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ORIGINAL AFFAIRS - TOWARDS SOME LESSONS FOR PARTICIPATIVE PLANNING

by

C. Duke and Elizabeth Sommerlad

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Centre for Continuing Education
The Australian National University

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ABORIGINAL AFFAIRS - TOWARDS SOME LESSONS FOR PARTICIPATIVE PLANNING

Inquiries should be made to the Centre for Continuing Education,
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Themes explored in paper

This is intended to be a forerunner to a forthcoming study of policy and administration in Aboriginal Affairs in the period since Labor came to office at the end of 1972. It seeks to clarify questions and explore parameters, in order to suggest what significance and width of application elsewhere implications drawn from this particular study might have. It is a mixture of history and future speculation, analysis and prescription.

The first section suggests both a framework for the discussion of events in Aboriginal Affairs and where other Australian Departments may be running into similar difficulties. Several themes are introduced. They are all inter-related. Together they highlight a disjunction between an emerging style of Government and the current Parliamentary system. The Labor Party has stressed the need for decentralisation of decision-making and the role of citizen participation in the affairs of Government. It would seem that energy is being unleashed at the community level which is being thwarted by the present bureaucratic machinery. This generates frustration with the current democratic system.

In the second section, Aboriginal Affairs is used as a case study to suggest some unanticipated consequences of changes in Government style, and the inability of people-oriented departments to devolve responsibility to the local level within the bureaucratic framework and the principles of ministerial accountability. The Aboriginal Affairs study itself traces events since a Department of Aboriginal Affairs was set up. It seeks to clarify the principles previously evolved by the Council for Aboriginal Affairs during the Liberal Administration, and to identify the difficulties encountered in attempting to implement those principles, especially in the more traditional Aboriginal context of the Northern Territory. It is undertaken in the belief that the Department encountered a whole range of problems, in trying to be responsive to the needs and requests of Aboriginal communities, which also face other people-oriented departments.

Assumptions and values

As educators, we place a high value on a responsible learning society. One precondition for this is active citizenship. We maintain that this is possible only under a decentralised, debureaucratized system which encourages individuals and groups to assume responsibility for their own lives.

We write from an advantaged position in Canberra, with a national perspective. Our work, while not primarily concerned with public administration, has nevertheless provided us with insight into bureaucratic processes. We adopt a model of social change which is designed to enable individuals, groups, and institutions to become more adaptive to a rapidly changing society, and to take on a continuing responsibility of providing opportunities for employees to gain new skills and to participate in the lifelong process of learning.

While as a Centre for Continuing Education we have worked closely with several Australian Government Departments we have had a continuing close involvement with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs in its attempts to reorient staff to new policies. We were responsible for convening a series of seminars in the Northern Territory, designed to provide field staff with an opportunity to understand and comment on changing policies and to modify them in the light of their implementation on the ground; subsequently we have participated in attempts to monitor and facilitate changes in the same direction more locally in the Territory.

Although our time-span derives from political events, the study is more administrative than political. This essay takes the position that there is a continual interplay between political decisions and administrative changes, but the main interest lies in the failure of the bureaucracy to see through political intentions. There has been a breakdown in understanding, and inability on the part of the administrative machinery to respond to community demands, which in turn has created a political backlash. In one sense, it may however be said that politics are now of limited importance, if active citizenship has a momentum of its own and individuals and groups at the local level continue to demand greater involvement in decision-making processes. No matter what government is in power, or what platform is adopted, debureaucratism is likely to gather momentum. We will however watch with interest the polarisation within the political community developing at present along centralism vs localism lines and apparently replacing the traditional polarisation, left vs right; at present we think it unlikely to prove a significant determinant of events.

The 1972 election is seen as an event of major significance, given the long period of conservative government which preceded it, and the significance placed on the event by many groups and persons. The change of government became a symbol for change in direction for Australia. More changes, and commitments to change, were associated with and hitched on to the political change than can be explained only in political terms. Heightened expectations - and anxieties - have raised

the stakes, there is greater energy for change, probably in some quarters fortified resistance to change, and more potential for disillusionment. This essay takes a position of general sympathy with much of the Labor platform. It may also appear critical of the Labor Government for not moving faster in certain directions, but this is not our purpose in writing.

Our interest is in forms of government, and assumptions about governmental decision-making and planning. We echo a view (Emery et. al.)* that bureaucracy and production-line forms of work organisation are ephemeral historical phenomena; that, looking at centuries rather than decades, hierarchical forms of organisation of work, with high specialisation of function, close supervision, and external control, are a "counter culture" rather than the "natural" form.

We hold the view that as Australia moves into post-industrial society, it will unlearn assumptions about bureaucracy and production-line forms of work, in favour of more flexible forms of organisation which provide more rewarding work environments, and allow people to take responsibility for the organisation of their own work. Debureaucratisation and decentralisation seem more likely than more massive organisations with tighter central control, which becomes less and less effective as change accelerates, diversity increases, and local variety makes central direction and control necessarily more cumbersome and costly.

This essay is also written from an attachment on principle to decision-making at the local level, whether about the future of the neighbourhood, the city or the region. It conveys optimism about human potential, and high value placed on choice. Diverse, plural social forms are preferred over tidiness and economy, although in the long run such acceptance of diversity in planning and administration is not thought to be more costly or less efficient. Decisions reached by people in their natural (social rather than administrative/geographical) communities are likely to be more satisfactory and appropriate than those handed down from the desks of outside experts. Those who have made the decisions - and must live with them - are more likely to work for their implementation than they are for decisions imposed by a department of government, however qualified its expert advisers.

* Fred Emery with Merrelyn Emery, Geoff Caldwell, Alastair Crombie Futures We're In, CCE, ANU, 1974.

From such an outlook and value-position, one naturally supports the devolution of power in decision-making from the planning and welfare bureaucracies to the client communities. The pyramid of authority and decision-making familiar to organisation theorists and perpetuated in the hierarchical organisation chart of roles and responsibilities is then turned on its head. Decisions flow from the community through local offices and agencies to head office for action, wherever action cannot also be completely decentralised out into the field.

