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**Equity for Aboriginal families
in the 1990s: the challenges for
social policy**

J. Finlayson

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SERIES NOTE

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- assist in the development of government strategies aimed at raising the level of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander participation in the labour market.

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Professor Jon Altman
Director, CAEPR
Australian National University

ABSTRACT

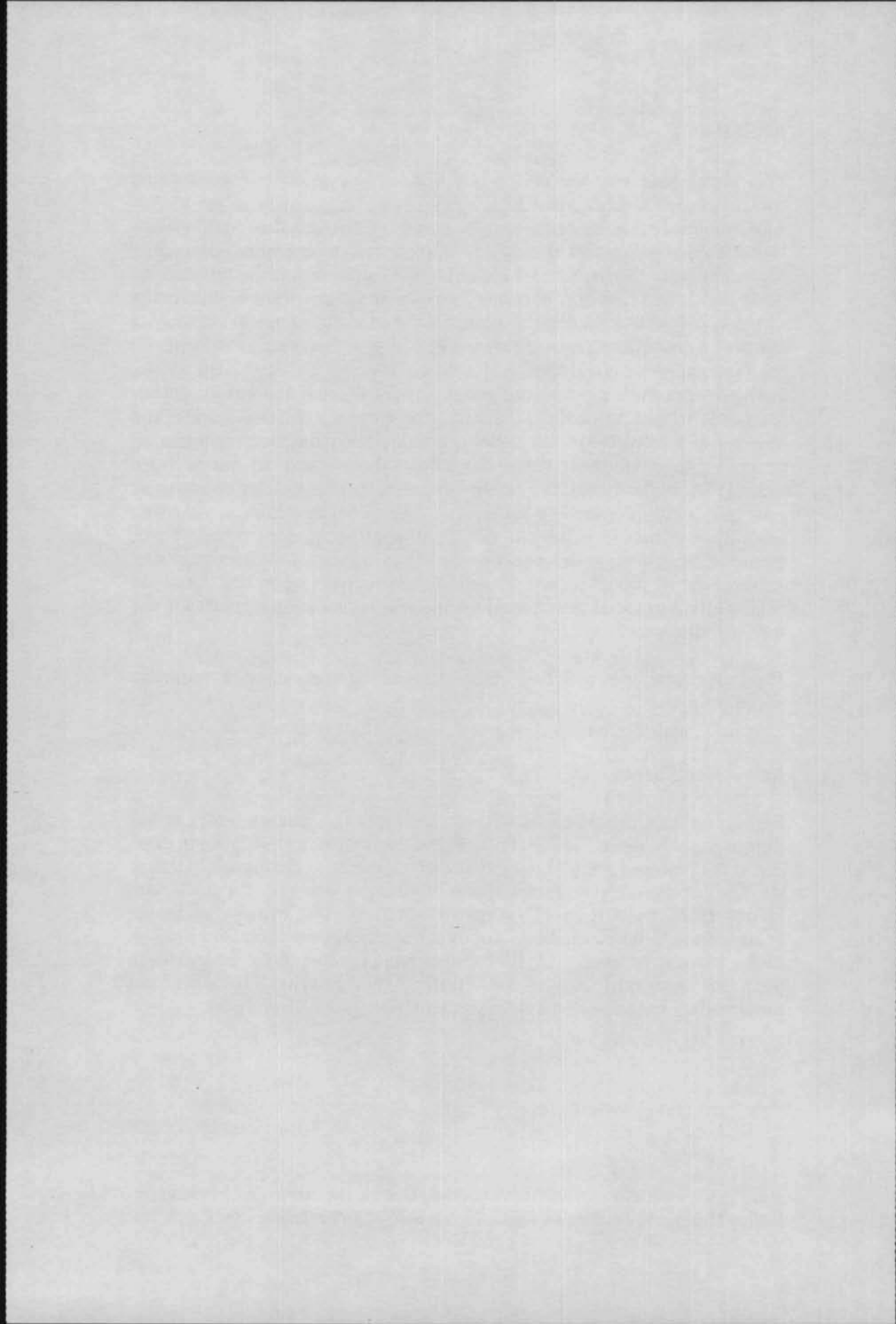
This paper addresses the policy question of how to achieve equity and social justice for Aboriginal families through social policy in the 1990s. This would appear to be simply a matter of finding the 'right' policy formula since policy makers are well informed of the extent of continuing, socioeconomic deprivation of indigenous Australian families relative to other Australian families. A comprehensive literature outlining the nature of the relative disadvantage is available based on analyses of Australian Bureau of Statistics census data for 1986-91 together with findings from the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey (ABS 1994). Both sources indicate the poor prognosis for closing the equity gap as standards in educational attainment, employment, income, health and housing to remain below the national average for indigenous families. In general, indigenous Australians' dependency on welfare has not declined since 1986. In the 1990s, the challenges for appropriate social policy must pose questions about how to deliver the types of policy which moves away from the confines of economic descriptions of social deprivation. Three themes are explored in this paper as the broad contexts for effective policy realism: the historical legacy of welfare paternalism; the policy transition from welfare to social justice; and the incorporation of Aboriginality in the modern nation-state.

