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## What job, which house?: Simple solutions to complex problems in Indigenous affairs

Mark Moran, World Vision Australia and University of Queensland

### INTRODUCTION

Low levels of development of infrastructure and industry in remote Australia enable Aboriginal people to continue to assert their social and cultural traditions more strongly than they can in regional and urban areas. Yet remote Aboriginal settlements operate in an extreme economic context, arising from limited economic opportunities, the small size of settlements, large distances between settlements, a lack of institutional capital, and high levels of mobility between and within settlements. Due to low levels of personal savings and disposable incomes, Aboriginal settlements have historically failed to attract private sector consumer services. Whereas mainstream settlements are actively engaged in the market economy, the economy of most remote Aboriginal settlements is dominated by government transfers (Moran & Elvin 2009).

A perilous state of human welfare has emerged in many of these settlements (Productivity Commission 2007). This has given rise to a public debate on their ongoing viability, which began when the Indigenous Affairs Minister Amanda Vanstone described small remote Aboriginal communities as ‘cultural museums’ (Australian Broadcasting Corporation 2005). Further contributions in this vein have been Helen Hughes’ book *Lands of Shame* (2007), published by the conservative Centre for Independent Studies, and the ‘Leaving Remote Communities’ conference, sponsored by the Bennelong Society in Sydney in September 2006. From both more and less sympathetic views, these interventions have supported a range of policy proposals, from investing more but differently, through to total withdrawal of support for the remoter settlements altogether, effectively leaving them to ‘wither on the vine’. Contrary views have been slow to mobilise, partly because the questions raised—why are health, education, employment and law and order outcomes so ‘bad’?—are valid, even if the proposed causes and solutions are contestable (Stafford Smith, Moran, & Seemann 2008, p. 123).

A recent paper by Dr Gary Johns (2009) titled ‘No Job, No House’, released by the Menzies Research Centre in January, is the most recent addition to this viability debate. Johns is an economist with a PhD in political science, who served as a minister in the Keating government, then as a senior fellow at the market-oriented Institute of Public Affairs, and most recently as the President of the Bennelong Society. He argues in his paper that housing should not be provided to remote Aboriginal communities where there are no jobs and people are unable to pay rent or service a mortgage: money spent on remote community housing has been ‘generous and well-targeted’ but it has produced ‘wrecked houses and dependent communities’ (p. 4). According to Johns, ‘the decline of these communities both in a social and population sense raises serious doubts about the level of government assistance that should continue to be provided to them’ (p. 6). Provocatively, he argues that government should not provide permanent housing to communities unless they can show they are economically viable: ‘the ultimate solution to Aboriginal housing in remote areas is jobs, but an honest assessment of employment prospects in remote areas is that they are bleak’ (p. 18). Johns argues that people need to adjust to the notion that if there are no jobs in their town, they have to move to where there are opportunities in regional centres, otherwise they will be trapped in poverty: ‘anything less than a ‘no job, no house’ mindset will harm Aborigines’ (p. 36).

From the outset, it is important to establish that such accounts of viability are selective. For example, an inquiry into the sustainability of local government councils in New South Wales found many operating unsustainably with funding support from other levels of government (Allan, Darlison & Gibbs 2006), but their viability has not been questioned. A simplistic accounting against some benchmark of viability

would also certainly judge many poorer pastoral settlements to also be unviable. Non-Indigenous people in remote Australia have generally suffered a degree of malaise, with declining populations in many rural towns, a sense of uncertainty reflected in poor mental health outcomes and high rural suicide rates, and projections for the non-Indigenous population to hardly grow over the coming decades (Fraser et al. 2005). Generally, economic globalisation has favoured concentration and centralisation in urban centres in Australia and elsewhere, resulting in increasing capital leakage from rural and remote areas (Holmes 2002). Thus, any consideration of 'viability' must engage with remote settlements in general and not simply Aboriginal ones, as is usually the case in the conservative critiques mentioned above (Stafford Smith, Moran, & Seemann 2008, p. 124).

