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A REVIEW OF REMOTE EMPLOYMENT POLICY: WHERE ARE WE, AND HOW DID WE GET HERE?

E. KLEIN AND F. MARKHAM

POLIS: The Centre for
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Aerial photograph of Ltyentye Apurte, used with permission of Atyenhenge Atherre Aboriginal Corporation.

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Elise Klein is an Associate Professor of Public Policy at the Crawford School, Australian National University (ANU). **Francis Markham** is a Fellow at the POLIS: The Centre for Social Policy Research, Research School of Social Sciences, College of Arts & Social Sciences, Australian National University.

A review of remote employment policy: Where are we, and how did we get here?

E. Klein and F. Markham

Abstract

Drawing on qualitative and quantitative data, this paper critically examines the trajectory and impacts of employment policies in remote Indigenous Australia. It first provides a snapshot of the current remote employment crisis. By tracing policy developments from historical contexts to current practices, including the combined impacts of trends in Indigenous affairs and mainstream social security policies, the paper identifies persistent challenges and potential avenues for substantive change. The analysis reveals that despite recent policy shifts, remote Indigenous communities continue to face structural employment barriers that are poorly addressed by governmental approaches that often do not align with community needs or aspirations. The paper argues for a reevaluation of policy frameworks, advocating for strategies that address the lack of employment options in remote communities, rather than assuming that providing training and pathways is sufficient in the absence of jobs. This review highlights the disconnect between stated policy intentions and outcomes and underscores the importance of community-led initiatives and Indigenous self-determination in shaping effective employment strategies.

Keywords: remote employment policy, employment, income, poverty

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The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not reflect any official position of the CLC. The authors take full responsibility for any opinions, errors and omissions in this document.

Acronyms

AAAC	Atyenhenge Atherre Aboriginal Corporation
ABA	Aboriginals Benefit Account
ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
ACCO	Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations
ANAO	Australian National Audit Office
ANU	Australian National University
APO NT	Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory
ATSIC	Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission
CDEP	Community Development Employment Projects (scheme)
CDP	Community Development Program
CIM	Compulsory Income Management
CLC	Central Land Council
COAG	Council of Australian Governments
CPI	Consumer Price Index
DEWR	Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (Australian Government)
DPMC	Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (Australian Government)
FWSC	Fair Work and Strong Communities (Model)
HILDA	Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia
IAS	Indigenous Advancement Strategy
NDIS	National Disability Insurance Scheme
NEE Trial	Ngaanyatjarra Engagement and Employment Trial
NJPT	New Jobs Program Trial
NIAA	National Indigenous Australians Agency

NT	Northern Territory
NTER	Northern Territory Emergency Response
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PBAS	Points-Based Activation System
RAES	Remote Australia Employment Service
RDA	<i>Racial Discrimination Act 1975</i>
REP Trial	Remote Engagement Program Trial
RJCP	Remote Jobs and Communities Program
RJED	Remote Jobs and Economic Development
UNDRIP	<i>United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples</i>

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Preface

This policy analysis is part of the background work aiding the development of the Purte Warrke-Irreme (‘Working together’) project. Purte Warrke-Irreme, facilitated by the Central Land Council (CLC) in partnership with Atyenhenge Atherre Aboriginal Corporation (AAAC), with funding from the Paul Ramsay Foundation and others, is a multi-year place-based project, trialling a community-led approach to youth employment and leadership pathways. The policy analysis specifically provides a baseline understanding of the policy context in which the remote jobs trial was being developed, to inform the focus of the trial and set expectations of the capacity of the trial to influence the national policy agenda. The analysis also seeks to make an up-to-date contribution to the literature on remote employment policy that documents the development of the Remote Jobs and Economic Development (RJED) program and new Remote Australia Employment Service (RAES) to replace the Community Development Program (CDP).

In the context of Australian Government plans to reform remote employment services, the Purte Warrke-Irreme project stems from a broader aim to test key elements of the Aboriginal Peak Organisations Northern Territory (APO NT) Fair Work and Strong Communities (FWSC) policy proposal. The FWSC model was developed in 2017 by Aboriginal community-controlled organisations to provide an alternative to the CDP, which had failed to increase Aboriginal employment outcomes in remote communities. It proposed a return to a focus on direct job creation and strengthening Aboriginal community control (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Elements of the Fair Work Strong Communities Model

Direct community-led job creation at scale	High quality employment assistance
A Remote Jobs Fund sufficient to create 12,000 new jobs Including 1,500 paid youth jobs.	Redesigned employment assistance that delivers a mix of services and programs that are relevant to local conditions, led by local people and are culturally safe.
Remote Youth Projects provide work experience with training for young people as a pathway to employment.	
Programs and systems that support employment are in place and effective	Indigenous-led governance
A fairer and more effective income support safety net	Decisions about national policy and program design are made in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, in line with the Closing the Gap Agreement.
Training system meets the needs of remote learners	
Effective assistance to set up and grow Indigenous enterprises (small and large)	Local decision-making guides local delivery
	Capacity-building for the Aboriginal community-controlled sector

Source: Unpublished presentation provided by the Central Land Council.

Following a year of research and design work with the Ltyentye Apurte community, youth employment pathways were identified as the greatest need and priority for the community, and the clearest gap in the government's reform landscape. Learning from outcomes locally, the trial aims inform remote employment policy reform nationally, as well as implementing in part four key aspects of the FWSC model: direct community-led job creation, high quality employment assistance, programs and systems that support employment are in place and effective, and Indigenous-led governance.

This policy analysis was peer reviewed before publication by three independent researchers. While the Central Land Council (CLC) has had the opportunity to provide comments and suggestions on drafts of this document, the opinions and analysis it contains are those of the authors. All errors and omissions remain the responsibility of the authors.

1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose of this paper

This paper aims to provide an overview of the changes in, and intersections between, Indigenous employment policy and social security policy to understand the contemporary policy landscape facing remote Indigenous communities and their economic lives, with a particular focus on the experiences of remote communities in the Northern Territory (NT).

It comes at a time when many remote Indigenous communities across Australia are facing significant economic strain, and none more so than remote communities in NT, where both unemployment and poverty levels are extremely high. It also comes at a time of potential reform with a Commonwealth Government in the process of implementing their commitment to replace the widely-critiqued Community Development Program (CDP) with a “new program that creates real jobs, with proper wages and conditions, in partnership with First Nations peoples” (Albanese, et al. 2024). At the time of publication, very tentative steps had been made towards reform, with the introduction of the Remote Jobs and Economic Development (RJED) program and the new Remote Australia Employment Service (RAES).

In order to contextualise the current situation, this paper will discuss the cumulatively harmful policy decisions of consecutive Commonwealth governments that have directly contributed to increased unemployment levels and household poverty rates since the early 2000s, and actively undermined community-control and self-determined economic futures.

Remote employment policy and non-remote policy are often developed and implemented separately (including implemented by different government agencies). Remoteness in policy is also used as a proxy for race – remote employment policy is often developed and designed by government with Indigenous people in mind (even though non-remote policy impacts Indigenous people too). However, whilst both areas of policy have distinct features, they also have interconnected and intertwined histories, and – over time – we have seen an increasing convergence between the two areas of policy. Reflecting the interconnectedness of the two policy areas, the paper is structured to not only consider the colonial story of employment and welfare policy particularly in remote communities, but also the non-Indigenous welfare and work policies, and considers how this convergence is shaping policy events unfolding today.

The paper ultimately identifies three significant and enduring logics underpinning these policy directions, that – if left unchallenged – are likely to prevent substantive reform that can improve the life outcomes of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in remote Australia. The policy logics that need to be transformed include:

1. **Finding ‘sustainable jobs’ as a remedy to welfare dependency in remote Australia:** Whilst employment may be important and aspired to, policy also must be cognisant that i) not everyone can work (because of illness, or disability), ii) a person may be working but just not in employment (voluntary work, care of Country, social reproduction and unpaid care), and iii) that labour markets are precarious, and in remote Australia, are very limited. Economic security and the value ascribed to the deservingness of economic security, cannot be linked to people’s proximity to the labour market.
2. **Linking of deservingness and economic security to having a job:** In remote Australia, there are simply not enough suitable waged jobs available for the people that want to be in paid employment. Future policies must move beyond short-term workfare models and acknowledge the structural limitations of the labour market in remote Australia. This means developing alternative avenues for securing dignified, stable, and liveable incomes, and ‘sustainability’ will mean sustained government

investment in direct job creation (potentially through treaties and other settlements), rather than recycling individuals through ineffective and punitive programs.

3. **Ongoing denial of Indigenous self-determination where ‘government knows best’ when it comes to remote Indigenous livelihoods:** Paternalism has been an enduring feature of Indigenous policy-making and has undermined Indigenous self-determination impacting on the ability for community development, the creation of work opportunities in remote communities, and economic security. Despite rhetoric around shared decision-making since 2015, and the commitments to partnership under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations & Australian Governments, 2020), governments continue to exercise paternalism in policy development in employment policy and beyond. This colonial approach by government needs a radical overhaul, and real solutions to employment in remote communities is wrapped up in broader questions of self-determination, treaties and settlements.

In considering these enduring challenges in remote employment policy, the paper concludes by offering three potential (and not mutually exclusive) avenues for reform. Ultimately, this paper argues that Indigenous self-determination is critical in finding meaningful ways forward when it comes to remote employment and economic security.

1.2 Structure of this paper

Following this introduction (Section 1), the policy paper has four remaining sections.

- Section 2 describes the current remote economic situation, focusing on two intersecting policy areas: employment and mutual obligation policy and income insufficiency.
- Section 3 traces the history of policy decisions and ideological changes that have produced the current situation outlined in the first section. This section pays particular attention to the chronic undermining of Indigenous self-determination in social security and remote employment policy, but also examines mainstream social security and employment policy that impacts remote policy choices made by government.
- Section 4 analyses the current policy and political conjuncture, drawing out specific opportunities for change.
- Section 5 comprises brief concluding comments.

2. The current situation

The current remote economic crisis in the NT has three intertwined and underlying dimensions that have culminated through colonial policy over time:

- (un)employment and mutual obligations
- income (in)sufficiency and control
- the ongoing undermining of community representation, governance and local self-determination by colonial governments.

Indigenous communities draw on a fabric of economic, social and political relations that have sustained life since time immemorial. However, these structures have largely been eroded by government policies since colonisation, an erosion which has accelerated in the last 20 years as a result of policy interventions by both Commonwealth and territory governments. The current situation is not one of Indigenous people's making. It originates from the choices of public policy-makers.

According to figures drawn from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census of Population and Housing¹, there were around 77,000 Indigenous people living in the NT in 2021, of whom 31,000 lived in the five largest urban centres of Darwin, Alice Springs, Katherine, Tennant Creek and Nhulunbuy or the dozen or so smaller towns with total populations of less than 1,000 people. Over 46,000 Indigenous Territorians lived in discrete Aboriginal communities and homelands or outstations, which in this analysis paper we term 'remote Aboriginal communities'. These communities are those located outside town boundaries and on Aboriginal-controlled land, with majority Aboriginal populations. Discrete communities lie on a spectrum from large settlements with up to 3,000 residents, to smaller homelands or outstations that may have relatively little infrastructure and rely on services provided in towns and other larger communities.² While scholars have long noted a 'false dichotomy in settlement hierarchies between larger discrete Indigenous townships and smaller outstations' (Altman, 2006, p. 1), since 2006 an administrative distinction has differentiated between 73 discrete communities and the remaining settlements as outstations and homelands.³

This section presents a contextual and statistical picture of the current income and employment situation in remote Central Australia to give a snapshot of the present socioeconomic circumstances shaping Indigenous

¹ And adjusted for the 'undercount' of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

² Homelands in the NT have come to administratively be defined in the negative, as any Indigenous settlement that is not a town camp or one of 73 'communities'. Most homelands (and indeed many of the smaller remote communities) were developed by Aboriginal people in the 1970s–1990s as part of a social movement that rejected assimilation in centralised government settlements and sought reduced state dependency through returning to live on ancestral lands and reviving customary economic activities there (Altman, 2006; Kerins, 2009).

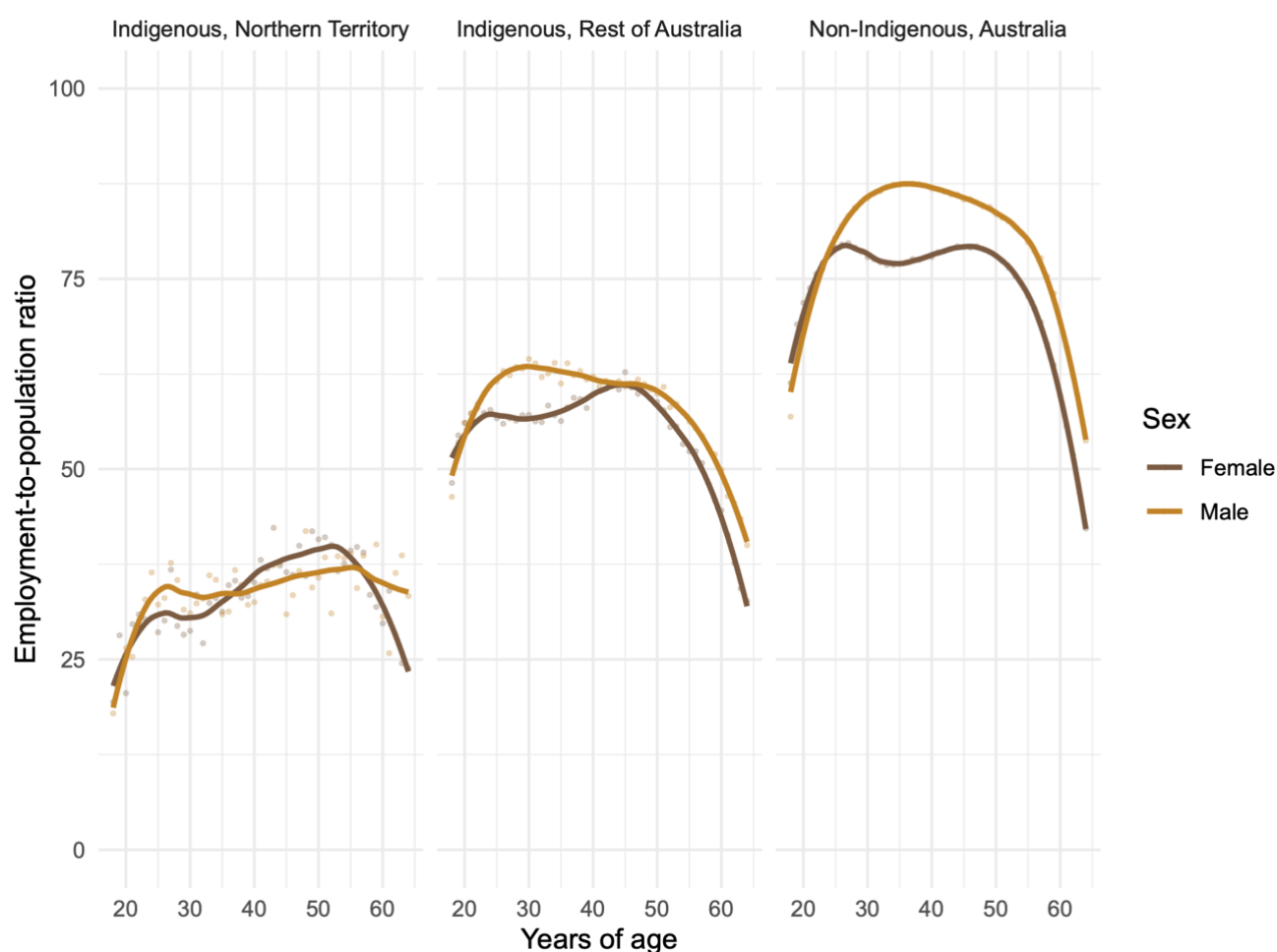
³ The identification of 73 discrete communities in the NT stems from Territory–Commonwealth administrative relationships, with the number sometimes varying between 72 and 73 depending on policy, influenced by Mutitjulu's unique status due to its location in a National Park. The Commonwealth supported the establishment of outstations and homelands before NT self-government in 1978, and continued this support through the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) until 2005 (Altman, 2006; Blanchard et al., 1987). These efforts included housing, infrastructure and essential services funding through various programs like CHIP and NAHS, with Indigenous Regional Councils having discretion over funding allocation under ATSIC. Post-2005, following ATSIC's abolition, the Commonwealth radically changed its policy, aiming to treat Indigenous communities as 'small towns' and questioning the 'viability' of settlements with fewer than 100 people (Vanstone, 2005). A new bilateral housing agreement divided NT communities into two tiers: 72 major communities supported by the NT Government and smaller ones remaining under Commonwealth responsibility (McAdam & Patterson, 2005). This division was further entrenched during the NTER in 2007, with many measures targeting the 73 'prescribed' communities identified in the 2005 agreement (Yu et al., 2008). The Emergency Response Taskforce described the 73 communities as being 'of 100 people or more on Aboriginal land and on Community Living Areas' (Gordon et al., 2008, p. 7), although this was not strictly true on a demographic basis. A 2007 Memorandum of Understanding formalised a four-level settlement hierarchy, withdrawing Commonwealth support from around 500 outstation communities and focusing remote housing funds exclusively on the 73 communities and town camps (Gibbons & Burgess, 2007). Housing in these 73 communities was transferred to the NT public housing authority, while housing in other settlements was privately owned by Indigenous landholders. Despite the Commonwealth's recent re-engagement with homelands through the *Restoring Funding for Northern Territory Homelands Agreement 2024–27*, the administrative distinction between 73 discrete communities and the rest remains.

lives and a brief policy snapshot as to the kinds of programs and interventions that have targeted remote Indigenous communities. Whilst we use official statistics to help outline the current situation, we do not suggest Indigenous policy 'success' only or primarily be measured in terms of the statistical sameness of the Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations on mainstream outcomes. There is a risk that the use of these mainstream indicators reflects normative ideas about 'progress' and overlooks the rights, aspirations and priorities of Indigenous peoples. Accordingly, this statistical picture is coupled with a deeper analysis of policy interventions by tracing the major processes and policies that have produced the current situation (Section 3).