The emerging style of Government

Government has assumed increasing responsibility this century for the general well-being of all citizens, especially through such departments as education, health and welfare, including income through a commitment to high or full employment, a minimum wage and various forms of social security benefit. So far this trend in the field of public administration has paralleled the growth of bureaucratic control in large organisations generally. More complex systems and larger numbers of staff are used to meet exceptions and cover eventualities. Hence the hostility which "socialism" attracts as a loss of freedom and choice, closer concern with all aspects of life which may take the form of paternalism. We suggest that the emergent style of government should be "post-paternalistic", accepting the maturity and responsibility of persons as citizens, analogously to the acceptance of mature, responsible and positively motivated adults which is beginning to show itself in the workplace. Moreover, we suggest that these two trends are unavoidably inter-related, that a shift towards responsible citizenship requires a change in the values and assumptions of the work-places where social planning and administration occur.

Debureaucratisation in the interests of more flexible, effective and rewarding forms of organisation of work will affect all government departments, since interest in participation or democratisation of the work place is a general phenomenon arising from cultural and social changes. But learning new forms of public administrative and participative planning will particularly affect the departments concerned with "people-planning" and welfare-type services. Among federal departments one might include Health, Education, Social Security, Immigration, Housing, Urban and Regional Development, the National Capital Development Commission, Recreation and Tourism, as well as Aboriginal Affairs and offshoot statutory commissions especially created to develop Labor policies such as the Schools, Hospitals and Health, and the Social Welfare Commissions.

Three main thrusts of the Labor Government which are relevant to the themes of this essay and affect people-oriented departments are briefly discussed below. They are citizen participation, open government, and new levels of government.

a) community participation

Community participation has become a catch cry in government administration. Some of its vehement advocates see participation as necessarily good, while others maintain that it may result in the reduction of services offered at the local level. In certain situations, it has been used as a cover for the implementation of political goals (for example, the establishment of health centres may be seen as one step in the socialisation of medical care). Participation may also be justified on pragmatic terms, being viewed as an active response of organisations to a turbulent environment. Given that society is changing rapidly, it is no longer possible to programme events and to predict responses of the people. If society is to survive, then individuals must become more active citizens and assume a measure of responsibility for their own lives.

Those who assume a priori that participation is good, contend that increasing bureaucratisation in both public and private sectors is creating in many people feelings of impotence in the influencing of decisions affecting their daily lives. There is also recognition that some sectors of the public, by virtue of their socio-economic position, may be increasingly subject to the effects of arbitrary decision-making by organisations which to all intents and purposes are designed to service their areas, but which do so in such a way that they do not relate to people's needs in day-to-day experience. This process, whereby organisational goals of service provision, based on need, are superseded by goals of administrative priority and efficiency, can be found in most government departments, particularly those dealing with groups in some way disadvantaged or lacking in the political skills to countervail their lack of power.

It is to this type of situation that community participation is seen as responding, for it sees itself as placing major emphasis on bringing about change among disadvantaged groups in order to resolve social problems, thus improving the quality of their lives. Its advocates maintain that active citizenship facilitates personal development, encourages acceptance of responsibility, and creates a greater feeling of control over events impinging on the individual. Personal growth is therefore more important than achievement of a particular task goal.

Participation can also be discussed in terms of decentralisation of decision-making. One theoretical model of organizations hypothesises (from laws of physics) that small organizations have a greater "surface area" than larger organizations. That is, a higher proportion of its members are involved in interaction with the external environment than in larger organizations. If responsiveness to turbulent environments is required, then the smaller organization or analogous decentralised decision-making group is more likely to encourage participation and be more adaptive.

The commitment of the present government to participation is revealed through the administration of those commissions and departments which have been established since 1972, among which Aboriginal Affairs was one of the first. The citizen who lives at the seat of federal administration in Canberra cannot but recognise the disjunction between principles of participative planning and continuing administrative practices. The Post Office Tower on Black Mountain will shortly come to stand as a monument to bureaucratic and political commitment against citizen participation. Less dramatically, the predicament of the ACT Advisory Council, and the style of the City Manager in the Department of the Capital Territory, inheritor of the tradition of the Department of the Interior, provide examples. N.C.D.C. on the other hand continues hesitantly to explore what community participation in planning might mean.

There are however fundamental differences in planning philosophy which N.C.D.C., and others in the business of large complex planning operations, well illustrate. The conventional "modern" view is that experts of various kinds are the only persons qualified to make decisions on such complicated matters as urban planning, but that they should take soundings among the people affected before reaching a conclusion. At least this may prepare people for the plan, and its effect on their lives, when it appears. More than this, it might throw up some aspects which architects, engineers and administrators had not already thought of themselves. A more radical approach is to regard these experts in planning as a consultant or advisory team to the community, which itself makes the decisions about the future of the neighbourhood, city or region. While many administrators and public planners now acknowledge at least the expediency, and perhaps also the desirability, of undertaking some exercise in consultation, probably very few would yet accept a redefinition of their role which leaves them with the authority of their expertise but not power over the outcome.

b) open government

Open government is an explicit element in the Labor Platform, although it has achieved only hesitant expression, following the return of Labor to office in May 1974. The narrowly averted crisis over the suspension of Charles Perkins from Aboriginal Affairs prompted widespread discussion of the issues involved, and some concessions have been won for public servants. A discussion of open government provides a clue to the far-reaching implications of moving in the direction suggested in this essay. The objection to open government is that it destroys the relationship of trust and confidentiality between a minister and his public servants. On the one hand, the public servant loses his political neutrality by commenting on public affairs, thus jeopardising the minister's faith in his department, and opening the way for political appointments and sackings in the public service. On the other hand, the minister can no longer be expected to protect his departmental officers in parliament, even resigning if the department is proved seriously at fault. This, it is felt, destroys the principle of parliamentary responsibility, and accountability of the public service to the elected representatives of the people. Thus appeals to traditional political theory afford an obstacle to changes intended to make government more accessible and responsive to the people, and to draw the people more really into the processes of decision-making.

c) levels of government

An important expanding form of central government is the direct intervention at the local level by one or another branch of the federal administration, which by-passes the State governments, and may also by-pass the third, local, level of government. The Australian Assistance Plan clearly goes straight from Canberra to the local community even though its definition of community is as yet unfixed, and may prove to be too large to have meaning; it may either tend to revitalise local government, or seek to undermine and replace it. The effect may differ from place to place. Other central departments, notably DURD, represent federal interventions and planning at the regional level. It remains to be seen if this will prove a step towards transferring power from the States to the federal government, or whether it will introduce a fourth level of government, resulting in more, rather than less, bureaucratic control and levels of administration for the citizen to cope with. Both health and education have moved towards direct funding at regional and local levels. These thrusts towards federal regionalisation could take Australia either towards more massive and complex government systems or towards greater community control, through regional levels of government, over federal government planning and spending itself.