The paper concludes with brief remarks about the importance of culture in social policy.

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Julie Finlayson is Post-Doctoral Fellow, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Faculty of Arts, Australian National University, Canberra.



Introduction

This paper discusses the historical and contemporary background to formulations of social policy for indigenous Australians. Within Commonwealth administrative procedures accountability has a high priority in assessing how efficiently and effectively programs address the socioeconomic needs of indigenous Australians (Commonwealth of Australia 1995: Introduction). The Minister for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs argues that the importance of ensuring social policies and service delivery in indigenous affairs is transparent: 'There is a need for public understanding of the extent to which their [Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples'] rights to fair and equitable treatment are yet to be realised, and of the policies and programs through which the Commonwealth is pursuing the human rights goal of social justice for them' (Commonwealth of Australia 1995: Introduction). Transparency, however, is only possible by reference to the historical development of welfare paternalism in order to recognise the contemporary social policy challenges.

The historical legacy of welfare paternalism

The generational and institutional inequalities experienced by Aboriginal families is best understood by revisiting the broad historical circumstances of Aboriginal relations with the state. This paper does so only briefly, and with particular reference to Queensland; mindful that analogous situations prevailed in other states (Taylor 1994). How the state viewed Aboriginal people as the exotic 'other' and then proceeded to construct the terms of that relationship cannot be understood without reference to the historical development of this relationship nor how state policies form part of wider political landscapes.

In the 1990s, it would be impossible to tackle issues about either the history of state legislation for Aboriginal families or the future challenges without addressing the issue of 'stolen children'. Yet it has only been comparatively recently that Aboriginal people themselves have contextualised their own biographies within a broad political context (Read 1995: 22). Increasingly, the focus around 'stolen children' has moved away from specific cases to arguments that the prevalence of such practices by the state not only constituted abuse of human rights, but must also be legally questioned as an appropriate use of state powers. In 1995, select members of the 'stolen generation' mounted a High Court challenge to the Australian Constitution in terms which allege breach of fiduciary duty, the legal invalidity of both discriminatory state acts and associated legislation, and the application of constitutional powers to sanction such acts (*Aboriginal Law Bulletin*, vol. 3, No. 73 April 1995).

With such action Aboriginal people are forcing the wider Australian society to recognise and acknowledge that the state's social welfare policies have not been in the best interests of Aboriginal families and that these policies have produced a legacy which the state must address. As many Aboriginal people express it, the social welfare policies administered by all state protection boards were both punitive and paternalistic and resulted in loss of their cultural identity and indigenous heritage. The social devastation of past state intervention and paternalism is openly recognised in welfare policy today. 'Social justice is not, however, something that can be imposed from above. If they are to be successful, social justice strategies and policies must provide people with the freedom to make their own decisions. Nowhere is this more true than in indigenous affairs, with its long and sorry history of direction and coercion, of decisions imposed without regard to the aspirations of the people themselves, leading inevitably to resentment, misunderstanding and bitter failure' (Commonwealth of Australia 1995: 3).