2.1 Remote (un)employment

Of the three sources of cash income – profits from investments, wages from employment, and social security payments – most working-age Australians rely mainly on wages from employment. However, for people living remotely, there are few employment opportunities available to take up employment. The lack of jobs available has meant that the Indigenous employment rate in remote Indigenous communities, including in the NT, are far lower compared to employment rates in the rest of the country. It also means that many people rely on the social security system for income, given structural unemployment. Figure 2 shows the employment-to-population ratios for Indigenous and non-Indigenous people at the 2021 Census across the life course, comparing employment rates in the NT with the rest of Australia, and comparing men and women.

Figure 2 Employment-to-population ratios for Indigenous and non-Indigenous men and women across the life course, comparing the Northern Territory with the rest of Australia, 2021



Three main features are evident from Figure 2. The first is that Indigenous employment rates in the NT are far below those in the rest of the country. Among those of working age (18–64 years), just 32.8% of Indigenous adults were employed in the NT, compared to 57.2% of Indigenous adults in the rest of the country. Second, Indigenous employment rates are far below those of non-Indigenous people nationally. Third, Indigenous employment rates in the NT are very similar for men (32.8%) and women (32.7%), although with different patterns across the life course. Indigenous women in the NT are less likely to be employed than men in their 20s and early 30s but are more likely to be employed than men in middle age. While the ‘dip’ in female employment during childbearing years is a well-established feature of female labour force participation, there is relatively little published research that might explain the pattern in middle age. Some of the differential may be explained by the relative health status and incarceration rates of Indigenous men and women. However, analysing national data from 2014–15, Dinku and Hunt (2021) note that – holding other factors equal – male Indigenous labour force participation rates decrease with age while female rates increase. More research may be needed to better understand the drivers of this trend.

Understanding work and employment in remote labour markets

Unemployment in remote communities is not frictional (i.e. arising when people are temporarily between jobs) or cyclical (i.e. resulting from economic downturns and restored when the economy improves). Rather,

unemployment is a structural feature of remote community labour markets where the labour force far exceeds the number of suitable jobs.

This is not because there is a shortage of work to do, or a lack of work being done in remote Aboriginal communities. Here, we differentiate between 'work' and 'employment.' Work refers to the concerted use of human effort to achieve a particular goal, which is part of all people's existence. In contrast, employment involves work carried out under a contract between an employer and an employee, where the employee's labour is paid for and is subject to the employer's control.

There is a vast amount of work being carried out in remote Indigenous communities in and out of employment relationships. Many Indigenous people living in remote communities engage in productive work 'on country' undertaking customary, non-market work for livelihoods and community care (Altman & Kerins, 2012). Many community residents also participate in multiple boards and committees including Housing Reference Groups, School Councils, Community Development Working Groups with the CLC, Store Boards, Local Area Authorities, Land Council Executive Committees and Councils. This work contributes to local governance and community development which is extremely time consuming for people in communities. While while this work is sometimes appropriately paid, often it is unpaid or underpaid and ultimately undervalued by the state even, though it is often highly valuable socially. For example, Klein et al. (2023) show the extensive amount of unpaid care work that is carried out in communities – including the unpaid care for people, community, culture and country.

Engagement in these productive activities has endured despite two decades of critique deriding this work as being outside the 'real economy' and promoting narratives about Indigenous passivity, dysfunction and non-participation in work. Prominent in these critiques was Noel Pearson's publication *Our right to take responsibility* (2000) which was taken up by conservative politicians and media as evidence to remove government policies that were designed specifically to support diverse forms of work in remote communities. Consequently, these diverse forms of work now rarely register in remote employment policy making. People and communities doing this work are now characterised as unproductive and unemployed, and are subsequently subjected to punitive social security conditions.

There is currently a disconnection in remote Aboriginal communities between work and employment. There is work being done, and more work still that urgently needs to be done. And there are many working age people who are unemployed or who want employment but have given up searching. But there is a thin employment market and few government programs to bring these two together.

Policy responses to remote (un)employment

There has been diverse attempts to address structural unemployment in remote communities with radically different outcomes. Not all approaches taken by government have been punitive and limited in their conceptions of work in remote communities. This section briefly outlines the different remote employment policy responses undertaken by Commonwealth governments since the 1970s. It shows both that it is possible to develop policy responses that recognise the lack of remote employment labour markets and the diversity of work undertaken in remote communities, as well as later, the damning impacts of policy driven by the pursuit of punitive and racialised government ideology. These programs will be addressed again in greater detail and situated within their political context in Section 3.

The Community Development Employment Projects scheme

The Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme implemented in 1977, running through to 2014, was the standout policy in the Australian remote employment policy landscape. Central to the policy design of CDEP was an understanding that government needed to invest directly in remote employment, and

that remuneration for productive work in communities is broad and diverse. Whilst it was not a silver bullet, CDEP had four key elements that contributed to its many successes (Altman & Klein, 2018).

First, CDEP was community-controlled and voluntary. In essence an Indigenous community council or organisation opting into CDEP was allocated a lump sum wages grant calculated on a per participant rate approximating welfare entitlements. On top of this, CDEP organisations were paid an amount to administer the scheme and related projects and an allocation to purchase capital equipment – deciding on the work that would be undertaken and how. This support for local Indigenous decision-making, as well as the resourcing for community decisions, supported local self-governance.

Second, CDEP was a mechanism to allow flexible work arrangements for those not able to work full-time or in the formal labour market. This flexibility was important to allow for cultural obligations. But it also specifically gave room for CDEP workers to participate in livelihood practices and relations outside the market economy.

Third, CDEP had a community development focus where it not only created part-time work for Indigenous people, but also facilitated community development in line with local aspirations and priorities. Wages from CDEP not only supported people to develop community-based enterprises and initiatives that generated collective benefit; CDEP was a community-led program that identified community priorities for people to work towards.

Fourth, CDEP provided work opportunity when the formal labour market was small or non-existent. CDEP participation was often the main source of employment income in regional and remote Australia because remote unemployment is structural – there are not enough jobs available for people that need them. CDEP participation was crucial for ensuring that people did not fall too far below the poverty line. CDEP proved popular and by 2004 there were over 35,000 First Nations people participating with 70% living in remote Australia and 265 community-based First Nations organisations administering the scheme.

Financially, most CDEP participants received a higher income than if they were in receipt of unemployment benefits. This is because most CDEP workers were eligible to work extra hours for ‘top-up’ wages, which were not subject to any social security ‘taper’ (Altman & Gray, 2005). CDEP organisations funded top-up wages by generating additional income through enterprise development and contracts using the CDEP workforce, and by securing government funding for traineeships or apprenticeships, which often involved full-time employment and higher income⁴. Additionally, participants placed with third-party employers could have their wages topped up by those employers. Accordingly, survey data from the 2000s suggested that the average CDEP worker was around \$100 per week better off than were they solely relying on social security (Altman & Gray, 2005). Nevertheless, CDEP workers did, until 1999, miss out on some social security supplements that other social security recipients were entitled to (such as the ‘Approved program of work supplement’ of around \$20 per fortnight, and rental assistance [see Antonios, 1997]). This was addressed in 1999 when Centrelink began to sign up CDEP participants for supplement entitlements in addition to the CDEP wages which were paid by their CDEP organisation (Sanders, 2016).

⁴ CDEP providers could sometimes offer apprenticeships through their enterprises, which was most most successfully delivered ‘on the job’ rather than in a formal training environment. Campbell and Schwab (2001) reported that larger CDEP organisations, with more substantial budgets, were able to fund training. Once a program grew sufficiently, it could support additional staff dedicated to seeking training funds or potentially guiding the program to become a Registered Training Organisation (RTO) to deliver in-house training. Campbell and Schwab note that securing training was complex and costly, requiring reliable, ongoing funding and sometimes dedicated staff were necessary to assess training needs, secure funding, and identify trainers. Apprenticeships were sometimes facilitated within projects run by CDEP organisations. For example, Gray and Thacker (2001) described a CDEP organisation in Port Augusta which secured contracts for residential and commercial construction, renovations, and maintenance work. In the late 1990s, its construction program employed nine fully-qualified tradesmen (non-CDEP participants) and 19 full-time CDEP participants who were completing apprenticeships that would lead to accredited qualifications.

Since the early 2000s, CDEP as a kind of effective direct government investment in Indigenous community-controlled job creation fell out of favour with policy and decision-makers. The policy focus changed to a focus on jobs being created through markets, rather than government-supported employment, resulting in the dismantling of the scheme over 2004–14. Alongside this, was the rise of punitive welfare conditionality that punished people receiving social security, to compel them into the labour force. These shifts resulted in CDEP being replaced with punitive mutual obligation and ‘work like activities’ via the social security system, through the Remote Jobs and Communities Program (RJCP) introduced by the Commonwealth Labor Government in 2013 – only to be replaced two years later with the confusingly and arguably misleadingly-named Community Development Program (CDP). Whilst similar in name, CDP was nothing like the previous CDEP scheme.

Remote Jobs and Communities Program and the Community Development Program

The assumption underlying the RJCP and CDP was that unemployment resulted from a behavioural deficiency rather than a structural feature of remote communities (an assumption first communicated in the Labor Government’s Working Nation White Paper in 1994 [Fowkes, 2019]). These behavioural assumptions assume that working-age people needed to be compelled to work through hostile, punitive and conditional welfare programs including RJCP and CDP.

The transition to the CDP had significant implications for Indigenous people living remotely including:

- increasing economic insecurity, leading to increased poverty rates (as outlined in Section 2)
- enforcing compliance with onerous mutual obligations, resulting in a disproportionately high rate of financial penalties being applied as punishment for non-compliance, leading to the reduction, or cutting off of income support (Fowkes, 2019)
- discriminating against remote living social security recipients – predominantly Indigenous people – by requiring work-for-the-dole mutual obligations that were more time intensive than comparable mainstream mutual obligations (Auditor-General, 2024; Fowkes, 2019)
- impeding people’s autonomy over time and movement, through strict mutual obligations that provided very little leeway for cultural obligations and livelihoods; this includes undermining people’s ability to spend time in self-determined ways that contributes to their wellbeing – such as self-provisioning of food, travelling on Country and caring for family and kin (Altman, 2018; Altman & Markham, 2022; Kral, 2016; Staines & Smith, 2022).
- Taking decision-making and administrative power away from Indigenous-controlled organisations and giving the control of CDP local service provision to government-contracted providers who were subject to the strict conditions of the compliance framework directed by government (Staines et al., 2021). CDP acted in combination with other policies underway in the NT to undermine Indigenous authority – including the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) and related NT legislation which included the amalgamation of small community-based councils into super shires from 2007.

Ultimately, although increasing remote employment rates has been a major stated aim of CDP, employment rates in remote communities have fallen since its introduction. The severity and depth of such dramatic changes in policy, and the ideologies behind them, is examined in the next section.

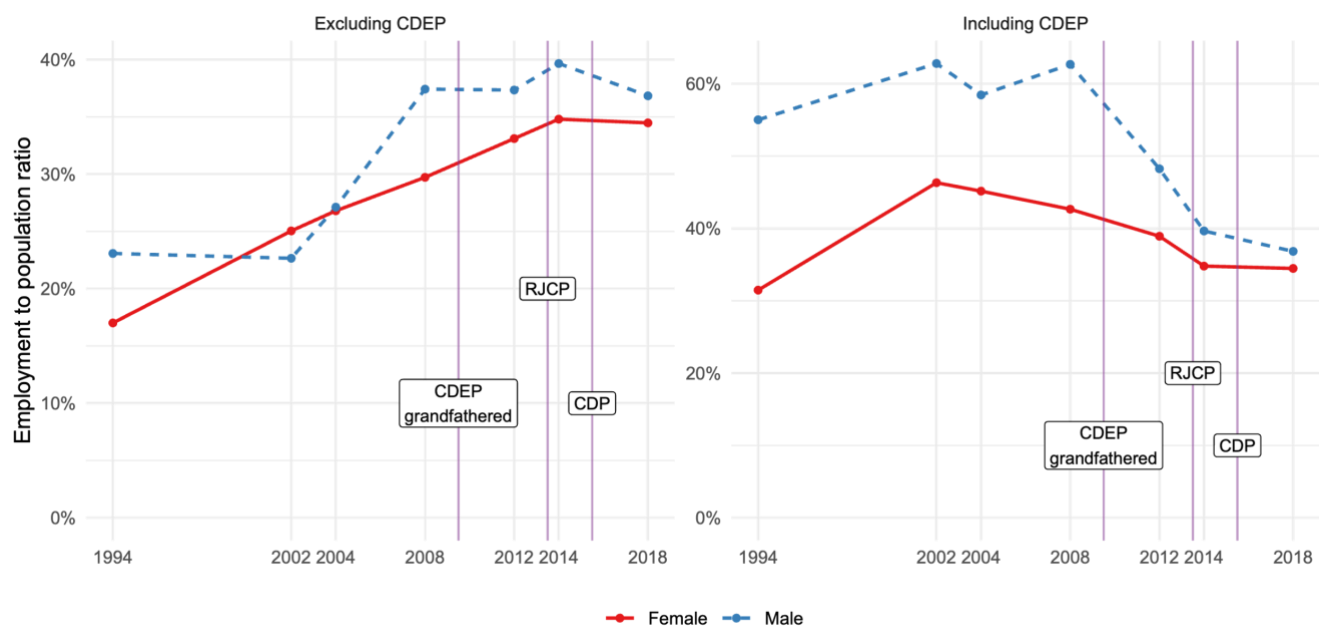
2.2 Consequences of moving from CDEP to CDP: Increased unemployment in remote communities

The trajectories of remote Indigenous employment since the early 1990s has been one of growth and then retrenchment. Figure 3 charts remote Indigenous employment-to-population ratios between 1994 and 2018, separately for both men and women.

The period until the grandfathering of CDEP in 2008 saw a considerable rise in non-CDEP employment (left panel) for both men and women, albeit from a very low base. Between 1994 and 2008, male non-CDEP employment rates had increased from 23% to 37%, while female rates had increased from 17% to 30%.

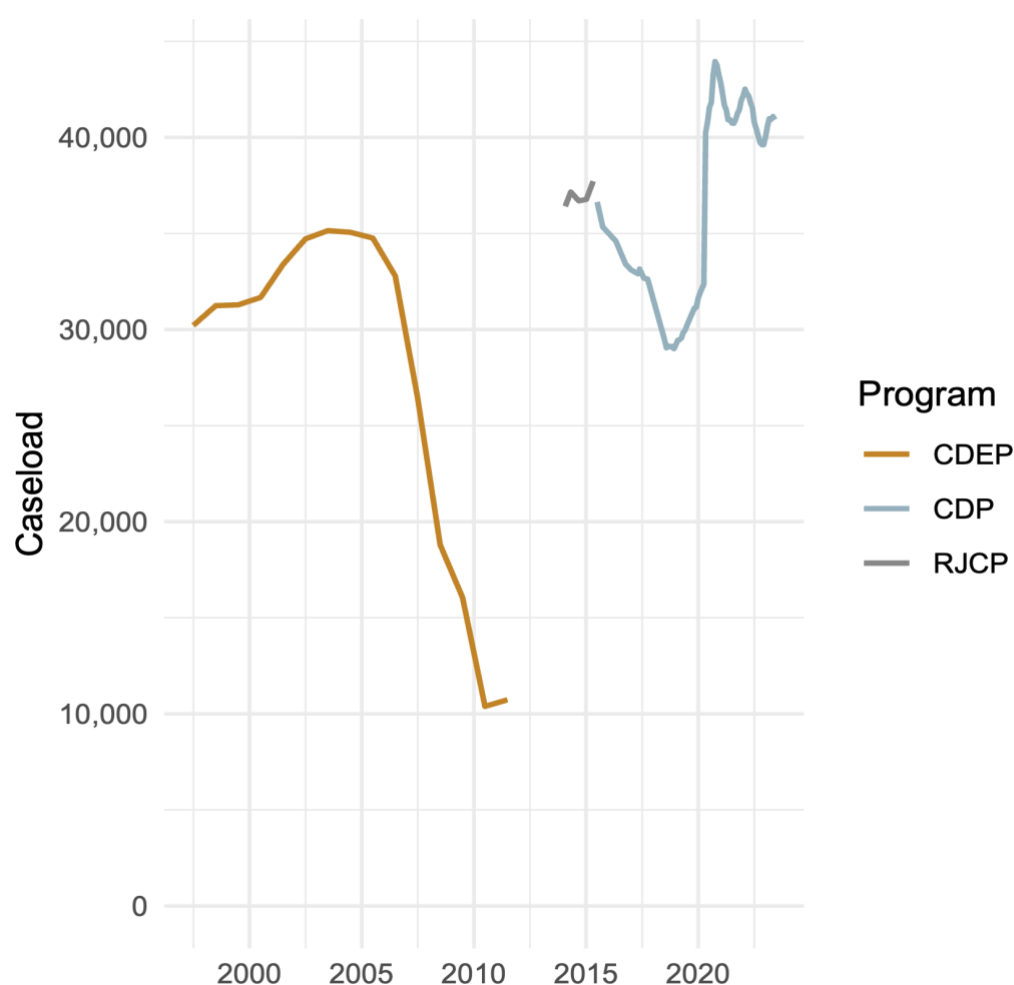
With CDEP, jobs were included in calculations, and the remote employment rate reached 63% for men and 43% for women in the early 2000s. Its abolition saw employment rates plummet to 37% for men and 34% for women by 2018. CDEP helped many men who wanted jobs to get them, with a notable tendency to deliver more jobs for men rather than women.

Figure 3 Employment-to-population ratios for remote Indigenous men and women, including and excluding CDEP employment, 1994, 2002, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2014 and 2018



Sources: Authors' calculations from various Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) surveys.