One problem currently confronting Federal Departments seeking to fund programmes in the States at either regional or local levels, is that the Australian Constitution (Section 96) disallows funding that is earmarked for a particular project. Thus, when the States are antithetical to a new philosophy which the Federal Department is advocating, it may be unable to implement its policies or establish priorities. Both DURD and the Social Welfare Commission have faced this problem when trying to initiate programmes through regional funding. The Karmel Commission seems to be unique in circumventing this problem by making grants available directly to individuals.

Reform of the Parliamentary system

Discussion of the emerging style of government suggests that the principles of citizen participation, open government, and the decentralisation of power regionally and locally cannot readily be implemented in a meaningful way unless the commonly accepted formulation of western parliamentary democracy, as practised in Australia, is substantially modified. The practice of democracy according to present theory (and leaving aside such qualifying institutions as referenda and mid-term dissolutions) involves the community delegating its right to make decisions for three years at a spell, through administratively and politically prescribed electorates (not natural communities of interest) via local members to a political party, which in turn creates a government of ministers. The public service is conceived as serving these ministers. Its actions are answerable only through them in the parliament of representatives from the electorates. There is no formal and direct answerability from the public service to the discrete communities of interest, or clienteles, which are the direct recipients of its administrative processes. Such cumbersome and indirect accountability to the parts of the total community through parliament seems manifestly inappropriate to late twentieth century conditions, in which educated communities with high aspirations seek direct influence or control over events immediately affecting them. Democratic participation needs to be far more discriminating and sensitive to the various sub-cultures which constitute Australian society. Hence the direct actions (green bans, Aboriginal embassy) which arouse traditional constitutionalists' objections, as does talk of open government, and free speech for public servants.

Unless the traditions of accountability and central control are significantly changed, attempts at regional devolution and community participation will prove hollow. The problem is that the new principles here advocated must take root in a public service tradition which we

may represent as the powers, responsibilities and traditions of the Treasury, the Public Service Board, the Auditor-General and perhaps also the Attorney-General. The short history of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs has quickly demonstrated the power of tradition, and the resulting constraints on the effectiveness of the bureaucracy to respond to local needs.

Since change in the direction of greater flexibility and decentralisation of decision-making is particularly discomfoting for monitoring and controlling agencies, it will be necessary for the new political and social philosophy of community participation to become much more explicit, and to receive much more attention at cabinet level, if the principles and values that at least the younger half of the Australian Labor Party espouse are to be translated into political-administrative behaviour. Even if the learning of federal control-type departments is rapid, Aboriginal experience suggests that we may anticipate an increase in direct action and/or disillusionment from many groups, before the federal bureaucrats unlearn their familiar control functions and redesign their organisations to become responsive rather than directive.

The role of the community and of professional groups

The principle of citizen participation is predicated on the assumption that individuals do in fact want to become involved in decision-making processes and to be able to control, in some measure, events which impinge on them. A theme of interest which deserves fuller treatment elsewhere, however, is the extent to which the "Australian community" really wants to be bothered with participation. It may, by contrast, prefer the continuation of not-too-obtrusive paternalism, with a fairer go for particular groups of unfortunates when they become unsettlingly visible (on the understanding that they do not express their ingratitude by over-reaching themselves with more demands, as, it is held by some, have the Aborigines). The theme is a difficult one, easily lost in circular arguments about human nature and nurture, self-fulfilling prophecies and the inevitable quiescence of the masses.

Another relevant theme is the role and self-perception of professional groups, especially the groups most involved in social administration and social change processes. It will be interesting to see how teachers respond to the Karmel/Schools Commission stimulus to teacher-controlled teacher resource centres, how the cooperating element within the medical profession performs in the new teamwork environment of health centres, behind which there appears to lie a belief in community participation as a good per se. Particularly interesting is the changing

understanding of social work, within which there appears to be some displacement by social activists of the traditional individually oriented case-worker. One helps the client to adjust to his environment, the other seeks to change the environment and reduce causes of maladjustment and distress. Both are in a sense political behaviours, though one works to adjust people to the system, the other to change the system itself; the latter is more undisguisedly political. The emergent role of community worker or community development officer likewise may serve to reduce political conflict by working for consensus and local conflict resolution, perhaps leaving the causes of conflict untouched and unrecognised. Or the community development worker may prove to be a political and social critic and activist, committed to raising community consciousness and giving communities the confidence and skills to confront and even change governments. Community, social and group work, like more traditional religions, can be opiate or a fiery torch.

Some lessons from Aboriginal Affairs

The second part of this essay sketches some of the main issues which stand out from a survey of Aboriginal Affairs, and which are examined in more detail in the study mentioned above. This essay, as a discussion paper, may help the authors to identify themes and incidents in the history of Aboriginal Affairs particularly worth examining for their relevance to other areas of social administration.

Administrative changes in Aboriginal Affairs

When Labor came into office, Aboriginal Affairs, under the Council of Aboriginal Affairs (of Dr Coombs, Professor Stanner and the Secretary, Mr. Dexter) was administered through the recently created "residual" department, or "ministry of lost causes", the Department of the Environment, the Arts and Aboriginal Affairs. Aboriginal matters in the Northern Territory were administered in most essentials by Welfare, which answered to Federal Government through the Department of the Interior. Relations between Welfare and Interior on the one hand and Aboriginal Affairs, on the other, were very cool. A difference of philosophy exacerbated Territorial suspiciousness of Canberra government in general. Although Welfare and Interior spokesmen tend to disagree, it is our view that the administration in the Territory, in line with earlier Liberal Party policy, added up, for practical purposes, to a policy of gradual integration, or assimilation, of Aboriginal communities into the dominant (white, Anglo-Saxon) Australian community. A number of officials clearly respected and appreciated Aboriginal culture, though perhaps more as an anachronism than something living, but the main thrust of administration was towards drawing the primitive Aboriginal cultures into the Australian mainstream and bringing

Aboriginal peoples "up to" whites' standards of health, education, industry, sobriety, and social values and behaviour. The Council, as well as taking a more optimistic or aggressive approach to equal rights for Aborigines, including land rights, protection of sacred sites, respect and use of traditional language etc., tended to see traditional ways of life as not necessarily doomed to extinction, although it was not clear how they might survive and be socially and economically viable.