Yet social policies such as the forced removal of Aboriginal children to institutional care should not be viewed exclusively or simply in terms of a policy to foster Aboriginal assimilation by enforcing social change and social control. It is clear that while removal policies undoubtedly had destructive consequences for Aboriginal people, it was also motivated by a hope that government intervention might ameliorate the appalling socioeconomic circumstances and limited life chances available to many Aboriginal families prior to the development of the welfare state.

State intervention in Aboriginal lives was systemic. The consequence of state policies were the removal and confinement of Aboriginal people to institutions away from their homelands and extended families. The state set Aboriginal rates of pay and compelled contributions to a state savings system. Indeed, a portion of all Aboriginal wages were appropriated to the Aboriginal Welfare Fund as a means to offset the costs of state aid. Indeed, the comprehensive nature of the protection legislation enabled the state to scrutinise every aspect of Aboriginal peoples' private and public lives, whether people were under the *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act 1897* or exempt from it. Colonial governments rationalised these actions by arguing that any abuse of human rights involved were the inevitable entailment of welfare policies 'for the natives' own good'.

In Queensland until the early 1970s, separatism was the quintessential feature of social policy and practice. It was the means by which a state-wide system of reserves and missions segregated indigenous people from other Queenslanders. Within these self-governing institutions, the reconstitution of the Aboriginal family played a central role in state plans for social intervention and manipulation. Indigenous self-determination in these settings were fundamentally reductionist. In order to assimilate, the individual had to stand outside the sociality of kin and community. Under

state social policy this was only possible through transcendence of an Aboriginality defined as primitive, communal and naturalistic, and its replacement by a modern, assimilated individualism allied to the nation-state through common economic and social values.

To achieve such massive social change, Aboriginal families were targeted. Aboriginal employment was made the training ground for learning one's social place. Women were trained in domestic skills while men laboured in agricultural and pastoral industries. Institutional life provided limited education and training for people considered at the time to be 'feeble-minded'. Adult Aboriginal people were legally classed as 'children' and the state exercised its decision-making powers as part of a fiduciary duty to their wards. Documents from missions affirmed the importance of the break with Aboriginality and Aboriginal ways. Institutional life ensured that socialisation had little in common with Aboriginal sociality (Austin 1993: 9-31). Trigger presents a detailed picture of how this power constantly encroached on Aboriginal lives and the freedom to express themselves in matters of traditional culture and self-management at Doomadgee mission (Trigger 1992).

In these 'training' establishments conformity with assimilated values and behaviours were rewarded. A former mission resident described the positions she held in the mission's institutional structure. As a religious convert, her status was further enhanced by reading the bible lesson in church, and consolidated through an appointment as matron of the small girls' dormitory. The status attached to these positions were transferable to employment outside the mission. Today, many Aboriginal people believe that those who achieved recognition and status on the mission were initially given a toe-hold into the white world and that such social capital even now enables the same chosen few to further their own power and that of their family.

There are elements of truth to this perception of generational advantage. Most employment contexts for Aboriginal mission residents were, and often still are, semi-skilled occupations linked to labour intensive primary industries. Yet even in contexts where Aboriginal labour was critical to the economic viability of the enterprise, distinctions of relative Aboriginal worth to the non-Aboriginal community were marked. In the north Queensland cattle industry for example, mission labour was derided as a poor second-best to that of 'station blacks' (May 1994).

Trades were encouraged for only the privileged few. The historical legacy of poor education over several generations and access to low levels of employment are evident in the contemporary profile of Aboriginal people. As a group, Aboriginal people are over-represented in unskilled occupations and have lower rates of employment and labour force participation than other Australians (Taylor 1994).

Disentangling the welfare paternalism of past social policies from present strategies will require careful critical thinking about the terms under which social justice strategies to redress socioeconomic disadvantage are framed. In part, this recognises the diversity of historical and geographical factors contributing to indigenous disadvantage; although migration and urbanisation are increasingly minimising such differences. But it is also a demand for critical rethinking in relation to the terms on which the state incorporates the social and political realities of contemporary Aboriginality.