This shift is evident in the caseload data for remote employment programs. Figure 4 plots published administrative data on the national caseload for CDEP, RJCP and CDP respectively. CDEP saw a long, steady increase in participants until 2004 when the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) was abolished and CDEP's integration with the social security system began. These caseload charts are not a proxy for unemployment. However, the change in the CDEP caseload — and its ultimate abolition — demonstrates that effectively around 35,000 Indigenous workers were retrenched nationally through a decade-long process.

Figure 4 CDEP, RJCP and CDP caseload, 1997–2023

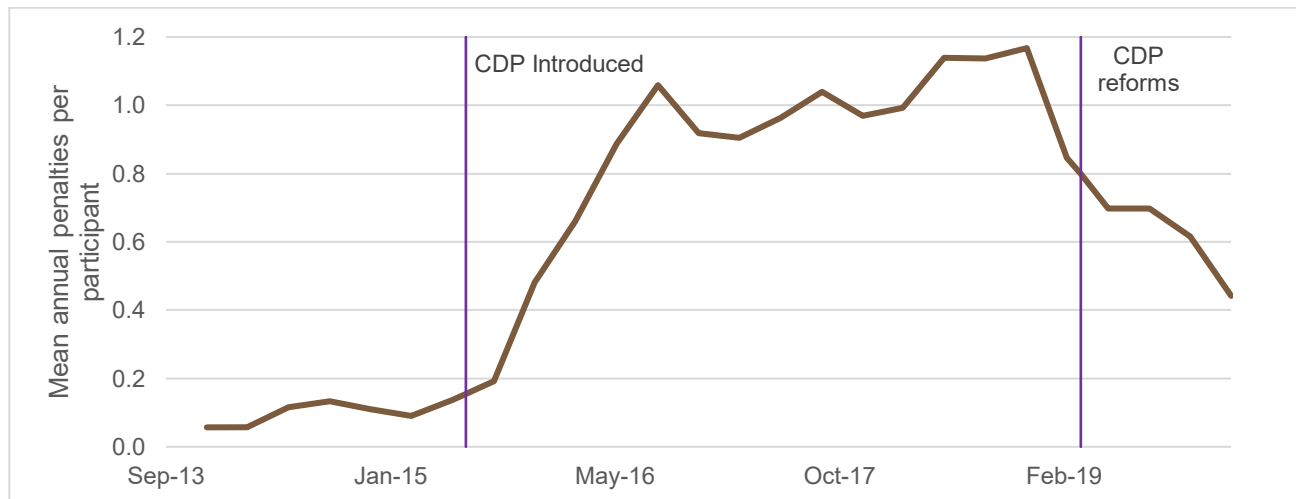
Sources: Various published program data.

A decline in CDP participation is notable between 2016 and 2019. This coincided with a spike in the number of so-called ‘serious penalties’ that participants were subjected to (see Figure 5). Serious penalties were applied to participants labelled by Centrelink as ‘persistently non-compliant’. These penalties punish non-compliant recipients by stopping their payment for a period of eight weeks. By the December quarter of 2018, the ratio of ‘serious penalties’ to participants had reached 1.2 penalties per participant. In addition to money lost to penalties, it is likely that many Indigenous people who were unemployed responded to CDP requirements by disengaging from the income support system entirely. The CDP evaluation conducted by the Australian Government’s Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (DPMC) found that 4.5% of CDP participants disengaged from the income support system in an average year (DPMC, 2018). Of this group, 14% did not return to income support. Among the 86% who did return to income support, the average period without income support was three months. The number of serious penalties declined after the implementation of reforms in 2019, and ceased once work-for-the-dole mutual obligations were paused in the pandemic. Other independent analysis suggests that the number of participants leaving the scheme but not finding work may be much higher (Fowkes, 2018).

The CDP evaluation also found that each quarter between January 2016 and June 2017, ‘around 60 per cent of CDP participants experienced at least one payment suspension and approximately one-third experienced at least one penalty’ (DPMC, 2018, p. 31). These penalties included zero-rate (that is, no income) penalties when

payments were suspended entirely, lasting for an average of 23 days. Fowkes (2019) presents data to show that these penalties were highly disproportionate, compared to those under mainstream services. Fowkes estimates that while between July 1, 2013 to June 30, 2018, CDP participants accounted for less than one-twentieth of the national employment services caseload, they received 38.8% of all penalties.

Figure 5 Mean annualised number of ‘serious penalties’ per RCJP/CDP participant



Source: Figure by the authors from data provided by Lisa Fowkes.

The CDP has been a major failure in remote employment policy, dramatically impacting the lives of Indigenous people living remotely. CDP failed dismally in its substantive aim – to move people into ‘real employment’.

More specifically:

- Around 70% of participants have received income support for more than five out of the last 20 years (DPMC, 2018).
- In the 12 months prior to June 2023, there were just 2,218 ‘26-week outcomes’ for over 40,000 participants, or around 5% of participants (National Indigenous Australians Agency [NIAA], 2024a). Many of these outcomes were actually part of CDP rather than jobs created by the private sector, and includes former CDP participants employed through government-funded positions such as the ‘Trialling Pathways to Real Jobs’ initiative.
- In the last financial year when work-for-the-dole was fully operational prior to the pandemic (in the 12 months to June 2019), there were just 492 ‘26-week outcomes’ for 29,350 participants, or 1.7% of participants (NIAA, 2024a).
- Caseload numbers under CDP have grown over time, peaking at around 44,000 participants in 2020 (see Figure 4 in this report).

Ultimately, the waged jobs that were supposed to lift participants out of their reliance on CDP (and previous programs) simply never eventuated. The policy, intended to hassle people into waged jobs that did not exist, was futile and damaging for those forced to endure mutual obligations. As described above, very few CDP participants have found employment in positions that lasted for 26 weeks. The quest to find ‘sustainable’ private job creation did not match the reality of employment in remote communities. It remains the case that most jobs created in remote communities are either directly or indirectly government-funded positions, in part or in full. Accordingly, the biggest risk to already existing jobs in remote communities is the longevity of government

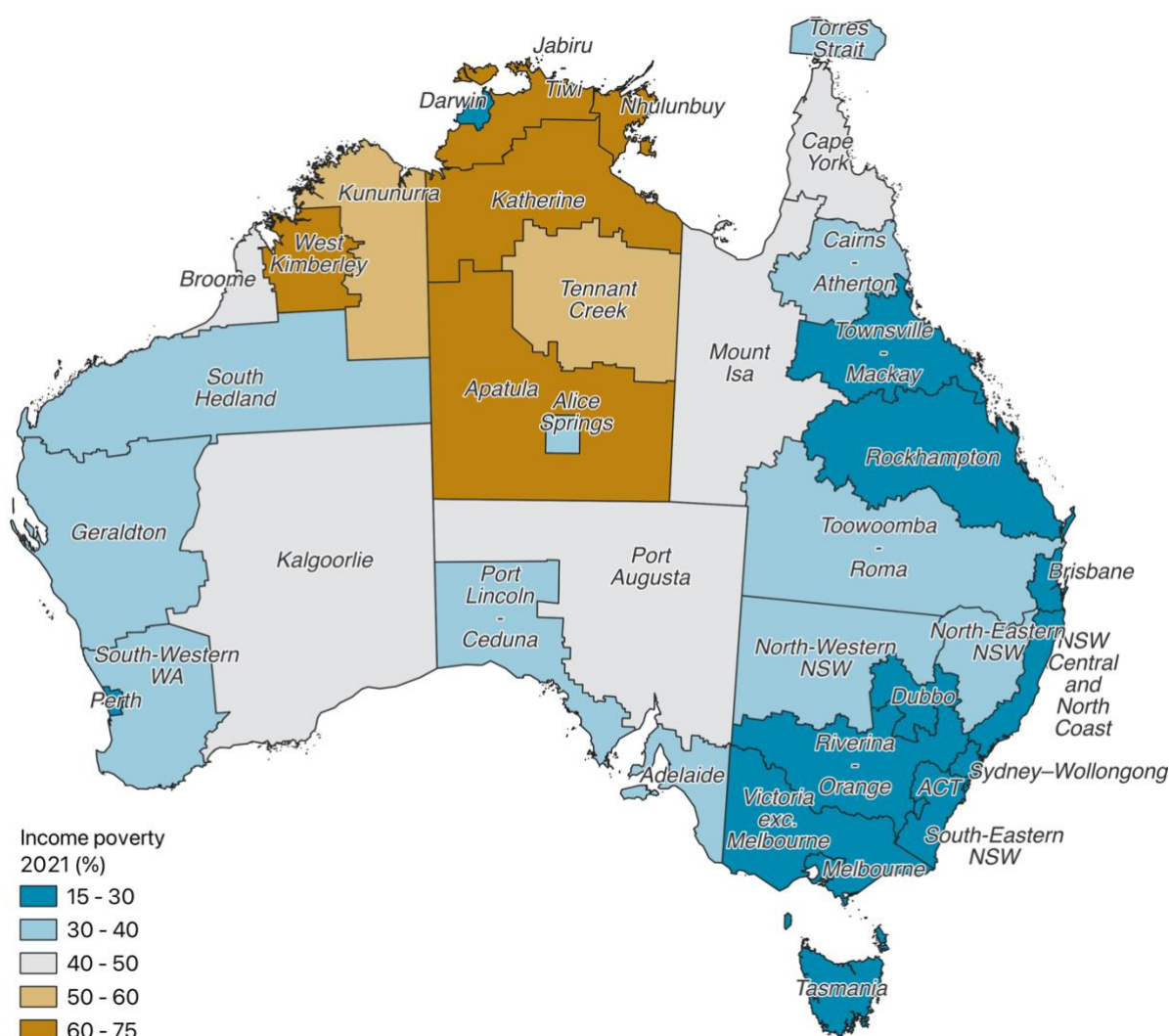
funding which is consistently affected by election cycles, government priorities, and government funding restrictions.

2.3 Income (in)sufficiency

Income insufficiency is both a product of structural disadvantage shaped by colonisation, and a tool used by government to propel people into labour markets, which, in remote areas, are extremely limited. The latter point is explained in Section 3 (*How did we get here?*), where hostile conditions of social security systems are designed by governments to deter people from seeking support and to propel them into labour markets.

Because of limited labour markets in remote communities, employment is not the main form of economic security for many households and many Indigenous people in remote communities rely on social security payments. However, social security payments, particularly Jobseeker and Youth Allowance payments are notoriously low and place people relying on them well under the poverty line.

Income poverty rates in remote Indigenous communities are among the highest in the country. In 2021, the Indigenous cash poverty rate in the NT was 54.6%, compared with 28.1% in the rest of Australia (Figure 6). Viewed regionally, poverty rates are uniquely high in the very remote parts of the NT and the Kimberley – and are getting worse. In these regions, poverty rates are more than 50%. In the 'Apatula' statistical region in Central Australia, Indigenous poverty rates are estimated to be 70.1%. This level of impoverishment is unparalleled among other populations in Australia.

Figure 6 Indigenous income poverty rates by Indigenous Region in the 2021 Census

Source: Calculations by the authors from the ABS 2021 Census of Population and Housing and the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA).

Worse still, the poverty rates portrayed in Figure 6 under-estimate the true difference in very remote parts of Australia, including much of the NT where poverty rates are highest. This is because standard income-based poverty metrics like cash poverty rates fail to capture the impact on poverty of the elevated cost of living in remote communities – masking the severity of poverty among remote Indigenous populations as inflated prices for food and other essentials in these areas deepen financial hardship.

Without adjusting for the higher costs in remote communities, conventional poverty rates offer a misleading picture, likely understating the true extent of poverty. Markham (2024) estimates that remote Indigenous communities face higher prices for basic goods that are around 39% higher than those in major urban centres. Higher prices are due to the combination of small populations and geographical remoteness, which limit buying power and increase freight costs. The income support system does not adequately account for this price differential. Markham (2024) estimates that to adjust for the higher cost of living in remote areas, the social security supplement known as the 'Remote Area Allowance' needs a significant increase. For a single unemployed adult, the allowance would need to be raised from \$9.10 per week to \$145.34 per week to ensure they can afford the same bundle of commodities as those living in a major city – thus providing 'horizontal

equity' in the social security system. Despite multiple reports to government recommending an increase to the Remote Area Allowance, it remains unchanged (Economic Inclusion Advisory Committee, 2024, 2025; Productivity Commission, 2024a; Senate Community Affairs References Committee, 2020, 2024).

The Albanese Labor Government response to this situation, the Low-Cost Essentials Subsidy Scheme commenced on July 1, 2025, with the goal of easing cost-of-living pressures and reducing high rates of food insecurity in remote First Nations communities (McCarthy, 2025b). The scheme involves a \$50 million expenditure over four years to reduce the cost of 30 everyday essential items to prices comparable to urban supermarkets, with remote consumers expected to save between 30% and 50% on these products. Items chosen for the subsidy, such as flour, rice, UHT milk, tinned vegetables, and personal hygiene products like nappies and toilet paper (Interim Subsidy Scheme Advisory Group, 2025). Fresh perishable goods were not initially included. The scheme initially targets over 76 remote stores with plans for expansion to up to 152 stores.

Income and poverty in remote communities

The decline in CDEP employment and its replacement with CDP led to falling median incomes for Indigenous people in remote areas. Figure 7 charts the decline in median real personal incomes for Indigenous men and women over the period 1994–2018. While the median income of women rose over the period from 1994 to 2008 as more women became employed, female incomes returned to 1994 levels by 2018 after the abolition of the CDEP. After falling in the eight years from 1994, real male median incomes recovered somewhat to \$320 per week. However, the CDEP to CDP transition saw median incomes for men fall to \$275 per week by 2018.

Unsurprisingly, these declines in median incomes have translated into rising poverty rates. Remote Indigenous poverty rates have been escalating over the last decade, increasing by over 8 percentage points between 2011 and 2021.

Poverty in the NT is not just more prevalent than in the rest of the country, it is also growing (Figure 9). The increasing rate of Indigenous poverty in the NT contrasts with the falling rate of Indigenous poverty elsewhere in Australia, which declined from 32.7% in 2011 to 28.1% in 2021. Poverty rates between 2016 and 2021 grew fastest in remote regions of the NT and in the West Kimberley (Figure 9).

Remote poverty rates have been rising for three main reasons. First, the transition from CDEP to the CDP led to a loss of income, as the additional hours of CDEP work with 'top-up' wages were eliminated. Analysis of ABS survey data from 2008 and 2018 show the impact this had on remote incomes (Figure 10).

In 2008, CDEP workers received an average of \$98 more per week than the unemployed due to the availability of top-up work. Without CDEP, people in remote areas who couldn't find work had to rely solely on income support, reducing the possibility to supplement meagre welfare payments. By 2018, the real rate of income support payments was unchanged. As such, the abolition of CDEP resulted in a \$100 per week drop in income for many remote residents.

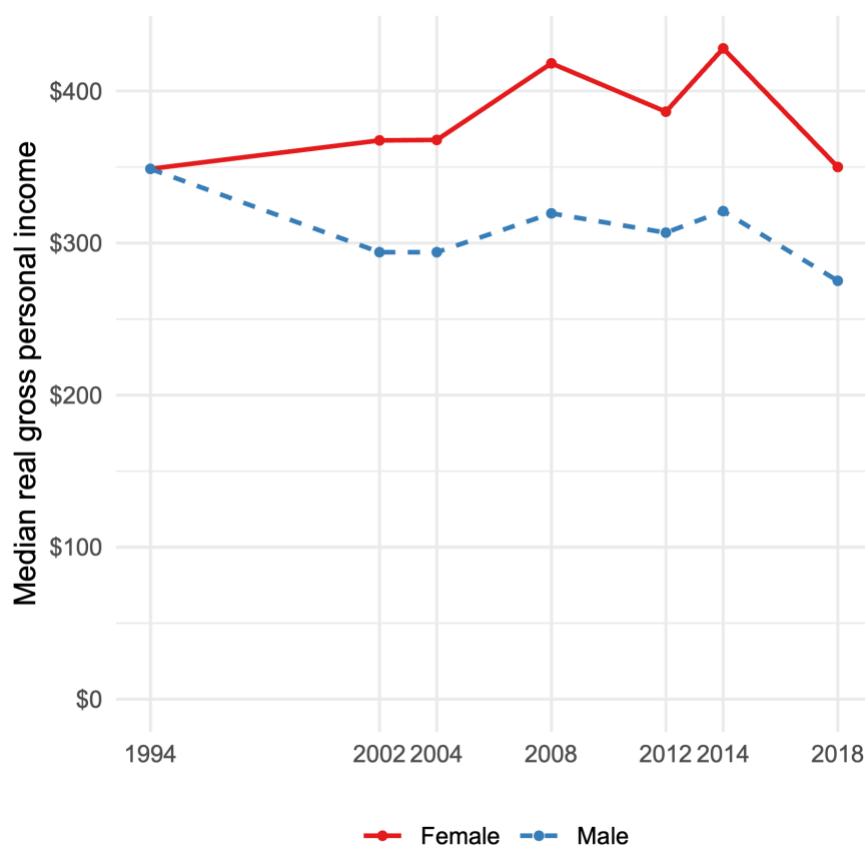
Second, the abolition of CDEP and its replacement with CDP did not lead to participants finding and taking up jobs. This was the assumption of the designers of the CDP. According to the *Programme Logic Model for the Reformed RJCP*, a medium-term outcome of the CDP would be 'Increased creation of local/remote jobs/local enterprises/building the local labour market' (reproduced in Altman, 2017, p. 18). But with no mechanism in place within CDP to create such an outcome, few jobs have been forthcoming. With few new jobs for former CDEP participants to go to, the CDP program failed to alleviate poverty and increase employment. Further, by imposing large numbers of penalties and fines on participants, CDP reduced participant incomes by a modest amount, while a number of unemployed former participants dropped out of the social security system entirely (DPMC, 2018).