With the change of government and the creation of a full Department of Aboriginal Affairs, Northern Territory Welfare was transferred to the new Department and the section of Interior responsible for this branch of the work was disbanded. Some officers transferred to Aboriginal Affairs; others were not found positions there and were employed elsewhere in the Public Service. Similarly, in the Territory, the second division public servant McHenry, recently transferred to Darwin from Management Services in Interior, became Director of the Northern Territory Division. The assistant administrator who had long directed Territorial Aboriginal Affairs in Welfare, and under whom McHenry had been appointed late in the previous administration as an able new-look career public servant, was moved out into an unattached position in which he remained for many months subsequently, being neither acceptable to the new Department because of his close identification with previous policies and styles of administration over many years, nor able to be appointed into a sufficiently senior regular position.

The Northern Territory became in effect the cutting edge or experimental site for the Labor administration, in a policy area which had featured prominently in the election platform, and which had been much in the news because of a remarkable example of successful direct action on the part of (mainly southern) Aboriginal activists, in setting up the "Embassy" on the lawns of Parliament House. The Federal Government committed itself to taking over the administration of Aboriginal Affairs from the various States. Territorial administration in the early days in 1973 was seen as preparatory experience for this. In the event take-over dates came and went and, for one political reason and another, the period to the 1974 dissolution passed with the transfer of only one State (S.A.) to federal Government.

Policy and objectives of the new Department of Aboriginal Affairs

The Labor Party committed itself to improving the situation of Aboriginal people in its Party Platform and a relatively generous budget was allocated to the Department to carry out its mandate. A large-hearted Minister, Gordon Bryant, who had been associated with Aborigines over a long period, was assigned the portfolio.

The guiding principle of the Department's role in Aboriginal Affairs was that of self-determination. This is capable of many interpretations, and for this reason the Department is now reluctant to employ the term without defining it further. The depth of meaning and emotionalism invested in the concept was well illustrated at a seminar for administrators and field workers in the Northern Territory Division of the Department convened by the authors. Over the period of a week early in 1973, they debated this concept and its meaning for a diversity of Aboriginal contexts. A final definition was reached which interpreted self-determination to mean "Aboriginal communities deciding the pace and nature of their future development within the legal, social and economic restraints of Australian society."

This definition was later amended by the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs to read "Aboriginal communities deciding the pace and nature of their future development as significant components within a diverse Australia." This wording was released as a statement of the Department's official policy. The change in wording was to overcome the criticism that would be directed against the Department for writing in constraints which might make the policy meaningless.

More recently, however, the Department has come round to accepting the earlier definition as a more accurate one. Certainly the new Minister, Senator Cavanagh, is not unaware of the political constraints which operate within the context of Aboriginal Affairs.

There are a number of constraints inhibiting the implementation of this principle.

First, political constraints. The Labor Party Platform committed itself to improving the housing conditions of Aborigines, and resolved to house all Aboriginal families within ten years. Similarly, it promised to improve health standards and to reduce infant morbidity and mortality rates. While these objectives might be laudable, they are not necessarily compatible with self-determination and the right of Aboriginal people to determine what, if any, housing and health care they require, and the timetable of that provision.

Second, legal constraints. Many groups of Aboriginal people, particularly those in tribal areas, wish to exercise greater control over group members and to be responsible for law and order in the community. This might entail both punishing individuals for transgressions of tribal laws, and dealing with transgressions of the Australian laws in their own way. They wish to reserve the right to call in the police only when they cannot handle the situation themselves. There are objections

to a minority group having these powers, however, and the predominant feeling seems to be that Aboriginal people, as Australian citizens, are also subject to all Australian laws.

Third, economic constraints. The constraints imposed on Aborigines by the economic system operating within Australia are becoming increasingly severe. The high premium placed on economic viability forces Aborigines to submit to a system which is alien to them, and to adopt a set of values diametrically opposed to their own.

In order to encourage participation at the grass-roots level, an attempt was made to introduce new administrative roles in the Northern Territory and to encourage Aboriginal communities to set up their own decision-making structures. The former Superintendent, who was a boss figure and responsible for implementing Government policy, changed roles and sought to become a community adviser whose principal function was to help the community identify its needs, find the resources to satisfy them, and feed into policy from the local community upwards. Aboriginal communities were invited to establish Town Councils which would become legalised through incorporation and be in a position to receive and dispense public monies. The means of injection of funds into communities was changed so that instead of whites holding the purse strings and determining priorities, Associations were established to carry out these functions. Although whites could be coopted to the executive of such Associations, they were not allowed votes, or were restricted to a minority. Thus control remained legally vested in the hands of Aboriginal members.

In order to make self-determination more meaningful, two other inter-related significant objectives were established. First, the Labor Party committed itself to recognition of land rights, and a Commission was established under Justice Woodward to determine how, not whether, such land rights could be granted. Associated with this decision was the encouragement of decentralisation. Whereas the previous Government had been opposed to moves away from settlement areas, the new Department declared itself committed to providing resources for Aboriginal groups who moved back to their land or away from existing communities.

Two other objectives of the Department on assuming office were to introduce the vernacular into the education programme, and to involve many more Aborigines in administrative roles. A Committee was established in 1973 to report on teaching in the vernacular and how it could best be achieved, and pilot programmes were established during the year. Despite the intention to recruit large numbers of Aborigines into the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, few moves were made in this direction during the first year of operation.

Elections for the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee, Mr. Bryant's pet project, were eventually held in 1973. While this body of Aborigines is seen by some as the future policy group, its role at the present time is fairly restricted, and it comes under frequent criticism.