Further, there are considerable economic benefits to remote Australia that flow from government funding of remote settlements (Crough 1993). There are many regional spinoffs from the 'business' of servicing remote Indigenous populations, including public sector employment, building construction, retail stores, and Indigenous art and tourism. This is contrary to public perceptions of remote settlements as sinks for wasted public funds, perceptions that are ironically often promulgated by the very non-Indigenous people in regional centres with the most to gain. Thus any consideration of 'viability' must also engage with regional economies and non-Indigenous populations in regional centres, not just the economies of remote Aboriginal settlements.

## RESETTLEMENT VERSUS HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Johns is correct in identifying the importance of employment to human development in remote settlements: beyond the benefits of financial gain, the learning and experience that comes from employment is critically important to development and empowerment in the broader society. There are, in fact, many jobs in the bush, but there are substantial barriers to Aboriginal recruitment, and many more jobs are being performed than are actually paid for. These are in the settlements themselves, where skilled employment positions are predominantly held by outsiders. More broadly, they include mining, natural resource management, construction, government (administration, education, health, etcetera) and pastoralism. Remote Australia is paradoxically both a region of mass unemployment (in settlements) and mass labour shortages (reflected in exorbitant wages paid to mining and construction workers). Thus the problem is as much a matter of human development, as it is resettlement to urban and regional centres. Significant challenges are involved in building skills, overcoming costs and other difficulties in travelling from the settlements to jobs, and in job-readiness and employment practices. At the aggregate level, there are many jobs which could be filled by the residents of remote Aboriginal settlements, and at a lower cost than flying in outsiders. Achieving this may not be feasible in the short term, but it should be a long term goal.

Simply moving people from the settlements to regional towns, 'where the jobs are', will leave the economic circumstances of people unchanged and may worsen their health and well-being. If a policy was introduced to relocate people to large towns to gain jobs, then governments would need to engage in the same type of capacity building and job-readiness programs that are needed in remote settlements. If you compare incomes and employment rates for people living in the Alice Springs town camps with those in the remote settlements, there is no significant difference (Sanders 2004). This could also be said for settlements in close proximity to tourism (for example, Mutitjulu) and mining (for example, Lajamanu). Mere proximity to jobs does not mean that people are qualified for them or that employers will employ them. Ironically, given Johns' argument, governments will inevitably need to provide housing for the unemployed anyway. More significantly, unless the underlying aspects of capacity and job-readiness are addressed, and the elements that drive Aboriginal employment and work behaviours understood (Austin-Broos 2006), proximity to jobs will not necessarily correlate with increased employment.

Johns claims that 'many of the remote communities have failed' and supports this with evidence that people are voting with their feet, and leaving for regional centres with improved education and employment options (p. 5). He correctly notes the decrease in the population in remote dispersed settlements (or outstations) (p. 27), but Taylor and Biddle (2008, p. 15, 17) found that this could be

largely explained by an undercount in the 2006 Census in remote locales. The population of Aboriginal 'community' settlements, which is the target of Johns' argument, remained relatively stable in comparison. The population of regional centres (such as Mount Isa and Alice Springs) did increase due to migration and natural increase, but it does not necessarily follow that this was due to people leaving remote settlements. Johns' analysis does not fully consider the complexity of mobility between Aboriginal settlements. The available evidence is that people move between a limited number of settlements across a reasonably stable 'mobility region', and that intra-regional moves between settlements tend to cancel each other out (Taylor & Bell 1999). In these regions, Indigenous mobility patterns approximate circulation rather than migration, with the development of localised, as opposed to national, networks of movement. Further research is required to understand recent mobility trends in central Australia, which cannot be measured from Census statistics alone.

Johns evokes the need to 'protect those who want to escape bad behaviour' by encouraging 'secure housing in large Aboriginal communities, country towns and regional centres to allow Aboriginal inhabitants to escape humbugging' (p. 34–35). With this proposal, he reveals a lack of knowledge for history, since this was largely the impetus for the homeland or return to country movement, which led to the establishment of outstations across outback Australia through the 1980s and 90s. For Aboriginal people, life on outstations has meaning well beyond employment and residence. Maintenance of language, culture and country, participation in economic activity (art, eco-tourism, natural resource management) are important activities with benefits that accrue not just to the individuals and communities directly involved. In addition, biomedical and ethnographic research demonstrates that people resident on homelands enjoy a higher standard of physical and mental health (Altman et al. 2008, p. 4). Outstations will continue to be an option for people to 'escape bad behaviour,' equally or more so than the foreign environments of regional centres.

