

Closing the Gap Rhetoric Buys into Howard Legacy

When Prime Minister Rudd makes his first annual statement in February 2009 on his Government's progress in meeting the six 'Closing the Gap' targets in life expectancy, infant mortality, literacy and numeracy achievement, employment outcomes, year 12 schooling attainments and provision of quality preschool programs, he may well rue his acquiescence to the Howard Government's Northern Territory 'National Emergency' Intervention. This is because John Howard and Mal Brough are all over the '2008–09 Closing the Gap for Indigenous Australians Budget'.

There are 37 new measures identified 'to help begin the process of closing the gap' which is a somewhat disingenuous statement in Budget Paper No. 2 because most of the major commitments are from the 2007–08 Howard Government Budget.

Of these measures, 10 are multi-year delivery of election commitments already announced at Additional Estimates in February 2008.

Of the 27 'other measures', 22 are to fund the Northern Territory Emergency Response, but have no out-years (beyond 2008–09) owing to impending review later this year. Hence the frequent qualifier 'provision has been made in the Contingency Reserve for ongoing costs (beyond 2008–09) associated with the Emergency Response'.

There are some big ticket 'governmentality' items here including nearly \$31 million for Government Business Managers (that is over \$400,000 per prescribed community) and nearly \$64 million for income management (that is nearly \$1 million per prescribed community) and \$32 million for the Task Force, reviewing the Intervention, and for a 'community capability fund' to be available to Government Business Managers.

These massive process investments can be contrasted with the \$0.5 million committed in 2008–09 for consultation on a national representative body and regional representative structure to replace ATSIC.

There are also some smaller ticket commitments to support very welcome community initiatives, like night patrol services, youth alcohol diversion programs, follow-up health care and the promotion of law and order. But why only in the Northern Territory?

Despite its rhetoric, the Government does not have a plan to tackle Indigenous disadvantage Australia-wide and its policy framework for Closing the Gap is captured by 2008–09 commitments to the NT National Emergency; these commitments are all subject to 'independent' review and face funding uncertainty.

There are two unexplained paradoxes in the Closing the Gap Budget. First, while Minister Macklin notes that 75 per cent of the Indigenous population lives in non-remote locations and that the number suffering from poor outcomes might be greater in urban and regional rather than remote Australia, almost all the new initiatives in the Budget focus on 13 per cent of Australia's 517,000 Indigenous peoples.

Perhaps there is a plan to Close the Gap in the Northern Territory first, in accord with Mal Brough's normalisation by 2011-12 Strategy, but if so it is not articulated. In the meantime targeting the gaps elsewhere in Australia is delayed by a year.

A second paradox is that a table is presented in the Closing the Gap statement that illustrates without any accompanying narrative that child abuse notification rates in the Northern Territory are about half the national Indigenous average, and better than New South Wales, Victoria, Queensland, South Australia and the Australian Capital Territory. This table seems to highlight the question of why the inordinate attention on the Northern Territory, aside from last year's election campaign acquiescence and the Commonwealth's constitutional territory powers?

There is some positive honouring of election commitments from the overarching Indigenous Economic Development Strategy with \$160 million to enhance management of the massive Indigenous estate. This demonstrates that when Indigenous aspirations correlate with national climate change and environmental management concerns investments are readily made.

However even this commitment represents an under-investment. As a proportion of the \$2.25 billion Caring for Our Country commitment, 7 per cent of funds are provided to manage 20 per cent of Australia.

Last year I lamented the inability of the Howard Government to establish an Indigenous Futures Fund with its massive budget surplus.⁴¹ This year locking up surpluses in such funds has become almost *de rigueur*.

Despite the renewed call from the 2020 Indigenous Stream for such a fund, an Indigenous Future Fund was again relegated below Education, Infrastructure and Health Future Funds for all Australians.

Less than a month ago I asked whether we could ever close the gaps without a fundamentally different policy framework.⁴² There is nothing in the 2008-09

⁴¹ Altman, above n 5.

⁴² Jon Altman, 'Can we ever 'Close the Gaps' in Indigenous outcomes?', *Crikey* (online), 17 April 2008
<<http://www.crikey.com.au/2008/04/17/can-we-ever-close-the-gaps-in-Indigenous-outcomes/>>.

Budget that challenges the policy status quo.

From one perspective this might reflect a degree of policy inertia—the long shadow that Mal Brough has cast on Indigenous affairs in the aftermath of the Northern Territory ‘National Emergency’.

From another, this might reflect a realisation by the incoming Government that there are no silver bullets in Indigenous affairs.

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