In the 1970s sociological research focused on the problems of urban Aboriginal families adjusting to social change. The yardsticks used were social and economic roles of white middle-class families; in particular, a male breadwinner supporting his spouse and their dependents. Surprisingly, in view of the role colour played in definitions of culture, survey data showed urban Aboriginal families were not like poor whites. More often than not, urban Aboriginal families were matri-focal domestic units of extended kin and highly mobile, moving as they did between rural and urban locations. Researchers argued that these characteristics were different from white families and contrasted with family patterns observed in traditional Aboriginal families. However, explanations of how indigenous families fared under social change argued simultaneously the differences from traditional Aboriginal families and their similarities with class-based poverty. Urban Aboriginal family structures were said to be a direct response to socioeconomic determinants (unemployment, poor education, low income) and concomitants of class not culture; except in so far as there was a 'culture of poverty' (Lewis 1966). Effectively, these conclusions supported decisions to service Aboriginal families through the same sets of social and welfare policies available to other Australian families.

Reflecting on their experiences, many Aboriginal families experienced welfare as social control. Understandably, some researchers suggest today that the legacy of these policies means Aboriginal families continue to view government assistance with scepticism (Jonas 1992; D'Souza 1993; Godfrey 1995). The states' insistence that Aboriginal families were incapable of raising their children appropriately 'has resulted in the Aboriginal community distrusting state altruism and paternalism and being hesitant to seek out 'white' support services, thus contributing to a continuation of the problem (Godfrey 1995: 27). Although this might be true of urban communities in south-eastern Australia, in remote and rural communities Aboriginal people are often positively disposed toward the welfare state and expect the state to play a beneficent role with regard to Aboriginal welfare.

However, in New South Wales, continued state intervention into Aboriginal families and households persisted as late as the 1960s; either

through temporary removal of 'neglected' Aboriginal children and their subsequent institutionalisation, or alternatively, by facilitating the adoption of Aboriginal children into white families (Godfrey 1995). In the early 1980s, organisations like Link-Up were first established to assist Aboriginal people to contact their natural families. In their view, the state welfare and Aboriginal protections boards were driven by a single objective: 'The removal of Aboriginal children from their families was systematically carried out, in an attempt to break down the social structure of Aboriginal culture' (Read 1995: 23).

Wider public knowledge of what was previously only told as 'shameful' personal narratives has exploded mythologies many non-indigenous Australians have nurtured about the benevolence of the state in its dealings with Aboriginal people. The change is partly the result of Aboriginal people speaking out about their own lives and exposing the ubiquity of these narratives across several generations. It has also come to wider public attention through the inquiries of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody which found that of the 99 people whose deaths were the subject of the investigation, 43 had 'experienced childhood separation from their natural families through intervention by the state, mission organisations or other institutions. In both New South Wales and Western Australia, over half the cases had been separated from their families. For Queensland, the position was nearly one-half' (Commonwealth of Australia 1991).

Critical analyses in the social sciences of colonial relations with indigenous minorities has further contributed to the deconstruction of state mythologies. Historians, for example, are revising foundation narratives once accepted as integral to the development of the modern Australian nation. Our view of Australian history now owes less to the homogeneity of what Carter (1987) calls 'imperial history' and more to a holistic appreciation of the role of regionalism and geographical differences in the contemporary nation; and increasingly to the role played by indigenous people in the development of our economic foundations (Reynolds 1990; McGrath 1987; May 1994).

The transformation from welfare to social justice

The 1990s would seem to be a period where potentially, the state articulated a new basis on which to address issues of social policy for indigenous Australians. Noel Pearson, Executive Director of the Cape York Land Council, is optimistic about such prospects (Pearson 1995). He argues that politically, what the late Professor Bill Stanner termed the 'cult of forgetfulness' has been redressed in some measure by Prime Minister Keating's 1992 speech in Redfern Park. This speech marked a turning-point through a national emphasis for the first time, on acceptance of

historical wrongs alongside commitment to both reconciliation and the consequences of the *Mabo* judgment.

Pearson is well aware that optimism must be realisable and the challenge remains for policy to turn symbolism into practice. 'The task now is to make these symbolic and institutional achievements actually deliver social policy for people on the streets, in the tin humpies and living under the bridges. *Mabo*, reconciliation and social justice must actually have consequences for people on the ground. It must actually mean something for the quality - and indeed the duration - of their lives' (Pearson 1995: 22).

