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‘Practical Reconciliation’: 21st Century Rehabilitation of Indigenous Paternalism?

ABSTRACT

Australian policy is again co-opting an Indigenous client population into obligation which requires adoption of government values and objectives. While previous criticism has focused on the ethical and moral failings of such an approach, this study reflects on its logical and economic elements. Presentation of the ideological background leads into study of Indigenous social housing clients and their historical resistance to imposed objectives. The account next considers Indigenous settlement and occupational options and indicates the importance of economic priorities in any debate about policy objectives. Further commentary raises the shortcomings of current trends by defining minimum requirements for social policy and then comparing them with the government’s claims about meeting the needs of its Indigenous clients. The conclusion questions certain of the policy directions and provides some alternative pathways to need satisfaction.

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Introduction

Promoting an apparently restorative policy agenda, the Commonwealth Minister for Health, Tony Abbott (2006a), has argued for a ‘paternal’ approach to social planning, through which ‘competent’ administrators manage Indigenous communities. Official concerns about health and welfare dependency, which prompted an obligation-based policy model (Thompson 2006: 1)¹, have now been overtaken by ones relating to child and substance abuse, justifying more thoroughgoing measures. The policy shift to personal responsibilities and obligations over ‘civil liberties’ represents a movement against the long-standing ‘political correctness’ of contemporary Indigenous social arrangements (Rowse 2002: 263; Walker 2004: 1). Now not only is the concept of ‘self-determination’ politically unfashionable, but the long-established, community planning model based on needs satisfaction is being supplanted by ideas about benevolent guardianship.

Based on an historical and economic reading of Indigenous housing policy (Thompson 2004), this article questions the long-term viability of an obligation-based and paternalistic social intervention strategy among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families. It presents a background to the Commonwealth government’s practical reconciliation² policy stance and, in examining its ideological basis, exposes implicit logical intentions and assumptions about client needs. To pursue the argument, analysis captures key historical moments in the planning of Indigenous living conditions. It draws out the logic of contemporary policy and considers the economic significance for clients of the underlying ideas. The pragmatics of the policy context in terms of settlement patterns and economic opportunity are addressed, leading to an account of the way in which proposed measures will have to be tuned and nuanced if past errors are not to reapply. The conclusions indicate some constructive directions in which emerging policy could

¹ See also Karvelas 2004: 1; Walker 2004: 1; Rowse 2005:1

² ‘Practical reconciliation forms the rhetorical basis for Indigenous policy development since 1996 ... Practical reconciliation gives emphasis to indigenous Australians having the same life chances as other Australians’ (ANTaR 2007:1) rather than giving emphasis to a treaty, land rights or an official apology for past wrongs

move in order to create more prospective outcomes among Indigenous clients.

Policy Background

On the 16 June 2004, the Commonwealth Ministerial Taskforce on Indigenous Affairs advocated a long term vision, based on the assertion that 'Indigenous Australians, wherever they live, should have the same opportunities as other Australians to make informed choices about their lives, realise their full potential in whatever they choose to do and to take responsibility for managing their own affairs' (Vanstone 2004). The present Commonwealth Minister for Health and Aging is influential within this taskforce and thus his agenda is important to realising this vision. Thus, if Minister Tony Abbott wants to see a new 'form of paternalism' to address the 'appalling living conditions of many Aborigines' and contends that 'someone has to be in charge of [these] struggling communities', the government agenda is arguably moving towards increased control over Indigenous lives (Abbott 2006b).

For Abbott, Aborigines' appalling living conditions are a consequence of 'dysfunctional family and civic characteristics' (2006b: 1) and 'the culture of directionless-ness in which so many Aboriginal people live' (2006b: 2). The fundamental problem is not lack of spending, since 'the federal Government alone outlays nearly \$6,000 a year on every Aboriginal person and ... each Aboriginal household receives \$70,000 a year in federal Government services and transfer payments' (2006b:2)³. Instead, a 'misplaced tact, and fear of imposing what are now seen as outside standards, rather than universal ones' has allowed this culture of failure to persist (Abbott 2006b: 3).

Minister Abbott agrees with Northern Territory Chief Minister Clare Martin's claim that successive governments' greatest oversight has been to rely on a policy

which might putatively constitute 'Aboriginal reconciliation' as commonly understood.