The federal government withdrew funding support to outstations dates back in the late 1990s. Yet outstation populations have proved to be remarkably resilient, suggesting that people are reluctant to move, whether supported or otherwise. Withdrawal of support began with a moratorium on outstation funding by the now disbanded Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. More recently, a Memorandum of Understanding signed between the federal government and the Northern Territory in 2008 states that no federal funding will be provided 'to construct housing on outstations / homelands' (Northern Territory Government 2008, p. 4–5). Significantly, Johns confuses outstations (populations of less than 50 people), with the more than 300 remote Aboriginal 'community' settlements (population of more than 50), which account for almost 90 per cent of the people living in discrete communities (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2007). The population and resourcing of remote Aboriginal 'community' settlements, in comparison to outstations, has remained relatively stable (Taylor & Biddle 2008). Like outstations, remote settlement populations in general are likely to be quite resilient to withdrawal of funding. Should Johns' ideas be adopted as policy, it is quite possible that people will either stay put, or they will be replaced by others moving back, irrespective of the decline in housing and living conditions that would inevitably ensue.

Johns writes that country towns, regional centres and major cities, should be equipped for an influx of Aboriginal settlers, 'including "refugee" resources and facilities', to help Aborigines transition into mainstream economic life. Johns (p. 18) argues that by providing increased servicing to 'help people to adapt' that 'the long-held fear of Aborigines coming to town can be allayed'. He shows his disconnection not only to Aboriginal Australians, but also to the non-Indigenous Australian residents in regional centres of all political persuasions. Residents of these towns have good reason to express their concern at the location of refugee resources and services of the scale proposed by Johns, especially when the underlying issues of job-readiness and availability remain unresolved.

The historical record does not bode well for resettlement of Aboriginal people to regional centres. In the 1960s and 1970s, the old system of Aboriginal station hands working for food and household goods was brought down by the introduction of equal pay in the pastoral industry. The Aboriginal station hands and their families lost their jobs and moved into regional towns where there was no work and no housing.

The impact of that lack of foresight and planning was still evident in 1980s. Men were only trained for station work and there was none to be had, which led to a range of social problems and ill health (Birdsall-Jones 1980). We see the same thing happening now in what Johns urges is the right course of action. Johns' idea that governments will assist people to move where the job prospects are better is not a new idea.

Johns falls short of advocating for the resettlement of all Aboriginal residents in remote settlements, evoking instead a threshold of economic viability below which government assistance should cease. Thereafter some settlements would be left to fend for themselves, or 'wither on the vine'. He is correct to raise questions about the level of government assistance that should be provided to remote settlements, especially outstations, but he is wrong to evoke a mental model of thresholds of viability. In keeping with a recent analysis (Stafford Smith, Moran, & Seemann 2008), there are small settlements in remote locations where it is impossible by any model to provide services which satisfy an Australian social minimum standard. But this does not preclude assistance to a lower standard. The truth is that people can choose to make almost any scale of settlement and remoteness work if they are prepared to adjust their aspirations and take on an appropriate service delivery model (probably involving a great deal of self-reliance). The question then becomes what standards of service are appropriate, rather than a simplistic on-off funding threshold of economic viability. Thus viability has to be regarded as a more complex trade-off between the aspirations for and benefits of services (the demand-driven desire for certain levels of affluence and services) and the costs of providing these services, and the form of this trade-off is different in different places (Stafford Smith, Moran, & Seemann 2008, p. 132).

## **RETHINKING THE MEANING OF WORK AND PRODUCTION**

Johns' particular economic lens sees employment as the only valid form of productive activity. Yet there is a range of important productive activity engaged in by those who are unemployed. Parenting for many is a full time occupation, with some matriarchs in remote settlements caring for ten children or more. Behind every piece of art that sells for a profit, there is a whole field of other activities including the passing of traditional knowledge, cultural practices, art tuition, and the many paintings that never sell. Volunteering in the many organisations and forums of governance required for the transmission of services and funding is also a major field of productive activity, and an important proving ground for Indigenous leadership in this country. Johns repeatedly derides the 'recreational lifestyle' of Aboriginal people, yet when viewed through a development lens, socio-cultural practices around kinship and mobility build social capital which can be drawn down at time of need (a point discussed further below). Similarly, sport is one of the few activities in Australian society where Indigenous people are permitted to meet and beat other Australians on a level field. Johns is correct in identifying employment as a critical means of economic activity, but other informal forms of production must also be taken into consideration.