Future social policy for indigenous Australians, as argued in this paper, must be thought of in broader terms than simply welfare needs. However, this is not simply a matter of a shift from the rhetoric of welfare to that of social justice. The Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission (ATSIC) sees indigenous self-determination or the principle of empowerment as integral to the realisation of social justice. In terms of social policies, the objectives of empowerment and social justice should provide indigenous people with the capacity 'to make their own choices in matters affecting their own lives' (Commonwealth of Australia 1995: 3). In policy terms, these goals will be achieved through: 'the exercise of real decision-making powers by the elected Regional Councils and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission' (Commonwealth of Australia 1995: 3).

In practice, however, the link between policy goals and achievable solutions to indigenous poverty are not so apparent. Although it is evident that indigenous Australians are impoverished relative to other Australians how this is measured and evaluated is itself problematic. Gray and Tesfaghiorghis (1991), Smith (1991b), Ross and Whiteford (1992), Taylor (1993) and others (Smith 1991a, 1991b; Sanders 1993) have pointed out a range of both specific and general methodological difficulties for measurement of Aboriginal poverty.

One source of confusion to analysts is the issue of appropriate definitions. What is Aboriginality? What is income? How do we find an appropriate definition of Aboriginal families? Additional problems concern data accuracy. For example, what is the most appropriate unit to survey, the family or the household? How are different degrees of poverty accounted for? What is the relationship between these orders?

Specific issues of the relationship of policy to program must also be addressed. Is the Community Development Employment Projects (CDEP) scheme, which enables indigenous people to work on a part-time basis on community projects for their welfare entitlement, best understood as an employment program or a welfare scheme? How do we deal with housing costs in relation to assessing disposable income? How is household expenditure defined (Smith 1991a, 1991b).

Whatever the dimensions of these methodological limitations (Taylor 1993), statistical evidence demonstrates the systemic nature of Aboriginal material poverty in both absolute terms (lack of food, water, shelter) and relative ones (such as 'decent' material living conditions) (Choo 1990). The material poverty experienced by Aboriginal people is a tangible concern for which policy realism is essential. Increasingly, policy makers have taken up this issue as a matter of effectiveness in service delivery through accountability and indigenous empowerment. However, as discussed below, identifying a structure to facilitate the two processes has been neither self-evident nor straightforward.

The development of contemporary social policy for indigenous Australians

In the early 1970s social policy for indigenous Australians changed significantly when Whitlam replaced assimilation with self-determination as the primary emphasis in Aboriginal affairs. However, while the new policy represented a sea-change in Aboriginal affairs, debate about effective mechanisms for delivery of social policy under self-determination and self-management has proved an intractable problem.

In general, concerns about how to deliver effective policy and encourage self-determination have been discussed in terms of structural matters such as funding arrangements. Sanders reviews the relative benefits of block grants versus single funding sources raised in debates about the most effective means of reaching Aboriginal needs. Essentially, these debates centre around arguments of the relative merits of a particular funding program: is service delivery more effective through mainstream Commonwealth, State and local government agencies or community-based Aboriginal organisations? The persistence of the issue is seen in recent debates in the health field which indicate the challenge continues in both the arena of policy and service delivery (Sanders 1993).

However, the question of which funding path to follow is not simply one of cultural appropriateness. Crucial to the debate are issues of single versus multiple service agencies, and strategic ways to structure welfare expenditure, both within mainstream programs and/or as separate, Aboriginal-run programs. These issues are crucial, long-term policy challenges since it is increasingly evident that the diversity of the indigenous clientele cannot be covered by a single or national policy. Indeed, regionalism is increasingly encouraged by ATSIC as a way to absorb the discreteness of the Aboriginal polity, and is in keeping with the devolution of program responsibilities to regional councils.