³ In October 2006, the Northern Territory Government claimed that it would cost \$AUD1 billion to meet current Indigenous housing demand, but that it could provide only \$AUD100 million over the next five years to address 'the crisis'. Newspaper reports cost an individual house as high as \$AUD450,000 (Wilson & Karvelas, 2006:

of self-determination. Indigenous townships have not provided the type of leadership needed to deliver modern services in an efficient and equitable way. 'The challenge faced by all levels of government is to go beyond acknowledging that a decades-old policy has largely failed and to build workable governance structures against the pressure of vested interests and the inevitable cries of racism' (Abbott, 2006b: 5). Leading Indigenous advocate, Noel Pearson (2000, 2000b), director of the Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, has argued against 'welfare dependency' or that Aboriginal people should assume responsibility for their personal lives and families, while public services in Indigenous settlements should be administered by mainstream service providers. The Health Minister agrees it is time for public servants to shoulder greater responsibility for standard governmental functions in Aboriginal townships.

To Tony Abbott, the rhetoric of self-determination has enabled officialdom to parade its concerns while evading its responsibilities. Now, the problem is one that can be solved only by strong leadership, with 'paternalism based on competence rather than race ... unavoidable' (2006b: 3). Correspondingly, the federal Minister for Indigenous Affairs, Mal Brough (2006), has suggested that 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people strongly support... more rigorous accountability for managers and directors' of their corporations, and they will now 'be able to recruit non-Indigenous experts to serve as board members.' Abbott suggests that 'federally-funded health services should provide regular, accurate information', since it will help 'governments ... to know what services Aboriginal people most need [and]... to deliver them more effectively.... Accurate information is often the last thing people want to hear because it can so easily challenge established behaviour and settled judgments but it is the only basis on which good policy can ever be sensibly devised and effectively delivered' (Abbott 2006b: 6).

Against the background of prevailing neoliberalism in government, the economic realities of remote settlement and the ambiguity of land rights progress, these contexts appear to echo Margaret Thatcher's memorable argument of the 1980s --

TINA ('there is no alternative'). Greater outside intervention with a patina of paternalism thus seems inevitable, but to what ultimate effect?

Ideological Underpinnings

In 50 years Indigenous society has travelled from the precepts of a hunter-gatherer society, through humanitarian liberal⁴ interventionism, to accommodate neoliberal administrative arrangements promoting a situation of 'welfare dependency'. At the outset, these organising systems require a brief explanation.

Hunter-gatherer society was characterised by reciprocity between the members of small-groups and a semi-nomadic economic system based on collecting plant goods and hunting for game. Clan-based mores and laws regulated social behaviour and resource allocation. This system provided Indigenous Australians with a relatively high quality of life for many thousands of years, though it included significant characteristics perceived unacceptable by contemporary and liberal observers (Thompson 2006).

Modern (or humanitarian) liberalism is an alternate organising and economic system. As an ideological model, it extends an egalitarian hand to ensure that even poor and marginalized citizens experience the right to the 'freedom', which is one of its central tenets. This form of governance emphasises rights for all citizens and humanitarian concern for those whose 'freedom' is limited by social circumstances. It advocates planned, but limited, state intervention into social conditions within a predominantly free-market society. In the Rawlsian sense that an improvement of the lot of the worst off in society constitutes a net gain in social welfare, past injustices perpetrated upon Indigenous peoples and the 'un-freedom' of their living circumstances have since 1965 been seen sufficient to require public assistance programs (Thompson 2005).

⁴ See Heywood (2003:55-57) for a discussion of modern liberalism and neoliberalism, and (2003: 102) for an examination of conservative support for market principles. See Thompson (2005) for a discussion of the similarities between modern liberal interventionism and social-democratic policy in Indigenous communities.

The humanitarian-liberal system has long rested on four precepts axiomatic to the logic of economic-liberalism and rights theory (Heywood 2003:58-60). The first is that consumer choice drives economic behaviour. Without creative, self-seeking individuals selecting their preferred patterns of consumption, there would be less need-satisfaction and the market would not function efficiently. The second is that consumer choice is limited by interventionism. It posits that free individuals in the market place (or even hunter-gatherers) are more rational and effective consumers than those restricted by regulation.

The third contention is that a totally free market does not satisfactorily meet the requirements of non-competitive individuals. Therefore, some public intervention is acceptable if it is designed to meet the justifiable needs of the disadvantaged and to provide essential services. Most remote-dwelling Indigenous Australians are acknowledged as people who require this government assistance. The fourth argument is that intervention should be minimal because it limits the natural creativity, self-reliance and individualism of human need satisfaction strategies. As these characteristics are essential for consumer choice and dynamic market-liberalism, they should be encouraged, even among non-competitive members of society. Thus, planning must assist welfare recipients sparingly since, along with the inherent scarcity of public resources, it must also account for government desires to maintain self-reliant individualism as a core characteristic in society.