Trigger (2005) usefully summarises the literature on the relationship between economy and culture in terms of pervasive Aboriginal values. These include a strong ethos of egalitarianism and an associated pressure to conform to norms of equality, the pursuit of family and local group loyalties against notions of the 'common good', demand sharing as a mechanism working against material accumulation, and an underlying ideological commitment to continuity with the past which militates against the acceptance of change. These values are contingent, dynamic and constantly challenged in the face of development, but they do not go away by pretending that they do not exist. Johns would have us focus on the moral reformation and human development of the individual, abstracted from his or her social and cultural situation. Cultural values and social factors have had, and will continue to have significant implications for the ways in which people engage with the economy, much as they do across the entire developing and developed world.

If only all this could be so easily manipulated as Johns would have us believe. Aboriginal mobility, for example, is particularly commonplace and persistent. Even in the 1960s and before when Aboriginal people had their movements restrained under the various state Aboriginal Acts and those owning vehicles were few, people were still quite mobile when the opportunity arose. The concept of the

'walkabout' is not a myth. People travelled large distances on foot or on horseback to attend Christmas ceremony camps, to go hunting, and to attend race meetings. They still do. In 40 years of concerted government effort to address Aboriginal housing problems with all manner of policies, this mobility has not gone away, been seriously curtailed or discouraged. Languages may have disappeared in many regions, ceremonies may have disappeared, knowledge about sacred sites may have been lost, but mobility persists, albeit within predominantly regional constraints (Memmott, Long & Thomson 2006). The pervasiveness of this mobility cannot simply be ceased by a policy decision. Johns sees this as an unwanted and undesirable (even immoral) form of recreation being carried out when these people should be pursuing a conventional job, but he fails to answer how he would actually stop Aboriginal mobility. As discussed above, this mobility tends towards circularity between settlements in a region, rather than migration; people return or are replaced by others. This mobility should not be confused with a net migration or evidence of the non-viability of settlements. Should people relocate to cities, many would inevitably continue to travel back to their remote settlements and homelands for regular visits.

## THE ECONOMIC VALUE OF SOCIAL CAPITAL

A detailed analysis of one remote settlement in Central Australia helps to illustrate the economic rationale behind the choices that Aboriginal people make (Moran et al. 2007). The settlement of 150 people is located within an Aboriginal-owned pastoral property of marginal profitability; at the time of the study, there were very few other economic opportunities in a financial sense. Government allocations dominated income through project grants and welfare payments. Almost all fully paid positions in the settlement (and its related regional centre) were held by outsiders. Welfare payment aside, little of this external funding flowed to household incomes due to the lack of local employment and enterprises. A close alignment between the store turnover and the weekly payroll (after compulsory deductions) suggest that almost all income was spent at the local store. There was little internal financial capital or savings to leverage economic development.

The political economy of the settlement led to an unusual asset base and resource use, in which internal asset transformations were more important than inputs and outputs. Physical assets (such as housing and infrastructure) were largely provided by the state, and communal ownership ensured that these assets had no market value (except for second-hand vehicles). Human capital (education and skills) was relatively low, and generally insufficient to fill the few jobs available locally. Despite the availability of natural capital (bush foods, firewood), community title and logistics meant that their economic potential was limited to subsistence purposes, important as this 'customary economy' can be (Altman, Buchanan & Larsen 2007). However, social capital (relationships and networks) proved more important than conventional physical assets, natural resources or money in terms of its economic transferability. By investing time and resources into family and kin, people effectively made deposits into social capital that they could later draw down.

