

2009 PUBLIC SEMINAR SERIES

‘Working Future’: A Critique of Policy by Numbers (or The Weakness of Collaborative Federalism in an Emergency)

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This seminar will begin by using population figures from the 2006 Census, organised by the ABS’s Indigenous geography, to raise some questions about the Northern Territory Government’s ‘Working Future’ policy, announced in May 2009. It will suggest that by focusing on more populous Aboriginal settlements, the policy has also, perhaps inadvertently, focused on the Top End of the Northern Territory at the expense of the Centre. Thirteen of the twenty Aboriginal settlements proposed as Territory Growth Towns are in the Top End and another three are north of Tennant Creek, the geographic centre of the NT. Only four, or one fifth, of the proposed Territory Growth Towns are in the southern half of the Territory, despite the fact that this area accounts for about one third of the Territory’s rural Aboriginal population. This reflects the fact that the Centre has a larger number of less populous Aboriginal settlements compared to the Top End.*

While this critique is based on population numbers, it also at least indirectly suggests that the ‘Working Future’ policy might itself have been based, rather too simply on such numbers. However in the latter half of this paper, I will suggest a somewhat deeper cause of poor policy – collaborative federalism in an emergency. I will argue that good collaborative federalism is built on genuine differences of perspective between central and regional governments, and hence robust debates and disagreements. The Northern Territory Government ought, in most policy debates, to have a different perspective and to be disagreeing with the Commonwealth. However, in an ‘emergency’, the normal politics of disagreement and difference of perspective becomes disreputable – and policy making suffers. Good collaborative federalism runs the risk of becoming poor coercive federalism, in which the perspective of the central government, with the power of the purse, too quickly predominates. The Northern Territory Government should be encouraged to develop its own distinctive perspectives on policy issues and to disagree with Commonwealth perspectives if necessary. For the sake of good public policy, let’s get back to politics as normal in a collaborative federation.

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Wednesday 19 August 2009, 12.15pm
The Seminar Room, NARU, 23 Ellengowan Drive, Brinkin
This seminar is free and open to the public.

The views expressed in this lecture are those of the presenter and do not necessarily represent the view of ANU.

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