Gleeson and Low (2000:9) argue that the previous accord about assisting the 'needy' has been replaced by a neoliberal belief that planned intervention is inefficient and even damaging (Heywood 2003: 55). A revised model emphasises the superiority of self-reliant individualism and of the market itself. Gleeson and Low (2000: 9) continue that recent conservative governments have wholeheartedly embraced the principles of neoliberalism and the value system which rejects 'dependency' or reliance on public transfer payments. Yet, with pressure from domestic and occasional international observers, the circumstances of Australia's remote Indigenous communities are seen by the Commonwealth government as 'appalling' and, ideology notwithstanding, responses must be crafted to deal with

the situation.

Pursing this nexus, Thompson (2004; 2005; 2006) recently examined intentions underlying individual responsibility, and Indigenous need satisfaction within the contemporary 'mutual obligation' (MO) policy of neoliberal Australian welfare. To frame the analysis, Kinnear (2000: 1) maintained that

mutual obligation policy has its origins in liberal democratic philosophical traditions – in particular, in the idea of the 'social contract' and the idea that rights have correlative duties or obligations. ... Government ... tells us repeatedly that the idea is 'simple', 'compelling' and 'fundamentally fair'. Indeed, this has become a key ... to strengthen obligations on recipients of social security payments. [Yet] when rigorous analysis is undertaken, the surface plausibility of the idea of mutual obligation disappears.

The self-reliant individualism which underpins contemporary MO policy emerges in an expectation that Indigenous families strive to achieve economic independence through work and then contribute economically to Australia through paying for the services they consume and via the taxes that support the system. The establishment of a work ethic is seen as developmental and then economic independence should follow. Mutual obligation would be exercised as a whole of government approach, irrespective of which office was at any time intervening in the market and providing individual or group assistance.

Across Australia, notions of gratitude for charity and demonisation of the poor have never been regarded as satisfactory bases for social planning, their being inconsistent with the government's stated intentions since the inception of Indigenous support in the 1960s (see Goodin 2002: 579-81). Contrariwise, the obligations associated with MO-based social policy appear as fundamental assumptions that Indigenous clients who benefit from humanitarian assistance embrace a 'work-ethic' to increase the self-reliant individualism within society. As much as there is any sense of compassionate assistance, beneficiaries are expected and assisted to develop self-reliant qualities through work and thereby compensate the community that assists them.

These objectives are facilitated by the instrument, quasi- or fully-contractual, of a shared responsibility agreement (SRA). Concerning these agreements which apply across a range of Indigenous affairs, it is useful directly to quote the official website⁵ which advises that:

- [SRAs] are entirely voluntary and are developed where Indigenous people and communities decide they want to address specific priorities.
- In return for discretionary benefits from government, communities make some specific commitments in order to achieve their identified goals.
- The community decides the issues or priorities it wants to address, how it wants to address them and what it will do in return for government investment.
- SRAs set out what families, communities, governments and other partners will contribute to address local priorities and the outcomes to be achieved.
- The Government is not placing conditions on the delivery of essential services - SRAs do not affect Indigenous people's access to benefits or services available to all Australians.
- SRAs are just one element of the Government's overall approach to improving outcomes for Indigenous people, which also includes harnessing mainstream programs and working cooperatively with State and Territory Governments to achieve better service delivery.

In the mainstream, the mechanics of neoliberalism are about fitting or incorporating people into a market economy. In the process they might well change their desires or satisfactions depending on market provision. In the Indigenous context, the logic of MOs and SRAs suggests that current, neoliberal social policy rests on the assumptions that:

- indigenous clients were not previously 'self-reliant' individuals,
- government assistance is sufficient to provide clients with feelings of satisfaction,
- the value of the satisfaction is recognised by the client,
- the value of the satisfaction is perceived sufficient to warrant compensation, and
- clients have sufficient resources to expend on warranted obligations.

Now, after each assumption is examined, the added complexities of the recent

⁵ *SRAs and RPAs Website*, <http://www.indigenous.gov.au/sra.html> accessed February 2007

ministerial prescription will be considered.

INDIVIDUAL SELF RELIANCE

From a mainstream perspective, remote Indigenous settlements are today characterised by: permanence; marginal land-use capacity; overcrowded conditions; deficient employment opportunities; and social problems. By contrast, pre-contact Indigenous communities featured: seasonal mobility; economic surplus; social cohesion; artistic creativity, a relatively high quality of life and a degree of violence (Memmott 1988; Briscoe 1989: 200; Berndt and Berndt 1992; Sutton 2001; Thompson 2004; Thompson 2006). At colonisation, Indigenous extended families were economically independent and self-reliance was manifest in a detailed system of reciprocity.