Third, the rate of working-age social security payments has been falling further below the poverty line. Standard poverty lines in Australia, such as the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD's) '50% of the median equivalised household income', rise in line with wages. If wages increase, the median household income and poverty line also rise. To stay above this threshold, household incomes must match or exceed wage growth. However, most working-age social security payments in Australia are indexed to the consumer price index (CPI), which typically rises more slowly than wages. Consequently, over time, these payments fall further below the poverty line.

In short, the economic marginalisation in remote Aboriginal communities has deepened in recent decades, particularly in the NT. From the early 1990s to 2018, remote Indigenous employment witnessed growth followed by a significant decline. The abolition of CDEP program – which had facilitated employment among Indigenous people – led to a dramatic fall in employment rates, with men's employment plummeting from 63% to 37%, and women's from 43% to 34% by 2018. The transition from CDEP to the RJCP and later the CDP did not compensate for the lost employment, as these new programs did not create jobs. The CDP also imposed strict compliance measures, resulting in many participants being penalised, leading to disengagement from the income support system.

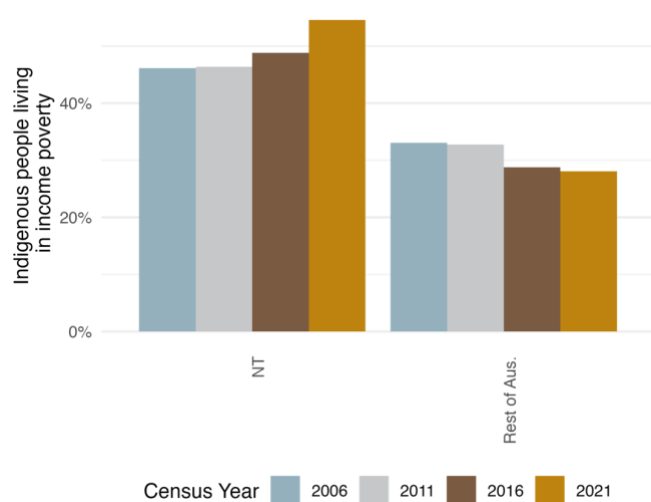
The abolition of CDEP and the implementation of RJCP and CDP also negatively impacted incomes. Median real personal incomes for Indigenous people in remote areas declined, particularly for men, whose incomes fell from \$320 per week in 2008 to \$275 per week by 2018. This was driven primarily by the loss of CDEP top-up wages. The decline in income contributed to a rise in poverty rates, which increased by over 8 percentage points in remote Indigenous communities between 2011 and 2021, reaching 70% in much of Central Australia by 2021. The NT saw a particularly sharp rise in poverty, contrasting with a decline in Indigenous poverty rates elsewhere in Australia. Contributing factors to this worsening poverty include the lack of new job opportunities under CDP and the failure of social security payments to keep pace with rising poverty lines. In short, the transition from CDEP, to RJCP, to CDP has exacerbated economic hardship in remote Indigenous communities, leading to lower employment rates, declining incomes, and rising poverty (See Figure 8).

Figure 7 Real median personal incomes for working-age Indigenous men and women in constant 2018 dollars, 1994, 2002, 2004, 2008, 2012, 2014 and 2018



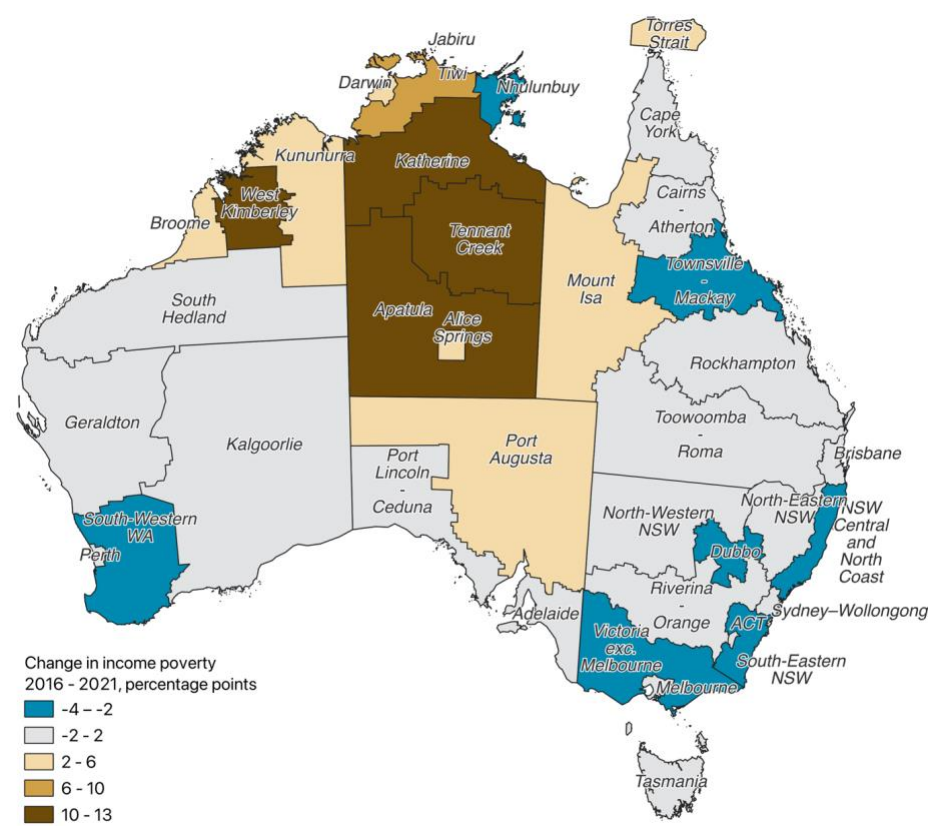
Source: Authors' calculations from various ABS surveys.

Figure 8 Indigenous poverty rates in the Northern Territory compared with the rest of Australia, 2006, 2011, 2016 and 2021



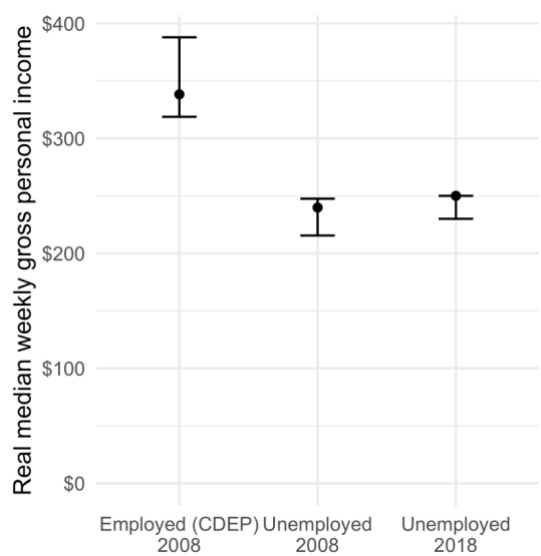
Source: Authors' calculations from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) and the ABS Census.

Figure 9 Change in Indigenous poverty rates for ABS Indigenous Regions, 2016–2021



Source: Authors' calculations from HILDA and the ABS Census.

Figure 10 Real median personal incomes for working-age Indigenous people outside mainstream employment in constant 2018 dollars by labour force status, 2008 and 2018



Source: Authors' calculations from various ABS surveys.

2.4 Recent remote employment policy responses

Given the harms evidenced above, CDP unsurprisingly faced strong critique from Indigenous people, their organisations and other advocates. Largely because of this Indigenous-led advocacy, and a racial discrimination case against the Commonwealth brought about by nine communities in the Shire of Ngaanyatjaraku (Auditor-General, 2024; Kral, 2016), in 2021, the then Minister for Indigenous Affairs Ken Wyatt committed to replacing CDP with a New Jobs Program (Australian Government, 2021, p. 176). This planned program was to be underpinned through the short-lived Remote Engagement Program (REP) Trial. On May 11, the Coalition Government announced it would cease the work-for-the-dole obligations (NIAA, 2021). This commitment was furthered in 2022 by the incoming Labor government who committed to ‘scrap CDP’ entirely (Australian Labor Party, 2022). Labor promised to ‘replace it with a new program that creates real jobs, with proper wages and conditions, developed in partnership with First Nations people’ (Australian Labor Party, 2022).

CDP replacement trials

A new phase of trials to inform the replacement of CDP commenced first under the former Morrison Government’s REP Trial, and further expanded by the first-term Albanese Labor Government. The Morrison Government era REP Trial was intended to test ‘whether receiving an additional \$190 per fortnight in supplementary income support payment is an incentive for jobseekers to participate in a placement for at least 15 hours per week’ (Auditor-General, 2024, p. 53). The REP Trial focused on job placements similar to CDP activities but with added financial incentives. Critics suggested that the trial was doomed to fail, given the challenges of providing pathways to jobs that don’t exist in structurally underdeveloped labour markets (e.g. Altman et al., 2021). The ‘trial’ ended with no one ever receiving the remote engagement program payment (Burney, 2024).

The second trial was announced by the then Minister for Indigenous Australians, Linda Burney in August 2022, following a Remote Employment Roundtable held in the lead-up to the Prime Minister’s Jobs and Skills Summit (Burney & McCarthy, 2022). The *Trialling Pathways to Real Jobs Trial* (also known as the CDP Trials) commenced in November 2022. It gave CDP service providers the ability to use a portion of their existing funding (initially 25%, later increased to 30%) flexibly, to undertake so-called ‘micro testing to improve support and employment outcomes people normally subject to CDP’ (NIAA, 2023b). Around 5,500 people were included in these trials. Despite the rhetoric of ‘consultation’ and ‘learning’, according to the Auditor-General (2024, p. 53), these trials had a purpose of ‘managing perceptions’ and managing the risk that providers are ‘unsuccessful in engaging job seekers in activities or not investing sufficient effort in encouraging engagement’. While the design of the trial made it difficult to clearly understand the trials’ impact (Auditor-General, 2024), a synthesis report based on interviews with providers found that (NIAA, 2024b):

- according to providers, mentoring of CDP workers is a key driver of retention
- many prospective employers lacked the supervisory capacity to take on CDP workers through the trial
- attempts to use the trials to support new social enterprises had mixed success
- paying award wages was an incentive for people to participate, but participants were wary of losing access to social security payments.

This second CDP Trial was extended into a second phase in January 2023, referred to as ‘Community Projects’ (NIAA, 2024c). This second phase aimed to create paid work for more than 2,000 CDP participants by the end of October 2024, among other outcomes.

A third trial – the New Jobs Program Trial (NJPT) was announced by the Minister Linda Burney in October 2022–23 and commenced in September 2023. It initially aimed to create up to 200 job opportunities in remote and very remote areas with limited labour markets (Auditor-General, 2024), and was expanded to 300 jobs due to delays in the establishment of RJED. Most of the program funding was announced in the 2023–24 Budget, with expenditure totalling \$22.7 million to ‘support the development of... the [NJPT] to replace the CDP...’ (Chalmers & Gallagher, 2023, p. 190). The NJPT was structured like an ongoing grants program that provided full wage subsidies to community organisations and local government bodies, covering the minimum wage and including leave and superannuation entitlements. The NJPT funding also covered associated costs like training, supervision, consumables, small-scale capital, and equipment hire. The NJPT was available in 17 of the 60 CDP regions, reportedly chosen for their thin labour markets, varied locations, high CDP participant caseloads, inclusion within enhanced CIM areas, and suitability for testing the trial approach in diverse contexts (NIAA, 2023a). While it was initially announced that the NJPT would be a six-month trial finishing mid-2023, it only started in September 2023 and was extended to conclude at the end of June 2025 (NIAA, 2024d). The NIAA reported to the Senate that in December 2024, ‘34 applications have been approved for 300 jobs with 187 people employed’ under the NJPT (NIAA, 2025c).

The fourth pilot, the Ngaanyatjarra Engagement and Employment (NEE) Trial, was established to meet the terms of the confidential settlement from the CDP racial discrimination case against the Commonwealth brought about by nine communities in the Shire of Ngaanyatjarraku (Auditor-General, 2024). Accordingly, it was targeted at Ngaanyatjarra communities only. The NEE Trial began with an Engagement and Design phase from July 1, 2023 to June 30, 2024, with the delivery phase starting on July 1, 2024 and continuing until June 30, 2025 (NIAA, 2025c). According to information reported to the Senate, as of September 30, 2024, 357 participants had taken part in the trial, although what their participation involved remains unclear. Among participants, around 5% (19 individuals) had gained employment (NIAA, 2025c).

Remote Jobs and Economic Development program and Remote Australia Employment Service

In February 2024, and beyond these trials and pilots, the Labor Prime Minister announced a two-stage plan to replace the CDP. The first stage involved creating a new remote jobs program, followed by a second stage focused on transitioning to a new remote employment service (Albanese et al., 2024). By March 2024, a First Nations Reference Group was formed to advise and collaborate with the government on designing and implementing the new programs (Burney & McCarthy, 2024).

The Remote Jobs and Economic Development program

The first of these initiatives was termed the Remote Jobs and Economic Development program (RJED). The RJED was slated to provide 3,000 government-supported minimum wage jobs supplied for three years across remote Australia. The first round of grants opened in December 2024, with a second round opening in February 2025. In early April, 2025, grants were expected to be awarded for ‘more than 650 new jobs with around 100 employers across remote Australia’ (McCarthy, 2025), with another 800 jobs with 160 employers announced in August (Albanese, 2025).

Importantly, the grant guidelines for the first two rounds of RJED made it clear that the program is not intended to provide long-term job creation in communities. According to the funding guidelines, RJED is instead ‘intended to create new jobs that will help people develop the skills and experience needed to transition to sustainable employment’ (NIAA, 2025b, p. 8). Accordingly, these positions are time-limited for a period of three years. Applications from organisations to secure RJED positions needed to describe how the job may be sustainable and the actions they will undertake to ensure ongoing sustainability of the job beyond the RJED funding (NIAA, 2025b, p. 18). The guidelines emphasised community consultation, requiring applicant organisations to

demonstrate active engagement with local communities to ensure that job creation initiatives reflect and meet local aspirations and economic development goals.

The Proposed Remote Australia Employment Service

At the time of writing, the draft guidelines for the new Remote Australia Employment Service (RAES) – the second step to replace CDP – has been released for public consultation, with the service scheduled to start in November 2025 (NIAA, 2025a). In many ways, RAES appears to be a continuation of CDP rather than a break with it. In response to questioning in the Senate about the key differences between CDP and RAES, the NIAA indicated rather opaquely (NIAA, 2025c):

The new service will feature participant-centred, tailored case management to reflect individual job readiness, improved assessment processes, a focus on literacy and numeracy. Community projects will be a key part of the service, funding providers to deliver innovative approaches to enterprise development, and supporting community projects that engage job seekers to build skills and become job ready. There will also be improved training and resources for providers and a new provider payment model to incentivise improved service delivery, including post-placement support.

The focus on job readiness, rather than the provision of employment or income remains. The draft grant guidelines also show minimal change from the existing CDP program, other than the inclusion of Community Projects. These are described as ‘an ongoing mechanism to further generate and create employment opportunities’ (NIAA, 2025a, p. 8). The guidelines indicate that 25% of the program’s overall \$738 million funding pool will be available to support Community Projects, and that providers will have to work with ‘community, employers and key stakeholders to scope and develop innovative projects that support employment pathways and job creation, community initiatives, social enterprise opportunities and local industry development needs.’ These Community Projects are modelled after the CDP Trials. Based on the draft guidelines, funding will be able to be used for wages and entitlements, project equipment/materials, payments to community members to assist with the design and facilitation of Community Projects, and practical support like meals and equipment for participants. A second notable inclusion in the draft guidelines is a focus on improving provider capability, with reference to ‘significant’ investment in provider training, service-delivery resources and online training under the new program.

There is, however, minimal information on provider accountability arrangements which was a key concern raised by the Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) report on CDP. Also concerning is the lack of attention to ongoing policy logics that have hampered remote employment policy over time and identified in this paper⁵; denial of Indigenous self-determination; preoccupation with finding sustainable jobs in remote communities with limited government support; and, how having a job defines people’s deservingness for economic security.