But at the end of the day, arguments about effective service provision are still contested because of the priority given to self-determination and self-management as policy objectives. While some writers argue that the

principle concern in policy and service delivery should reflect the diversity of indigenous Australians through a multiplicity of service agencies (Sanders 1993; Gerritsen 1982, 1990); others cautiously embrace such views. They emphasise the lack of coordination in policy across the tiers of government and the ineffectual outcomes (Commonwealth of Australia 1991). Moreover, enabling indigenous Australians to access mainstream social policy initiatives remains problematic (Commonwealth of Australia 1995: 7). The challenge for policy makers is as much conceptual as it is practical, how might government address both Aboriginal material and social needs systemically?

While reporting on Aboriginal child poverty, Choo (1990) found that many Aboriginal people saw poverty in non-material terms and listed deprivations such as loss of cultural heritage, removal of children, and the results of assimilation policies as fundamental to how they see their poverty. Clearly, Aboriginal people want social policies for social justice, not simply material welfare or income equity.

How can such goals be achieved? At present, in spite of the rhetoric of self-determination and self-management, the reality in many Aboriginal communities is that social policy and service delivery foster relationships between Aboriginal people and the state reminiscent of institutionalised welfare. Two points must be remembered in explanations of this phenomenon. Firstly, that the socioeconomic measurements of indigenous disadvantage inevitably attracts state intervention, while simultaneously compounding the potential to systemically embed indigenous people into welfare dependency. Secondly, the real social policy challenge lies in the nexus between policy and legislation which facilitates conditions in which Aboriginal people can be proactive, not simply reactive, in the terms of their engagement with the state.

The challenge for government is one of critical appraisal to identify processes for achieving a turn-around in endemic Aboriginal poverty and socioeconomic disadvantage. In some measure, this requires shifts in decision-making at the national level down to the specificities of the regional and local levels where the particularities of locational disadvantage, cultural differences and exclusion from citizenship in the nation-state can be directly addressed (Altman and Smith 1993: 3). However, it is also clear that in the 1990s, social policy reform might ultimately require less thinking about the structural nature of agency-appropriateness in service delivery (Sanders 1993), and more attention to questions about how policy mechanisms in concert with structural factors can truly facilitate self-determination and self-management.

In practice, the legacy of state benevolence means that much community development under current social policies is experienced as analogous to welfare (Dale 1992). At the local level in many remote communities, self-

determination and self-management have no practical reality because Aboriginal people are structurally locked into long-term dependency (Tefaghiorghis and Altman 1991). The CDEP scheme is an interesting case of how social policy goals, with the potential for redefinition of work, can be subverted through ambiguities of both program objectives and the servicing structure. Some policy analysts argue that the CDEP programs are in danger of extending welfare and limiting entry to the labour force and that the status of the scheme must be clarified before its effectiveness can be assessed, raising the issue of whether it is income supplement or a labour market strategy (Altman and Smith 1992).

Incorporation of Aboriginality in the modern nation-state

Researchers interested in relations between indigenous groups and the colonial governments argue the dominance of self-interest in state welfare policies, especially where these link industry productivity and access to sources of cheap (indigenous) labour (see Beckett 1987; McGrath 1987; Reynolds 1990; Ganter 1994; May 1994). May (1994) has comprehensively argued this point in relation to the labour-intensive pastoral industry in north Queensland. The wider policy issue of white interest groups both lobbying for State government assistance, and State governments disproportionately reflecting these interests, is taken up elsewhere by Kunitz (1994) in relation to State and Commonwealth responsibility for health. In his view, these struggles are part of the historical legacy of intra-government politics.

The consequences of past welfare policies based on particular constructions of Aboriginality continue to overshadow contemporary Aboriginal lives. Pearson credited Keating's Redfern Park speech with the potential to integrate the future with the past (Pearson 1995). For Aboriginal people, meaning and sense in everyday life is contiguous with traditionally-based cultural and social perspectives. Reconciliation between the wider society and indigenous Australians is also central to the possibility of Aboriginality in the nation-state.

The concept of culture in social policy

At the heart of the present South Australian Royal Commission into the existence and veracity of Aboriginal women's secret knowledge of Hindmarsh Island lies the issue of continuity with the past. Opponents of the Aboriginal women claiming secret knowledge, challenge the possibility of Aboriginal people maintaining an authentic connection with their past. These opponents talk of a 'feminist conspiracy' and the 'reinvention of tradition'. The intensity of the furore may resonate with a continuing demand, in the wider community, that Aboriginality in the 1990s should mirror a particular understanding of 'tradition' which is authentic, yet with no clear definition of what is meant by authenticity.