By the first decade of the 2000s, the dearth of gainful community-based employment for other Indigenous people requires government intervention and an obligatory 'self-reliance' strategy based on work creation schemes, such as the Community Development Employment Program (CDEP) and 'Work for the Dole'. Very little opportunity exists for those who choose or are confined to live in the settlements that government created to contain remote Indigenous Australians. Public support for essential infrastructure in some of these locales also depends on SRAs, which require Indigenous effort toward (government) planning priorities for housing and health (Pearson 2000: 87; Rowse 2002: 263, 271; Thompson 2006: 2). Indigenous self-reliance existed and might still exist in hunting, foraging, art, community and spiritual activities, but it now competes with aspects of government policy aimed at addressing dependence.

In order to promote economic independence, contemporary social planning prescribes Indigenous participation in solutions to problems essentially created by colonisation⁶. Ineffectual work strategies address issues which government planners hold as the priorities in a milieu of unsatisfactory living conditions.

⁶ Irrespective of Sutton's (2001) argument a previously independent and 'dry' 'culture' is now characterized, by some, as being economically dependent and having alcohol-related social problems. Thus these problems in

Indigenous approaches to economic self-reliance and environmental management since the 1960s have been subject to constraints and intervention which restrict self-determination and impose other ideals of self-reliance (Thompson 2001; 2004). Later in this discussion, the logical continuities between the historical policy and contemporary planning highlight the shared failings in these approaches.

GOVERNMENT ASSISTANCE

The second assumption upon which the success of government planning depends is that Indigenous need satisfaction results from policy intervention. However, according to the government's own recent policy statements, neither Indigenous living conditions nor social problems are improving.

Maslow's acclaimed model, modified according to Locke's contextualised interpretation of need, is useful for considering Indigenous satisfaction (Thompson 2004; 2005). From this perspective, human behaviour is interpreted through culture and experienced as ordered demands for: 1) foods, fluids, and elemental protection; 2) safety; 3) relationships and affection; 4) self esteem; and 5) feelings of growth. The satisfaction that Indigenous people achieve in these five realms reflects their own reality. According to mainstream logic, the self-determination taken for granted by the Australian community is crucial to people's progress along this hierarchy of satisfactions.

In support of arguments about cultural determination of satisfaction, Kate Senior (1999) described how camp-dwellers, who are perceived by government to be priority groups for housing and services, rated social relationships and other cultural considerations as far more important than those attributed to them. Since the real benefits of consumption are defined by individual realities, needs that are not experienced cannot be satisfied. For example, mainstream Australian food needs cannot be satisfied by mangrove-worms, nor shelter by wiltjas (wind breaks). This disjunction implies that imposed concepts of need and services provide little appeal for Indigenous families and that their self-reliance is limited by

inappropriate intervention (Thompson 2004). Government statistics about failing health and well-being reflect the lack of actual satisfaction achieved.

RECOGNITION OF SATISFACTION

From the Maslow/Locke model, it is evident that the cultural construction of needs can impact on an evaluation of life. The discussion hinges on two alternate assumptions. Indigenous people evaluate their satisfaction either objectively or normatively and, at any time, culturally-constructed reference norms are based on a mixture of traditional and contemporary influences. Traditional activity was once dominated by hunting and foraging. Since that 'economic culture' provided a satisfying quality of life, the traditional norm was a relatively high level of personal amenity (Memmott 1988; Briscoe 1989: 200; Berndt and Berndt 1992; Thompson 2004). Moreover, since the unproblematic life-style permitted individuals the opportunity to meet their basic social and artistic needs, Indigenous normality included: freedom, self-reliance, meaningful interaction, and creativity. If Indigenous evaluations of modern economic circumstances are measured against traditional hunter-gatherer lifestyles, the latter could be seen to provide a high level of utility relative to existing settlements⁷. Conversely, since mainstream statistics now present Indigenous people as the most needy in the Australian community, contemporary national social norms, reflective of opportunities which cannot be accessed, are also likely to encourage them to be dissatisfied with their current quality of life. Against both the normative benchmarks, the Indigenous quality of life is potentially perceived as poor.