4. How did we get here?

The road to the current crisis has been long, but in the last two decades significant ‘neo-colonial’ and ‘neo-liberal’ approaches have exacerbated hardship for First Nations people in the Northern Territory and elsewhere in remote Australia. Before European colonisation, Indigenous peoples were sustainably ‘fully employed’ through livelihoods since time immemorial. Indigenous unemployment and underemployment has only been

⁵ We note that our Freedom of Information request for the RAES program logic was denied on the basis that its publication may ‘have a substantial adverse effect on the financial interests’ of NIAA and that it would ‘raise probity concerns in the procurement of services for the RAES Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning work’. See https://www.righttoknow.org.au/request/raes_program_logic#incoming-41995

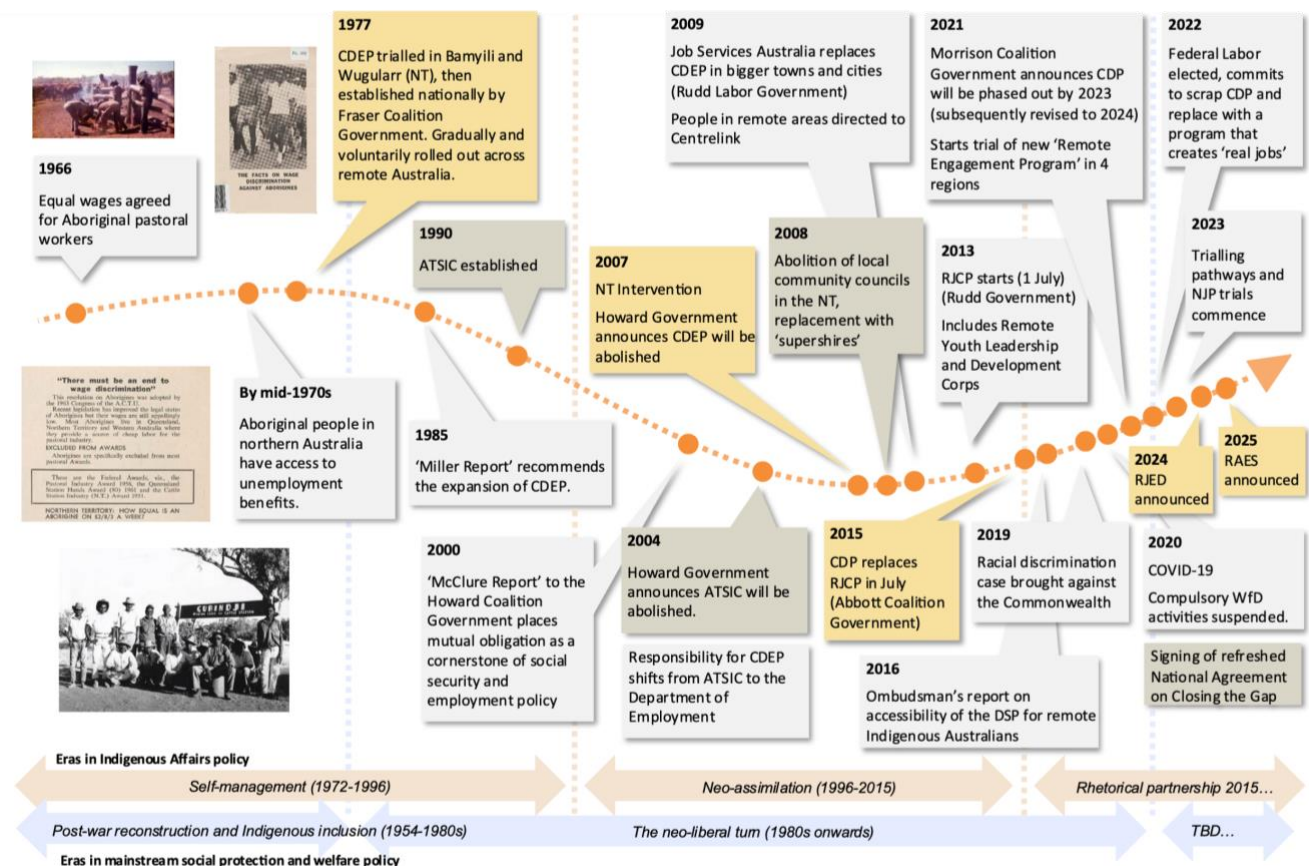
created through European colonisation that has dispossessed Indigenous peoples of their land and livelihoods – first through frontier violence, and later, attempted assimilation. Unemployment and economic insecurity can only be understood as a problem emerging from both historic and ongoing colonisation.

The settler economy has long expropriated Indigenous labour. The extraction of unpaid and forced labour of Indigenous people living remotely has been central to the viability of many settler industries such as agriculture, pastoralism, and pearling. Expropriation was also enabled by the Protection Acts which facilitated the non-payment of First Nations people for their work through what is now called ‘stolen wages’ (Standing Committee on Legal and Constitutional Affairs, 2006), as well as the stolen generations where stolen children were made to work in unpaid servitude in non-Indigenous households (Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997). Even after award wages were required for Indigenous people, many living on ‘government settlements’ and ‘missions’ were paid below award training allowances (Sanders, 1986).

A timeline of the key policy changes in remote employment and welfare policy-making is shown in Figure 11, and in changes in the so-called mainstream social protection and welfare policy-making. These aspects of policy history are described in detail below.

This section explores the evolution of remote Indigenous employment and income policies as outcomes of changing approaches to settler-colonial governance intersecting with mainstream social protection policies. We first examine how settler-colonial governance has shifted from policies of exclusion and assimilation towards self-determination (or self-management), and then to a phase of punitive mainstreaming via neo-assimilationist logics. We then examine the changing ideological approaches to mainstream social protection and welfare policy that have occurred alongside, whilst also shaping aspects of settler governance.

Figure 11 Timeline of key changes in both mainstream social security policy and remote employment policy



Source: Unpublished presentation provided by the Central Land Council.

3.1 Settler-colonial governance over time

Self-management era, 1972–1996

With the 1967 referendum and the election of the Labor Whitlam Commonwealth government in 1972, a new era of Indigenous policy-making began, sometimes referred to as the 'self-determination era' (Davis, 2015). The Commonwealth took a leading role in Indigenous affairs nationwide. Before self-government in the NT in 1978, the Commonwealth had operated the regional administration of Indigenous affairs in the Territory. But after 1972, the Commonwealth expanded its role nationally, establishing a Department of Aboriginal Affairs and moving to respond to the growing Aboriginal social movements, including the movement for land rights.

During this period, Indigenous people won land rights in the NT, established national Indigenous representative bodies, gained access to social security, took control of former missions and government stations, and, in some cases, moved back to remote homelands (outstations) that survive today as discrete Indigenous communities. They also established an ecosystem of community-controlled organisations that evolved into what has come to be called the 'Indigenous sector' (Rowse, 2005).

With the election of the Whitlam Government, the Department of Aboriginal Affairs and an elected National Aboriginal Consultative Committee was established. These institutions would later become ATSIC in 1990 when Indigenous control of Indigenous affairs was at its peak. ATSIC allowed elected First Nations representatives to

participate in policy-making, devise and implement regional development strategies in consultation with communities, distribute program funding, and advise all levels of government on First Nations policy and planning (Sanders, 2002). Despite being constrained by Cabinet's decisions and the rules governing all Australian Public Service agencies, ATSIC provided First Nations representatives with unprecedented autonomy in administering Indigenous affairs and influencing political decision-making.

Although Indigenous public policy-making by the Commonwealth rarely met the standard of self-determination, during this period it did focus on Indigenous self-management and facilitated considerable local autonomy.

Discussions of remote employment also underwent considerable change in this period. Following the Wave Hill walk-off and ongoing pressure by Indigenous peoples and communities, award wages were granted for Indigenous people. Unemployment benefits were also paid to Indigenous people living on settlements or missions where they were 'capable of and willing to work and [where] no such work is available on the settlement or mission' (Sanders 1986, p.285, cited in Fowkes 2019, p. 54).

Award wages exposed the unviability of many industries across Australia, who had before used unpaid and indentured Indigenous labour. Now having to pay Indigenous people, station owners and pastoralists cried poor and pushed people off the stations. By the late 1970s, hundreds of Aboriginal people who had been displaced from pastoral stations ended up in towns across the NT and northern Western Australia. The ongoing issue of the limits to remote labour markets became a major public policy issue.

The Fraser Coalition Government responded to this issue of limited labour markets for people living remotely through the eventual invention of CDEP. H. C. 'Nugget' Coombs, a key architect of the policy, described CDEP as, '... not simply a means of providing employment as a source of a minimum cash income, but a training exercise in self-management and increasing independence for the Aboriginal communities involved' (Coombs, 1977 cited in Fowkes 2019, p. 56). However cracks quickly appeared – CDEP participants faced restrictions in accessing unemployment benefits, and CDEP was more popular than expected, so CDEP places exceeded the number that the Department of Aboriginal Affairs could initially fund (Fowkes 2019; Sanders 1985).

Given these issues, the Hawke Government commissioned a review of CDEP by the Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs (1985), known as the 'Miller Report' as it was led by Indigenous leader Mick Miller. The report saw that CDEP was both a way to improve access to the regular labour market as well as to recognise the right of Aboriginal people to generate livelihoods outside it. Importantly, and as identified by Fowkes (2019), CDEP was never a 'complete program to develop remote communities' and needed further investment. Rather '... the CDEP, when properly understood and implemented, provides a sound approach for communities needing to develop a more diverse economic base. It needs to be considered as much (perhaps more) an income supplement to productive activity being undertaken, as it is a work creation program' (Miller Report, p.188 cited in Fowkes, 2019 p. 61).

The Hawke Government responded to the Miller Report by expanding CDEP – both in number and also geographically – providing places for non-remote communities. CDEP was further strengthened with the establishment of ATSIC in 1990, which largely saw CDEP as a critical aspect of Indigenous working and community life.

Neo-assimilation era, 1996–2015

As Prime Minister, John Howard decisively ended the self-management era, attacking the notion of Indigenous self-determination and Indigenous political autonomy as a form of separatism that ran counter to 'Australian national unity'. As Leader of the Opposition, he had opposed policies that supported Indigenous political aspirations, such as the introduction of ATSIC and the official recognition of the Aboriginal flag (Gunstone,

2007). As Prime Minister, he set about weakening the institutions of Indigenous rights and vestiges of Indigenous self-management. Among his objectives were weakening native title rights, which he famously claimed in 1997 had 'pushed the pendulum too far in the Aboriginal direction' (Howard, 1997). Howard's abolition of ATSIC in 2004 set the stage for the demise of CDEP, which survived for some years after ATSIC, but ended under the Labor Government some 10 years later. Howard attacked 'self-determination' in international forums too, with Minister Herron (1999) seeking to have the term removed from the United Nations Draft Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) because its inclusion might support 'forms of Aboriginal sovereign self-government'.

At the heart of the ideology of the period of neo-assimilation is the view that Indigenous aspirations, priorities and ways of life were deficient in comparison to white settler modernity, and that Indigenous self-determination was a threat to the unity and self-image of the Australian nation. Opposing political autonomy and self-determined Indigenous futures, Howard, Rudd/Gillard and Abbott Governments promoted statistical convergence with the mainstream such as through the first round of Closing the Gap targets, which placed these measures as *the acceptable* standard for Indigenous economic development (Altman, 2009). Inequality was understood as the lack of sameness between some Indigenous peoples and non-Indigenous peoples (Altman, 2016). Consequently, settler ideas of improvement and progress focused on enforcing the uptake of norms of settler society – particularly through the focus on being employed. Basic services and social security were made conditional via the social security system. Individuals were rewarded for displaying the 'correct' settler behaviour, whilst those resisting were punished through the disproportionate work-for-the-dole requirements under CDP and Compulsory Income Management (CIM) (Strakosch, 2015). Indigenous development policies that were underpinned by these ideological assumptions targeted behavioural change and foreclosed options for alternative livelihoods.

A defining blow of this time was the Northern Territory Emergency Response (NTER) in 2007 which has major implications for Indigenous self-determination today, including impacting community-driven solutions for remote unemployment. Under Prime Minister Howard, the 'Intervention' initiated a wide-ranging plan to reshape Indigenous communities and lives in the NT. The NTER involved the enforcement of a raft of policies targeting Indigenous individuals and communities across the NT. Measures included (Altman & Hinkson, 2007):

- bans on alcohol consumption
- bans on pornography
- quarantining of welfare money
- highly regulated tenancy arrangements that disallowed different residential arrangements
- compulsory acquisition of township leases from the legally recognised owners to facilitate governmental controls, and
- appointing government business managers with legal rights to monitor the meeting of community organisations and with absolute powers in townships.

The NTER was a racialised policy that targeted Indigenous Australians and was only possible because the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* was suspended. The United Nations Special Rapporteur on Human Rights, James Anaya, criticised the NTER for Australia's breaches of the *United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (UNDRIP) (Anaya, 2010).

Under the NTER, Indigenous people receiving welfare support were placed onto Compulsory Income Management. There is strong evidence that the introduction of CIM caused strong adverse outcomes for children, in birth weight and school attendance (Cobb-Clark et al., 2023; Doyle et al., 2022). These authors

suggest several explanations for the reduction of birth weight, including that CIM increased stress on mothers, disrupted existing financial arrangements within the household, and created confusion as to how to access funds; and that implementation issues may be a possible explanation for the reduction in school attendance.

At the time of writing, CIM continues in the NT (and has further been expanded to other populations through the Cashless Debit Card and now Enhanced Income Management⁶). The cohort of people in the NT remains the largest group of people subjected to CIM in Australia – around 19,000 people. This is despite the Commonwealth Government's own evaluation of the program showing the results were poor. Specifically, Bray et al. (2014) concluded that:

... [a] wide range of measures related to consumption, financial capability, financial harassment, alcohol and related behaviours, child health, child neglect, developmental outcomes, and school attendance have been considered as part of this evaluation.... Despite the magnitude of the program the evaluation does not find any consistent evidence of Compulsory Income Management having a significant systematic positive impact.

The impacts of the NTER were cumulative – in individual lives, and within and across communities. The NTER exercised dramatic control over Indigenous lives, whilst undermining and eroding ACCOs' capacity and authority to deliver for their communities. Ultimately the NTER was an assault on self-determination and the ability for communities to enact decisions on areas that impact their lives.

For example, funding to support Indigenous community organisations has subsequently been cut post-NTER. In 2014, much of the \$4.8 billion relied on by ACCOs was put to tender by the Australian Government (Page, 2018). This Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) forced ACCOs, many small and unfamiliar with such a highly bureaucratic processes, to apply in a competitive funding process. This meant that Aboriginal controlled, community-based organisations had to compete for funding needed for survival against organisations versed in competitive tender processes. Many organisations they had to compete with were non-Indigenous and sometimes for-profit organisations – with grant-writing, efficiency-budgeting expertise, and political lobbying capability (Davis, 2016). Indigenous applications constituted only 40% of the total and a smaller 26% of successful grants. Further, the average size of grants was \$663,000, much less than the average sought of \$2.8 million (Altman, 2015). This is significant, as many ACCOs were already under-resourced. Having only partial funding severely impacted ACCOs' capacity to undertake the front-line work, leaving significant 'gaps' in the services delivered to First Nations people (Senate Finance and Public Administration References Committee, 2016).

Most pertinent to this paper is the demise of CDEP. Howard's neo-assimilationist agenda and destruction of Indigenous self-management institutions such as ATSIC and CDEP both succumbed to prolonged attacks during Howard's fourth and final term. Abolishing ATSIC, one of CDEP's biggest defenders, made it easier for Howard to make changes that would begin the demise of CDEP – which survived despite attacks until the election of the Rudd/Gillard Labor Government.

It was the Rudd and Gillard Labor Governments from 2008 to 2013 who oversaw most of the destruction of CDEP through their RJCP. The RJCP, like its successor CDP, was a mutual obligation program and it was RJCP that saw the introduction of the compliance-based mutual obligations. Following this, the Abbott Coalition Government replaced RJCP with the now-failed CDP⁷. Under CDP, mutual obligations were further tightened,

⁶ The Cashless Debit Card (CDC) is now voluntary outside the NT. The NT Government is transitioning people forced to use the BasicsCard and the Cashless Debit Card to take on 'Enhanced Income Management' through what is called the Smart Card. The NT Government is also currently consulting across the NT about the 'future of income management' – with an indication but no firm commitment that it will be made voluntary – although whether voluntary is at the individual level or community level, remains to be seen.

⁷ For a nuanced and extensive discussion of this period of policy changes (CDEP to RJCP to CDP), please refer to Fowkes 2019, chapter 3.

and these changes were heavily influenced by Andrew Forrest's advocacy linked to his *Review of Indigenous Training and Employment Programmes* (Klein, 2014).

This whole period of CDEP demise was also driven by departmental differences within Commonwealth agencies and individual bureaucrats (Sanders, 2012). This goes to the issue of knowledge produced and held within departments and their ability (or lack of) to support Indigenous communities and advocates to genuinely address root causes of Indigenous unemployment.

Era of rhetorical partnership, 2015–present

Arguably, the overt neo-assimilationist era has morphed into an era of 'inclusion' rhetoric; a change marked during the prime ministership of Malcolm Turnbull from 2015. Turnbull – while failing to invest in Indigenous policy initiatives and refusing to adopt the demands of the Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017) – adopted the language of 'inclusion' in Indigenous affairs. In his memoir, Turnbull was proud to profess that he adopted as a 'mantra' in Indigenous affairs that 'we must stop doing things to Indigenous people and start doing things with them' (Turnbull, 2020, ch. 43). However, under his leadership, doing things 'with' Indigenous people morphed into doing very little. This period remains significant for remote employment policy because again, we see the denial of Indigenous self-determination by policy makers and the reinforcement through rhetoric, 'that government knows best' when it comes to remote employment policy-making.

Symptomatic of the shift to rhetorical partnership was Turnbull's handling of a Council of Australian Governments (COAG) process to 'Refresh' the expiring Closing the Gap framework (Council of Australian Governments (COAG), 2018). Rather than heeding calls for self-determination via treaty, Turnbull used 'refreshing' Closing the Gap to promote the rhetoric of inclusion, without divesting legal power or recognising Indigenous sovereignties. The Refresh process commenced as a top-down exercise run by Aboriginal Affairs bureaucrats and ministers.

Yet Turnbull – and even more so Scott Morrison after he replaced Turnbull as Prime Minister in 2018 – reacted to pressure from leaders of Indigenous peak bodies for representation in decision-making processes for the Closing the Gap Refresh. The language communicated from the negotiation of the new agreement was one of shared decision-making, genuine partnerships, co-design and priority reforms to how governments do business.⁸

The language of self-determination re-emerged following the election of a Labor government in 2022. However, in the government's first term, the policy substance has failed to live up to the rhetoric, and the implementation of this new National Agreement on Closing the Gap provides another example of the disconnect between rhetoric and practice. While the commitments under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations & Australian Governments, 2020) mark a clear shift away from neo-assimilationism to a language of inclusivity, the actions of governments have remained largely unchanged.

The Productivity Commission's (2024) review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap found that a significant barrier to progress is the lack of power sharing for joint decision-making and the unwillingness of governments to cede power to Indigenous interests. The referendum on a First Nations Voice provides another symptomatic example for the analysis of the current moment. In December 2015, Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull and Opposition Leader Bill Shorten established a 16-member council to provide guidance on advancing a successful referendum to recognise Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in the Constitution. Over the

⁸ For example, see the priority reforms of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap: 1) formal partnerships and shared decision making, 2) building the community controlled sector (ACCOs), 3) transforming government organisations, and 4) shared access to data and information at a regional level. <https://www.closingthegap.gov.au/national-agreement/priority-reforms>

following year and a half, the Referendum Council developed a Discussion Paper, and facilitated 12 First Nations Regional Dialogues as well as a National Constitutional Convention held at Uluru in May 2017.