The Northern Territory as the cutting edge of policy

In the Northern Territory, the gradual opening up and reorientation of the Department, commenced cautiously by McHenry under the previous administrative system, proceeded apace under the new designation as N.T. Aboriginal Affairs. An administration previously characterised by extreme defensiveness, especially towards southerners, Canberra bureaucrats and academics, now sought ideas and inputs from all directions, not entirely excluding even the radical southern Aborigines who had acquired stature, confidence and mobility during 1972, and proceeded to harrass some departmental officials quite persistently during 1973. There was now no conflict in policy between the Council of Aboriginal Affairs, which in effect became the Department, while the Council itself tended to withdraw from the limelight during 1973, and the N.T. administration, at least at the top. McHenry worked simultaneously on several fronts.

a) transfer of functions

A first priority was to transfer out from Aboriginal Affairs responsibilities which could be taken on by functional Departments. Education and Health were early major examples. (Later, when he himself was promoted across to the Department of the Northern Territory, the social welfare function and personnel quickly followed him.) Although these policy decisions had to be taken in Canberra, and usually in Cabinet following the advice of the Secretary, Dexter, and the Minister, Bryant, there seems to have been general agreement on such matters. Whether the assumptions underlying the transfers were justified, was another matter. It was felt that Aborigines should learn to relate to and win appropriate assistance and services from, Departments such as Health, Education and Labour, on the same basis as other individuals and groups. The paternalistic Welfare empire, which controlled Aboriginal experience of white society and administration largely from the cradle to the grave, would thus be dismembered, and Aboriginal communities allowed, and required, to come of age. The philosophy accords with the principles put forward in this paper. Subsequent events and setbacks - for instance the apparent inability of personnel in both Northern Territory Education and Health (field teachers and nurses as well as Darwin administrators in some instances) to appreciate and support Aboriginal Affairs' policy

and purposes - may suggest that different timing and tactics might have been better. Possibly either more education of other departments, or greater sanctions over their behaviour vis-à-vis Aborigines, should have been sought first.

b) Re-orientation of the Department

McHenry's second and simultaneous approach was to open up and reorient the Department itself to new policies and forms of administration. An attempt was made to have Darwin Head Office seen as a resource centre for workers in the field, rather than mainly a source of inspection and accounting controls. The high degree of devolution from Canberra to Darwin practised by Dexter was in some measure replicated within the Territory, both towards Alice Springs, which divides its ethnocentrism between Canberra, Darwin and, in some cases, its Aboriginal residents, and also devolution more generally towards officers working out in the field. More opportunities were arranged for them to get together and exchange views and experience, sometimes with the aid of outside facilitators. The shock of McHenry's first superintendents' conference, in which they were expected to initiate and discuss rather than be told, reverberated around the Territory for months after.

The urgent need to provide field staff and administrators with an opportunity to discuss the new policies, changing roles of staff, and organization redesign, was recognised in both Canberra and Darwin. A series of seminars were organized by an outside agency, the A.N.U. Centre for Continuing Education in Canberra, and held at Batchelor, N.T. These set out both to translate the meanings of ALP and DAA policy for the Territory and the particular Aboriginal community, and to feed back the results of such studies to Darwin and Canberra so that senior administrators through to the Minister and Cabinet could appreciate and respond to the implications of general statements of policy and principle handed down. These seminars made a considerable impact in the Territory, and marked a new era in administration by providing field staff with an active role in the determination of policy and its implementation. The Centre, while regarded with a high degree of suspicion in its initial stages of involvement in Aboriginal Affairs, came to gain a measure of recognition from Departmental officers which has enabled it to have a continuing role and to maintain contact with a wide network of fieldworkers in the N.T. and elsewhere.

One major focus of discussion at the Batchelor Seminars was on the explication of the meaning and the practical implications of "self-determination", which had come to express and encapsulate, however, inadequately, the mission of the Labor Party in the Aboriginal field. Out of this emerged a redefinition of the role of the white superin-

tendent in an Aboriginal settlement, as a community development officer, or facilitator. This led in turn to training designed to assist officers through the difficult role change from directive superintendent to non-directive catalyst and adviser. No easier than the attempted change from manager to adviser was the question of loyalty to the Aboriginal community, when it seemed to be in conflict with the requirements of the employing Department. This raised questions of the proper employment base for such community workers. Although they have remained departmental public servants, there was sustained discussion for a while as to whether they might not become employees either of a statutory Bureau of Advice and Aid and/or of the communities themselves.

c) Reorganization of the N.T. Division of the Department

Related to this attempted staff reorientation and clarification of public service roles was an attempt in the Territory, matched more hesitantly in some discussions in Canberra, to reorganise the Department (N.T. Division) on matrix and project team lines, allowing more responsibility to devolve to local regions and giving Aboriginal communities control over what was spent on their behalf. The isolation of field workers was recognised, and some attempt was made to allow them to draw together as regional teams. Later, informal encouragement was given for the creation of a community workers' association for professional exchange and development, as a less extreme way of developing this role and identity within the Department and the public service structure. This Association grew out of a training course for officers moving into community development roles, and a member of this group thought suitable by his peers was subsequently moved into a role of community development/staff development officer. His job was designed to give field workers a liaison point, friend and adviser in the Division's Head Office, and to counter the bureaucratic (procedural and accounting) priorities which tend to loom larger than the needs of the communities to the occupant of a head office desk.

The senior personnel of the whole Department, including a Territory contingent, also attempted, through a weekend search conference in Canberra, to draw up guidelines and an organisational form more suited to the Department's objectives than the existing one. The assumption was that the Department should eventually, in the long term, go out of existence. As in the Territorial seminars, it was taken as essential that Aboriginal communities should be the source of policies, rather than either Cabinet or Head Office, although it was recognised in both settings that the political, social, economic and legal constraints of the dominant society had to be generally accepted. The Canberra conference concluded that it did

not in fact need to add significantly to its Head Office staff, rather that the Department should be heavily regionalised so that its expertise was accessible to Aboriginal communities. Although there was no necessary causal connection between the Northern Territory and the Canberra seminars and searches for appropriate organisational forms and deployment of resources, the style and outcomes of the meetings were in harmony, and the most senior personnel of the Department were involved in both exercises. Thus the Territory was able in various ways to feed back its view of the implications of policy for organisation, administration and staff roles, to the Canberra office. Thus far at least it was serving as an "experimental site" for new-style Aboriginal administration.

d) involvement of other groups

Other aspects of the strategy in the Territory included attempts to win over the white community - particularly the cattlemen - and other government departments, to the Aboriginal Affairs approach. This strategy did not succeed particularly well, since the Cattlemen's Association was opposed to the granting of land rights and tended to polarise with the Department over new policies. While the Department was more open about its objectives, and used the mass media to endeavour to educate the public, there was a counter-attack by the Rights for Territorians group (centred in Katherine) which undermined the positive approach of the Department. This group is essentially an anti-black group which objects to discrimination in favour of Aboriginal people.