CONSTRUCTING OBLIGATION FROM SATISFACTION

While obligation-based approaches are now characteristic of mainstream welfare in Australia, their construction in Indigenous affairs is comparable with paternalistic

⁷ When Australian governments 'settled' Indigenous people in the Northern Territory, they became more available for intervention methodologies (Thompson 2004; 2006). The concentration of these remote Indigenous populations overloaded the economic capacity of local environments (Memmott in Thompson 2004) and the Government eventually had to assume economic responsibility for the settlements. The capital transfers for this economic support were tied with welfare intervention which was prescribed as 'needed', 'temporary' or 'special measures'. Indigenous people, were expected to 'make the transition... favourable to their social, economical and political advancement' (Commonwealth of Australia 1965: v) so that they could provide the future labor requirements of rural industries, many of which failed to materialise).

housing policy of the late 1960 and early 1970s. Alongside today's shared responsibility agreements, Thompson (2004) discusses the early obligations for housing intervention. Simply, obligation must occur both at the 'giving' and 'receiving' end of the equation. Though Indigenous social policy has, for 40 years, been seen in the public arena as a compassionate response to Indigenous 'needs', it has not been experienced as such by clients (Thompson 2005). From the outset, it impacted Indigenous self-determination through a process of imposing 'needed' solutions upon a population only dependent because of 'settlement' policy. Though in 1963 'very few Aborigines ... possessed houses or normal services', by 1965 assimilative mainstream norms had been applied to construe the situation as an Indigenous social problem which required 'about a hundred houses equipped with stoves, water ..., toilets etc' (Commonwealth of Australia 1965: 75). From this initial 'assistance' it became possible to create a questionable perception that recipients should be 'obliged' for the public resources foregone elsewhere in the nation.

Whatever their health and life expectancy outcomes, Indigenous living conditions were not a problem until European settlement (Rowley 1967: 797; Briscoe 1989; Memmott 1991: 64-77; Shaw 1993: 24; Thompson 2004). Later in the 20th century, the public intervention which prevented traditional surplus production (Briscoe 1989: 200-01) and limited Indigenous needs satisfaction promoted unrealistic expectations. The supposedly-benevolent intentions of policy-planners actually focussed on a 'staged' assimilative cultural change process (Heppell 1979: 8-10; Memmott 1988: 34; Sanders 1990: 39; Hughes 1995: 369-71), rather than a strategy to increase Indigenous satisfaction⁸. Though 'primitiveness' was the primary focus for intervention and (1960s) policy-planners were pleased when even a small number of unsatisfying houses gradually 'advanced' Indigenous living conditions, they perceived their action as help, and expected gratitude (Commonwealth of Australia 1965: 75, Thompson 2005). Though the mainstream

⁸ Memmott's (1988) work is enlightening about the actual satisfaction which was achieved from earlier policy assistance as he argues that Indigenous social housing of the 1960s was likely to be less comfortable than vernacular dwellings ('humpies') and in some cases was near uninhabitable (Saini (1967: 792) described such housing as sub-standard)

economic system was regionally incapable of compensating a lost quality of life, the policy plan to modify rather than satisfy Indigenous people was held as compassionate (Memmott, 1991: 64-77; Thompson 2004). This position, which left most clients in extreme poverty and some in very low-amenity housing (Thompson 2004), provided planners with the assurance that they were meeting need, though there is little evidence to that effect (Thompson 2004).

Prescription is a normal standard of mainstream mass welfare processes. Such programs have, since Elizabethan times, been constrained because of a perception that recipients of costless assistance will maximise their benefits rather than just satisfy their needs. However, though modern liberalism expects some restraint on the individual freedom of clients who receive welfare, it does not foresee that (Indigenous) economic behaviour be completely replaced by welfare-based assistance. Settlement policy imposed on individual freedom (modern-liberal principles) but never satisfactorily established the compensatory rural capitalist economy. Normatively, any level to which Indigenous people can be thankful (obliged) for this charitable intervention must be based on the level of satisfaction achieved after adjusting for previous benefits withdrawn or removed from access. From contemporary observations, it appears that little compensation has been achieved and little obligation is justifiable.

SUFFICIENT RESOURCES FOR WARRANTED OBLIGATIONS?

The final axiom about mutual obligation policy is that resources need to exist before they can be allocated. Rationally, before Indigenous clients can meet the obligations of the MO policy plan, they must be economically capable of reciprocation. This economic capacity is determined by the level of surplus resources they hold after their existing needs are serviced. Thus, if they have unmet needs, then they can only commit resources to MO objectives if they provide greater utility than they would achieve through their own need satisfaction strategies. Otherwise their deficits will increase.

Pragmatics of the Policy Context

Fundamental discussion, as presented above, drives into the essential logic of Indigenous settlement and economy. Historical review would suggest that until about 1780, only 225 years ago, there had been some 40,000 apparently successful years of traditional hunting and gathering in generally sparse environments. If these lifestyles had proven grossly unsatisfactory, Indigenous people might have undertaken mass (Pacific-style) emigrations or altered the type of civilisations they had created. Since there is little evidence of these courses, either local resource constraints went unrecognised or people were satisfied to live within them.