There was a high level of community mobility evidenced during the above study, as is typical for most remote Aboriginal settlements. At one time, all but two people were absent for a large sporting carnival. At another, the population of the settlement swelled for sorry business after the death of a senior elder. Some of this mobility was related to employment in Alice Springs, and remittances were an important form of income for some families. To the extent that mobility built and sustained social capital, it was an economically rational strategy. There are high costs associated with mobility, given distances between centres, fuel costs and poor road conditions, yet people prioritised travel over other livelihood options, pooling limited cash and displaying innovative bush mechanic techniques, including a network of wrecks for spare parts. Mobility is frustrating for service providers accustomed to static populations, but people are exercising a discretionary socio-economic response to the limited economic options in their home settlements. The sharing and exchange that occurs is a form of economic activity. Notably, it is the type of capital which is most reliably under their own control.

This over-reliance on social capital is indicative of a dysfunctional service-delivery system, most evident in the disconnect between external services and the intended end-users. There was a clear mismatch between demand and supply of services, evident in the lack of local employment in service delivery, the

low levels of attendance in fully staffed schools, and the lack of private telephones despite universal subsidies. This raises questions about the manner in which services are provided, the process involved, and the participation of consumers in the process. Seen through an economic lens, there is no necessary connection between supply and demand for services that operate in settlements. On the contrary, there is empirical evidence to suggest that service providers proliferate in the absence of effective demand (Moran 2006). Policies and programs expand and undergo reform, based largely on new supply driven solutions that are seldom informed by consumer perspectives or even internal evaluations against policy goals. The rate of launching new programs exceeds the closure of old, resulting in an annual increase in the quantity of administration to be processed. This has led to a highly fragmented institutional environment in the Indigenous sector with increasing regulation and escalating costs, driven by standards and economic benchmarks originating in urban centres.

We could do so much better than we have done with the money that is already at hand. There is a need to create local livelihoods from this funding which are under some measure of local control, through employment in building, infrastructure maintenance, retailing, tourism, natural resource management, education, governance and other services (Biddle, Taylor, & Yap 2008, p. 41). Johns (p. 22) dismisses such 'import substitution' models as suffering 'from the same fate as the welfare model', but in so doing he negates the largest source of finance in regional and remote Australia. So long as the not insubstantial amount of funding continues to be exported to the benefit of external suppliers, the economic 'viability' of remote settlements will be seriously limited (Taylor & Stanley 2005).

## HOUSING: WHERE AND WHAT KIND?

Another backdrop to Johns' paper is the escalating costs of building housing in remote settlements, which is not helping the shortage of housing. Citing federal government figures, Johns (p. 7) demonstrates how funding for new houses is not keeping up with old houses reaching the end of their lifecycle. Johns is right to point out high capital costs of community housing, units of which often have a life cycle of ten years or less. The missing dimension here is the limited participation of people living in remote settlements, as conscientious tenants, home handypersons, and home owners. Johns (p. 10) is also correct to raise concerns about the viability of home ownership for those who are unemployed, but there are some households in remote settlements with a history of employment, and these could be targeted initially as role models for others to follow. Indigenous home owners in urban areas have been shown to protect their investments and to maintain and even renovate their homes (Szava & Moran 2008). Should housing life cycles improve, this would indirectly alleviate the pressure on limited funds for new housing. While home ownership will only initially be feasible for some households, it has the potential to fundamentally shift the onus of responsibility for housing to a more demand-driven model.

Johns puts forward the case that government investment can never deal with 'corruption in local housing management and appalling tenant behaviour' (p. 8). He is concerned that new houses to 'replace those wrecked by tenants, will suffer the same fate' and that 'replacement under the same rules would create a moral hazard by rewarding poor behaviour' (p. 20). The available evidence suggests otherwise. A recent review of Indigenous Community Housing Organisations identified a range of issues relating to remoteness, insufficient scale, lack of capacity, and under resourcing, rather than corruption (Eringa et al. 2008). A national survey of housing hardware breakdown similarly found that the underlying causes were 'either routine (due to environmental conditions) and/or faulty (in some cases due to incorrect installation)', and that only around nine per cent on average were 'associated with damage caused by home occupiers' (Department of Families and Community Services and Indigenous Affairs 2006). The reasons for high levels of maintenance were more related to poor design, poor quality of materials and poor contract administration during construction, and high usage due to overcrowding.

