or transitional economies. Officials from South Africa, South Korea and, more recently, Sri Lanka, have all travelled to Australia in the past three years to study the Commonwealth Grants Commission’s model of fiscal equalisation. From an Australian perspective, the cumulative effect of centralised revenue raising was initially quite destabilising and questions were raised even before federation about how a central government should distribute expenditure on an equitable basis. At the time, the 1890s, and for several decades later, Australia was the only country to have developed and refined a system of fiscal equalisation which involved equity both in the assessment of revenue collection and in expenditure—a principle that has been used as model for other systems of equalisation. Generally speaking, western models of administration and public policy have been applied to developing countries in rather an indiscriminate way. Bird (1992) outlines how universal models for tax reform in developing countries, for example, were prescribed in simple ways which ignored the entire historical development of
particular institutions. This helps to explain why analysts have emphasised the virtues of accounting but almost totally at the expense of understanding the significance of political and cultural institutions (Moyo 1992).12

**Culture, civil society and development**

Relating culture to institutional development and public sector reform is both central and essential to the debates on equity—a factor recognised by some of scholars of development but not in general and not necessarily in the literature produced under the banner of such institutions as the World Bank or the IMF (but see Caiden and Wildavsky 1980; Thompson, Ellis, and Wildavsky 1990; Rondinelli 1993). The preoccupation with identifying a new public sector culture is not exclusively related to developing countries (see Keraudren 1996). But the importance of an effective and creative public sector is such a critical part of national stability in development that the application of cultural theory would seem paramount. Also, since the collapse of state apparatus in eastern Europe questions of citizenship and concerns with relationships between people and government spill over into the literature on civil society and civics. The strengthening of civil society as a measure of free association is part of the process of political liberalisation in Europe (Walzer 1995). But the role of civil society as a cohesive network of associations in the process of social, political and economic stability is less clear in countries where non-western traditional institutions are dominant and where governing has been absorbed into the functions of a totalitarian regime. Over the past few years, particularly since the collapse of eastern Europe, the literature on the relationship between civil society, government and society has grown rapidly: the main focus is now concentrated on identifying what the social infrastructure actually looks like—a simple explanation of civil society is one which illustrates the networks of associations, unions, clubs, parties, organisations, and all of the non-government networks in which people are free to associate (Przeworski 1995). Generally, civil society draws its shape from democratic principles. In the absence of democracy, there is some difficulty identifying the existence of citizenship activity outside of that which the state controls. But, even if democracy is in a healthy condition, that in itself does not guarantee the existence of equity. Fatton (1995:72), for example, raises questions about civil society and the state in Africa, arguing that civil society is imperfect and that

by generally reflecting the lopsided balance of class, ethnic and sexual power, the organizations of civil society tend inevitably to privilege the privileged and marginalize the marginalized.
To a large extent, it's not surprising that civil society reflects the inequities of freedom, particularly in western societies: America, with its individualism, is a prime example of social and economic inequities but for different reasons to those in Australia. In Australia, society was dominated by Anglo-Celtic tradition until the middle of the 20th century when immigration began to encourage governments to reflect on the more obvious ethnic differences and reform the institutions to be more responsive. But Aborigines are not classified as part of the Australian ‘ethnic community’ and the influence of Anglo-Celtic tradition on civil society meant that Aborigines were excluded from taking part in western social development. The institutions of Australian society remained oriented to western values for some time and so the organisation of civil society along western lines (mainly British) enabled governments to implement policies of assimilation which not only marginalised Aborigines but alienated them from their own culture and pushed them to the brink of extinction.13 In Zimbabwe, the black population had virtually no rights until 1980. Likewise in Australia, the Aborigines were denied basic citizenship rights in some areas until the early 1970s. In the state of Western Australia, Aborigines were denied the franchise at local government elections until 1984 because, under crown law, only property owners could vote and very few Aborigines owned property. In both Zimbabwe and Australia, the indigenous people were not well served by the public sector—in fact, in many circumstances, they were not served at all. Herbst’s (1990) evaluation of Zimbabwe is a reminder of the difficulties inherent in institutional reform: for example, after the Rhodesians stepped down, Zimbabweans had to completely deconstruct their colonial administrative structures before being able to completely rebuild the same sort of organisations within a new cultural framework—notably, one more responsive to the needs of the black population. Orkin (1995) makes the point that civil society is not a substitute for democratisation but it does provide a solid base for establishing standard human operating procedures which contribute to the stability of social order. However, civil society does not replace the principles of constitutional democracy—for better or worse, it simply reinforces them. The significance of exploring civil society is, as Osaghae (1995:194) argues, its importance as a framework for the relationship between social organisations and government.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to identify some of the problems of inequity associated with the globalisation of public sector reform principles which societies in developing countries (Zimbabwe) share with indigenous societies in developed countries (Australian Aborigines). The decision to take an institutional approach to comparative research in Zimbabwe and Australia arose from pressures to reform and perceptions
of democratisation, including recognition of the need to develop stronger and more substantial processes for ensuring equity in development. Zimbabwe, for example, has a layer of policy infrastructure which, if managed properly, can be the basis of realistic public sector reforms—including the development of a more efficient system of fiscal decentralisation. Public sector decentralisation is fundamental if the distribution of equity—health, education, welfare, infrastructure and so on—is to have a future in development. Decentralisation, like all policies, is only as effective as the management of the institutions. Both Zimbabwe and Aboriginal Australia have experienced mismanagement. In Australia, less dramatically but equally destabilising, programs to assist Aboriginal communities have been plagued by government mismanagement since western-style jurisdictions were put into place. Part of the problem stems from the fact that, in indigenous affairs, many of the jurisdictions that governments created have contributed to the dispossession of the Aborigines.