A man of religious leanings, Tony Abbott (2006: 5) made the following observation on post-contact settlement in the 19th and early 20th centuries:

It's still fashionable to scoff at the work of remote area missionaries but none of them were on short-term contracts and many of them had no other home. Service was their life, not just their business philosophy. They took solidarity with Aboriginal people to be their personal responsibility and many of them left their bones in the settlements they created. Their sense of calling did not make them perfect but it motivated them to commit their lives to Aboriginal people in ways that can seldom now be matched.

As the Minister further notes, in places where Aboriginal people form the bulk of the population, traditional mores gave way to mission authority which has now been replaced with 'a vacuum'. Yet, since it is well known in political theory that an absence of power is impossible in human affairs (Hardt and Negri 2004: 162), it is no surprise to see that 'such authority as exists rests with local "big men" often in conflict with each other and white managers usually dependent on unstable alliances in the local council' (Abbott, 2006b: 5).

All Indigenous activity and welfare provision is spatially-defined, often involving what are externally seen as difficulties inherent in remote settlement. This problematic logic emerges in the following schema which sets the framework for public policy, whether the driving strategy relies upon assimilation, integration, self-determination or any other formula (Figure 1):

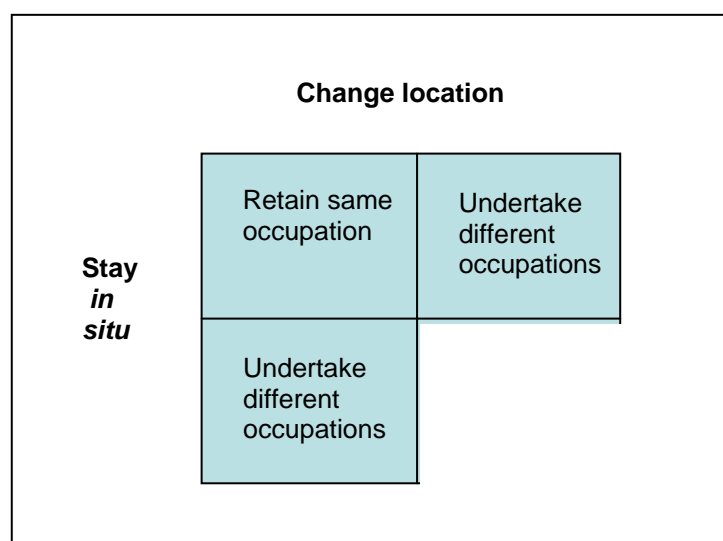


Figure 1: Spatial settlement/activity options for ‘advancement’ of Indigenous (or any other) economic conditions

Source: Authors

Given this summary of options, it is worth pausing to consider the implications of official calls for increased oversight. Which improvements might such an approach offer in a setting of MOs, SRAs and greater exogenous influence? As any social planner would confirm, it is difficult to know where to break into vicious cycles of dependency. As a singular solution, gainful economic activity can annul needs for various forms of welfare intervention. Yet, productive activity depends at least upon appropriate health and education, as taken for granted in the mainstream. These latter elements are underpinned, necessarily but not sufficiently, by satisfactory shelter and stability. If economic improvement in communities is required, a base level of welfare is presumed. The issues become where to intervene in the policy mix and which priorities will kick-start processes which can lead to desirable employment and eventual independence.

With the Indigenous population continuing to increase, even the currently buoyant economy and budget surpluses are insufficient to assuage government concern about the costs of Indigenous social living conditions. The Minister for Health holds that current lifestyles are unsatisfying and unsatisfactory from the viewpoints of most stakeholders. The matter is the more compelling since Indigenous problems

are now relegated within the neoliberal⁹ mainstream, which is arguably more focussed on interest rates, the price of fuel and, more distantly, industrial relations and the war in Iraq.

Economic Realities and Contemporary Policy

Thompson (2004; 2005) has argued that the physical determinism implicit in 1960-70s Indigenous settlement and housing policy failed, in that behavioural change, presumably toward a mainstream middle-class outcome, was not sufficiently manifest. Logical problems beset its associated obligations. Amongst the shortfalls created, Indigenous people did not experience the intervention as sufficiently satisfying (or needed) to warrant obligations. Second, houses supplied were less to do with shelter satisfaction than the machinery of paternalistic assimilation (Thompson 2004; 2006). In consequence, any rational allocation of scarce resources to these non-needed goods could only limit the people's capacity to access needed items. So much could still apply today.