Attempts were also made to coordinate efforts by different groups working for Aboriginal advancement. The missions were brought into all the main discussions and reorientation programmes of the Department, ending a long period of segregation, and allowing each side to be exposed to the views of the other.


Acceptance of changes

Although the role of whites in Aboriginal Affairs had changed considerably, and the new policy laid emphasis on the interests of the Aboriginal people, it seems that, for the most part, N.T. officers have adjusted to the changes involved. Some of them had worked for many years under quite different assumptions and conditions, but they were able to accept that Aborigines should in fact be encouraged and assisted to choose their future, and that their culture was not merely of zoological or antiquarian interest. Land rights and the introduction of teaching in the vernacular probably contributed to this. May be more significant

was the tendency for tribal groups to move out from the settlements (whites' contrivances for the delivery of welfare, health and education services to Aborigines whose only future was to be assimilation). Groups throughout the Territory, and across the border in Western Australia also, moved away from places like Hermannsburg, Papunya, Galiwinku, and Milingimbi, as well as from the best publicised settlement, Yirrkala, to their tribal lands. Whether this was to protect the land from white incursions, hopes being raised by talk of Woodward, or was rejection of the white man's system, or whether it was actually another example of doing what the white administrator wanted (see for example Coombs' enthusiasm for the movement away from the settlements in his 1973 Anzaas address in Perth) is immaterial. It probably helped sceptical long service administrators to see Aborigines as having some ability to act on their own, and gave some possible meaning to the talk of self-determination, which seemed at first to be so much claptrap from the Canberra bureaucrats and the academics.

The acceptance of a policy of self-determination by Aboriginal people has varied. In one sense, the trend towards decentralisation has clearly shown that some Aboriginal groups want to assume responsibility for their own lives with minimal interference by whites. In another sense, the interpretation of self-determination by some whites as laissez-faire has been rejected by other Aboriginal groups who do not feel able to assume full responsibility for management of their own communities and wish to maintain a level of dependency on whites at this point in time.

Two of the series of N.T. re-orientation conferences were attended by Aboriginal people, and it was sometimes difficult for them to understand the changing policies and changing roles of whites. It may well be that for them, life in the community continued as usual, despite the changes in labels.

More re-orientation of Aboriginal people towards changing policies, and exchange of ideas, needs to be carried out by Aborigines rather than by whites. Instead of nominating individuals to attend conferences where these ideas are discussed, Aboriginal communities might encourage interchange between themselves, with a group from one community spending time talking with a range of people in another community. Diffusion of new ideas is more likely to work if the whole community is involved, rather than just isolated individuals. 

Problems encountered in the field

The Department was committed to devolution and the animation of Aboriginal communities, and as a result it tended to raise expectations that with the change of Government all would be well for Aboriginal communities

who had but to ask to receive. Expectations were further raised by the work of peripatetic southern Aborigines who sought to raise the consciousness and aspirations of northern communities. Often, it seems, nothing followed the hopes and promises. Self-determination meant that the Superintendent changed his name but behaved as before. Or that he refused to give a lead, and some other white on the settlement took over. Land rights meant, for some, a visit by Justice Woodward to the community, or perhaps to some other settlement in the region. Then, again, nothing. A commitment in principle to abolishing the old training allowance in favour of award wages (and unemployment benefit as appropriate) was still not implemented at the end of the year, having run into difficulties in Canberra. Where grants were promised, frustration was experienced at the delays caused by public service procedures, exacerbated by the demands of a very busy new Administration. Thus, even given good intentions and a run of reasonable luck at first, the coming to power of Labour meant either nothing at all or raised aspirations followed by seemingly endless delay, and so, again, disillusionment and a renewed sense of betrayal.

It is not possible more than to touch on the range of theoretical and practical problems thrown up in these early months. One, alluded to above, was the conflict between generous hand-outs and the fostering of self-reliance. Officers felt uneasy, especially when the Minister made visits to various communities and distributed largesse for the asking, which had then to be given form and reality. Some promises, it was felt, should not have been made. Others were made but took months to act on. Either way, such easy distribution of resources in the early months of 1973 seemed quite to contradict the commitment to self-determination, whereby Aboriginal communities were to wean themselves from the hand-out mentality and at least learn from, if not in a conventional sense, earn, what came to them. The idea that public moneys would and should be "wasted", or rather defined as money for learning rather than necessarily for economic return, was gradually, but not easily, accepted. It was suggested that perhaps 30% of grants and loans to communities for projects would in the conventional sense be wasted, that the return should be measured rather in terms of community learning than as return on investment. By the time N.T. officers had come to internalise this and started to accept this aspect of their role as community facilitators and educators rather than custodians of the public purse or project managers, there had been a quite catastrophic reversal of policy from Canberra (see below) which, for some time at least, largely nullified this process of redefinition, and of commitment to longer term Aboriginal advancement and self-help.

The political scene in Canberraa) Events leading to Bryant's dismissal

Political events in Canberra further disrupted the difficult process, for communities but still more for the public servants trying to learn a new role and behaviour. The first Minister, Mr. Bryant, adopted a highly personalised style of administration. This was intended to give easy direct access to Aborigines long held remote from the seat of power. He encouraged direct telephone calls from all parts of the country, and associated closely with a group of (mainly Aboriginal) advisers not members of the Department. The result was inadequate communication and increasing friction with the Department, most senior members of which however shared the Minister's values.

Inefficient administration and accounting undoubtedly stemmed in part from this arbitrary and personal style of leadership, in which the Department was required to make good promises, and was distracted from developing criteria for aiding Aboriginal communities. Mr. Bryant's style probably raised Aboriginal and damaged departmental morale in about equal measure. While flexibility and responsiveness were essential qualities to be sought for a Department which intended to place its clientele in the initiating rather than passive role, it was necessary that the Department be used, and redesigned on regionalised, project team lines, not by-passed.