The role of democracy in public sector reform remains unresolved in the Zimbabwe one-party state where the costs of compromising the mechanics of democracy remain to be seen (Sithole1992; Rukobo 1991). Assistance with economic and democratic development needs to be carried out in a strong framework of self-determination. Without self-determination, it is difficult to effect a coordinated approach to public sector reform in any substantial way; without institutions that can respond to self-determination, there is little chance of reform.14 The Zimbabwean public sector is on a steep upward learning curve. Strikes and confrontations have been unsettling but, in this case, they should be seen as a sign of healthy unrest—people taking issue against corruption, demanding to have the right to free association, demanding democracy and, to be governed through a more equitable process. In Australia, the democratic institutions are entrenched—constitutionalism is a fundamental principle. But, as this paper has argued, institutional equity and the ability of the system to respond to the needs of the Aboriginal people is unresolved. As this paper has illustrated, democracy and liberalisation do not guarantee equity.

Endnotes

1 Processes of governance concerning Aboriginal Australians are commonly compared with circumstances facing Native Canadians.
2 The comparative project was initiated by the North Australia Research Unit (The Australian National University) and the Institute for Development Studies (University of Zimbabwe).
3 Often, the notion of ‘government’ is skewed by the overbearing nature of the ‘state’, particularly in Nigeria, where the concept of government is subsumed by the role of the armed forces and repressive institution—a distinguishing feature of some African states (see Beckman and Jega 1995).

From an Australian electoral perspective, people are not categorised by race so, outside of discrete communities, there is no insight into voting patterns except for surveys and exit polls. Under the law, people must registering their name on the electoral role in Australia but not everybody complies. Moreover, at each election, a percentage of votes are informal.

South Africa has a problem of increasing anarchy in the system of law and order and, more generally, in the entrenched informal economy.

*The Herald* (Zimbabwe) 4 November 1996.

Comments in September 1996 by a newly elected member of the House of Representatives, Pauline Hanson, in the Australian Parliament led to an upsurge of racist outbursts particularly against Asians and Aborigines. See the Hansard version of Pauline Hanson’s maiden parliamentary on the Net, http://www.adfa.oz.au/~adm/politics/#topical events.

Witness the international concern over the general elections in Pakistan in January 1997.

Access and Equity was a government strategy for the development of Australian Aboriginal self-determination prior to the change of government at a federal level in March 1996.

For example, Canada; see Mathews and Jay 1972.


In analyses of relationships between Australia and Asia, western civil society is seen as part of the explanation for our sometimes misguided cultural interpretations of other societies, (Milner and Quilty 1996).

Aboriginal Australia relies on the framework of self-determination for its survival. Self-determination is the main cultural indicator which Aboriginal people use to claim their inheritance to land. It underpins their survival because it is based on the same sort of principle that colonised societies used to shake themselves free of European occupation in the immediate post-war period.
References


Milner, Anthony and Quilty, Mary (eds), 1996. *Australia in Asia: comparing cultures*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne.