Since the 1990s, obligations have been increasingly related to the unsatisfactory economic performance of Indigenous clients (Thompson 2004; 2006). Rather than the official approach being seen as an economic (rationality) failure, Indigenous people have been judged morally lax about paying rent, 'contributing' and meeting their obligations for social assistance received. Such reasoning has prompted MO policy or paternalistic analyses as planning responses.

The five previously cited precepts upon which obligation-based policy rests can be summarised as expectations that: Indigenous people should have the resources

⁹ Harvey (2005) describes neoliberalism as 'the doctrine that market exchange is an ethic in itself, capable of acting as a guide for all human action'. For Harvey neoliberalism 'has become dominant in both thought and practice throughout much of the world since 1970'. This ideology turns away from the compassionate and interventionist ideas of modern liberalism in favour of increased self reliance and economic independence. The neoliberal position (see Trigger 2004: 46, Pearson 2006: 26), might argue that, yes, Indigenous people have been gathered in overcrowded communities, and on marginal land that ensures the failure of their traditional economy, but it is time they became economically independent in the mainstream market, mainstream culture and on mainstream terms because the fault is their culture and their individual motivation.

required to meet determined obligations; and the latter should be justifiable. They relate to liberal economic conditions that needs are met within mainstream society when individuals are permitted the degree of self-determination required to choose and then can allocate their scarce resources to realise these preferences.

These underpinnings suggest that present Indigenous policy is aberrant in a number of ways. Noel Pearson (2006: 26) recently wrote that, compared with other democratic countries with first nation populations, Australia is treading a *Sonderweg*, an exceptional path, in its indigenous policy. 'We Aboriginal Australians are being reduced to beggars in our own home'.

Just as early Indigenous housing policy failed to establish commitment to the obligations associated with consumption, contemporary policy is suspect if it continues to impose demands in association with costly but unsatisfying service provision. If MO policy requires that welfare beneficiaries expend more of their resources meeting the objectives laid down in SRAs then, as argued, individual autonomy is eroded. The extent of limitation depends on the control which the individual has in setting the SRA. Though Government sources hold that the overt goal of the MO policy is to raise individual self-reliance, it requires that government and 'community' or 'brokers' define the interests of the client (McClure 2000: 14, 38-39; Rowse 2002: 270). Government thus retains both the bargaining power, and the capacity for setting the priorities to which individuals must commit.

In this context, the policy thrust includes improving the quality of leadership at the Indigenous community level, in a belief that historical, logical failures in policy-planning can be addressed by local governance. This view equally entrenches perceptions of clients' moral delinquency and assumes capabilities of policy experts who, nonetheless, misjudged the actual housing needs of Indigenous people (Thompson 2006). Though the plan is not to promote powerlessness, there has long been an undercurrent that irresponsible behaviour is normal for welfare clients.

Costless benefits are seen as conferring too-much freedom without responsibilities (Howard 1999). Though Hughes (1995) argued that 'self-determination' policy already imposed intolerable controls upon Indigenous clients, emergent views which emphasise moral judgements about welfare addiction have overwhelmed this critique. Those views could influence the policy direction at a time when there is a need for reasoned as opposed to negative perceptions of Indigenous economic self-determination.

If, as stated in government documents, successful Indigenous policy is measured against satisfaction, it is logical that new measures be first focussed on determination of genuine Indigenous needs and greater pursuit of participative strategies. This approach links the rationality of the hunter-gatherer and the market society, both of which can work for the social groups involved. Application of market restraint is about encouraging individual responsibility through participation in priority setting, rational choice, (assisted) allocation and consumption within resource limits. Rather, the official way has been about expert determination of 'need' and the development of quasi markets which mimic market functions without allowing consumers the capacity for decision-making (Thompson 2005). While it has empowered some leaders in decision-making for clients, Thompson (2006) has argued that it has also prevented the consumer from making any real decisions about housing characteristics and, hence, has limited self-reliance. Just as non-Indigenous Australians would resist federal and state ministers determining consumption priorities, Indigenous Australians might have economic reasons to object.

Prime Minister Howard has seen the solution to Indigenous welfare dependency as an increase in paternal controls and regulation of clients' lives (Walker 2004: 1). Noel Pearson argued for Indigenous leaders to take increased control over Indigenous clients (Abbott 2006b: 5, Rowse 2002: 271). Tony Abbott (2006b) latterly argues that the real need is for more expert intervention, both through precision in problem assessment and 'competent' administration of Indigenous community services. Welfare 'dependency' has been the focal problem which the

new plan addresses, potentially through greater administrative control! This approach overlooks a social-work orthodoxy that social problems can only be solved for the long term by clients achieving the power to take control of their life situations. This step is best addressed by building on their strengths, rather than pathologising them and imposing solutions.