This extensive process of discussion and debate led to the creation of the Uluru Statement from the Heart (2017). This document articulated the positions and aspirations of the Convention's First Nations participants. The Uluru Statement advocated for two significant reforms within Australian political institutions: the creation of a First Nations Voice enshrined in the Constitution and the formation of a Makarrata Commission to oversee a process of agreement-making between governments and First Nations, and to promote truth-telling about Australia's history.

While these proposals for reform were rebuffed by the Turnbull and Morrison governments, the Labor Party came to power in 2022 with a promise of implementing the Uluru Statement from the Heart in full. The first priority was to be a referendum to embed a requirement for a First Nations Voice into the constitution.

The decision to propose the Voice as the first reform was the result of a carefully calibrated political decision from participants in the dialogues. A Voice was seen as being a meaningful reform that would transfer discursive power to First Nations people, without requiring a constitutionally underpinned transfer of decision-making authority of the kind enjoyed by ATSIC. The delegates to the First Nations Constitutional Convention decided that this kind of modest yet substantive proposal had the best chance of gaining bipartisan political support (generally thought to be required to garner the necessary votes to change the constitution at a referendum). Even if successful, this proposal would have been limited to the realm of discursive power transfer only, in line with the ethos of the time.

Despite – or perhaps because of – the incoming Prime Minister, Anthony Albanese, announcing on election night that a referendum would be a key priority of his government, bipartisan support did not materialise. The referendum, held in October 2023, was decisively defeated. Even the modest reform of establishing a Voice was deemed too ambitious by the Australian electorate. As a result, more radical proposals such as Treaty or Treaties have been removed from the Commonwealth and most state and territory government's policy agendas⁹.

It may be too soon to definitively describe the current government's approach to Indigenous affairs, however, it appears that there is a significant gap between rhetoric and reality. Although government rhetoric has shifted to emphasise inclusion, co-design, and partnership, with Indigenous consultation becoming a priority for government agencies, little has changed in practice. The Productivity Commission has highlighted that business-as-usual practices persist within both government departments and cabinet, especially at the highest levels. Others have questioned Albanese's return to an 'economic development' agenda and the dumping of Uluru Statement from the Heart as a return to Howard-era assimilation (Williams, 2025). Apart from the language used to speak about Indigenous affairs, little seems to be changing within this government.

3.2 Mainstream social protection and welfare policy

The establishment of the social security system has long been held up as a major success of Australian democracy – with the first laws being passed just after Federation. While Australia was early to develop a welfare state internationally, it did not grow significantly until after World War II. Indigenous people, however, were explicitly excluded from the social security system in the first half of the 20th Century, and despite some

⁹ See, e.g., Prime Minister's backing down on his promise to implement fully the Uluru Statement from the Heart and the Makarrata body at the 2024 Garna Festival <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2024-08-05/albanese-backs-away-from-makarrata-commission-promise/104181776>. <https://www.pm.gov.au/media/economic-empowerment-indigenous-australians-address-garna-festival>

positive signs during CDEP and some remote area exemptions, have largely been marginalised and punished within it ever since.

At the heart of the Australian welfare state is the valorisation of employment as *the* contribution to society. In the first 50 years of federation, the debate around benefits was, in a large part, over how much individuals contributed to society to be deserving of benefits. Benefits were for those who contributed financially to the system through waged labour and paying taxes (which in turn paid for social security).

This link between work and social security entitlements is what led Castles and others to famously name the 'Australia's *wage-earners* welfare state' (Castles, 1985). This is why the first social security payment was the aged pension – a reward for the (male, white) worker who had contributed to the economy through his labour over his life. The next lot of payments were maternity payments in 1912 which were won from white feminists who made the case that social reproduction is also a contribution to the economy and society.

The moral economy classifying some people as deserving and others as undeserving of state support is carried over from Britain. Mendelsohn (1979, p. 207) notes that the 'Commonwealth retained power until 1974 to refuse payment if a person were not of good character or deserving of a pension, or had deserted a spouse, or if as a husband the applicant had failed to support his wife and children'. Governments have long tried to prevent the 'undeserving' from accessing welfare to which they were deemed not to be entitled. The Australian 'workers' welfare state' was bolstered further by the logic of 'less eligibility' – making the welfare system hostile and payments low enough that only the most 'needy' would access it (everyone else would seek employment).¹⁰

Both the logics of less eligibility and deservingness have continued in various iterations throughout Australian social security policy since federation. The former informs the ideas about who should have support, and the latter is the base of what we understand now to be the means test – ensuring that support is only given to the 'neediest'. These ideas about deservingness are visible in remote employment policy formulation still today, where people are punished via the welfare system (e.g., through below poverty line payments and mutual obligations), if they are not in work.

Post-War Reconstruction and Indigenous inclusion: 1945–1980s

The expansion of the welfare state

The post-war era saw a notable expansion of Australia's modern welfare state from the 1940s to the 1970s. The wartime Labor Government established the Ministry of Post-War Reconstruction, headed by H. C. Coombs to plan the transition to a post-war economy (Macintyre, 2015).

Labor had mixed success in expanding federal authority over key areas of the welfare state and introducing significant reforms, such as the unemployment benefit, the pharmaceutical benefits scheme, and maternity payments. Australia embraced Keynesian macroeconomic management, which fit well with its nation building traditions. Coombs led the Reserve Bank of Australia over 1949–1968 during a period in which it sought to use Keynesian demand management to stimulate the economy and maintain full employment, with unemployment rates averaging around 2%. Coombs, a key architect of the state-driven post-war employment

¹⁰ Less eligibility comes from the Poor Laws stemming from the 1832 Royal Commission to examine the provision of poor relief in England. The Royal Commission wrote that 'the first and most essential of all conditions, a principle which we find universally admitted' is that the recipient of relief's situation 'shall not be made really or apparently so eligible as the situation of the independent labourer of the lowest class'. The 1832 Commission recommended that the able-bodied poor could be given relief in the workhouse under conditions less eligible than the working poor. Less eligibility meant making workhouse inmates labour, strict regimes, monotonous diet, and no small pleasures. These conditions were carefully crafted, as reports and correspondence from various workhouses shows. The British poor laws were never introduced in Australia, but governments promoted private charities to establish and run orphanages, industrial schools and workhouses which were all informed by British ideas of less eligibility. These included the 'workhouse test' where appropriate (relief only in exchange for work), the notion of 'less eligibility' (any relief offered to the destitute poor had to be worse than that obtainable through work of the lowest paid), and the separation between the deserving and undeserving poor, particularly through the use of vagrancy acts (see, e.g., Mills & Klein, 2021).

boom, would later become influential in devising CDEP, the community-development approach which drew inspiration from post-war reconstruction.

To finance the expansion of social security services, Australian governments steadily increased progressive income taxes and various indirect taxes, including sales taxes and excise duties. This tax strategy was essential for maintaining the financial sustainability of the welfare state and supporting the broader economic objectives of the Keynesian full employment model. For those not employed, Australia's flat-rate benefits were miserly compared with social insurance systems, but they were more universal as they did not require past contributions such as required with a social insurance schemes.

Capital controls, public works, and decent wages ensured that most workers could achieve secure home ownership, lower living costs and protection from poverty in retirement. The exclusion of remote Indigenous people from standard employment meant that they benefited little from the growth of the welfare state. The *Henderson Poverty Inquiry* in the 1970s revealed the limitations of the wage-earners' welfare state and highlighted the significant levels of Indigenous poverty (Altman & Hunter, 1997).

From Indigenous exclusion to equal rights

Whilst non-Indigenous Australians enjoyed support from the welfare state from the early 20th Century, Indigenous people had no right to access social security payments. With the shift from protection to assimilation policies in the 1950s, 'protectors' became 'welfare officers,' and both were part of the bureaucratic machine that controlled Indigenous lives and took Indigenous children away from their families. Rations were used as a way to coax Indigenous people onto stations, plantations and missions and off Country.

Indigenous people only gained formal access to social security gradually from the 1940s onwards (Sanders, 1986). In 1942, some Aboriginal people gained access to child endowment. This access was conditional on the mother's 'character' and exemptions from state and territory protectionist control. In 1966 the final legislated exclusion was removed, only six years after the additions of the exclusion if mothers were considered 'primitive'.

Whilst the removal of legislative barriers to receipt of benefits for Indigenous people, came about formally in 1966, administrative decisions prevented access to unemployment benefits for remote Indigenous people until well into the 1970s. It still took the best part of a decade for Indigenous people living on missions and reserves to receive their social security entitlements directly, rather than having them paid to church or state authorities (Sanders, 1985). Individuals were administratively classified as being 'outside of the workforce' and thus not unemployed. Indigenous people living remotely were left with the 'training allowance' – minimal income paid for skilled work undertaken on reserves. No training was necessarily involved, the use of the term 'training' was to justify a lower payment rate reflecting the dramatic and racialised undervaluing of Indigenous labour (Fowkes, 2019; Rowse, 1998).

This arrangement continued in the NT well into the 1970s. Change only came about after Aboriginal workers were included in the NT pastoral industry award and NT authorities succumbed to pressure to raise the training wage to above the rate of unemployment benefits. Whilst legislating a minimum wage for Aboriginal people consistent with what non-Indigenous people were being paid was a step forward, doing so exposed the unviability of agricultural industries across the North of Australia that had long profited from unpaid and then underpaid/government-subsidised Aboriginal labour via the training programs. When they were required to pay the minimum wage, they could not afford to without jeopardising their profits, and so they removed many First Nations people off their farms and stations, causing their mass internal displacement to the fringes of towns such as Katherine and Alice Springs. It also made visible the government's 'remote unemployment problem', and the many people needing social security to survive.

The Whitlam Government, when elected, intended to create a number of award-wage public service positions for Indigenous people in remote communities and provide funds for Aboriginal organisations and councils to undertake specific projects or provide particular services (Sanders, 1985). Those unable to secure such a position would be eligible for mainstream social security payments, including unemployment benefits. These changes were not fully implemented until 1978, amid obstruction within the Department of Social Security and concerns that those receiving unemployment benefits would be disincentivised from working. This was the beginning of CDEP.

CDEP: A novel solution to the problem of Indigenous labour market exclusion

In 1977, H. C. Coombs noted that in the Pitjantjatjara communities where he was working, there were 'socially important tasks to be undertaken' but no waged employment (Sanders, 2012). Coombs, therefore, argued that 'it would be rational and practical to resolve the policy issue' by providing communities with grants equal to the amount their members would receive in unemployment benefits. These grants could then be used to employ community members directly.

The CDEP scheme was gradually and voluntarily rolled out across remote communities from 1977. The scheme provided government-supported salaries for community determined activities. CDEP supported Indigenous community employment for almost 40 years before being incrementally dismantled over a decade from 2004.

The CDEP was a standout in remote employment policy with regard to increasing remote employment rates, community development, and community control. Some celebrated this era of policy-making as embodying a spirit of Indigenous self-determination, however self-determination was not guaranteed by the constitutional changes of 1967. The granting of Commonwealth powers to legislate for Indigenous people in 1967 meant that First Nations rights were always subject to the control of Commonwealth governments (Moreton-Robinson, 2009). As Moreton-Robinson (2009) notes, being included under the jurisdiction of the Commonwealth government continued the status quo whereby Indigenous people and their sovereignty are subject to the control of settler legal frameworks, which can be used to promote assimilation. This became evident with the election of the Howard, Rudd/Gillard and Abbott Governments, and despite CDEP having many successes, CDEP was always at the whim of settler government decisions, which ultimately chose to abolish the program.

The Neoliberal turn: 1980s onwards

With the 1980s election of Margaret Thatcher in the United Kingdom and Ronald Reagan in the United States, a new era of economic management replaced Keynesian economic management across the West, including Australia. Neoliberalism ushered in an era that understood economic instability as a condition not remedied by government, but rather through non-government intervention, or, allowing the 'market' to regulate itself through *laissez faire* economics. Contrary to what is commonly thought of as neoliberalism – i.e. limited government intervention in a 'market based' society, neoliberalism in reality involves mass government regulation. What makes this regulation 'invisible', is how the state creates laws and regulations that support the market and private capital (Cahill, 2010).

Full employment as the model for the settler economy was abandoned and a new economic order was implemented. This new neoliberal model relied on higher rates of unemployment to keep inflation constrained – since the 1980s, the unemployment rate has averaged 6.6%, compared to 2.0% in the post-war Keynesian decades.¹¹

To manage the politics of this structural change (that has thrown more people out of work), causes of poverty and unemployment have been redefined. They are now attributed to an individual behavioural fault rather than

¹¹ Authors' calculations from the ABS *Labor Force Survey*.

to the choices of economic managers and the structural marginalisation inherent within capitalism. Rather than addressing these structural forces, neoliberal economic logic argues for the state to take on a paternalist and disciplining role for any individuals or groups that are unable to be self-sufficient or effective in their choices (Chester, 2012). Poverty and the receipt of social security payments became a key marker of this in this era. The old logics of deservingness and less eligibility have been refashioned by the political class as the stigmatising notions 'welfare dependency' and 'dole bludger' (Archer, 2009).

From the 1990s onwards, the social security system in Australia became increasingly hostile to recipients. This manifested in three different ways.

The first, and most obvious, was tight controls on spending on social security payments – while 'tax concessions', a form of welfare for the middle and upper classes, ballooned (Stebbing & Spies-Butcher, 2010). The rates of working-age social security payments were kept low and allowed to drift further below the poverty line. Eligibility for family allowances to support children, and more generous working-age payments such as single parent payments and disability support pension were also tightened, successfully constraining social security spending in the 2000s and 2010s.

Second was the privatisation of services. As part of a neoliberal push towards privatisation and the reduction of public sector capacity, support for the unemployed was transferred from a Commonwealth agency to private employment service providers in 1998 (Quiggin, 2002). Governments have relied on market competition in urban areas and competitive tender processes in remote areas to select organisations to administer programs that 'help and hassle' the unemployed in finding work. This approach has proven largely ineffective at assisting the unemployed to find work and potentially harmful, especially for those unemployed for long spells. Recent research suggests, for example, that unemployed workers subject to mutual obligations take longer to become re-employed and spend less time in employment compared to otherwise identical unemployed searching without mutual obligations (Gerards & Welters, 2022).

The system favours short-term training programs over long-term skill development and has led to the recycling of unemployed individuals through repetitive work-for-the-dole programs, which can be demoralising and counterproductive. Conflicting incentives within the system prioritise profit, performance against contractual indicators, and competition over care and trust, resulting in a dehumanising and ineffective support system for job seekers. Time spent by unemployed workers complying with mutual obligation requirements can also perversely reduce time available to search for suitable work, keeping people unemployed for longer and nudging them to exit the system into jobs which may be a poor match for their skills (Gerards & Welters, 2022).

Third has been the rise of mutual obligations and low payment rates. This 'welfare conditionality approach' was cemented in 2000 through the final report of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform, *Participation support for a more equitable society* (McClure, 2000), that argued for a new Participation Support System underpinned by mutual obligations. Mutual obligations have meant that payments are conditional on recipients undertaking tasks such as training, submitting job applications and taking part in 'work-like' activities for their payments. Also following the McClure report, mutual obligations were extended to groups that previously did not have them, including sole parents and carers of younger children.

Mutual obligations are mandatory, and so people are often met with sanctions if they do not undertake these obligations. The logic of this hostile social security environment caused by mutual obligations and the threat of suspension and sanctions is to deter anyone not 'needing support' and compel people back into the labour market.

Noel Pearson supported this change in social security ideology and argued for mutual obligations in his vision of Indigenous welfare reform. In *Our right to take responsibility* (Pearson, 2000), and *From hand out to hand up*

(Pearson, 2007), Pearson essentially saw mutual obligations as a way to reinstate ‘responsibility’ in Indigenous communities that he argued had been lost through welfare dependency. He argued that while the social security system was superficially consistent with Indigenous values like reciprocity and community, it may exacerbate marginalisation rather than alleviating it. For Pearson, welfare dependency creates a damaging cycle of poverty, fostering short-term cash economies and undermining self-determination. Accordingly, he advocated for welfare reform he saw as genuinely empowering Indigenous people, enabling them to take control of their lives rather than imposing conditions that reinforce inequality and dependency. In practice, this has meant support for welfare conditionality through measures such as Income Management, the scrapping of CDEP and advocacy for a job guarantee which would provide a job for all – but on the condition that ‘unemployment benefits... become history’ (Pearson, 2020, para. 28). While Pearson has proposed a job guarantee, arguing that it has significant merits, there is also a significant risk that there would be no safety net for those out of employment (Pearson, 2020; Pearson & Mitchell, 2020).

Critiques of welfare conditionality are diverse but often include the failure of policy to recognise both the limited availability of dignified and suitable jobs and the reality that people draw on social security for various reasons, including illness, disability and because of caring responsibilities. Both of these points are particularly important as many people, particularly women and First Nations people living remotely, need social security to supplement their income because they are already undertaking productive work – albeit unpaid – or because they are subjected to limited labour markets.

There have been various iterations of the employment services regime, with mutual obligation as the cornerstone – including JobActive, WorkForce Australia and ParentsNext. We now discuss the last two as they have specific implications in thinking about ongoing pressures shaping the unemployment space.

Workforce Australia

Starting in 2022, Workforce Australia is the Australian Government’s main employment service. Workforce Australia replaced *Jobactive* and is administered by Department of Employment and Workplace Relations (DEWR). It is the fifth iteration of privatised employment services. Currently, two other national employment services run alongside Workforce Australia: Disability Employment Services administered by the Department of Social Services; and Community Development Program (CDP), administered by NIAA.

People subject to Workforce Australia are required to complete mutual obligation requirements. Mutual obligations vary but can include agreeing to a Job Plan, attending appointments with a provider, and completing activities set out in the Job Plan.

These requirements are meant to be set out in the Job Plan (Employment Pathway Plan) and participants must report completion of obligations on a regular basis, unless exempt (exemptions though are usually only temporary) (DEWR, 2024a).

Workforce Australia also includes the Points-Based Activation System (PBAS) – a monthly points target that participants must meet to fulfill their mutual obligations. Participants are required to accrue a maximum of 100 points per month to meet mutual obligation requirements. As part of the PBAS score, Jobseekers are also required to complete a minimum number of job applications per month. This system is largely automated and online managed by privatised employment service providers. If people do not comply with these measures, their payments are suspended and/or cut off.