The public debates about Aboriginal knowledge of their traditionally-based heritage challenge ideas that knowledge can legitimately be held differentially, by virtue of gender, age and birthright. What is essentially Aboriginal and acceptable to the wider public are traditional beliefs and practices in remote communities; but in urban and rural locations, the legacy of past relations between Aboriginal people and the state entails a widespread expectation of cultural and spiritual assimilation. The terms of these debates correspond to the situation of the culture of urban Aboriginal families migrating to the cities in the 1960s and 1970s.

The challenge for contemporary social policy, like the challenge of Hindmarsh Island, is the demand for policy makers to develop a more complex understanding of the relationship between different groups of Aboriginal people with different historical and political experiences of the state. Unfortunately, the Hindmarsh controversy suggests that in the area of heritage protection legislation, the capacity for Aboriginal responses are limited to reaction. Assessments of cultural authenticity and Aboriginality need not be constructed solely in terms which privilege and essentialise spiritual heritage and classical traditions over considerations of cultural change and grounded practice.

How is the state to identify and legislate for an alternative position from which proactive engagement by Aboriginal groups is possible? Careful thinking about potential mechanisms to facilitate and enable creative engagement with the state is required both at the level of policies and programs. The CDEP scheme, for example, was expected to shift unemployed Aboriginal people out of the welfare cycle and into the mainstream labour force. Yet a clear assessment of either the policy goals or the program performance are muddled by uncoordinated views of the scheme's intention and purpose.

Concluding remarks

Critiques of anthropology in general are part of contemporary ongoing concerns in the social sciences with relationships between objectivity and subjectivity and between professionals and their clients. In field practice and writing these concerns are integral to the anthropological enterprise. Within Australian anthropology, the critiques arise from interest in the discipline's own history and the importance of professional ethics in field work and the representation of difference (Said 1978). Cowlshaw argues that in Australian anthropology, anthropologists unwittingly contributed to the negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people as natural, primitive and authentic by accepting employment with State and Territory governments as experts in Aboriginal culture (Cowlshaw 1986, 1990). In her examination of the role played by Elkin in aligning anthropology with the interests of the state, Cowlshaw argues that such affiliations were morally

tainting. Not only did anthropologists like Elkin and Strehlow presume an expert knowledge of Aboriginal culture beyond that of Aboriginal people themselves, but they failed to argue for the human rights of Aboriginal people to self-determination. Against a background of critiques within the discipline (Sullivan 1986; Rose et al. 1987), anthropologists and policy makers might both ask what contribution can anthropology or history provide in the formulation of social policies in the 1990s?

Anthropology's contribution lies in its emphasis on the centrality of cultural factors in social life. Traditionally, the discipline has provided 'thick description' through detailed material of social life. Such research material has been the outcome of case studies in small scale societies based on participant observation. A research focus at this level has two major strengths. First, the potential for establishing a reflexive dialogue with national policies, and assessments of policy processes and outcomes. Second, local case studies have the potential to illuminate cultural meanings or emic views (how Aboriginal people see themselves and their situation). Both anthropological and historical case studies emphasise the diversity of Aboriginal experiences with the state and provide contextual frameworks for describing and understanding social experience on the ground.

In the 1990s, unless cultural parameters contribute to embedding policy process such service delivery and objectives in on-ground conditions and experiences, social policy for Aboriginal families will fail to move beyond statistically-based descriptions of systemic poverty.

In public controversies over cultural or religious 'truth', like the Hindmarsh Island case, policy makers need to rethink the terms of beneficial legislation so that tests of authenticity are not limited to idealised cultural values, nor that the processes of articulation between indigenous Australians and the state perpetuate welfare dependency and limit initiatives. A central concern in the 1990s should be questions about processes on the ground and what enabling mechanisms and structures provide ways for social policy to meaningfully engage Aboriginal Australians with the modern state in a true spirit of reconciliation.

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