In arguing the case for employment and housing, Johns states that 'non-Aborigines are more likely to stay in the remote regions when they have a job and are therefore able to afford sufficient accommodation, or when they are not employed or lack accommodation they tend to leave the area (for example, mining and public sector jobs exhibit a quick turnover)' (p. 9). In support of this, he argues that Aboriginal people in remote areas should be more prepared to live in temporary accommodation

arrangements, like mobile homes and demountables, since non-Indigenous people do so during their temporary sojourn (p. 12). Clearly, this is because remote Australia is not their home: unlike Aboriginal peoples, it is not their 'country'. Putting aside such simplistic comparisons, temporary accommodation arrangements were used in Aboriginal housing in the 1970s and 1980s, including mobile housing, but these did not withstand the wear and tear of overcrowding and harsh environmental conditions. Today they now stand as interesting showpieces in the industrial archaeological landscape of failed Aboriginal housing found in most remote settlements. Tradeoffs in standards and amenity have to be weighed against the long term maintenance costs and the reduced housing life cycles.

An important pathway to increased employment is to overcome supply-side barriers—of which adequate housing is a significant example. The mining sector provides positive examples of how some companies have invested in programs that enhance work readiness and fitness for work requirements (Tiplady & Barclay 2007). In his study of the West Kimberley, Taylor sensibly argued that supply-side barriers to employment are 'more wide-ranging than just the skill-set brought to the labour market and include many of the factors that underpin the very acquisition of such skills in the first place' (2008, p. vii). He specifically identified poor health, interactions with the criminal justice system, and significantly, homelessness, overcrowding and sub-standard housing stock. Contrary to Johns' central argument, withdrawal of housing assistance to remote settlements will have a negative sum effect on work readiness of prospective employees.

## FINDING SOLUTIONS

The co-location of remote Aboriginal settlements and vast parts of the Australian natural estate provide considerable employment opportunities which are only beginning to be realised (Altman, Buchanan & Larsen 2007). The synergies between cultural practices and natural resource management have long been exploited through a network of land and sea management centres, which are being increasingly recognised and supported by the Commonwealth under the banner of its 'Working on Country' initiatives. Currently there are calls for the controlled seasonal burning of the bush in what is now fire-ravished Victoria, reflecting ancient Aboriginal land management practices. Yet Johns objects to any such special measures, on the grounds that Programs 'that are really in the national interest (as opposed to being in the interest of those who want to have Aborigines shepherded into a designated band of employment options) should be available to all Australians not just Aborigines' (p. 21). So, faced with the real potential for Aboriginal employment, he counters that these jobs should be open to non-Indigenous Australians as well. Here Johns shows his distrust for a basic tenet of human development which led to this synergy in the first place: that sustainable projects involve a degree of match with local aspirations and skills. It also raises questions as to whether Johns would see any measure specific to Aboriginal peoples as being in the 'national interest'.

Johns states that the 'idea that Aborigines should only work in some culturally appropriate tasks, thereby preserving their culture, is debilitating' (p. 21). Here he displays his lack of understanding of the intercultural dynamics which are at the heart of the process of human development in remote Aboriginal settlements. If there is one constant to be found in successful employment initiatives in remote settlements, it is an Aboriginal leader and a trusted outsider, who through years of building understanding and trust, are able to bring together a productive coalescence of local and external knowledge. While a fragile basis of action, such productive partnerships are a key success factor in Indigenous affairs (Moran 2007). Decisions and opinions formed in places like Canberra by commentators like Johns consistently have not, and will not, work.

The body of international research in the field of development studies is attuned to the social and cultural realities of the end-users, whether conceptualised as consumers, citizens or beneficiaries. The common ground between development agencies and end-users in development assistance projects internationally is pathways to improved safety, education, income, health and well-being. It is quite different to apply these practices to remote Aboriginal settlements, where there is little agreement between governments and Aboriginal people on what constitutes development pathways. For a developed country like Australia, it is in the national interest to have a safety net for the significant minority of the Australian



public who find themselves unemployed, disabled, elderly, single parents, or otherwise disadvantaged. This safety net, however, becomes something else in remote Aboriginal settlements, where the vast majority of the adult population are often recipients. The international development experience has proven that providing cash or other material inputs, in the absence of a development assistance framework, can lead to a 'cargo cult' type of passivity. When earnings are guaranteed, there is little incentive for people to explore other employment options. It is quite different to development practice which builds on local strengths, initiatives and innovations. The international development experience suggests that welfare reform processes that are place-based and working towards local employment pathways do have merit.