In November 2023, the House of Representatives Select Committee on Workforce Australia Employment Services released the final report *Rebuilding employment services* (the Hill Review), which concluded that:

It's harsh but true to say that Australia no longer has an effective coherent national employment services system; we have an inefficient outsourced fragmented social security compliance management system that sometimes gets someone a job against all odds. The system does not effectively serve jobseekers or engage service partners, and it is overly focussed on supply (jobseekers) rather than demand (employers). Government must be far more actively involved with a public sector core to a rebuilt system. ... A key part of the problem is that the Australian Government today has no view as to what is a good service model or what or why something works (Hill et al., 2023, p. xi).

On the topic of mutual obligation, the report described them as 'excessive, tying the system up in red tape, driving employers away and having limited, if any benefit in terms of improving [long-term unemployed] jobseekers' capacity for social and economic participation or securing work....[and] in too many cases... actually making people less employable' (Hill et al., 2023, p. 73). Instead of the current system underpinned by the Targetted Compliance Framework, it recommended more tailored individual 'Participation and Jobs Plans' be introduced, widening the variety of activation requirements and removing 'default activities', and increasing discretion for frontline staff to 'counsel clients a few times a year before moving into compliance' (Hill et al., 2023, pp. xvi–xvii).

The report noted the over-representation of Indigenous people in mainstream employment services, both among the unemployed relative to their population share, and in terms of the penalisation rate (Hill et al., 2023, pp. 439–440):

In the period from April to June 2023, First Nations peoples made up 25 per cent of participants in Workforce Australia Services who received at least one payment suspension. In addition, suspension data for Workforce Australia Online and Workforce Australia Services for the period from July 2022 to September 2023 shows that First Nations peoples made up 36 per cent of participants who received 10 to 19 suspensions and 47 per cent of participants who received over 20 suspensions. By comparison, First Nations peoples have consistently made up approximately 15 per cent of the Workforce Australia caseload.

The report recommended that '...there would be a specialist service partners [sic] available in each region where there... [is a] reasonably sized First Nations... cohort' (p. 494) and that Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations [ACCOs] 'are to be preferred as the service delivery organisation for First Nations jobseekers' (p. 495). This would, according to the report's authors, '[align] with previously settled understandings of First Nations peoples' right to self-determination' (p. 495). A recommissioning of employment services through ACCOs in areas with a high Indigenous population was recommended as a 'priority, even before a new commissioning model is fully developed and implemented' (p. 498).

Despite this comprehensive and damning review, and its extensive recommendations, the Albanese Labor Government has done very little to transform these fundamental failures of the employment services system. Workforce Australia continues with major flaws including a privatised and unresponsive provider system, mutual obligations that damage those subjected to them, and a system based on a logic that does not reflect the changing nature of work – which is increasingly precarious, sporadic and low-paid. Whilst noting these issues in the Hill report, the Australian Government response to this inquiry still committed to mutual obligations, or in the words of their report 'ensuring the social security system continues to be considered to facilitate participation' (Australian Government, 2024a, p. 7). The government cites public sentiment that 'people receiving income support, who are assessed as capable to work [should] engage in some kind [of] activity in return' (p. 8-9).

Also included in the Government's response to the Hill Review is a small wage subsidy trial, and a handful of place-based trials of employment services initiatives. These initiatives are vague, and phrased around

'progressively reform[ing] the mutual obligation framework which focuses on supporting people into work' and considering' better tailoring the system to the needs of the unemployed (p. 9). First Nations people who are unemployed have only fleeting mentions in the government response to the Hill Review – where the government has redesigned the electronic communications for Workforce Australia 'with a First Nations communications specialist and user tested to ensure they are culturally suitable and easy to understand' (p. 7).

Whilst we do not assume that government will apply the Targeted Compliance Framework and the PBAS system in remote communities, mainly because of the ongoing and effective opposition to these measures by Indigenous led organisations such as APO NT, it is important to consider the impact of mainstream policy settings because they do, as history shows, influence what happens in the design of remote employment programs.

ParentsNext

ParentsNext was a punitive and compulsory mutual obligation program running through 2016–2023 (it later became a program included under Workforce Australia when it was constituted in 2022). ParentsNext specifically targeted many parents who received the Parenting Payment, the majority of whom were single mothers.

In the initial 2016 pilot, ParentsNext was explicitly focused on Indigenous communities and included a disproportionate number of Indigenous women. People placed on ParentsNext were obligated to develop a participation plan with the service provider, which included agreeing on specific activities that parents would undertake. People on ParentsNext were then expected to fulfil these activities as part of the compliance requirement. These plans included provisions for not just turning up for the activities and provider appointments, but also to self-report their income regularly. Attending these activities was not voluntary. Failure to attend activities or to self-report income could result in the suspension of their parenting payments, which was often their only source of income (Klein, 2021).

Mutual obligations have been particularly problematic through a gendered lens because they overlook unpaid care work and social reproduction work undertaken already by people subjected to them. As argued by McDowell (2005), welfare conditionality policies such as ParentsNext, 'ignore the relational values of care and love for others that inform voluntary and unpaid care, assuming instead that value lies only in financially remunerated forms of effort' (McDowell, 2005). This goes to a major and enduring tension of mutual obligations in ParentNext which contributed to its downfall; its inability to recognise various productive activities people undertake – including unpaid care work.

Due to pressure from community organisations and women subjected to ParentsNext, along with evidence showing the detrimental impacts of ParentsNext, and damning findings (in a separate part of the Hill review), the Albanese Commonwealth Labor government has recently abolished the program.

The future of ParentsNext stands out in the employment services reform landscape. Unlike other aspects of Workforce Australia, the Commonwealth government has committed to a complete redesign of ParentsNext codesigned with single parents and their advocates. This is a marked shift in how government has previously worked in the employment policy space and could provide an important precedent for how government *should* work with Indigenous controlled organisations to create real and meaningful employment policy and programs.

4. Opportunities for the future of remote Indigenous employment programs

Drawing on the changes underway in remote employment policy, and informed by an appreciation of the historic context of what that has been done before, this section of the paper analyses the current opportunities for remote employment policy reform capable of addressing the scale of need in remote Indigenous communities.

The analysis will first assess the enduring logics that continue to limit substantive reform. It will then explore the potential new frameworks for governance and social policy that might emerge as replacements.

4.1 Enduring logics that cloud clear policy thinking today

The current policy conjecture in Indigenous policy is shaped by both changing settler colonial and mainstream ideologies. Below, we note three significant and enduring assumptions that in our view, continue to shape and limit innovation in the current policy landscape.

Linking of deservingness and economic security to having a job

The logic of having a job to determine your worthiness of having economic security underpins both remote employment policy making, and mainstream social security provision. Whilst employment may be important and aspired to, policy also must be cognisant that i) not everyone can work (because of illness, or disability), ii) a person may be working but just not in employment (voluntary work, care of Country, social reproduction and unpaid care), and iii) labour markets are precarious, and in remote Australia, are very limited.

This enduring logic of deservingness and ‘having a job’ as a marker of a person’s worth, and contribution to society legitimatises the low social security base payments (particularly Jobseeker and youth allowance), as well as overlooking the structural limits of remote labour markets.

Finding ‘Sustainable jobs’ as a remedy to welfare dependency in remote Australia

Welfare dependency has been treated as a disease that needs to be cured through employment policy – impacting disproportionately Indigenous people. This is a perverse framing given how Indigenous peoples were made to be dependent on the Australian state when the Australian state removed Indigenous people from their lands and took away their means of production.

Cronin (2007) argues that this ‘denial of sovereign rights has left Indigenous people with a welfare economy and has put us in a position of “dependency” where we must rely on the benevolence of government’ (Cronin, 2007, p. 179). Despite being an outcome of settler colonial dispossession, Indigenous people are long blamed for dependency and despite this structural dispossession, are expected to develop ways of self-sufficiency amidst colonisation.

In the context of the Commonwealth Government’s efforts to replace the CDP with a program that provides direct investment in job creation, the ‘sustainability’¹² of these jobs (i.e. ability for a worker to transition into

¹² We also find the use of sustainability as a term problematic in the context of climate change and the severe challenges faced by communities in Australia’s North, including many remote First Nations communities, and government policy that is not reflecting the urgency of the situation. As noted by Barrie et al. (2024), ‘The Australian Government is giving priority to the development of northern Australia, including fossil fuel energy resources, regional trade expansion, indigenous affairs and increased military presence in line with DSR strategic realignment [Defence Strategic Review]’. Yet the report also noted how much of the North of Australia is included in ‘Heat Zones’, areas so extremely impacted by climate change that they will make livelihoods and communities difficult to sustain. The authors ask ‘...has the government fully considered the impacts of climate change on the future viability and liveability of that region?’ (p. 14).

another 'real job' after a (short) period of placements remains a significant challenge. The expectation that this can and should happen reflects two key assumptions: that the market economy will generate and sustain these jobs, and that the government's role is to prepare individuals for existing jobs.

However, in remote Australia, there are simply not enough suitable waged jobs available. High unemployment rates are primarily due to a failing labour market rather than a lack of incentive among individuals. To truly address the issue of 'sustainable' jobs, future policies must move beyond short-term workfare models and acknowledge the structural limitations of the labour market in remote Australia. This means developing alternative avenues for securing dignified, stable, and liveable incomes, and sustained government investment in a level of direct job creation, rather than recycling individuals through ineffective and punitive programs.

Ongoing denial of Indigenous self-determination where government knows best when it comes to remote Indigenous livelihoods

Paternalism has been an enduring feature of Indigenous policy-making that continues to undermine Indigenous self-determination and governance. Despite rhetoric around shared decision-making since 2015, and the commitments to partnership under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, governments continue to exercise paternalism in policy development. They not only control the options on the table, and have the final say, but also decide who is included in discussions and who is excluded. Indigenous organisations are faced with precarious and often opaque funding arrangements or reporting requirements, and sometimes competition with non-Indigenous organisations through a tender process.

At the program level, these three enduring logics have significant implications for the ability to achieve reform in line with the principles articulated in the Fair Work and Strong Communities (FWSC) model and beyond.

4.2 Employment services reform – current directions and future opportunities

In this section we canvas the various current policy ideas impacting remote employment, and note opportunities for policy to support First Nations people.

Replacing CDP

The replacement of CDP is expected to be completed by the end of 2025. As described above, the reform comprises a job creation component – 3,000 new jobs funded under RJED – and the employment service component – the new RAES. Whilst the creation of 3,000 jobs is a step forward, it will not meet the needs of 40,000 CDP participants. The government appears to be giving limited serious policy attention to how to do this.

When considering employment opportunities for individuals on the CDP caseload who won't receive jobs through the RJED program, there may be opportunities to formalise work undertaken to care for people in remote Australia, for example, through alternative commissioning for the NDIS. However, these will likely only suit the needs, skills and aspirations of some carers. Future policy should continue to consider how caring for people might be more widely supported and valued in remote Australia.

Attempts at employment creation through growing local industry and community enterprises are also important, but these won't cover everyone. Local organisations and service providers do attempt to start up community enterprises and small businesses to employ people. Whilst this work is important, they often do not provide ongoing employment for everyone in need of ongoing employment. For example, during the 'Trialling Pathways

to Real Jobs', providers sought to establish 28 community enterprises during the trial, including cafes and kitchens, maintenance and cleaning for National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) participants, art sales, and laundries. Due to the short period of the trial, all were set up as part of the CDP provider, rather than as standalone organisations. However, reviews of some of these initiatives noted how the enterprises 'were not operating optimally and were unlikely to be financially sustainable in their current form' (NIAA, 2024b).

Replacements to CDP must directly confront the issue of sustainability. Future approaches should move beyond tinkering with workfare models that assume there is sufficient paid employment available for all remote living Indigenous people. Making individuals 'job ready' with training and workplace discipline will not automatically generate paid employment. According to data provided by the NIAA to government, 15,000 of the 40,000 CDP participants are *already 'job ready'* (Auditor-General, 2024) – they need jobs, not mutual obligations. Certainly, upskilling and education opportunities should be available to all who wish to take these up. But they cannot be relied upon to fix the structurally limited labour market in remote Australia because they do not target its primary cause – there simply is not enough paid employment for all. Any meaningful program designed to replace CDP must address this primary cause head on.

One resource for Indigenous people in contestation over the replacement of the CDP is the *Racial Discrimination Act 1975* (RDA). The legality of CDP under discrimination law was always in doubt. As early as 2015, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet (which held responsibility for CDP) was advised that there was a 'medium to high' risk that the program was inconsistent with the RDA (Abbatangelo, 2025; Auditor-General, 2024, p. 30). In December 2016, the Shire of Ngaanyatjaraku lodged a complaint with the Australian Human Rights Commission regarding the CDP, claiming it breached the RDA. The mediation process that followed failed, leading to litigation in the Federal Court in *Dawson and Others v Commonwealth of Australia* in July 2019. In 2021, key officials – including the chief executive of NIAA and relevant ministers – were advised they could be personally liable for 'misfeasance in public office' (Abbatangelo, 2025). That same year, the case was settled out of court for \$2 million, thereby avoiding legal scrutiny of the program's lawfulness. As part of the negotiations and final settlement, the NIAA committed to reforming the CDP. The complainants insisted that the CDP's mutual obligation requirements, or those of any future programs, should be 'on par' with requirements in non-remote areas (Auditor-General, 2024, pp. 30–31). A new class action launched in July 2023 now threatens to reopen these unresolved legal questions (Abbatangelo, 2025).

The settlement in *Dawson v Commonwealth* – and the reported legal advice provided to the Commonwealth in 2015 – indicates that the excessive penalties and suspensions resulting from CDP, and its indirect racial targeting of Indigenous peoples, was likely to have breached the RDA. Any replacement to CDP must be conducted in a manner that does not discriminate against Indigenous peoples. Given the existing evidence of disproportionate harms accruing to non-remote Indigenous people under Workforce Australia described above, there is a reasonable chance that an extension of this mainstream program to remote Australia will be judged as unlawful if litigated. Accordingly, re-introducing compulsory forms of work-for-the-dole to the unemployed in remote Australia as envisaged could be very difficult to do without overstepping the bounds imposed by anti-discrimination law. It is perhaps for this reason that 'participation in activities to meet mutual obligations will remain voluntary until 2027' under RAES (NIAA, 2025d).

A possible avenue to secure the legal footing for the replacement to CDP is to introduce it as a 'special measure' for remote-living Indigenous people (rather than as a policy focused on all residents of remote regions). Special measures are those that, according to article 1.4 of the *International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination*, are:

taken for the sole purpose of securing adequate advancement of certain racial or ethnic groups or individuals requiring such protection as may be necessary in order to ensure such groups or individuals

equal enjoyment or exercise of human rights and fundamental freedoms shall not be deemed racial discrimination, provided, however, that such measures do not, as a consequence, lead to the maintenance of separate rights for different racial groups and that they shall not be continued after the objectives for which they were taken have been achieved.

For a special measure to be legal, it would require that the replacement for CDP actually benefit remote-living Indigenous people, and substantively accord with their priorities and aspirations (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2011). Designing future remote employment programs as a special measure could give government both a secure legal foundation for the policy, but they would need to ensure that the policy actually benefited remote Indigenous people. It is notable that CDEP was implemented under such a legal arrangement and lasted the best part of 35 years (Antonios, 1997).

The Australian National Audit Office (ANAO) has highlighted some serious deficiencies in the government's approach to the replacement of CDP (Auditor General, 2024). Perhaps most importantly, given this reform has occurred in the Albanese government's commitment to the priority reforms under the National Agreement on Closing the Gap, and its pre-election commitment to design the replacement for CDP 'in partnership with First Nations people' (Australian Labor Party, 2022), the report notes that 'key governance arrangements for the reform process, including the representation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups in decision-making, were not established until January 2024' (i.e. with the agreement to establish the First Nations Reference Group [Auditor General, 2024, p. 8]). The report also notes that 'the Coalition of Peaks did not consider the proposed model for the First Nations Reference Group to be a genuine in-partnership arrangement or consistent with the principles set out in the Closing the Gap agreement' (p. 74).

Changes to Workforce Australia

The Hill Review of Workforce Australia from a parliamentary committee chaired by a Labor MP, provides an indication that there is an appetite for reform within sections of the current party of government (Hill et al., 2023). The Hill Review outlined a number of positive directions for the overhaul of employment services and mutual obligations.

The report critiques the current mutual obligations framework in Australia's employment services system, finding it excessively rigid and largely ineffective in supporting jobseekers. Characterised by 'onerous' and often irrelevant activities, the framework imposes a significant burden on both jobseekers and providers, resulting in decreased motivation and engagement, especially for those facing substantial barriers to employment (Hill et al., 2023, p. 65). It noted that a one-size-fits-all approach lacks flexibility, failing to consider the diverse circumstances, needs, and goals of jobseekers, and particularly disadvantages those further from the labour market (p. 428). To address these issues, the report recommends broadening and tailoring obligations to reflect individual jobseeker profiles, advocating for changes to make the PBAS more flexible and 'primarily [used] for job-ready individuals' (p. 420). Additionally, the report proposes replacing the Targeted Compliance Framework with a 'Shared Accountability Framework', enabling frontline staff to use discretion and focusing on a supportive, rather than punitive, approach to compliance (p. 420). It suggests that reducing the work of complying with mutual obligations, particularly for vulnerable groups, would alleviate unnecessary obstacles. The report also underscores the need for reciprocity, suggesting that mutual obligations should also hold providers and employers accountable for offering genuine support, thus creating a more meaningful path to employment (p. 66).