The outcome was natural. There was something of a backlash against the generosity of grants to Aborigines (as it was seen) and at the "waste" of money which resulted. There was too little understanding or public education as to the criteria for judging loans and grants - as learning aids as well as capital investments for economic viability. Indeed, the somewhat easy and arbitrary style of granting aid, though explicable on grounds of sympathy and concern, was neither politically expedient nor the best way of fostering community autonomy. When the Minister was transferred to other responsibilities and replaced by Senator Cavanagh, who was seen as a hard-headed politician adept at clearing up trouble, neither public service nor public opinion was adequately prepared to judge the situation. Leaving aside the details of the turtle farm controversy, which has become a cause celebre, part of the Australian political vocabulary in use in other community-oriented departments, the necessity and desirability of a significant proportion of moneys being "wasted" has not been established.

b) Appointment of Senator Cavanagh

Senator Cavanagh's appointment was in some senses successful. He proved far more hard-headed and politically able than Mr. Bryant,

though without the warmth which attracted Aboriginal support at a time when any kind of support for a Minister from committed Aboriginal activists was improbable. He dispensed with private advisers - Bryant's shadow department - and insisted on working by the book in his dealings with Department and community groups alike. The direct line was cut. This enabled the Department to work more systematically, and to begin to put its own house in order. Cavanagh was thus welcomed, at least by some senior members of the Department, as enabling the Department to work effectively for the first time. The price was however high. Hitherto, the departmental style, set from the top, had been to identify essential purposes and directions, agree on underlying values, and work as fast as possible in these directions by whatever formal and informal means presented themselves. Bryant's own political activity, for instance his effect on the planned take-over of the States, must have been highly frustrating to a committed Department. But Senator Cavanagh's lack of evident idealism, of shared values, proved soon to be no less corrosive. None the less, Cavanagh out-smarted Senator Georges, who apparently set himself the task of bringing down the departmental Secretary through the turtle farm inquiry; the new Minister thus bought the Department some elbow-room.

Reorganisation of the Department

No attempt is made in this paper to provide a full or well balanced narrative, only to bring out certain elements in the study important to the theme of obstacles to participative government. Cavanagh's old-fashioned approach to administration may have saved the Party and the Department, but it made no contribution, beyond this, to solving the problems which brought on the crisis. Departmental officers were obliged to adopt more formal and traditional forms of working; indeed, much departmental effort in the period since Senator Cavanagh took office appears to the outsider to have been taken up with trying to straighten the record (notably for the Public Accounts Committee and the Auditor-General). It became very difficult to develop in new directions, since funds under various heads had been exhausted and the Treasury was, it seems, being extremely cautious about allowing any initiative whatsoever to Aboriginal Affairs. The result was less responsiveness to community requests, and more formal channeling of these requests through local offices and then to the appropriate Canberra branch of the Department. Finally, the Public Service Board was invited in to suggest a more efficient form of organisation of the Department. Probably, although the Board only acts thus on invitation, there was an understanding that the Board was to be thus involved. The result was a form of organisation which appears tidy and allows for close monitoring and control, but does violence to

the realities of the work. (Policy, programme planning, and operations were set up, not as three modes, but as three discrete divisions, with personnel assigned to one or another part; the only way this can be made to work effectively, given the necessary interaction of the three, is to create project teams across the divisions, thus unscrambling the formal structure.) The Board's recommendations included a significant increase in the size of Head Office establishment. While this was doubtless welcomed in one way, since part of the difficulty and mismanagement was the result of severe understaffing and pressure of work, it was also a retrograde step, negating the Department's own conclusion, in the search conference during 1973, that what was needed was heavy devolution and regionalisation, with a small think-tank and monitoring Head Office group, not an expanded traditional bureaucracy.

Brief mention may be made of the Perkins affair(s), which attracted much press attention in the first half of 1974. Perkins' insistence on speaking out on matters of conscience, even at the risk of censure and suspension, won him support, especially from the Clerical Officers' Association, and generated interesting public discussion (e.g. letters to the press) on important questions of open access to information, and the role of the public servant in our parliamentary democracy. In a sense Perkins, though in a difficult and exposed position, could not lose. The first incident provided dramatic suspense for the January press and represented a triumph for the permanent head who stood firm against what seemed to be illegitimate ministerial pressure and interference. The second round went the other way, since the Secretary did suspend Perkins and attracted a bad press for doing so, while Perkins emerged as a kind of hero. In reality, no-one won, for the Department again attracted poor publicity, the Secretary had apparently climbed down under pressure, and the Minister appeared to have exerted undue and unfair influence. Cavanagh's adroitness, here and in other events at the same time, notably negotiations with the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee, appeared as of a rather shallow political-legalistic kind, which alienated both Aboriginal people and some members of his own Department, without achieving any long-term gain. The Department continued to appear incompetent, which fed both the "white backlash" and the stigmatisation of Aboriginal Affairs as the black sheep in the public service flock.

Some lessons for participative planning

What lessons are suggested by this very cursory sketch? It is not easy to summarise the situation reached in mid-1974, when Labor returned for a second spell in office. Aboriginal Affairs is still defined as a difficult portfolio, a problem area. It still has a politically adroit Minister who lacks respect or affection from Aboriginal groups,

and appears to be committed rather to avoiding political trouble than to advancing the Aboriginal cause, much less making over decisions and responsibilities to Aborigines. There is still little public appreciation of the significance and complexity of a policy of "self-determination", much less a realisation that no other course offers a prospect of choice by and respect for Aboriginal people. (This refers more to the traditionally oriented groups than to the urban and rural southerners who have tended to identify their future more similarly with that of white Australians, and so represent less of a threat to the norms of the dominant society.) It may be that other departmental officers, including e.g. teachers, nurses and policemen, are beginning to appreciate what Aboriginal Affairs is trying to do, or rather allow. If so, this is because a commitment to Aboriginal community growth and choice on the part of individual officers is being communicated in behaviour as well as words.