But it is something else again to suggest that disadvantaged peoples in remote settlements should be excluded from housing assistance. Johns is not coming from a perspective of development studies but, rather, an extreme position of what has been coined neoliberal economics. That Johns is able to take such a position at a time of global economic downturn, when the excesses of this approach are being so widely questioned, is indicative of their enduring currency in senior policy circles in Indigenous Affairs. The opposition Liberal Party (Payne 2009) was quick to endorse his paper, and the Liberal member for Herbert, Peter Lindsay advocated that a 'no job no house' policy be implemented in Palm Island in North Queensland (Bateman 2009). Such endorsements have come, even though the intellectual underpinnings of Johns' proposals are not compelling. In substantiating his arguments, he tends to simplify or misrepresent others' research. His quotation from Martin's (1995) paper is not to be found in the original. One of his main sources, the CHIP review, has been criticised for its limited analysis (Seemann et al. 2008, p. 11). Further, Johns does not engage with researchers who have paid attention to issues of cultural change in the face of modernity. Peter Sutton (2001), for example, raises a range of issues that overlap directly with those Johns treats, but Sutton's study is based on a detailed and nuanced understanding of remote Aboriginal Societies.

The tragedy of Indigenous affairs is the way that we non-Indigenous Australians use it to play out our politics. Thus issues and policies play out in Indigenous affairs before they are broadly adopted to the rest of Australia. This is most obvious in the way that the Right has recently recast the failure of self-determination as the failure of 'welfare' more broadly, and the likes of income management has come to be adopted into the mainstream. But has the Left not done likewise in years past? Was there broader political advantage to be gained by portraying the failure of assimilation policies and church administrations, in support for a more rights-based and secular Australian society? The point here is to not argue the merit of these initiatives, but rather the way that Indigenous Affairs is used opportunistically in their promotion. So when we read the writings from the Bennelong Society, and similarly ideologically-based accounts from the Left, we need to look not only at the citations and statistics, but also at the tactics for broader political cleavage. While it is easy for readers to abstract Johns' account to a racial minority, his 'one size fits all' approach comes closer to home than most Australians might initially think or like. What would happen should this ideology be applied to the rest of Australia? There is a strong correlation between unemployment and public housing in urban cities: would Johns have us withdraw housing assistance from non-Indigenous Australians as well?

Change is clearly necessary in Indigenous Affairs and is occurring in the individual capacities and collective cultures of remote Aboriginal settlements. And a large part of that change is driven by the opportunities and constraints of the external environment. But policy solutions like Johns', which ignore the contextual and socio-cultural realities of the end-users, are doomed to fail. There are no easy solutions here, but successes are coming from the Aboriginal and non-Indigenous people who are engaged in day-to-day practicalities: the leaders and the workers, the nurses and teachers, the legions of development workers from regional Aboriginal organisations and governments, the front line workers that are easily derided as missionaries, misfits and mercenaries, or just simply dismissed *en masse* as corrupt or inept (Sanders 2008). This is the engine room of Indigenous Affairs. The mosaic of policy and administrative practice that has created the current situation will not be resolved by further myopic policy suggestions that blame recalcitrant sections of Australian society, and assume away the collateral issues as just someone else's problem. Johns should spend some time talking to Aboriginal leaders in remote



settlements about the 'national interest'. And those who subscribe to his ideas should reflect on how such ideas might impact them closer to home.

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Dr David Martin, consulting anthropologist, Visiting Fellow, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University

Dr Will Sanders, political scientist, Senior Fellow, Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research, Australian National University

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Dr Christina Birdsall-Jones, anthropologist, Research Fellow, John Curtin Institute of Public Policy, Curtin University

Annie Kennedy, international development specialist, post-graduate scholar, Southern Cross University.

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*Mark Moran* is Head of Australia Programs at World Vision Australia and Adjunct Associate Professor in the Aboriginal Environments Research Centre at the University of Queensland.

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