The report recommends a public sector job creation initiative, the 'Work in the Community' program, designed to address entrenched disadvantage in regional areas. This program would provide fully subsidised positions for individuals whose 'prospects of open employment are negligible' (Hill et al., 2023, p. 391). It proposes a

voluntary participation model offering jobs that vary in duration and intensity, allowing people to contribute to 'community development' projects based on identified local needs. Participants would gain work-like experience with a focus on 'skills development and in-work training' rather than immediate placement in open employment (p. 389). Success would be measured by improvements in participants' 'confidence, health, mental health, connectedness, self-esteem, and skills' rather than by immediate job outcomes, thus supporting people with limited employment prospects in building capabilities that may ease a future transition to the workforce (p. 389). Additionally, the program would offer a safe return path for those needing sustained support to re-enter open employment, enabling participants to rejoin as necessary. Many features of this proposal mirror those of the CDEP and could be achieved through the Community Projects element of the new RAES.

The report also emphasises the need for cohort-specific, tailored services to address the unique challenges faced by various groups within the employment services system. For First Nations jobseekers, it recommends the involvement of Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations (ACCOs), recognising that these organisations are 'best placed to provide services to address barriers' with cultural sensitivity and relevance (p. 66). This recommendations aim to provide 'cohort-specific specialist support' that directly responds to diverse needs and improves employment outcomes by ensuring that services are adaptable and relevant to each group's circumstances (p. 173).

The Albanese Labor Government's response to the Hill Review signalled a limited appetite to implement these reforms, at least in the short term, despite suggesting some willingness to tweak the regulation of employment services (Australian Government, 2024b). The government acknowledged the need for a system that is 'responsive' and 'inclusive', agreeing that current services are not fully meeting the diverse needs of users (p. 7).

While expressing an intention to improve service design and accessibility, the government's approach has been cautious at best, framing reform as a 'gradual' process requiring further stakeholder engagement and evidence gathering (Australian Government, 2024b, p. 16). Positively, the government has committed to integrating a greater role for 'community-based organisations', including Aboriginal-controlled organisations (Australian, Government, 2024b, p. 4). Yet, implementation details remain vague, and the government response frequently mentions the need to balance reforms with community expectations and fiscal constraints. Reforms to date such as the establishment of a complaints service for people engaging with pre-employment and employment services (Watt, 2024), while positive, hardly constitute a significant change in the core direction of employment services policy.

Despite the government's failure to adopt the core recommendations of the Hill Review, the report nevertheless provided a thorough critique of the current system of mutual obligation from within the party of government. However, without addressing the core issues within the report, as well as considering ongoing issues outlined in this paper, Workforce Australia remains dramatically illequipped to address challenges for remote employment policy faced by Indigenous communities.

It is notable that the RAES designers foresee a future alignment with a reformed Workforce Australia. As mentioned above, participation in work-for-the-dole activities under RAES will be voluntary until 2027. This initial period of non-compulsion appears to be tied to the timeline for what NIAA call 'broader employment service reforms' (NIAA, 2025d).

Overhaul of ParentsNext

Despite the Hill Review clearly noting the systemic and wide-reaching failures of mainstream employment services – including the failure of mutual obligations to support people into work, and the failure of employment services to support jobseekers – the government has declined to tackle these enduring issues in the system.

Specifically, Workforce Australia will continue to use the PBAS system, be largely automated and run by privatised employment service providers that often have very poor track records of supporting people into work.

However, a major departure to this approach is the redesign of ParentsNext. As noted above, ParentsNext was part of Workforce Australia but in 2023, in response to sustained community pressure, the government abolished the program and declared a redesign.

Important to note is how the Commonwealth Government has embarked on a redesign process of ParentsNext, working with single mothers and their advocates to develop a new program for single parents finding employment *without* mutual obligations. Specific details of this new program called *Parenting Pathways* are yet to be released but it has identified the following features of the new program:

- *voluntary participation*
- *a flexible service that values parents' caring role*
- *support by suitably qualified and experienced mentors*
- *'meets parents where they are at' – both in location and in their lives*
- *clear information and choice about supports that are available*
- *support for parents to make their own choices in deciding their future*
- *practical financial support to parents, including an individual fund to help build capacities identified by participants, and a Pooled fund to be used by service providers (DEWR, 2024b).*

The approach outlined in Parenting Pathways is different to the punitive way government has been conducting employment support such as through CDP and Workforce Australia. Parenting Pathways is not only voluntary, it also explicitly values other forms of work such as care work, and is strengths based where it supports and honours parent's agency to make their own decisions about if, how and when to engage with the labour market.

Importantly for questions of remote employments service redesign, Parenting Pathways provides an example of government working with people subjected to social security payments – a process of genuine 'co-design' that stands in contrast to the approach taken to the replacement of CDP. It is also a precedent for government co-designing a program that aims to support people's agency, values non-paid work, and is voluntary. Unfortunately, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in remote communities do not stand to benefit from these new directions, as eligibility requirements for Parenting Pathways specifically exclude people living in remote areas.

4.3 Relationship between the state and Aboriginal people

Ultimately, remote unemployment rates are a symptom of the ongoing and enduring issue of governments denial of Indigenous self-determination. This was identified in the Miller Report back in 1985 but, as the analysis above shows, has never been taken seriously by governments since. Therefore, to get remote employment policy right for Indigenous people (indeed all policy), the Commonwealth Government needs to take seriously what it means to be less colonising and honour Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination. Whilst there is talk about partnership in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Coalition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peak Organisations & Australian Governments, 2020), it is the work of treaty, settlement and reparation which can offer the most promising possibilities for remote employment and overcoming the three enduring and limiting policy logics.

The National Agreement on Closing the Gap

The commitments made in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap to reforming the way that governments work with Indigenous communities and peak bodies have rarely been translated into changing practices. This is true across most policy areas, including CDP reform, where – as identified above – the formal involvement of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander groups in the governance of the reforms has been belated, and the government explicitly foreclosed the option of the First Nations Reference Group operating as a joint decision-making model (which would have been consistent with Priority Reform 1 of the Agreement) (Auditor General, 2024, p. 74).

The National Agreement commitments do, however, have some rhetorical weight and in September 2023, the Commonwealth Government committed to developing a ‘First Nations Economic Partnership’ with the Coalition of Peaks and other organisations. Rhetoric around enabling Indigenous peoples to exercise their right to self-determination in the design and delivery of policies and services that affect them could be called upon. It is unclear what such a partnership might entail, and to what extent it may be resourced. However, the development of such a partnership could create a policy window in which self-determined economic development options can be pursued.

Through the Closing the Gap process, self-determination has also re-emerged onto the government Indigenous governance agenda. In particular, the Productivity Commission’s first review of the National Agreement on Closing the Gap recommended that:

The Agreement should be amended to clarify the purpose and broaden the scope of Priority Reform 1. This amendment should recognise that power must be shared with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in order for decisions to be made jointly and to achieve the ultimate goal of self-determination, as agreed to in the UNDRIP (Productivity Commission, 2024b, p. 7).

The recommendation to ‘Amend the Agreement to clarify the purpose and broaden the scope of Priority Reform 1’ included the action that:

Parties to the National Agreement on Closing the Gap should amend Priority Reform 1 in the Agreement to:

- *recognise the ultimate goal of Priority Reform 1 is self-determination (which Australia has committed to under the UNDRIP) and that shared decision-making authority is only a step towards achieving this goal*
- *clarify that efforts to achieve self-determination extend beyond the policy partnerships and place-based partnerships (Productivity Commission, 2024b, p. 11).*

On July 5, 2024, ministers responsible for Indigenous affairs in all state, territory and Commonwealth jurisdictions, as well as 12 representatives nominated by the Coalition of Peaks agreed to implement this action (Joint Council on Closing the Gap, 2024). This renewed emphasis on self-determination rather than ‘partnership’, ‘co-design’ or ‘shared decision-making’ provides a window of opportunity for governments to move beyond mere partnership rhetoric in their relationship with Indigenous peoples. However, the evidence provided by the Productivity Commission in its review shows that a commitment to undertaking such an action provides no guarantee of change.

Settlement and treaty negotiations – returning to the Miller Report and beyond?

The focus on remote employment is often assumed to be made possible either through government-funded positions or through private industry. Both, as discussed above, present major challenges to First Nations economic security and self-determination. There is a possible third option – funding through settlement agreements, land rights and reparations. The Miller Report (Committee of Review of Aboriginal Employment and Training Programs, 1985, p.9), specifically argued that land rights would enable Indigenous people to have “control of resources” that would let “Aboriginal people become more independent by enabling them to provide for their own livelihoods”. In that review of CDEP it was noted that,

... the problems of Aboriginal employment go beyond what can be achieved by employment and training programs. The whole question of the way in which Aboriginal people can provide for their livelihood in accordance with the life-style they choose raises structural matters which need to be addressed. These include access to and control of land and other resources, local government arrangements for Aboriginal towns, relationships with other forms of local government, access to development capital and involvement in particular industries. (Miller Report, p. 183 cited in Fowkes, 2019, p. 61–62).

The Miller Report started to outline what this could mean for remote Indigenous communities. They wrote that,

The most important factor is undoubtedly the lack of control over and access to land and other productive resources... In the context of the economic progress of Aboriginal people, the importance of land as an economic resource cannot be overstated. This importance varies from land being a critical resource to sustain the hunter and gatherer economy, which supports a significant number of Aboriginal people, to the importance of land in Aboriginal aspirations to participate, on a much larger scale, in Australia's agricultural, pastoral and other natural resource-based industries.... Yet government policy relating to the acquisition of land and other economic resources for Aboriginal people has received little prominence as an economic policy issue and there have been few links between Aboriginal employment, training and education programs and measures, and land acquisition and enterprise development programs. (p. 183).

While it is 50 years since these words were written, these insights from the Miller Report remain very relevant. It is time that the business of land rights with real control over resources, as well as reparations, treaty and settlements are addressed. This is so First Nations communities can be self-determining, can establish enterprises, and have resources to develop and direct community development, work and livelihood pathways.

Treaty has been canvassed in the NT recently. In 2019, the Northern Territory Treaty Commission finalised their report directing the NT Government on implementing a treaty across the state — however the implementation process was slow and ultimately ‘dismantled’ by Chief Minister Lia Finocchiaro in February 2025 (Brennan, 2025). Treaties and settlements provide economic possibilities for self-determined economic development. However, how economic development is defined, and the values that underpin it, go to the heart of if and how economic development can be a real space of change for First Nations communities. For example, at Garma in 2024, Prime Minister Albanese promoted economic development, but the economic development he defined did not explicitly include a commitment to settlements, land rights, treaty or reparation, was less focused on

Indigenous values and economies, and instead promoted an approach of integration with the colonial capitalism that has undermined First Nations people since invasion. We will outline here a few examples of different economic approaches developed through the use of compensation and settlements. Each differ in the kinds of economic development promoted.

Whilst a different jurisdiction to the NT, it is worth noting precedent in recent agreements between the state Government of Western Australia and First Nations peoples. These significant settlements have supported various self-determined job creation initiatives. The 2021 South West Settlement 2021 includes 30,000 Noongar People and encompasses approximately 200,000 km² in the South West region of Western Australia (South West Aboriginal Land and Sea Council Aboriginal Corporation, 2021). The settlement involves the Noongar people receiving a '[AU]\$1.3 billion package relating to land, resources, governance, finance and cultural heritage in exchange for surrendering native title rights and interests'.¹³

The 2020 Pila (Gibson Desert) Agreement distributes AU\$7.5 million over 10 years to support joint management activities of land covering an area of approximately 18,900 km (Ward et. al, 2020). This agreement was a way for the Western Australian Government to address the longstanding issue it had of extinguishing the native title of traditional owners by establishing the reserve in the first place. The 2023 Tjiwarl Palykuwa Agreement provides the Tjiwarl traditional owners compensation and other measures to settle ongoing demands for redress for historic acts by the Western Australian state that have impaired or extinguished native title (Tjiwarl [Aboriginal Corporation] et al., 2023). Compensation paid under this agreement includes AU\$25.475 million (some tied to administration functions), plus the transfer of some freehold land and management rights of water.

These settlements provide compensation that is more substantial than what is available through native title alone, along with expanded rights to access land, deliver social supports, and create employment opportunities. They represent some of the most significant agreements in the country, with some even describing the South West Settlement as Australia's first treaty (Hobbs & Williams, 2018).

Changes in the Aboriginals Benefit Account (ABA) are also important to reflect on, as this fund stems from reparative logic and compensation for colonisation and disruption to Aboriginal land in the NT. The *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* (Cth) includes a component of compensation built in for taking subsurface minerals from Aboriginal land. Edward Woodward, the architect of the Act, wrote of how compensation was central to the land rights legislation in a report for the Commonwealth. Specifically, Woodward noted that any legislation must ensure:

that none of these interests or rights [of Indigenous people] are further whittled away without consent, except in those cases where the national interest positively demands it – then only on terms of just compensation ... [Also to be ensured is] the provision of some basic compensation in the form of land for those Aborigines who have been irrevocably deprived of the rights and interests which they would otherwise have inherited from their ancestors, and who have obtained no sufficient compensating benefits from white society (Parliament of Commonwealth of Australia, 1974, p. 2).

Following Woodward's recommendations, the *Aboriginal Land Rights (Northern Territory) Act 1976* was designed to include distribution of the royalties from mining based on Aboriginal land. Of these royalties, 40% is allocated to land councils which act independently of government to represent the traditional owners of the land in commercial dealings; 30% is allocated as compensation to landowners and those directly affected by mining; and 30% is for the benefit of the Aboriginal people of the NT. This 30% was paid into the ABA, previously

¹³ It included the establishment of a perpetual trust that receives from the state government yearly instalments of AU\$50 million for 12 years, AU\$10 million a year for 12 years paid to Noongar Corporations, as well as agreements regarding access to lands, support for housing and other important social and economic supports (ANTAR, 2022, p. 4).

controlled by the Commonwealth Government, but since 2021 the fund is managed by a First Nations majority on the fund's board of directors through Aboriginal Investment NT.

In Aotearoa/New Zealand, there are examples of Indigenous groups using settlements to invest in enterprises that promote economic development governed by Maori. For example, through the *Ngāi Tahu Claims Settlement Act 1998*, the Ngāi Tahu won a settlement including an apology from the Crown, recognition of Maori place names, co-management of certain conservation areas and land and capital valued at NZ\$170 million. The full organisation of Te Rūnanga Group provides paid employment for Ngāi Tahu people; work they would otherwise be doing unpaid (Scobie & Sturman, 2024). Following the settlement, the Te Rūnanga Group was set up and tasked with managing the NZ\$170 million cash settlement – in part through the investment of the settlement. The income from this financialisation supports the resurgence and protection of Māori culture and over time, the re-emergence of Māori economies. Scobie and Sturman (2024) describe three priority areas to use this distribution of income. First, 'sustaining identity' – this includes building Ngāi Tahu archives, creating and documenting maps and place names, language and the maintenance of the tribal register. The second spending area is 'social' – to improve socioeconomic inequality in the spaces of health, housing, education and emergency response due to disasters such as COVID-19, earthquakes and other such issues. The third area is referred to as 'defending the realm' – where income is used to fund concerted efforts to hold off ongoing attempts of colonisation by the New Zealand state – from racist policies to infringement on land and water rights, to opposing regulatory changes that impact on treaty obligations. Much of this money is spent on court cases and legal expenses but all work towards defending the realm aims to protect Māori against ongoing colonisation.

There are different views about this Ngāi Tahu approach. Scobie and Sturman (2024) note that,

whilst many acknowledge this capitalist accumulation as a success, others argue that the model has financialised aspects of Māori land, bodies, lifeways and self-determining authority, transforming the layered collectives of Ngāi Tahu whānau, hapū and iwi into individual Te Rūnanga Group beneficiaries (Scobie & Sturman, 2014, p. 90).

Still, the Ngāi Tahu settlement, as well as moves underway in Australia provide possibilities for self-determined economic relations that contest colonial capitalism, provide reparative justice and treaty, with control and access to land and resources. It would be critical though to consider the issues Ngāi Tahu have faced, and how not all economic development has meant self-determination and wellbeing for culture, community and Country.

5. Conclusion

This paper aimed to provide an overview of the changes in, and intersections between, Indigenous employment policy and social security policy to understand the contemporary policy landscape facing remote Indigenous communities in Australia.

The aims of this paper are significant as they go to the heart of understanding why government's remote employment policy continues to be such a failure for Indigenous people today.

Through examining not just the contemporary landscape of remote employment policy, but also considering how we got here, this analysis presents issues that continue to haunt remote employment policy. We maintain that this haunting will continue until the root causes are addressed.

Such root causes include enduring logics that limit real policy action in employment policy such as determining individual's and communities' deservingness of government support by their contribution in the labour market, and the myth of creating private settler industries across remote Australia is sufficient to employ everyone currently unemployed. As the paper notes, the policy era of self-management, ATSIC and CDEP provided the beginnings of a different way to frame remote unemployment policy – where CDEP notably was not shaped by these logics. Still, since the Howard era, there has been a return to the cost of rising remote unemployment, poverty and the demise of self-determination.

Still, reviewing the current policy landscape, there are some hopeful avenues. We outline three. The first is through the ongoing lobbying by Indigenous organisations focused on the government's process to replace CDP, and the guardrails put on this process by discrimination law. The second is through the precedent set in mainstream Workforce Australia – and the overhaul of ParentsNext. This saw the transformation of a punitive mutual obligation program to a voluntary program utilising rights-based approaches to employment and social security support. The third is through ongoing work around treaty and settlements. Solutions to Indigenous unemployment have long been thought about as being addressed through either private (settler) investments in remote labour markets, or through government support. We propose a third way, something canvassed by the Miller Report in 1985 – reparations, treaty, and real land rights that support Indigenous organisations to develop their own economies and jobs. This would mean not just a return to self-management but going further – a real honouring of Indigenous sovereignties and self-determination, where Indigenous economies and employment can thrive.

This has never been done in employment policy. It is time.

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CONTACT US

POLIS: The Centre for Social Policy Research
Research School of Social Sciences
ANU College of Arts & Social Sciences

RSSS Building
The Australian National University
Canberra ACT 0200
Australia

W polis.cass.anu.edu.au

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