However, the political events from the latter part of 1973 have damaged the morale of the Northern Territory community workers of the Department, who are the cutting edge for the policy of facilitation. Already heavily embattled, with criticism from traditional whites (cattlemen, town residents, friends and relatives whom they meet on leave), ethnocentric officers from other Departments who come out to communities and expect Aborigines to respond like whites to the services they afford, and Aboriginal spokesmen who polarise and accuse them of racism themselves, they have felt further undermined by the various statements of the Minister critical of his own field staff, and still more by the swing back to traditional bureaucratic modes and formulae from which they had been painfully extracting themselves throughout the year. One result is that a number of the most able and conscientious field officers have left the field work, or the Department, temporarily or for good. Among those who remain, uncertainty continues to breed low morale. There remains a serious problem of loyalty and responsibility as between the political demands of Canberra - e.g. for good accounting and reduction of waste - and the closely felt needs of the communities which may have begun to respond to the exhortations of 1973 to stand on their own feet and ask for the things they need. The situation is illustrated by one simple example: a community goes through appropriate processes of internal deliberation and decides it needs a market garden project, then goes through due processes to seek funds and expert advice for this; after protracted delay the community adviser, sent to Darwin to investigate, learns that the expert adviser has decided that a cattle project would be sounder and has transferred his efforts to preparing this instead.

The position in mid-1974 is that there had been an experiment in placing the pyramid of power and authority on its apex instead of its broad base, and that this proved too unstable. There is still departmental commitment to having policy and decisions flow down from the many local Aboriginal communities into the Department, through local channels and as far to the apex as is necessary to get action. But in practice political pressures and administrative traditions reasserted by the Public Service Board have resulted in firm reinstatement of familiar forms. The Department's reputation is to be saved, if at all, by behaving like a traditionally structured bureaucracy, not by exploring new forms more appropriate to its task. The pressures come from the Minister himself, the Board, the Treasury and the Auditor-General. Happily, some other federal Departments, less embattled and including some long-established Departments (like Customs) as well as more obvious innovators (like DURD) are exploring more flexible forms. When the heat became too intense (a political judgement of what the electorate, or parts of it, might think and do) the reaction was to tighten things down and retreat to familiar forms.

The story was complicated by the period of Mr. Bryant's leadership, and the inadequacy of accounting procedures of the Department. None the less, the essential elements may still be identified, and there are important questions for political and social administrators generally, and those in people-oriented Departments in particular. If "communities" (whether of the Australian Assistance Plan, Health, school board, regional development, migrant or Aboriginal kind) are to become active partners in defining their own needs and having them met, transfer of power to the local community must be real, not a token. This means that the administering federal Departments must be redesigned so that policies and decisions feed in from the localities, not mainly, as at present, from the Minister and Cabinet. Appropriate forms of organisation are needed for the Departments themselves, with heavy decentralisation, and authority to respond to needs from below. New accounting procedures are required, both the criteria for judging whether public moneys have been wasted or misappropriated, taking into account the learning functions and the importance of community choice, and the actual methods of financial control (audited records of use of funds granted, rather than prior sanction as to how money is to be allocated). Public service and parliamentary control would thus move back from literal control towards review in the light of general national objectives.

There is however a different point of view which holds that the present system cannot be debureaucratized. Given that the Federal Government collects taxes and redistributes them, it would not be possible to change the monolithic structure without changing the funding base.

The role of the Commissions in the present Government deserves closer attention and may provide some lessons for future development in Aboriginal Affairs and the role of the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee. Since Labor came to power, the Government has set up 25 permanent Commissions which are mainly concerned with policy. The fact that these Commissions exist reflects, in part, the ossification of the Public Service resulting from 23 years without a change in Government. However, a more important reason is the changing role of the Minister from that of an arbitrator within his Department to that of an innovator who wishes to implement new and dynamic policies and programmes. Traditional departments, however, seem unable to respond to innovative ideas or to be adaptive. In a recent article in the National Times (July, 1974), Clark supports these views and asserts that this alternative bureaucracy developed for two main reasons: first, the desire of Ministers to obtain an alternative view on important policy questions; second, the conviction among Labor Government members that the departmental structure was too large and cumbersome a vehicle for rapid development of ideas. A statutory body, they argued, was small and flexible enough for this purpose. Supporting this view, there certainly appears to be unanimity of opinion among the heads of these bodies that their essential function would be subverted if they were allowed to grow.

It is too early to predict the future role or fate of the Commissions. It therefore seems premature to advocate the transition of the Department of Aboriginal Affairs into a statutory body or Commission, as Charles Perkins has argued. While the former Office of Aboriginal Affairs performed, in essence, the role of a Commission with a policy-making function, it cannot be equated with the Department of Aboriginal Affairs which has developed into a large bureaucracy with increasing numbers of administrative staff. An alternative might be for the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee to become a Commission while the Department of Aboriginal Affairs remains primarily an administrative body.

Another future for the National Aboriginal Consultative Committee would be as a Congress with parliamentary status. Such a shift would represent intervention by more direct representation of an interest group, between the generally elected representatives and the public service, which traditionally serves not the public but the government. Whether or not NACC becomes such a body, this essay suggests a major shift in the working of parliamentary democracy, and the rejection of many shibboleths arising from traditional constitutional theory, as government is renovated and refashioned to meet the needs of a mature, diversified society in which choice and real participation in planning one's own environment and needs become a measure of human-ness.

There is evidence to suggest that changes of this nature are already taking place. While bureaucratic constraints continue to operate, these are not on the pure constitutional model. This is demonstrated by the fact that the Minister for Aboriginal Affairs did not resign over the turtle farm incident. Similarly, although resignations were tendered under the former Government by Ministers Peacock and Howson, these were not accepted. The recent decision to unsilence the public servant is also a step in this direction. These two developments may be seen as interrelated and a sign that the old system is crumbling. Just as the silencing of the public servant was designed to ensure his anonymity, so has erosion of the Westminster model of ministerial responsibility opened the way for more direct participative democracy. These steps undermine a central tenet of established political theory. By invading the confidential (or collusive) relationship between minister and public servant, they point towards more direct forms of democracy and answerability between communities and public service bureaucracies, not mediated through a three-year parliament alone. This may suggest a progressive channeling of direct action into direct representation, and participation in planning and decision-making, if the planning and welfare departments modify and move out to meet the direct action groups. The alternative to such redefinition and evolution of administrative and political forms will be more confrontation and polarisation of the green ban kind.

This essay is not intended to whitewash the administration of Aboriginal Affairs. It does suggest that a close and reflective study of the disease of that Department since early 1973 could have wide and fruitful applications.

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