The Health Minister's recent arguments about Indigenous welfare have cited dramatic case-studies of familial neglect and breakdown, so that coercive policy responses seem justifiable to any person concerned about the powerless in society. Such emotive arguments make it irrational to tolerate the self-determination which permits the substance-abuse and child-neglect, which characterise (some) Indigenous living conditions (Abbott 2006b: 1-3). Irresponsible liberty is not seen as acceptable for welfare clients (see Pearson 2000: 87; Rowse 2002: 267, 271; Pearson 2004: 11), even though selfish rationality is perceived normal in mainstream market-liberal life. In this context, conservative beliefs dominate the 'common-sense' views that government and even some Indigenous use to understand client needs. Benign intervention is thought the answer to problems that are perceived to require free decision-making in the bulk of society. Yet, rationality suggests that administrators cannot be expected to make decisions to advance powerless clients. Indeed, in Australia, it has proven difficult even to encourage competent or honest administrators to low-paid, remote positions.

Conclusions

Given a backdrop of influential conservative beliefs about the needs of Indigenous clients, neoliberal expectations for individual self-reliance, and mainstream definition of social problems, the tasks for this paper were to consider:

- rational rather than moral evaluations of Indigenous circumstances,
- rational diagnoses of problems, and
- foci for planning efforts based on rational solutions.

Liberal axioms supporting social planning hold that even the relatively powerless members of society must control their milieu in order tolerably to meet their basic, social and higher order needs (including community participation). In this context there are plausible reasons why past coercive policy has fallen short and why any repeat, which reduces the control individuals have over need satisfaction, will tend in the same direction. The account suggests that flawed models could be rehabilitated within the aegis of contemporary interpretations of the Indigenous problem.

Within a neoliberal, laissez-faire mindset, the federal government has settled upon a more paternal approach to improving Indigenous living conditions and life chances. Such improvement, achieved effectively, efficiently and equitably, is indeed the aim of social planning. The above critique indicates the slippage in past paternal intervention and the folly in assuming that the mainstream economy can unilaterally embrace Indigenous communities and solve the problems. A revised *modus operandi* is needed.. It requires both some principles for Indigenous social planning and some pitfalls to be avoided.

The first pitfall is based on Minister Abbott's perception that 'self-determination' limits effectiveness, efficiency and equity because it encourages officials to be irresponsible. The paternal argument is that competent officials should be appointed so that they can ultimately determine which services 'Aboriginal people most need'. Simplistic perceptions of need, the wellbeing of individuals and official service delivery have been challenged above. The first planning insight is that 'need' conceptualisations are a highly contested aspect of service delivery which must be defined by clients.

'Accurate information' might indeed be 'the last thing people want to hear', because the 'established behaviour and settled judgments' of Indigenous policy are not challenged in the way Abbott assumes in his policy statement. Rather, the 'only basis on which good policy can ever be sensibly devised and effectively delivered' (Abbott 2006b: 6) is accurate information about Indigenous need, an

item that can best be provided by Indigenous people. It requires strategic application of self-determination associated with genuine action-consequence dynamics, the sort of thing lacking in quasi-market arrangements or current policy planning mechanisms. The second insight is thus that government and its agents are service providers rather than service prescribers and that paternal agenda-setting acts against this stance. Its rhetorical coating notwithstanding, the SRA is fundamentally based upon uneven power relations and paternal imposition.

The concept of the SRA might seem facilitative of good service planning where Indigenous perceptions and priorities powerfully determine objectives. According to economic logic (as discussed), the SRAs to which individuals commit can only form out of the priorities of those individuals (in their communities). If they result from government initiatives they will constitute an economic cost that is perceived as non-essential. Thus government has a service provision role but not one in agenda setting. The basis for planning service objectives and for subsequent performance evaluation must principally be the subjectively defined well-being (needs) of clients rather than the objectives stipulated by formal policy. So much presumes bottom-up development based on a broader understanding of individual economic engagement and self-determination about personal priorities.

Finally, Abbott's desire for expert intervention is valid only if this expertise is deployed in addressing client priorities. There is a requirement for a thorough review of international literature/practice concerning both the conceptualisations of need underpinning policy and successful, client-centred models for service delivery. Any new policy must at least have walked a mile in the shoes of the 'other'. Thus, information produced by the evaluation process should inform recommendations based upon an increased measure of subjectively-assessed wellbeing. It can inform the understanding of infrastructure needs in service planning. The goal is to enhance policy sustainability through bringing personal claims and formally defined services as close together as possible, therefore reducing the requirement for further institutional or individual expense related to modification or repair of social interventions due to inappropriate implementation.

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